

## Decentring the Male Gaze: Gendered Sovereignty and the Commodity of Gold in *Ponman*

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**Abstract:** Male Gaze Theory, introduced by Laura Mulvey in her seminal 1975 essay “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*”, remains a foundational concept in feminist film theory. Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema is structured around a heterosexual male perspective that positions women as objects of visual pleasure rather than as autonomous subjects. Through cinematic techniques such as camera framing, narrative alignment, and visual composition, women are frequently rendered passive, while men occupy active, controlling roles within the diegesis. This paper applies Male Gaze Theory to *Ponman*, a Malayalam-language dark comedy thriller directed by Jothish Shankar. The film narrates the story of P P Ajesh, a gold dealer who lends jewellery to families for weddings with the expectation of monetary return and social reciprocity. By examining the film’s narrative structure, character positioning, and visual strategies, this study investigates how female characters, particularly the bride are represented and whether they are framed primarily through a male-centred perspective. The study explores how the bride’s value becomes symbolically and materially linked to gold, positioning her within a system of exchange that reflects broader patriarchal economies. While the narrative foregrounds male agency and authority, the film may simultaneously function as a critique of these very structures. Thus, rather than merely reinforcing patriarchal ideology, *Ponman* potentially destabilizes it by exposing the commodification of women within marriage transactions. Applying Mulvey’s framework allows for a deeper understanding of how gender, power, and materiality intersect within the film. This study argues that *Ponman* is not only a thriller or dark comedy but also a text that reflects and possibly interrogates the gendered power dynamics embedded in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** *male gaze theory, gendered sovereignty, patriarchal economy, commodification of women, Malayalam cinema.*

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### Introduction

The portrayal of women in film has historically been influenced by visual systems that favor male dominance and viewpoint. Since the 1970s, feminist film theory has scrutinized the ways in which cinematic language shapes gender identities. A key contribution to this discussion is Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, which presents the idea of the male gaze. Mulvey contends that mainstream film’s structure visual enjoyment from a heterosexual male viewpoint, portraying women as objects to be looked at rather than as active participants. This study analyzes the Malayalam film *Ponman*, directed by Jothish Shankar, using male gaze theory as a framework. This dark comedy thriller, focused on gold dealer P.P. Ajesh, delves into the connections between gender, economics, and visual representation. The account portrays gold not just as jewelry but as a form of circulating wealth within marriage, where the bride’s person embodies both economic and symbolic value in a system of exchange. In South Asian contexts, gold is deeply embedded in dowry systems, functioning as both economic security and social

capital (Chakravarti, 2003). Within *Ponman*, this material aspect combines with visual display, prompting important inquiries into the commercialization of women. This paper contends that the film both reinforces and challenges patriarchal norms by revealing how women are objectified within visual and economic frameworks.

### Methodology

This research employs a qualitative interpretive methodology based on feminist film theory. It largely uses Laura Mulvey’s (1975) concept of the male gaze as its main analytical tool. According to Mulvey, cinema operates through three related ways of looking: the camera’s perspective, the characters’ viewpoints within the film, and the audience’s observation. These perspectives frequently collaborate to create a visual framework that prioritizes male experiences while presenting women as sources of visual enjoyment. To expand this framework, the research includes the viewpoints of Mary Ann Doane (1991) and Teresa de Lauretis (1984), who challenge the notion of passive spectatorship and suggest that films have the potential to create

moments of resistance and different ways of seeing. Additionally, David Bordwell's insights from 1985 are utilized to analyze narrative structure, especially concerning focalization and how the story aligns with particular characters. The analysis is organized around three main points. Initially, it assesses narrative consistency to see if the story emphasizes male control, particularly via the main character. Next, it analyzes visual techniques to understand how the bride's body is presented, depicted, and situated within the film's setting. Third, it analyzes the symbolic meaning of material objects, specifically gold, by considering its place in the film's social, economic, and cultural environment. The study uses detailed analysis of specific scenes, especially wedding scenes, to explore the connection between visual displays and financial transactions. This paper aims to demonstrate how gendered meanings are created through the combined use of cinematic techniques and material culture.

## Results

### Narrative Alignment and Male Agency

The narrative in *Ponman* revolves around Ajesh, who drives the main events. He provides loans, establishes financial agreements, and advances the storyline through his business dealings. The film's tension arises from his dangers and worries, not from the bride's feelings or deeper reflections. This narrative alignment supports Mulvey's claim that classical cinema privileges male perspectives, positioning men as active agents and women as passive figures (Mulvey, 1975). The bride mainly serves as a symbolic and transactional figure. She shifts from being an independent actor to a facilitator of economic activity. The film's visual style supports this idea by depicting wedding scenes as extravagant displays of wealth and beauty. The camera often uses close-up shots of gold jewelry and slow, deliberate movements over the bride's decorated body, with bright lighting highlighting the sparkle and clarity of the adornments. These methods collaborate to create a bride who is visually appealing, echoing Laura Mulvey's idea of being a subject for observation. This process emphasizes the woman's outward appearance, neglecting her inner thoughts and feelings and presenting her as an object for viewing. Nevertheless, the film also features moments of suspense within this display. The abundance of gold seems excessive, and the bride's limited mobility due to its weight implies a constraint rather than a feeling of strength. This subtle visual inconsistency suggests a critique of the systems the film appears to replicate, exposing the constraints and forces inherent in these depictions.

### Visual Construction of the Bride

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### Gold and the Commodification of Women

Gold serves a crucial role in the film, functioning as both a tangible object and a symbolic representation. In South Asian marriage practices, gold is closely linked to dowry, family honor, and economic security (Chakravarti, 2003). Ajesh's work as a gold dealer in *Ponman* illustrates how gold becomes a form of circulating capital in the context of marriage-related exchanges. In this context, the bride's body represents a place where various kinds of worth meet. Her value is reflected economically by the amount and quality of gold she adorns, socially by the presentation of her family's status and reputation, and culturally through gender expectations influenced by patriarchal standards. This alignment of values presents the bride as an object of trade, where her worth is determined not by her individual qualities but by her financial value. The film builds upon Laura Mulvey's idea of visual objectification, broadening it to include economic commodification, and illustrates how the female body is integrated into both visual and monetary systems of worth.

### Gendered Sovereignty

Gendered sovereignty describes the power to govern worth, mobility, and choices within communities. Men are the prevalent figures in these areas within *Ponman*. They control the flow of gold, handle financial dealings, and shape the overall story. Although women are highly visible, they have limited influence within these systems. The bride is not involved in the financial choices that determine her worth. This strengthens patriarchal authority and emphasizes the unequal distribution of power. Nevertheless, the film's depiction of male authority is not completely consistent. Ajesh's role is characterized by anxiety and vulnerability, indicating that patriarchal power is conditional rather than definitive.

### Moments of Critique and Destabilization

Although *Ponman* incorporates aspects of the male gaze, it also presents critical perspectives. The movie's satirical humor and over-the-top portrayal of wealth highlight the ridiculousness of viewing marriage solely as a financial arrangement. The disproportionate emphasis on gold verges on absurdity, highlighting the illogical nature of valuing possessions. Likewise, the portrayal of male greed underscores the moral inconsistencies inherent in patriarchal structures. These points support Doane's (1991) and de Lauretis's (1984) assertions about films' ability to foster thoughtful engagement from viewers. *Ponman* prompts viewers to challenge their preconceptions by exposing the artificiality of visual and economic frameworks.

## Discussion

The analysis shows that *Ponman* functions within a dual system of support and criticism. On one hand, the film replicates the visual and storytelling frameworks highlighted by Mulvey (1975), placing women as objects of fascination within a male-dominated storyline. However, the film also challenges these structures by revealing how they operate. The intersection of visual spectacle and economic exchange is particularly significant. Gold simultaneously enhances visual appeal and serves as a store of wealth, connecting the male perspective to wider structures of economic influence. This intersection indicates that the portrayal of women as objects in film requires more than just a visual analysis.

It is also reflected in economic systems that place a value on women's bodies. Highlighting this link, *Ponman* broadens feminist film analysis to include socioeconomic criticism. Additionally, the film's use of satire and exaggeration creates a self-aware quality. Instead of just reinforcing traditional patriarchal ideas, it highlights their inherent instability and contradictions. This is consistent with current feminist perspectives, which highlight the possibility of challenging norms through cultural works.

## Conclusion

*Ponman* presents a convincing analysis of the connections between gender, visual representation, and material culture. The film uses the portrayal of gold and marriage to illustrate how women's bodies are treated as sources of visual enjoyment and financial transactions. Although the film incorporates aspects of the male gaze, it also offers a critique of the economic and social structures that support it. *Ponman* encourages viewers to challenge ingrained patriarchal customs by highlighting the elaborate display

of wealth and revealing the reasoning behind dowry payments. Therefore, the film functions as a self-aware work that shifts away from the traditional male perspective by exposing how it operates. It both demonstrates current power dynamics and provides an opportunity to scrutinize them.

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