

**Exploring Women's Experiences of Gulf Migration: A Cinematic
Analysis of *Khaddama* and *Pathemari***

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Abstract

Gulf migration, being an important episode in the history of Kerala has significant influence in Malayalam literature and films. The movies on Gulf migration spread light to several social and cultural issues like separation from families, alienation, cultural clashes, the struggles of migrant workers, adaptation to a new culture, and the impact of migration on their families and communities in Kerala. While most of these films focus on male labourers, some films like *Khaddama* and *Pathemari* shed light on the often-overlooked experiences of women, both as migrants themselves and as those affected by migration of men. Though Gulf migration provided better opportunities and living conditions for many of them, there is also a darker side of reality experienced by many of these migrants and also the Gulf widows. This paper mainly sheds light on those darker shade of realities.

Khaddama (2011) portrays the struggles of Aswathi, a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia. She encounters a journey of exploitation, abuse and isolation which underscores the vulnerability of women in the precarious working conditions of Gulf countries. *Pathemari* (2015) through the character Nalini, focuses on female experience of migration through the women who are left behind, commonly termed as Gulf wives or Gulf widows. Through this two films, this paper explores how Malayalam films reflect the gendered dimensions of Gulf migration, emphasizing the exploitation and marginalization faced by women in two different contexts.

Keywords: Migration, women, Gulf countries, trauma, Gulf widows

Gulf migration has been an important aspect of Kerala's socio-economic landscape, with millions of Malayalis seeking employment opportunities in the Gulf countries. While most of the mainstream narratives on Gulf migration are about the economic benefits and challenges of migration, the experiences of women in the process of migration are often a neglected topic. The films *Khaddama* (2011) and *Pathemari* (2015) are the most important cinematic representations that explore the gendered dimensions of Gulf migration. Both these movies shed light on the struggles, sacrifices, and resilience of women who leave their homes for a life of hardship abroad. "Malayali women, ranging from migrants themselves to the families of migrants to community members, are becoming empowered through shifts in gender roles and expectations catalyzed by Gulf migration" (Gerry, 49). But there is also a counter narrative for this. Not all women share the same experiences. Even though Gulf migration has a positive impact on many women who are either migrants or Gulf widows, there are another group of people who have experienced the horrors and traumas of migration. This paper throws light on those group of women by analyzing the films *Khaddama* and *Pathemari* which portray a darker side of migration in a powerful way.

"There are few Gulf migration movies which have women protagonists. Men who migrate are portrayed as war heroes and sacrificers. On the other hand, women's lives are given a negative connotation, and their sufferings are mostly ignored or underplayed, reflecting the dominant framing of the migrant family" (Ahmed, 2024). *Khaddama*, directed by Kamal, tells the story Aswathi, a housemaid whose life in the Gulf is marked by exploitation, isolation, and abuse. *Pathemari*, directed by Salim Ahamed, mainly focuses on a male protagonist but also touches on the quiet sufferings of women who are left behind, managing households and carrying emotional burdens. These films examine how women navigate the personal and social consequences of migration, often caught in a web of class, gender, and cultural expectations.

Khaddama: The Female Migrant's Journey of Survival and Sacrifice

The film *Khaddama*, sheds light on the life of domestic workers in Saudi Arabia under the Kafala system. A Kafala system binds the workers to the employers, which may often lead to abuse and exploitation. Through the character Aswathi, the film represents many female domestic workers who migrate to Gulf countries in hope of a better living condition but find themselves trapped in oppressive working

conditions. The film is about Aswathi's migration to Saudi Arabia after the death of her husband and about the harsh and hostile working environment that awaited her and eventually her escape from the hands of her employer who tortured and abused her. The narrative emphasizes her personal struggles, showcasing the physical and emotional trauma she endures during the process of migration. Through Aswathi the film gives a bold statement about gendered violence in the context of Gulf migration. Aswathi, after reaching Saudi Arabia has experienced a profound sense of isolation and vulnerability which happens to all migrants upon reaching a new land. Aswathi, as a middle class, Malayalee women in Saudi Arabia easily fell into this pit of isolation and vulnerability. The flashback scenes in the movie portray the deep sense of isolation and nostalgia that caught Aswathi. Above all this, Aswathi faced physical and psychological abuse from her employers. She was mistreated, starved and was subjected to violence. These scenes are given intensity in the film by the lack of sound track so that the audience also felt the same gravity and intensity of

Aswathi's sufferings. Here Aswathi's pain becomes the pain of the audience and also the pain of all migrants who left their homeland and shed their sweat and blood in the vast deserts of Arabia. Identity crisis is an important issue faced by all migrants in the host countries. Adapting to a new culture is not an easy process. Aswathi also faces an identity crisis upon reaching the new country. In the beginning of the movie, there is a scene in the airport where Aswathi is asked to wear a burqa by fellow travelers who are also migrating to different parts of Gulf countries as house maids or Khaddamas. This was the beginning of Aswathi's identity crisis.

On reaching Saudi Arabia, she waited one whole day for her sponsor. This was the beginning of the dark days that awaited her. Aswathi entered the beautiful mansion of her employer with big hopes of a better future not only for her but also for her family back in Kerala. But the reality was different. She was subjected to harsh working conditions, long working hours and most of the day she starved. Apart from this, she faced brutal physical punishment even for minor mistakes. Fatima, another housemaid in the same household was whipped by the employer when he found out that she was having an affair with Usman, his driver. One day Aswathi helped Fatima to elope with Usman. But its punishment was so severe. She was brutally whipped by her employer. This shows the dehumanizing treatment that she experiences in the foreign land. She is trapped in her cramped living quarters unable to raise her voice and seek help.

After receiving such mistreatments Aswathi decided to escape. She ran through the endless desert but ended up in the hands of traffickers. But somehow she managed to escape and found a temporary refuge. With the help of Razak, a social worker Aswathi managed to reach her homeland. For many people, Gulf is the city of hope and opportunities, it's the land that yields gold but for many people like Aswathi, Gulf is a nightmare. There was a huge difference between the life she dreamt and the realities she encountered. According to her Gulf was a land of opportunities where she can earn an income of 800 Riyals to support her family and provide a better living condition to them. She has seen many women who went to Gulf as housemaids and became financially settled. But for Aswathi, realities were different. She received only 600 Riyals and above all her life was so miserable. Her dreams turned into nightmares and she was trapped in the shackles of hopelessness, fear and despair.

Aswathi's plight is intensified by the lack of legal safeguards for migrant workers. Aswathi, being trapped in the Kafala system, was unable to leave or change employers without permission. Even her passport was confiscated. "Expatriates in these countries typically have their passports confiscated and are forced to work under the highly exploitative kafala system of sponsorship-based employment, which prevents them from leaving employers. As a result, expatriate workers in the Gulf frequently experience hazardous working conditions, long hours, unpaid wages, and cramped and unsanitary housing. The situation is particularly dire for the millions of migrant domestic workers, almost exclusively women, isolated in private homes" (Seethi, 14). She was powerless to escape the abusive environment. But when she decided to escape, she decided to flee without passport and money. As the film depicts, the legal systems in many Gulf countries offer little recourse for domestic workers in her position. The hope of returning home looms heavily over Aswathi. But it was difficult without her passport and legal means to leave. She was not certain about whether she can leave this country and return her homeland. This uncertainty adds to her psychological burden. Even after her return the emotional and physical scars from her experiences in the Gulf will stay with her for a lifetime.

Through Aswathi, *Khaddama* paints a grim but realistic picture of the hardships faced by Gulf migrants, particularly women, who are often invisible in the larger narrative of Gulf migration.

Pathemari: The Silent Endurance of Women Left Behind

Pathemari centers on the life of Pallikkal Narayanan, a Gulf migrant who migrated at the initial stage of Gulf boom. But the film also give prominence to the women who are left behind in the home, commonly called as the gulf wives through the character Nalini, Narayanan's wife. While Narayanan works abroad, Nalini lives with his family in Kerala handling all the burdens of the household and waiting for her husband to return. Her character is an embodiment of sacrifice, a woman who sacrificed her family life weighing an emotional trauma of separation. Here Nalini has to manage all the household responsibilities, take care of her children and manage all the financial constraints.

Nalini's emotional trauma is also highlighted in the film. She leads a life of loneliness and she is anxious about her husband's life and safety in a foreign land. This is a common characteristic of all Gulf wives. They live a life of isolation and anxiety taking care of their children and household, endlessly waiting for the husband who visits once in every two years. Nalini always longs for her husband, especially during family functions where she has to take up all the responsibilities. Nalini raised two sons and took care of Narayanan's joint family. For the children their father is just an annual visitor who brings them lots of gifts and chocolates. But Nalini balanced everything. Even though she lacks the presence of a husband, she never expressed it. She longed for her husband's emotional support. For every vacation she has only one desire, she wants Narayanan to stay back with her. But circumstances and situations were always against her. Narayanan will always encounter something that forces him to go back and Nalini is again left behind. The situation of Nalini is almost like a widow, even though her husband is alive, she lives without his presence as a widow. The term Gulf Widows is also commonly used as a synonym to Gulf Wives and Nalini can be seen as an epitome of this. Nalini takes up the dual role of both mother and father. While Narayanan is away, she manages the upbringing of their children. She also handles all family responsibilities, ranging from making decisions about their education to addressing emotional and practical needs. For their children the father is just an annual visitor. Nalini raises the children largely on her own, ensuring they are cared for and provided for, all the while carrying the emotional burden of not having her husband's support in parenting.

After their marriage when Narayanan decided to migrate to Gulf, Nalini expressed mixed emotions. She was happy as she knows this decision will help to

mitigate their financial burdens but she was so sad about the long absence of her husband that too after this early stages of their marriage. As Narayanan works abroad Nalini took up all the household responsibilities but she always waited for her husband's return. Nalini's waiting for Narayanan's phone call in the telephone booth is a perfect example showcasing Nalini's emotional longing for her husband. After Narayanan's death, when Nalini reflects about their life together she realized that she spent her entire married life like a widow even though she has a husband.

Even though Nalini lives a life of isolation and responsibility, she is often subjected to societal expectations and judgements. For the society, she is the wife of a Gulf man, a woman who has all the luxury. But for Nalini, the remittance she received was hardly enough to maintain a joint household. She never lived a life of luxury instead she was contented with what she has. The financial responsibility of a joint family falls entirely on her shoulders, placing immense pressure on her to stretch the limited funds while keeping the family afloat. Amidst of this economic pressure, she balances the family's financial needs with the uncertainty of when or how much money will arrive.

Exploring Women's Experiences of Gulf Migration

Aswathy in *Khaddama* and Nalini in *Pathemari* are so different in various contexts but both of them are the representations of the emotional and physical impact of Gulf migration on women, even though they experience it in different contexts. Both Aswathy and Nalini faced significant hardships as a result of Gulf migration. Aswathy, as a domestic worker in the Gulf faces direct physical and emotional abuse, while Nalini bears the emotional burden of being left behind in Kerala as a Gulf widow. Irrespective of their two different circumstances, both these women display immense resilience in navigating their respective struggles. Aswathi, being cut off from her family and community has a life which is marked by isolation in the Gulf as she endures the harsh treatment from her employers. Similarly, Nalini also experiences emotional isolation as she waits years for her husband's return. She is left to manage her household and children alone, often feeling neglected as her sacrifices remain unnoticed.

Both Aswathi's and Nalini's lives are shaped by sacrifice. Aswathi sacrificed her safety and well-being to support her family by migrating to Gulf. Nalini sacrificed her personal dreams and desires and lived a life of emotional sacrifice as she waited

for her husband's return. In both cases, their sacrifices are driven by the socio-economic constraints imposed by Gulf migration. Both characters represent the societal norms and expectations on women as the examples of care, endurance, and sacrifice. Aswathy who is sent to work abroad for supporting her family, faced many abuses but her struggles are largely invisible and unacknowledged. Nalini, is expected to fulfill her duty as a wife by remaining loyal to her husband's long-term absence and maintaining the household in his absence.

Conclusion

Both these movies, *Khaddama* and *Pathemari* explore the experiences and challenges faced by women as a result of Gulf migration. Aswathi in *Khaddama* portrays the tragic life of a female migrant worker who works as a housemaid in a large family in Saudi Arabia. She is a representative of all female migrants who left their homeland in search of better opportunities. When many of these migrants find better opportunities and living conditions, a lot of migrants like Aswathi end up in exploitative and abusive environments. As a migrant who is away from the homeland, Aswathi always have a longing and nostalgia about her homeland. She always yearns to be back in her homeland but it may lead her family to abject poverty. The conditions at her home and the abusive environment in which she ends up added to her misery. But all these was invisible to her family back in Kerala who believed that she lived a happy and luxurious life. But when she reached a point where she couldn't handle this mistreatment anymore, she decided to escape. At that moment she didn't think of her family, her passport or money. The only goal she has was to escape and ends her trauma.

Pathemari shows the life of women who are left behind in the process of migration commonly called as gulf widows. Nalini in *Pathemari* is not just a character, instead she is a representative of all the gulf widows who are left behind in the homeland while their husbands work at the Gulf countries as labourers. According to the society's conviction, the gulf widows, who is the 'wife of a gulf man', lives in all the luxury with gulf money and gulf product. But their story is filled with the emotional toll resulted from the endless waiting for their husband. Nalini, in the absence of Narayanan becomes the backbone of the family, taking care of all the responsibilities from raising their children to building a home and conducting marriages of the close ones. Here gender roles become reversed. A woman become the backbone and the head of the family with a heavy burden of responsibilities in her shoulder. This is not just the case of Nalini but of all gulf widows.

Both these movies explore the women's experiences of Gulf migration, both as Gulf migrant and as Gulf widow. Most of the mainstream discourses of Gulf migration focuses on the male experiences of Gulf migration but only less importance is given to the female experiences of Gulf migration. Both these movies are a deviation from the mainstream narratives of Gulf migration as they mainly portray the female experiences of Gulf migration. Both the movies dwell deeply into the economic expectation, gender roles and the emotional turmoil associated with Gulf migration.

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