



Radical Voice of Community Change: The Case of Two Beary Language Films

Sandhya Christabel D'Souza¹ and Jayakrishnan Narayanan²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication, Amrita School of Arts, Humanities and Commerce, Coimbatore, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, India

² Asst. Professor, Department of Mass Communication, Amrita School of Arts, Humanities and Commerce, Coimbatore, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, India
n_jayakrishnan@cb.amrita.edu

Abstract. This paper, through a thematic content analysis, examines the representation of Talaq-e-Biddat (triple talaq) in Beary language cinema. The language Beary, which has elements of various local languages of South India, is spoken by the Beary community, a distinct Muslim community of the South-Western Coastal region of the states of Karnataka and Kerala, India. Beary language cinema, which has only had a handful of films produced till-date, is a less-researched area of Indian cinema. This study analyses two Beary language feature films, *Byari* (2011) and *Triple Talaq* (2019), from the perspective of their representation of societal issues, particularly Talaq-e-Biddat. The study employs Islamic feminism and Subaltern theories, apart from theoretical elements of Radical media. The study analyses how these films represent the Beary community, negotiations of gender equality within Islamic traditions, resistance and conformity to dominant power structures, among others. The paper also employs in-depth interviews with some crew members of the films to explore how Beary cinema serves as a platform for religious and cultural awareness. The paper contributes to the larger discussion on the intersection of religion, culture, and gender by illustrating how films may be a potent tool for social change in the Beary community.

Keywords: Indian Cinema, Beary Language, Radical Media, Community Cinema, Minority Language Film

1 Introduction

The Beary community, a distinct Muslim community of the South-Western Coastal regions of Karnataka and Kerala, India, with a history of 1200 years is known for its unique cultural identity. The community with over 1.5 million speakers of the language Beary, is singular in its linguistic characteristics brought by the language-mixing of

South Indian languages [1]. The term 'Beary' is thought to be derived from the Tulu word Beary which means merchant and also has similarities with Arab word 'Bahari' which means seafarer [2].

Despite the rich cultural heritage, Beary community and Beary language has more to be explored in terms of academic research. The government of Karnataka granted minority status to Beary Language following which the Karnataka Beary Sahithya Academy was formed in 2007 [2]. Today, feature films are also made in this language. In this light, there have been a handful of films produced in Beary. The first Beary language film, 'Byari' released in 2011 won the National Award for best feature film in the same year. Most Beary films focus on subjects that have significant social relevance while also maintaining a rooted connection with the Beary community.

This paper explores the representation of Talaq-e-Biddat (triple talaq) in two Beary language cinema, namely '*Byari*' (Suveeran, 2011) and '*Triple Talaq*' (Gulvady, 2019). The study, through a thematic content analysis of the films, aims to analyse how the films depict localised cultural narratives surrounding Talaq-e-Biddat, an Islamic practice that allows a Muslim man to immediately divorce his wife by uttering the word 'talaq' three times [3]. Furthermore, the paper analyses the narrative techniques used in these films, in order to examine how they frame the discourse of gender, religion and societal norms, reflecting the community's myriad perspectives on modernity and tradition.

The paper employs the theoretical framework of Islamic feminism, Subaltern Studies, Radical Media Theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis in its analysis. In-depth interviews with the directors of the two films were also conducted to compare the insights gained from the content analysis with the creative intent behind the films. This way the study looks at the role of films in contributing to the broader dialogue on gender, advocacy of rights, women rights, religion, patriarchy and cultural identity, in the Beary community.

1.1 Beary Cinema

Production of mainstream films in minority languages, such as Beary, has been very few mainly due to limited audiences, budget constraints, and a lack of archival efforts. Furthermore, there has been limited scholarly attention on Beary cinema. The lack of academic exploration in this area presents a significant research gap, as Beary cinema remains largely unexamined in the broader discourse on Indian regional films [4] [5].

A study conducted by Sengupta [5] further notes that when the minority language film, *Byari* won a national film award, perplexed viewers were found exclaiming, 'But where is this language spoken?'. This exclamation denotes the perceived sense of difficulty that the audience face in placing films of minority languages on the map of India. This sense of exclamation can also be extrapolated to the academic scenario too where there is a dearth of studies on Beary cinema.

The Beary film industry is a relatively smaller one, with just a handful of films released till date. The first film in the language was *Byari*, directed by K.P. Suveeran, which was released in 2011. It went on to win the Best Feature Film Award at the 59th National Film Awards of India. Subsequently, many more films have been made in

Beary, including *Abba* (2018), *Triple Talaq* (2019), *Musafir* (2023), *Theta* (unreleased) and *Badalayo Manas* (unreleased), apart from few short films.

1.2 The movies – ‘Byari’ and ‘Triple Talaq’

Both Byari and Triple Talaq share a common narrative theme where they both depict the consequences of triple talaq and attempt to create awareness among community members. The films are shot in the Beary language, against the backdrop of the Beary community’s customs and traditions.

Byari shows the challenges faced by the protagonist, Nadeera, who is hastily divorced by her husband after fallout with her father. The movie portrays the suffering of Nadeera, who is caught between her desires and the socio-political system. The challenges she face in a male-dominated society and her struggle for freedom against social and religious patriarchy is intricately woven into the movie’s plot [6].

Triple Talaq showcases the life of Fathima, the protagonist who is a victim of triple talaq, not once, but twice. Fathima’s daughter, Shabeena, who was married to Mushtaq too meets the same fate as Fathima. Mushtaq who turns out to be a human trafficker uses triple talaq as a weapon to trap vulnerable women for his trade. However, Shabeena challenges Mushtaq in court and seeks remedies as per the Triple Talaq bill (the Parliament of India declared Triple Talaq practice unconstitutional and made it punishable under law from 1 August 2019) [7].

2 Objectives of the Study

These main objectives of this study are as follows:

- 1.To analyze the selected Beary language films from the perspectives of representation and preservation of the community’s cultural and socio-religious identity.
- 2.To understand, using the theories of Islamic feminism, how the selected Beary language films depict gender hierarchies within the Beary community, especially in the intersectionality of gender, religion and resistance.
- 3.To analyze how the selected Beary films address the practice of Talaq-e-Biddat, and to examine the narrative strategies employed to highlight its social and psychological consequences for women.
- 4.To analyze if the selected films behave as radical cinema in critiquing and challenging dominant narratives and in fostering discussions on women’s rights within the Beary community.

3 Literature Review

Films have for long been recognized as a powerful medium for cultural preservation, social change, and empowerment [8][9][10]. Independent and regional films have emerged as a powerful medium for amplifying the voices of marginalized communities and addressing critical social issues in India [11][12]. This is echoed by Darshan et al (2020) where they observe that minority language cinema portrays “the essence of their language, culture and to promote the very existence of being part of the unique tradition.” [13].

This ability to convey rich cultural messages is evident in various cinematic traditions, where filmmakers often address the complexities of their communities while simultaneously pushing back against patriarchal norms and societal constraints [14]. In this context, the role of film extends beyond mere entertainment, transforming it into a vehicle for advocacy that can inspire collective action and foster an environment where societal norms are questioned and redefined, particularly regarding gender dynamics and the representation of women in media narratives [15]. Further, apart from storytelling, cinema becomes a window to the lifestyle and culture of far-off places and communities [16].

4 Methodology

The study analyzed two Beary films, *Byari* (2011) and *Triple Talaq* (2019), focusing on Talaq-e-Biddat.

These two films were particularly selected for this study as they deal with the subject of Talaq-e-Biddat (triple talaq). Further, they are among the few Beary language films ever produced. These two films have been critically acclaimed for their sensitive handling of social issues, gender dynamics, and representation of cultural identity. Other Beary films either lack a central thematic focus on Talaq-e-Biddat or does not deal with a plot line that is driven by a focus on social issues.

Further, as mentioned earlier, *Byari* won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in 2011, bringing attention to Beary cinema on a national level. *Triple Talaq* explored the subject of Talaq-e-Biddat in the post-2019 socio-political context of India, where the Supreme Court of the country ruled Talaq-i-Biddat as unconstitutional. These aspects contribute towards the rationale in selecting these films as subjects for the current study.

In-depth interviews with directors were conducted, and thematic analysis was applied to examine narrative elements, characters, and dialogues. Scenes were coded into themes such as "Gender Inequality," "Religious Authority," and "Resistance and Empowerment." These themes were interpreted through Islamic feminism, Subaltern Studies, and Critical Discourse Analysis. The thematic coding approach aligns with previous research, such as a study on the depiction of transgender individuals in contemporary Malayalam cinema [17] and a similar study on the portrayal of the minority culture

of the Kodava people in Indian cinema [4]. Multiple data sources and theoretical frameworks ensured the credibility of the research, with AI software used for grammar and spell checks.

5 Discussion

5.1 Cultural Identity

Both films, *Byari* and *Triple Talaq*, are set against the backdrop of the Beary community. The language used is Beary, and the occupations of the protagonists, as well as the dressing style of the community members, reflect the cultural identity of the Beary community. In *Byari*, men are seen in traditional Beary attire, which includes a white muslin turban, a wide belt at the waist, and a shirt called *Kuppuyam* [2]. A white *mundu* (a garment worn around the waist) or a cotton checkered *mundu*, with a thick belt are also outfits of the Bearys, noticed in the movie.

Beary women are traditionally clad in *Kachi*, a *Mundu* type of clothing, *Kuppanjem*, a top with embroidery in front, *Pattu* (silk sarees) [2]. The locations shown in the film include banks of the river, the sea, and boat, emphasizing the community's connection to the coastal environment [2]. For example, in *Byari*, the protagonist's husband is a fisherman, whose profession as depicted in the film, is commonly associated with the members of the community. Meanwhile, women are portrayed as homemakers. Nadeera earns some income tying *beedis* (a thin cigarette made of tobacco flake wrapped in a *tendu* (*Diospyrox melanoxylon*) leaf), again a profession commonly seen among *Byari* women [2].

Both films also represent some cultural aspects of the Beary community, including some rituals and ceremonies. For instance, *Byari* includes the depiction of traditional baths and 'Mangila' (a wedding) [2]. *Triple Talaq* also captures a traditional wedding ceremony.

5.2 Lack of Agency

Both films highlight the patriarchy-induced lack of agency among women in making decisions about their lives. It is shown that women have very little say in making decisions in subjects such as their own marriage. For example, in *Byari*, the consent of the female protagonist, Nadeera, was not accounted for when her marriage was fixed. When her parents discuss marriage arrangements, Nadeera asks, "who is getting married" to which her mother replies "you". Nadeera was still a child when she was married off to a much older man, and her opinion was not sought even during her divorce. In *Triple Talaq*, Fathima has been divorced twice and is left to fend for herself and her two children. She educates her daughter, Shabeena, to avoid meeting the same fate, but Shabeena too gets divorced.

5.3 Focus on Triple Talaq

In *Byari*, Nadeera's husband hastily divorces her after a conflict with her father, and Rabia is publicly divorced by her husband when she objects to his actions. In *Triple Talaq*, Fathima suffers from Triple Talaq twice—her second husband divorces her via a letter sent to her, after finding a better prospect, and her daughter, Shabeena, faces the same fate after exposing her husband's human trafficking. Additionally, in the film, an educated lawyer's daughter becomes mentally unstable after her divorce, highlighting that even educated women are victims of Triple Talaq.

5.4 Consequences of Triple Talaq as Shown in the Films

Nadeera is shown to be depressed after the divorce. When her father tries to convince her to remarry, she is enraged at being treated as a commodity and expresses her anguish by crying and pushing her father away. Another woman, Rabia, who is given Triple Talaq allegedly because she spoke back to her husband, publicly grieves, questioning what will become of her children. In the film *Triple Talaq*, Fathima too is abandoned and depressed, resorting to begging and searching for employment. She works as a house maid and is forced to enroll her daughter in a free residential school for her studies.

5.5 Laws of Convenience

In both films, Triple Talaq is used for convenience. In *Byari*, Rashid hastily divorces Nadeera and later demands that she undergo Nikah Halala (marrying someone else to reunite with her first husband) to remarry him. When Nadeera questions this, Rashid insists on religious reasons but secretly asks her not to consummate the second marriage. In *Triple Talaq*, a human trafficking racket is exposed where women are married and divorced after consummation, left with little chance to remarry. When Shabeena uncovers this racket, Mushtaq instantly divorces her to escape.

5.6 Towards Empowerment

Both films not only depict social issues but also show the protagonists fighting the system for empowerment. While both Nadeera and Shabeena are shown as victims of gender inequality, they fight for their empowerment. Nadeera, who is forced into Nikah Halala, ends up questioning the system. She reclaims her power by deciding to consummate the marriage with her second husband. In *Triple Talaq*, Shabeena approaches the court and seeks judicial remedies in light of the Supreme Court passing the Triple Talaq bill.

5.7 Discussion based on the Interviews with the Directors of *Triple Talaq* and *Byari*

Presenting the entire transcripts of the interview is beyond the purview of this paper. Therefore, only points relevant to this paper are discussed here. K.P. Suveeran, the director of *Byari*, explains that while the character of Nadeera was crafted specifically for the story, his primary intention was to depict a woman reclaiming her power and making her own decisions. Throughout the film, Nadeera encounters various challenges due to decisions imposed by men in her life, religious rules, and societal concerns.

Suveeran shares that Nadeera's character was shaped after he and Althaf, the producer of the film, interacted with community members during field research. During these interactions, many women expressed that they lacked education, had limited exposure to films and television, and that some had experienced divorce through triple talaq. Suveeran observed that divorce had become normalized for these women, and they often lacked the capacity to challenge it.

Through Nadeera's journey, Suveeran aimed to question societal norms, patriarchy, and religious rules. He mentioned in the interview that he wanted to show that a woman has the power to make her own decisions and reclaim her agency.

Yakub Khader Gulvady, the director of *Triple Talaq*, explains that his film was made to dispel the misconception that triple talaq is permitted in Islam. He also aimed to create awareness among women that triple talaq is a punishable offense in India. Women can seek legal remedies if they are victims of it. Gulvady emphasizes that divorce is an issue in all religions, not just Islam. However, he chose to set the film within the Beary community because he belongs to the community. He has witnessed instances in his community where women have suffered due to triple talaq. He says that by portraying strong female protagonists in the film could inspire and empower viewers

6 Analysis

6.1 Cultural Identity and Subaltern Theory

Both *Byari* and *Triple Talaq* portray a community that is both rich in tradition and isolated from mainstream narratives. This makes it a suitable subject for analysis by applying Gayatri Spivak's Subaltern Theory.

The gender and power dynamics shown in the film, within the Beary community aligns with Spivak's conceptualisation of the "gendered subaltern." Both *Byari* and *Triple Talaq* explore the intersections of caste, class, and gender. This brings forth how Beary women navigate the complex web of social and cultural expectations. Hence, 'body' becomes a critical symbol not only of oppression but also of empowerment and resistance, enabling women to reclaim their narratives in a society marked by dominant patriarchal structures [18].

In these films, the use of Beary language, traditional attire, and depiction of local customs aims to resist cultural erasure. The community that has historically been on the fringes of societal narratives is being given a voice. By centering the stories on Beary

women, the films challenge the marginalization of these women within both their own community and the broader society. This brings struggles and resilience to the forefront.

6.2 Lack of Agency and Islamic Feminist Theory

The films *Byari* and *Triple Talaq* show narratives that align with the principles of Islamic Feminism, a movement that advocates for the rights of women within the framework of Islam [19].

By reinterpreting religious texts and challenging patriarchal interpretations that have historically marginalized women's voices and agency, this movement highlights restrictive practices surrounding marriage and divorce as depicted in the films [20].

This reinterpretation is essential in addressing the socio-cultural and historical contexts that perpetuate gender inequalities. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of women's rights as intended in Islamic teachings [19].

Furthermore, by emphasizing the necessity of region-specific studies and interpretations of Islamic principles, Islamic feminists aim to reclaim women's rights as integral to their faith. This rejects western-centric notions of feminism that often overlook these complexities [20]. This reclamation reinforces the idea that the struggle for gender equality among Muslim women is not merely a reflection of their circumstances but is deeply embedded within their religious and cultural identity, calling for a critical examination of how traditional norms can be redefined to empower women.

In *Byari*, Nadeera's lack of consent in her marriage and subsequent divorce shows the ways in which religious and cultural norms can strip women of their autonomy. Similarly, *Triple Talaq* shows the devastating impact of unilateral divorce on women like Fathima and Shabeena. This highlights how patriarchal structures within the community exploit religious practices to oppress women. The Islamic feminist critiques call for a re-examination of religious laws and practices to ensure they uphold the dignity and rights of women, and the narratives of the films resonate with the same.

6.3 Misuse of Triple Talaq and Radical Media Theory

The films' focus on the misuse of triple talaq can be explored with Radical Media Theory which suggests that media has the power to challenge and transform societal norms by presenting alternative narratives. [21] refers to radical media as a generally small scale media which provides "an alternative vision to hegemonic policies and perspectives".

Triple Talaq challenges the misconception that the practice is religiously sanctioned. By using the medium of film to raise awareness about the legal and social consequences of this practice, it depicts the plight of women who are victimized by triple talaq. The film seeks to educate and mobilize viewers against the practice, serving as a Radical Media. *Byari* also critiques the normalisation of divorce and the lack of agency afforded to women in such situations. Hence in the film it is noticed there is a push for a societal shift in how these issues are perceived and addressed.

7 Conclusion

It is asserted by previous researchers that advocacy for women aims to promote “women's rights by addressing gender-based violence and discrimination”, and by reforming “discriminatory policies, laws, and cultural practices” [22][23]. With films continuing to influence the construction of gendered identities in the society [24], it can be argued that Beary language films that voices several social critiques, raises the status of films beyond entertainment, to the levels of advocacy and radical films. Both *Byari* and *Triple Talaq* depict a journey towards empowerment, with the protagonists challenging the norms that have oppressed them. Nadeera in *Byari* and Shabeena in *Triple Talaq* represent women who overcome the initial lack of agency and reclaim their power by making decisions that rebel societal expectations. As the films represent a subversion of the dominant patriarchal and cultural norms that have historically silenced and oppressed women, the theme of empowerment is significant within the context of both Islamic feminism and Subaltern Theory. The films hence contribute to a broader discourse on the rights and agency of women within marginalized communities. The films advocate for social change and justice, through stories of resistance and empowerment.

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