



Reframing the Familiar: Resistance, Representation, and Defamiliarisation in Contemporary Malayalam Jewellery Advertisements

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Abstract

This article explores how certain Malayalam jewellery advertisements confront traditional gender roles through creative visual narratives. By examining Bhima's "Pure as Love", Kavitha Gold and Diamonds' "Choose Your Special", and Vinsmera's "Truly Irresistible", this study employs Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarisation in conjunction with theories of gender performativity and resistance to assess how these advertisements challenge standard depictions of beauty, identity, and family dynamics. These ads present an inclusive storyline encouraging audiences to reconsider stereotypes and accept diverse forms of gender expression by situating them within a capitalist context. The paper contends that these advertisements, despite their commercial nature, act as influential cultural texts that promote social discussion and resistance.

Keywords: defamiliarisation, Gender stereotypes, resistance, media discourse, identity

Introduction

The Indian advertising reflects a broader shift in the nation's socio-cultural consciousness. Usually, the jewellery advertisements have reinforced the rigid ideals of femininity, fair skin, heterosexual marriage, and domestic submissiveness. However, the recent trends in Malayalam advertisements suggest a shift toward subversion and resistance, challenging gender binaries, reframing beauty standards, and acknowledging marginalised identities.

In this context, this study examines how three contemporary Malayalam jewellery ads - Bhima's "Pure as Love", Vinsmera's "Truly Irresistible", and Kavitha Gold and Diamonds' "Choose Your Special" - employ Victor Shklovsky's defamiliarisation to

destabilise long-held assumptions around gender, tradition, and aesthetics. These ads do not merely show ornaments; instead, they challenge the conventional narratives regarding who adorns them, for what reasons, and in which socio-cultural settings. Furthermore, this study connects with broader contexts from resistance literature, framing advertisements as literary objects that reshape power relationships in language and representation.

Methodology

This research is an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that merges literary, cultural, and gender theories to interpret how contemporary Malayalam jewellery advertisements resist normative social



constructs. Victor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarisation suggests that art should interrupt habitual perception by making the familiar strange. According to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, these ads portray gender as a performed and socially constructed identity, rather than a fixed biological category. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model also analyses how audiences interpret these alternative narratives. Using these theoretical lenses, the research explores how jewellery advertising operates as a marketing tool and culturally serves as texts that contribute towards wider conversations on identity, resistance, and social change.

Narrative Overviews of Selected Advertisements

Bhima – "Pure as Love"

The advertisement begins by focusing on a young man with a moustache and beard, lost in thought, seated in a dimly lit space, reflecting a sense of inner turmoil and isolation. Then the camera focuses on a picture frame containing three girls and a boy, highlighting his deep yearning to become a woman. From the beginning, the ad situates its main character in a profoundly emotional and transitional moment of life.

What follows is a nuanced and gradual depiction of gender affirmation. The boy is shown receiving an anklet from his parents as a present. The father's loving embrace and the mother's smile indicate family support and acceptance. Scenes depict growing her hair, starting hormone therapy, shaving off her moustache and beard, strolling along the beach wearing anklets, and confidently walking through the streets alone, indicating the physical transition of the protagonist. The ad showcases tender family interactions: having her ears pierced alongside her mother, dining out with her parents joyfully, the grandmother lovingly applying hair oil, visiting a tailoring shop for a blouse, spending quality time with her father, and the mother adjusting her jewellery. These gestures signify subtle yet profound expressions of love and acceptance.

There are meaningful close-ups of jewellery, such as earrings, bangles, and necklaces, shown

throughout the advertisement. Here, jewellery is portrayed as both a companion and a driving force in the protagonist's path to self-affirmation. Each piece she adorns represents not tradition or conformity but serves as a visual symbol of transformation, belonging, and self-expression. The jewellery emerges as a representation of joy and validation in the protagonist's new life. In conclusion, the ad features the trans woman adorned in a traditional saree and bridal jewellery, walking with quiet self-assurance, all without the presence of a male partner or wedding ceremony, thereby emphasising individual identity over romantic fulfilment. The ad's slow pace, warm colour palette and nuanced facial expressions lend it a style of emotional realism, making the viewer empathise with the character and reconsider ingrained beliefs about gender, beauty, and inclusion. The closing shot highlights the product's essence: "Pure as Love."

Choose Your Special: Kavitha Gold and Diamonds

This advertisement for Kavitha Gold and Diamonds features the renowned Malayalam actor Fahadh Faasil accompanying his mother for a jewellery shopping at Kavitha Gold & Diamonds. The setting is calm and personal, avoiding the usual glamour often seen in jewellery promotions. While his mother tries on various pieces, especially a fine nose pin, he quietly watches and approves. Then the camera focuses on his expressions, which convey not indifference or mere companionship but sincere admiration and a deep longing. In the meantime, he gets a video call from his female partner asking whether his mother approves. He responds that she does not, creating a moment of tension and curiosity.

As they prepare to leave, however, the mother surprises him by gifting him the nose pin with a gentle reassurance. His face lights up; he calls her "modern mumma." She responds, "Why should girls have all the fun?" This spontaneous line conveys the ad's core message - jewellery and self-expression are not bound by gender. Fahadh then wears the nose pin and walks with quiet confidence. The camera captures close-ups of his expression, which is not



performative or humorous but reflective, proud, and authentic. There is no voice, just a soft soundtrack and dignified visual narration. The ad ends with the tagline "Choose Your Special," emphasising that jewellery is a personal choice beyond assigned gender roles.

"Truly Irresistible" – Vinsmera Jewels

The advertisement "Truly Irresistible", featuring Mohanlal and directed by Prakash Varma, begins with an opulent scene: Mohanlal reaches a photoshoot set in a luxurious vehicle, and Prakash Varma greets and welcomes him to the set. When Prakash Varma explains the shooting script, Mohanlal remains a silent, watchful figure, listening attentively. Subsequently, Mohanlal is introduced to the model: a modern, sophisticated woman adorned with a captivating necklace, who warmly greets him. Mohanlal's smile, expression, and nuanced reactions lead us to question whether he has been observing the heroine through a patriarchal lens.

As the photo shoot commences, the model's jewellery suddenly disappears, instigating alarm. Unbeknownst to the team, Mohanlal discreetly takes it for himself and retreats to his caravan parking outside. Inside, he leisurely embellishes himself with the necklace, bracelet, and ring intended for the model, simply in his everyday shirt and trousers. Classical Indian music sets the backdrop for the scene. Without speaking a word, Mohanlal gives a profoundly moving performance through his expressive eyes, delicate hand gestures (mudras), and soft, dance-like movements, expressing wonder, joy, and a deep appreciation for beauty.

When director Prakash Varma walks into the van, he finds Mohanlal lost in his dreamy adornment and responds with a warm, uninhibited laugh, signifying ease, acceptance, and gentle rebellion. The advertisement concludes without any explanation or judgment, leaving viewers with the actor revelling in unapologetic self-expression. Instead of getting reprimanded, Mohanlal lets out a spontaneous, warm laugh. He says the ad's tagline: "Aarum Kothichu Pokum".

Redefining Gender Through Visual and Narrative Language

The three jewellery advertisements transform gender portrayals by challenging the visual and narrative conventions typically found in commercial media. Shklovsky argues that "art exists to make one feel the 'stone-ness' of a stone," emphasising how defamiliarisation disrupts automated perception (Shklovsky 12). In the Bhima "Pure as Love" advertisement, the product (bridal jewellery) and the occasion (a wedding) are all extremely familiar within the realm of Indian advertising, especially for jewellery. These familiar themes are so entrenched that viewers can often anticipate the entire plot within the first few seconds. However, by distorting the conventional wedding narrative by showcasing an unexpected protagonist: a trans woman, the narrative becomes significant. It questions conventional gender roles and the restricted definition of who qualifies as a 'bride.' It broadens the understanding of marriage and family acceptance in the collective mindset while adhering to a seemingly traditional narrative. The advertisement depicts an Indian family as a site of compassion and progressiveness. These actions challenge traditional heteronormative and patriarchal family dynamics, hinting at the potential for collective, generational change.

If the advertisement featured a cisgender woman, it might have merged into the backdrop of numerous similar commercials. Portrayal of this well-established trope through the perspective of a trans woman's journey and the exclusion of a male romantic partner, Bhima's ad compels viewers to engage with it more actively. The advertisement employs visual aesthetics and narrative structure to challenge and reconstruct the conventional gender norms.

Similarly, Kavitha Gold and Diamonds' "Choose Your Special" features a mother presenting a nose pin to her son, which questions long-held beliefs that link an ornament primarily to femininity. This act of gifting is imbued with love, warmth, and unvoiced affirmation. Fahadh accepts the gift, not with doubt, but with acceptance. In the final scene, Fahadh



Faasil's character wears the nose pin confidently, standing proudly beside his mother and getting embraced by his female partner, which are decisive moments of defamiliarisation.

Traditionally, jewellery ads in India are filled with exaggerated feminine imagery and rigid gender norms - men are gifting jewellery and women are wearing it. If the ad had followed a traditional mode, it would likely have depicted a mother choosing and gifting a nose pin to her daughter, and finally she would have gracefully walked with her male partner. By flipping these gender stereotypes, showcasing a man wearing a nose pin, the ad defamiliarises the conventional act of ornamentation, forcing the viewer to reconsider what is considered 'normal' or 'appropriate'.

At first glance, the advertisement may lead viewers to doubt whether Fahadh Faasil's character identifies as transgender, especially his introspective way of admiring the nose pin. This is an intentional and powerful ambiguity. It unsettles the viewer, prompting them to confront their own biases about gendered behaviour and appearance. However, a supportive female partner in the final scene gently reorients this perception with an inclusive vision of masculinity. A man can desire and wear traditionally feminine jewellery without his identity being questioned. The partner's warm embrace and calm acceptance indicate a world where such expressions of selfhood are met not with shame or scrutiny, but with quiet understanding and love. According to Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarisation, these moments restore the perceptibility of gender expression by illustrating it not as binary or fixed, but as a fluid spectrum of choices.

The nose pin, considered a traditional feminine accessory within Indian culture, now takes on a new meaning - a representation of personal expression that transcends gender norms. The advertisement challenges the notion that jewellery is exclusively for women or that men must adhere to a strict, socially accepted masculinity. It portrays a male character, mainly played by a well-known actor recognised for his complex and reflective roles, embracing an adornment that has historically been reserved for

women. The advertisement avoids exaggeration or stereotypes. There are a few spoken words in the ad, mostly gestures, eye contact, and soft background music convey the idea. Ultimately, the advertisement redefines jewellery from a traditional symbol to one of personal liberation, with the tagline "Choose Your Special" urging viewers to rethink who can wear what—and why. It marks a clear shift from conventional ads that reinforce gender-specific roles through bridal or gifting themes.

Defamiliarisation is forcefully demonstrated in the ad Vinsmera's "Truly Irresistible," directed by Prakash Varma, by casting Mohanlal, a male superstar, in a character that subtly but firmly challenges conventional notions. In Malayalam cinema, Mohanlal, who has long been linked to masculine dominance, is portrayed wearing diamond jewellery and appreciating it in silence in a private, intimate setting. The lack of any love tale, female partner, or explicit explanation makes the picture more remarkable. His slow, graceful movements, the pleasure of wearing necklaces, bracelets, and rings, and his calm reflection in the mirror are typically associated with women in popular culture. This aligns with Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarisation, which holds that art forces viewers to perceive the familiar in an unfamiliar way. The advertisement defies stereotypes by redefining jewellery as a source of personal aesthetic enjoyment rather than a gendered sign. The advertisement makes a bold statement on gender fluidity, aesthetic freedom, and resistance to stereotypical masculinity by portraying Mohanlal's behaviour as natural, enjoyable, and self-expressive.

The Performative Self: Identity Beyond the Binary

These ads profoundly articulate Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Usually through attire, gestures, and social roles, gender is shown as something done, enacted, and repeated rather than as an inherent truth. The protagonist's transformation in Bhima's advertisement is shown as a path toward authenticity. Her wedding dress, gait, and smile embody femininity as reclamation rather than



imitation. Fahadh Faasil's silent but expressive desire for the nose pin and his mother's final approval in the Kavitha Gold and Diamonds advertisement represent a loving acceptance of non-binary expression in the home. Mohanlal's portrayal in the Vinsmerra Jewels - "Truly Irresistible" advertisement turns into a silent act of gender resistance through performance rather than speech. His character's enjoyment of adoration in jewels, which has long been interpreted as feminine in Indian jewellery advertising, blurs the lines between traditional masculine and feminine roles. This reflects Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity, which holds that gender is a recurring collection of patterned acts rather than a fixed essence. Mohanlal, a representation of traditional masculinity performing tenderness, elegance, and self-adornment, shows that these gestures do not have to be limited by gender stereotypes. His self-contained enjoyment of wearing jewellery shows identity is chosen and felt beyond the boundaries of social expectations, rather than as biologically assigned.

Acts of Resistance and Rewriting Norms

Advertising has historically reinforced conventional ideas about gender, but the current ads act as powerful forms of resistance. Bhima's "Pure as Love" places the journey of a transgender woman without featuring any male romantic partner in the ad, with love and support from her family, highlighting family acceptance and personal identity. In Kavitha Gold and Diamonds' "Choose Your Special", a mother gifting her son a nose pin and his female partner supporting and approving his nose piercing, challenge the gender norms in society. The Vinsmerra's advertisement shifts away from the typical portrayal of women adorning themselves for men. Instead, it depicts a man enjoying jewellery for himself by reflecting beauty and confidence without seeking anyone's validation. These commercials challenge outdated beliefs and promote an inclusive perspective on gender, beauty, and love.

Jewellery as a Reflection of Identity, Beyond Mere Adornment

Jewellery signifies purity, marital state and femininity in Indian culture. However, these advertisements disrupt these perceptions with jewellery being an element not just for adornment, but a means to establish one's identity. In these advertisements, jewellery loses its gender-specific connotation. It transforms into an embodiment of charisma, presence, and self-admiration. This transformation indicates Roland Barthes' idea that cultural products carry their own myths; in this case, the mythology of jewellery as a status symbol of marriage and servility is deconstructed and transformed.

Cultural Reinscription in Modern Malayalam Media

These ads mark a turning point by moving away from the aesthetic of fair-skinned, upper-caste, cisgender brides idealised by earlier stereotypes, and move toward one that celebrates diversity in emotion and identity. These campaigns are not completely abandoning cultural codes but reinterpreting them in new lenses. They are instantiations of what Stuart Hall has termed "cultural re-inscription" - a practice wherein present cultural symbols are reloaded with new meanings. These commercials are not merely selling goods but creating new cultural imaginaries, wherein visibility, acceptance, and beauty are plural. Through this, they join the larger resistance movement within literature and language, remaking who gets to be seen, dressed up, and anthologised.

Conclusion

The research presented here has examined the ways modern Malayalam jewellery advertisements are reconstructing the cultural narrative around gender, identity and self-presentation. These ads provide an insight into how commercial storytelling can serve as a powerful form of resistance. While some critiques, such as one featured in *The Malabar Journal*, suggest that these progressive advertisements like Bhima's "Pure as Love" and Vinsmerra's "Truly Irresistible" commodify social resistance and



incorporate trans or gender-fluid narratives into capitalist systems. In consumer culture, advertisements usually serve a profit-driven purpose by reinforcing gender binaries and idealised femininity. Through defamiliarisation strategies and highlighting performative aspects, these three ads intervene in traditional norms and present emotionally centred alternatives to strict binaries. Defamiliarisation in advertising breaks through the clutter of a saturated media landscape, increases memorability by challenging familiar perceptions, and creates deeper engagement by prompting active interpretation. It also generates meaningful conversations, allowing the message to resonate beyond the screen and extend into public discourse. While capitalist motives may lie behind the production, these three advertisements' symbolic and semiotic effects on public perception are undeniable. Advertising may not be transformative, yet in these specific cases, it serves as a platform for narrative resistance, demonstrating a willingness to resonate with changing cultural values and encouraging consumers to rethink tradition through a more inclusive perspective.

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9. Critics and audiences lauded the advertisement for its refinement and substantial emotional impact. Many observed that Mohanlal's portrayal represented a new, fluid form of masculinity that could embrace beauty and adornment without irony. Analysts pointed out that the advertisement gently blurs gender lines through elegance, rather than through a striking spectacle.