

**AGEISM UNVEILED: AN EXPLORATION OF MIDDLE-AGE IN MALAYALAM
MOVIES**



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of the requirement for
the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in English Language and Literature*

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I hereby declare that this project titled “Unveiled Ageism: An Exploration of Middle-Age in Malayalam Movies” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Ms. Sayoojya C S, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

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Unveiled Ageism: An Exploration of Middle-Age in Malayalam Movies

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The project, titled “Unveiled Ageism: An Exploration of Middle-Age in Malayalam Movies” deals with how ageism is ingrained in a youth-favored society in different aspects and the challenges experienced by middle-aged people particularly, women. The project is divided into three chapters and includes an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter is a theoretical exploration of the ageism and the areas its aspects work. The second chapter is the analysis of two Malayalam movies *How Old Are You* and *Udaharanam Sujata* to support the project's intention on examining how middle-aged women are affected by the ageist perspectives in a society. As the second chapter is worked with the reference to two Malayalam movies, the third chapter addresses the ageist and gender -based disparities that are pervasive in the film industry, particularly Malayalam film industry.

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Introduction

Ageism is the prejudice against older people on the basis of negative and unfavourable preconceptions. It is so pervasive in every culture that people often fail to recognize it. Ageism can take root in a very young phase of life. Individuals begin to learn as young children that growing older is an undesirable process and that people who are older are incapable of taking care of themselves. The media sources carry these kinds of negative messages. Advertisements guaranteeing to make "unsightly" age lines disappear, or television shows depicting senior citizens as powerless and frail, casual remarks made by friends and relatives can also spread ageist messages. The messages of antiaging face treatments, satirical birthday cards about becoming older, and ageist jokes are obvious: Growing older is something to be avoided. Both youngsters and senior citizens might be the target of ageism. However, because of the tendency in society to glorify youth, prejudices and hostility based on age are more likely to affect older people (Weir).

Ageism being a form of age-based discrimination has an extended history that spans back to ancient civilizations. Elders were respected for their knowledge and experience in many traditional civilizations, and they were significant members of the society and decision-makers. But as civilizations changed, perceptions towards aging began to shift. As industrialization and modernization expanded, youthful individuals became recognized more and more for their physical ability and productivity, whereas older people were often overlooked or regarded as challenging. Perspectives of aging have been moulded by a variety of religious and cultural convictions throughout history. For instance, getting older was considered as an accomplishment and an indication of expertise in certain cultures, but it was also linked to decline and loss of value in other cultures.

The term "ageism" was initially coined in 1969 by sociologist Robert Butler, whose work has been credited with enabling the idea of ageism come into its own. Butler observed that there were disparities in job, healthcare, and social prospects amongst older people due to the widespread negative viewpoints and discriminatory actions against them. Ever then, there has been a rise in the awareness of ageism, which resulted in advocacy campaigns and legal amendments to fight discrimination based on age and enhance age-inclusive communities. But ageism continues to exist in many ways, which underscores how essential it is to keep up the fight against biases and misconceptions about aging. In his seminal work "Why Survive? Being Old in America, published in the year 1975, Butler examined the social and psychological components of aging and highlighted the challenges that older people have in a culture that promotes youth. He advocated against the generally accepted notion that aging is a period of decline and dependence and in support of a more optimistic and inclusive perspective of aging.

Butler's ageism theory puts a strong emphasis on the significance of eliminating age-based prejudices and stereotypes in society as well as the diversity and endurance of older persons. In an effort to combat ageism and advance age-friendly policies and services, he stood for more awareness and campaigning. Butler was an outspoken advocate of senior citizens' rights as well as their welfare throughout his career, and his efforts established the groundwork for the field of gerontology and research of ageism. Advocates, lawmakers, and researchers striving toward creating an age-inclusive society are still inspired by his legacy.

Middle-aged women today have to deal with a complicated social landscape full of challenges and issues related to their age group. They still face prejudice at work, cultural norms that are generally accepted, and familial expectations which often diminish and undermine their worth, regardless of progress made in the area of gender parity. They face a wide range of challenges that influence their experiences and prospects, from subtle ageism

to explicit discrimination based on their age or gender. Through this project, an attempt is made to shed light on the complexity of middle-aged women's lived experiences and advocate for further support and recognition in the society as it explores many issues and dilemmas that they deal with.

Ageist views, conduct, and attitudes are capable of much more than simply depreciating and undermining one's self-esteem. Emotional and physical well-being, feeling of dignity, interactions with others, and even financial well-being can all be profoundly affected by age prejudice and bias. In contrast to racism and sexism, ageism is often viewed as more socially acceptable, yet like those problems, it takes time to overcome. To address issues like racism and gender prejudice, the majority of organizations of today have departments devoted to diversity, equality, and inclusion. But age prejudice is seldom taken seriously, even in those areas. Ageism is a peculiar-ism' as it is still widely accepted in society in several ways. It influences various societal organizations and sectors, such as the legal system, the workplace, the press, and the sectors of social care and health care.

Ageism has adverse impacts on people's health and wellbeing that are substantial and severe. Ageism is linked to deteriorating mental and physical health in older adults, as well as increased loneliness and social exclusion, greater financial instability, lower standards of life, and an earlier mortality. It has been estimated that ageism is contributing factor of around six million incidents of depression worldwide. It has an adverse influence on people's health and well-being as it combines with and amplifies various kinds of bias and disadvantage, such as those related to sex, race, and disability. In addition, ageism is frequently reinforced by negative perceptions that misrepresent aging. Employment discrimination, digital divide, health-care disparities, social isolation, intergenerational conflict etc can be seen as the current challenges and trends existing in a society which pose strong ageist perspectives.

This project aims to conclude that almost every culture and social groups in general and film industry in particular hold the potential to demonstrate strong aspects of ageism by tracing its roots back to the Preconceptions, portrayals and casting choices.

How Old Are You is a Malayalam film released in the year 2014 written by Bobby Sanjay, produced by Listin Stephen and directed by one of the finest directors in the industry, Rosshan Andrews. He is known for his versatile filmmaking and has contributed to movies spanning various genres through his direction. He is well known for his ability to handle different genres such as drama, thriller and the most relevant, social issues. *How Old Are You* is one of his notable works, that showcases and explores themes related to women empowerment, prejudices faced by middle aged people and their struggle to meet societal expectations.

Udaharanam Sujata is a Malayalam movie released in the year 2017 directed by Phantom Praveen, adapted by Naveen Bhaskar and produced by Martin Parakkat and Joju George. This movie is a remake of a Hindi language film named *Nil Battey Sannata* (The New Classmate). The director is a potential filmmaker in the Malayalam film industry and he is known for writing as well as directing. The movie *Udaharanam Sujata* is one of his notable works that explores the central theme of a middle -aged single mother's selfless efforts to ensure a bright and better future for her daughter.

There are three core chapters to this project. The first chapter "Breaking barriers: navigating the complex landscapes of age-based discrimination" focuses on the theory of ageism and explores its aspects especially the disparities middle-aged women face. Chapter two "Chronicles of age" takes two Malayalam movies *How Old Are You* and *Udaharanam Sujata* as references to prove the concept of ageism mentioned in the primary chapter. The final chapter "Ageism on the silver screen" in association with the movies, deals with the ageist

and gender-based discrimination existing in the film industry, particularly Malayalam film industry.

Chapter 1

Breaking Barriers: Navigating the Complex Landscape of Age-Based Discrimination

Ageism refers to stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age, according to the World Health Organization. Aging is considered a universal experience and process, but it is nevertheless widely accepted in our culture. Furthermore, ageism has two distinct targets: other-directed ageism, which is when people stick to the belief that other older people are wise or slow, or ageism that is directed at other individuals. Self-directed ageism is another form of ageism, which means that it is directed towards oneself. For instance, an individual may have negative feelings about getting older (“Ageism-Global”).

The divergent means by which ageism manifests can be categorized as implicit ageism and explicit ageism. Unconscious biases or stereotypes that affect attitudes and behaviors towards individuals based on age can be defined as implicit ageism and openly expressed discrimination or prejudice based on age can be defined as explicit ageism. Many negative effects on the body and mind are not innate, but they do have a complex relationship and start to accumulate early in life. In contrast to other domains where culture influences aging, the majority of aging-related physical failures are not predicted. Ageism amplifies discrimination that has been practiced for a lifetime. It is interconnected with other biases such as misogyny, racism, ableism, homophobia, and classism because any of these prejudices, especially compound ones, are likely to worsen as the targets get older. In contrast to other types of biases such as ableism, sexism, or racism, ageism is a systemic kind of oppression that affects all people. Despite the fact that ageism is universal, people may not accept it as seriously as they do other forms of inequality.

Three levels of ageism are: micro (individual), meso (social networks), and macro (institutional and societal). Interpersonal ageism occurs when someone applies ageism to themselves, whereas institutional ageism occurs when an institution maintains ageism by through its actions and regulations (“Ageism | OHSU”). Additionally, ageism might change based on the situation. hostile ageism refers to condescending views about people based on their age, such as considering elderly folks to be infantile and in need of assistance with everyday duties. Hostile ageism, on the other hand, consists of overtly aggressive attitudes regarding age, such as considering teenagers to be violent or dangerous. Depending on whether a person is aware of it or not, it might be classified. It is referred to be explicit ageism if they are conscious of it and implicit ageism if they are not. Using a medical setting as an example, implicit ageism would occur if a doctor unintentionally treats older and younger patients differently. Ageism can take in various forms, including in the workplace.

Some examples of ageism prejudices in the workplace include the refusal of the relevant authority to hire people based on their age rather than their experience, asking applicants about their age during job interviews that are irrelevant, perceiving younger people as unskilled and not trustworthy, considering middle-aged people as outdated and unfit, implementing policies that unfairly favour one age group over another, and holding unfavourable stereotypes about both younger and older workers. It is a threat to the workplace harmony and productivity. Ageism in interpersonal relationships can manifest as a tendency to undervalue or neglect the abilities or expertise of family members due to their age, to make crude and inappropriate jokes about someone's age, to disregard someone's concerns because of their age, or to take advantage of someone's age for personal gains. Ageism is a widespread issue that impacts people in various social contexts.

Ageism is pervasive, yet it's often overlooked or given less attention than other forms of discrimination. This emphasizes how crucial it is to bring attention as other forms of bias,

leading to age-related that remain unrecognized. Ageism is interrelated across all facets of people's lives and is not confined to just one area. Social interactions and health might be impacted by discriminatory employment practices. A thorough comprehension of ageism requires understanding and knowledge of these linkages. Ageism has a significant impact on people's quality of life. Age-based discrimination can seriously affect mental health and result in feelings of isolation and limited options. By emphasizing these consequences, ageism's seriousness and scope of influence are brought to light. Understanding the cultural and historical context of ageism emphasizes how historical events and cultural norms shape societal attitudes toward aging. By acknowledging that perceptions of age are influenced by larger cultural forces, this recognition adds depth and complexity to the study of ageism.

The World Health Organization recognizes that gender plays a critical role in understanding the evolution of public policy related to active ageing. It acknowledges the difficulties women have throughout their lives, which might differ in severity depending on the nation ("Ageism-Global"). These challenges encompass issues like education, health care access, nutrition, employment, caregiving, and inheritance. This strategy underscores how crucial it is to deal with gender-based prejudices and stereotypes throughout a person's life in order to guarantee a fulfilling old age. When it comes to healthy aging, gender also has a big impact on the experiences of aging, especially for older women.

The expression "the double standard of aging" is heard so frequently that it almost seems obvious. Compared to the situation of male, women's social worth has been more strongly linked with their physical attractiveness, and these assessments of women's worth decline more sharply with age than those of men. Extending beyond heterosexual prejudice, it appears that seeming old is seen more harshly for women across variety of cultures as well as, presumably, for individuals of other sexual orientations. Garner B A, an editor in chief of

Blacks Law Dictionary has encapsulated that “Women lose their social worth simply by growing old”. Men are more likely than women to be assessed and rewarded for their accomplishments.

In political economies where women find it difficult to simultaneously contribute to the production of goods and human reproduction, gender has become particularly important. This challenge favours male dominance over production and, consequently, wealth, making women dependent on them in relationships that require great deal of unpaid labor and an exploration that is frequently disguised as familial love. Nonetheless, the practices that organizations use to distinguish women and men, masculinity and femininity remain largely rooted in those mutually exclusive but varying extents. Affiliation with these types of employment can become a matter of gender identity, with the notion of men being the breadwinners on the account of their productive work and women being objects of desire due to their attractiveness. In light of this, masculinity and femininity have been shaped developing the sets of gender values that define manhood and womanhood and hold both genders responsible.

In a world characterized by changing societal norms and relentless pursuit of youthfulness, middle-aged people find themselves navigating a complex world full of age-related biases. Growing older involves developing maturity and turning into a more mature, responsible and considerate adult. Some people hold a negative perception of aging, viewing it as a setback that lessens the pleasure they may have derived from their own personal development. Many people consider aging as a challenging process that causes them to lose their confidence and experience the lack of productivity. Over the past century, industrialization and modernization have resulted in significant declines in older individuals' social and cultural status. Individuals, especially middle-aged people now need to work more

swiftly and efficiently due to the industrial age and technical improvements to remain competitive. These modifications have decreased the necessity for and visibility of older individual's activities.

Ageism, thus can be defined as prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes separately, these elements can be considered as behavioural, affective, and cognitive. As a result, age stereotypes are fixed ideas that exaggerate the characteristics, qualities, and actions that a particular group of middle-aged people share. Age stereotypes can directly contribute to presumptions about a middle-aged person's abilities in both mental and physical aspects as well as their social skills, political and religious beliefs, and other traits. So, they tend to internalize the negative and damaging stereotypes of ageism that continue to be spread widely throughout society today and tend to confine themselves to age-related preconceptions, which turn them weak, unhealthy, and even less open to accept new learning opportunities. It is increasingly understood as a risk factor associated with increased anxiety, stress, depression, feeling of desolation and lowered life satisfaction.

Interpersonal conflicts can arise at any stage of life, from early adulthood to old age. According to the life span literature, as people get older, they are exposed to a variety of social contexts. People's daily lives are characterized by their interactions with family members, acquaintances neighbours, coworkers and friends. But family plays the major part especially in the life of women undergoing middle age. These social exchanges might have detrimental effects in addition to positive ones. Interpersonal issues are the detrimental causes of stress out of all the issues that arise on a daily basis and interpersonal tensions are better indicators of psychological well-being than other types of everyday occurrences such as work overloads.

Referring to a poem 'middle age' by Kamala Das, "Middle age is when your children are no longer friends but critics, stern of face and severe with their tongue" ("Middle Age -

Kamala Das: About the Poet | PDF”). This poem captures sense of isolation, agony and sadness of a middle-aged mother. It portrays the harsh realities and difficulties of middle-age, when children grow into adults who no longer need their older parents. It also reflects the absence of love in inter-personal relationship of a middle-aged woman, especially one who experiences motherhood. The poem has conveyed the expressions of a mother who is left alone in her middle age by her child. Here the mother is not glorified but neglected and detached from love and care. She laments over the loss of her son’s love and attention through her middle age while he was grown up to be a critic and not a companion. This poem can be a major example conveying the effects of ageism in a woman’s interpersonal life especially a mother on her middle age era.

The role of mass media in influencing cultural values has been a topic of debate for a while. The media, at the very least, reflects the existing values in a culture. The portrayal of how men and women represent how ageism and sexism are deeply embedded in the social structure. The portrayal of people based on their age in films, Television shows, and commercials is known as ageism in the media. Older persons are often underrepresented or stereotyped which contribute to societal prejudices and misconceptions. Analysing how age-related stereotypes are portrayed in the media sheds light on how these portrayals design public perceptions. Ageism intersects with racism, sexism, and ableism, the other forms of discrimination. Individuals may experience additional prejudices based on their age along with other aspects of their identity. By encouraging narrow and unrealistic image of old age that does not accurately reflect the diverse and varied reality of contemporary life, the media can contribute to ageism and sexism. Ageist and sexist stereotypes that are already present in traditional media can be further strengthened by social media platforms. Age-based prejudices in the media is a reflection of socially acceptable cultural norms and beliefs.

Unfortunately, during the pandemic, ageist narratives and pictures became more present in both traditional and social media.

Although it will require patience, changing attitudes can begin with addressing language. We interact with each other by words and actions. Giving backhanded compliments, speaking in a condescending tone or loudness, employing belittling descriptions, and employing "elder speak" are some forms of subtle disrespect directed towards senior citizens. It's critical to understand that, regardless of age, everyone is aging. Spending some time recognizing and resolving own ingrained worries and internalized fears can help. Acknowledge each person's role in the contribution to this shift by adjusting thoughts, language, and adjustments in actions.

Chapter 2

Chronicles of Age: Analysis of middle-aged portrayals in *How Old Are You* and Udaharanam Sujata

The movie *How Old Are You* is one of the brilliant works in the Malayalam film industry that showcases and explores themes related to women empowerment, prejudices faced by middle aged people and their struggle to meet societal expectations. The plot revolves around a middle-aged woman named Nirupama Rajeev, who leads a routine life as a selfless wife and mother. The story narration takes a twist and turn when she gets a totally unexpected opportunity to meet the honorable President of India, resulting in a crucial revaluation of her life choices and a strong reply and comeback against those prejudices she faced due to her middle age. The movie stars Manju Warriar as the leading role and her performance was acclaimed as enthusiastic and considerable success. The character which Manju Warriar plays in the film serves as a lens through which the storyline touches upon the stereotypes and formidable hurdles faced by middle-aged individuals, especially women in our society. The movie is an excellent and compelling choice for analysis on the context of theory of ageism.

As mentioned above the movie is centered on a ‘thirty-six’ year old woman named Nirupama Rajeev who works as a UD clerk in the Revenue Department. Her husband, Rajeev Narayan works at Akashavaani and desires of migrating to Ireland for a better standard of life and better education for their daughter. Nirupama as a wife and a compassionate mother aspires to accompany her family in their journey of life in Ireland but everything goes in vain as most Irish companies turn down her job applications because of her age. Unlike the other family members including her husband and daughter, she does not have any kinds of higher

aspirations. She just wants to accompany her family so that she can take good care of her them, especially she can be there whenever her teenage daughter wants her support and care. These are said to be the only typical aspirations of an Indian woman, who is especially in her middle age and a mother too.

The movie begins with the scene itself that Nirupama attending an interview where she fails because she is just ‘thirty-six’ and not thirty-five. See the conversation between the interviewers and Nirupama “I think we have a bit of problem here Mrs. Rajeev because definitely you are aware of the age bar we have for this job and it is thirty-five. “But I am I am just thirty-six” (*How Old Are You* 00:04:00--00: 04:12). In her life, everything was normal and nothing interesting or extraordinary was there and she craves for a change. Nirupama is initially shown as an indolent person who leads a very normal life and showcases a massive transformation eventually throughout the storyline. Nirupama also gets looked upon by some of her colleagues in a satirical manner. She as an enduring and loving mother, cares for her dearest daughter selflessly and it’s her daughter the prime reason for her desire to migrate to Ireland.

On her thirty-sixth birthday she meets her daughter in a bakery after her school for a quite quality time. There her daughter makes an indirect common joke about her mother’s diminished vision that directly associated with the loss of health for the middle aged and ageing people. “It is time for you to start wearing specs” (*How Old Are You* 00:13:51--00: 13:55). In the same scenario, her daughter’s friends happened to come across them in the bakery and addresses Nirupama as ‘aunty’ which is against her liking. Her daughter simply leaves it by saying they use the term ‘aunty’ to address women who are above the age of thirty -five but she feels kind of insecure about her age and the process of being aged (*How Old Are You* 00:13:59—00:14:10). To support her feeling, she also makes a statement that “none of these are applicable to men” (*How Old Are You* 00:14:10--00:14:11). This phrase

can be applied to one more scenario in the beginning of the movie itself. When she happens to encounter with an aged lady whom she sees every day in bus asks her whether it was her brother who was seen with her on the other day at passport office. Nirupama replies ‘no it was my husband’ with a simple smile and ignores it (*How Old Are You* 00:09:15—00:09:22). The discomfiture of her husband being mistaken for her younger brother further troubles her. This scene can be considered as one of the examples of differences that occurs in the physical appearance of the male and female once they involve in the process of ageing. This scene supports the common notion that generally men look younger than women in the middle age, though they are of same age. The fact that this is due to their additional experiences gained and physical, psychological and emotional struggles underwent due to the process like menstruation, gestation, lactation, nurturing, care giving etc. are conveniently forgotten. At the end of the bakery scene, Nirupama reveals her daughter that she failed her interview to go to Ireland because of her age and unintentionally disappoints her (*How Old Are You* 00:14:40—00:15:18).

Following these experiences she had on her birthday, she instantly feels a need for a little change and goes for dyeing her hair flattered by the hair dresser’s advice for her to look ten years younger. Here she can be seen as a representative of middle-aged women who is conscious about their physical appearance associated with the process of ageing. Also, the need for looking younger to be accepted in a society which is so prone to ageism and unlike other discriminations, this particular one lacks activists and hence articulation. When talks about another aspect of ageism, that demonstrates the tendency to ignore and underestimate the skills, knowledge and opinions of the family members and disregarding someone’s concerns due to their age, Nirupama’s daughter’s attitude and behavior towards her mother clearly supports this. She makes an inappropriate joke “if I start arguing with you, I will become old” (*How Old Are You* 00:21:54—00:21:59) to disregard her mother’s thinking at

the age of thirty-six. She experiences dismissive attitudes from her husband and daughter who is a minor and they undermine her worth as middle-aged woman (*How Old Are You* 00:34:40—00:36:16). In addition to this, her professional urges are belittled, reflecting the ageism concepts prevalent in her workplace. She faces ageist bias on institutional level. Such encounters foreground systematic ageism and strengthens the notion associated with middle-aged people. As an older employee and as a woman she is often overlooked for opportunities. She experiences subtle and undisguised ageist attitudes and indirect offensive ageist jokes from her colleague who is around same age as her (*How Old Are You* 01:03:32--01:03:38). It shows the multi-faceted nature of age-based biases.

The story narration takes a turn when she gets summoned to the local police station and acknowledges that she has been invited for an informal breakfast and a conversation with the honorable President of India. She learns that a question which her daughter posed to the President who visited the school was the reason for such invitation. Generally middle-aged people are insecure about revealing their age or someone adding to their age while any conversation. Nirupama feels disappointed when she acknowledges that her age is written as thirty-seven instead of thirty-six in the newspapers that had the news of her meeting with the honorable President of India (*How Old Are You* 00:46:30—00:46:40). Unfortunately, on the day of the meeting, she faints in front of the President and the whole scenario turns out to be a disaster. She becomes a topic of talk in the town and the laughing stock on Facebook. The social media users created ‘Nirupama Jokes’ and made critical and dishonoring comments about her age attempting to marginalize her based on the societal expectations. These instances she deals with reflects the reality of the society which is so obsessed with the idea of ageism and gender bias in online spaces and platforms where individuals, particularly women face negativity and intolerance based on their age. With this incident, she even faces the issues of being criticized by her own family members especially her daughter (*How Old*

Are You 1:05:08-1:05:25). Later she ends up in a sentimental situation where she has to witness her husband and dearest daughter fly to Ireland without her. In the scene where Rajeev confesses the news of their departure, Nirupama shows a concern as she cannot accompany with them to Ireland. Rajeev says “it is not a right thing to leave parents behind all alone, if everyone else leave for Ireland” (*How Old Are You* 01:08:17—01:08:20). This instance shows that how a middle- aged woman’s dream and aspirations are determined by patriarchal undercurrents at play in the society. According to a middle-aged family-oriented woman, her own self aspirations and dreams are among her least priority.

One of her old classmates, Susan David, a successful businesswoman pays a totally unexpected visit to her life and reminds her of the potential and highly spirited woman she used to be during her college life and inspires her to unearth her younger self. One day she sets out to visit an old lady who she would meet every day in the bus, both of them not knowing each other’s name, after she gets to know that the old lady is sick. She turns up at her house with the organic vegetables she grew in her own terrace garden and the news of her pure organic vegetables spread quickly as the sick woman shares the details with her employer who is a well-known business man.

The whole story narration takes a turn and the destiny of a thirty-six years old middle-aged woman starts to change with this incident. The business man was impressed by the quality of Nirupama’s fresh organic vegetables and asks her if she could be able to provide same quality fresh organic vegetables for his daughter’s wedding in just four months. For this she encourages all her neighbors to join her in this journey by cultivating vegetables on their rooftop as well, and it turned out to be a massive success. In between she faces pressure from the family, her husband and daughter calling her to Ireland to stay with them and take care over the family (*How Old Are You* 02:00:05—02:00:22). But she hesitates to go as she realizes she has more dreams to achieve despite her insecurities based on her age, more

works to do including her commitment to supply organic vegetables. Her husband seems unhappy with her hesitation and strongly implies that she is neglecting her duties and care for her daughter as a mother (*How Old Are You* 02:01:19—02:02:20). This scene clearly represents the social pressure and the pressure within the family or from inter-personal relationships faced by middle-aged people, especially women to hold on to traditional roles, finite opportunities for self-growth and career development. She gains confidence and reminds her husband who was never a support system to her to expect only what is given to her.

The same old friend who inspired and helped her for a massive rediscover of her younger self encourages her to present a seminar with a high valued and important audience including state minister and collector. Nirupama showcases her excellence on her speech framing the topic of organic farming by prioritizing bio vegetables garden in all housing projects and it delights all the officials attended her seminar. An ordinary middle-aged woman who raised an extraordinary question to the President once fainted at the moment of meeting, has woke up again and thinks to begin from where she failed.

Once again, she meets the honorable President with her family and this time to consider her vision of organic farming idea nationwide. Thereby she is trying to prove age is just a number. Finally, Nirupama is able to answer the great question that her daughter raised to the President. “Who decides the expiry date of woman’s dreams?” (*How Old Are You* 02:07:47—02:07:52). Her transformation from an indolent woman who was obsessed about her ageing and leading a very extra ordinary life, putting her talents behind on the behalf of her age to a steady and sprightly lady is the whole point of the film.

The movie *How Old Are You* addresses the social norms and stereotypes associated with her age and the challenges she faces on the notion of ageism. The film underscores how

each individual, especially women of our society, can be freed from these societal expectations related to the concept of ageing. Its narration of the story supports the idea that age should not limit or restrict anyone's potential to excel in any field they like or they feel like they belong to and contribute to the society, mirroring the issues of ageism in culture. The film also digs into the value and importance of recognizing and accepting the experience and wisdom one gained and that comes with age. By depicting the leading character Nirupama's journey of resilience and self-discovery the movie promotes more egalitarian and a respectful society for people of all ages, especially the category of middle-aged people who face prejudices based on their age on a daily basis. Through the portrayal of a middle-aged woman reclaiming her identity and manifest her actual worth, the movie turns out to be an impressive and convincing commentary on the interrelation of ageism and gender bias.

The movie *Udaharanam Sujata* is one of the notable works in Malayalam film industry that explores the central theme of a single mother's selfless efforts to ensure a bright and better future for her daughter. The narration follows Sujata, a middle-aged single mother who belongs to lower-middle-class strata of the society working menial jobs to provide nourishment, protection and better educational opportunities for her daughter. Sujata's daughter Athira is academically gifted but the family's financial status threatens her dreams of becoming successful and thus she begins to perform academically weak and blames her single mother for their financial constraints. To change her daughter's attitudes and academic performance, she decides to enroll in the same school where her daughter studies. The film spotlights the hardships faced by both mother and daughter as they confront expectations of the society they live in, economic constraints, and pursuit of better academics. Sujata as middle-aged single mother goes through various discrimination based on her age, her educational qualification and her living conditions. Sujata struggles to meet daily needs but her determination to ensure quality education for her daughter keeps her hardworking and

optimistic. This film stars Manju Warriar and Anaswara Rajan as the leading roles. The character which Manju Warriar plays in the film acts as a lens through which stereotypes and hardships faced by middle-aged individuals, particularly women and single mothers in the society we live in.

The major instance that shows ageist perspective in this movie is when Sujata wanting to continue her education at her middle age. The scene where Sujata applies for her admission to the tenth grade and the principal's reaction to her joining school at middle age can be seen in the ageist perspective. It was quite surprising for the principal when he learns about Sujata's decision to continue schooling at this age and he initially says no to her because of her age. "He implies that there are other systems of education for people like Sujata who is a middle-aged woman" (*Udaharanam Sujata* 00:46:32—00:47:20). Also, her daughter Athira gets angry with her and later begs her to not attend the school as she fears embarrassment just because Sujata is a middle-aged woman and it's against the societal stereotypes. When she starts attending classes, she becomes a target of age-based discrimination and mockeries from her younger classmates. The students find it as strange for someone her age to be in the same class as them which leads to the concept of skepticism. They initially underestimate Sujata's ability to excel in academics when compared to younger students.

Sujata's decision to return to school summons the existing social norms and she experience stigma on the social level for going against the traditional roles expected of women, especially of middle age. Instead of supporting her mother's aspiration to continue education, her family itself tries to restrict her due to her age and gender. It challenges stereotype that educational and successful aspirations are only meant for young people. The act of her mother embarrasses Athira and she pretends to not have acquaintance of her at school. Sujata as a selfless mother, works more menial jobs including working late in the night in small restaurants and saves more money for her daughter's education along with

paying out the family debts. It underscores the strong determination and resilience of a single mother, especially near her forties to break through age- based barriers to provide a secured future for her child. It questions the prevalent notions that a society poses about the capabilities and desires of each individual based on their age.

During a mother-daughter argument, Athira accuses her mother of earning money by prostitution as she sees her mother coming late home every day (*Udaharanam Sujata* 01:40:34—01:41:46). She feels devastated about her daughter's suspicion on her and their relation goes all-time low. This instance depicts the assumption of youth that disregards and underestimate the abilities and skills of middle-aged persons, particularly women. Her daughter's perspective that her middle-aged single mother can only earn money by prostitution and she is not capable for doing any other decent jobs represents the societal attitudes towards such individual.

Coming to the end of the film, Athira realizes her mistakes, corrects it and passes SSLC examination along with her mother and she fulfills her mother's aspiration see her daughter as a District Collector. The movie ends with a scene where Athira as a District collector answering to a question 'what inspired her to choose IAS as her career?' with 'she didn't want to become a house help' and she is inspired from her dear mother who tutors mathematics to economically backward children in their colony for free. Though there was a change by the end, the initial portrays are of ageist related.

The plot clearly unfolds the themes of motherhood, strong determination, societal stereotypes and prejudices faced based on age. Through the portrayal of struggles and win of Sujata, a middle-aged woman, especially a single mother, the viewers are encouraged to rethink and act against the age-related biases existing in the society and to understand the potential for personal development and accomplishment at any stage of life, despite of age.

In both movies *How Old Are You* and *Udaharanam Sujata* age is portrayed as a barrier that women must overcome and in both of the films Malayalam actress Manju Warrier is starred as the female lead. Both movies explore the concept of motherhood and their transformations were for their daughters than themselves in the first place. The notions that the society preconceived about what is expected of women particularly at middle age create struggles for their personal and educational goals. These movies explore the theme of transformation of women, both without family's support especially their daughters as a common element. Family members, friends and the society everyone lives in find it hard to accept their decisions, which raises the hardships faced when breaking free from age-based norms. These resemblances highlight wide social issues of ageism, particularly concerning women, the ones who experiencing motherhood and their choices of life. Both the movies aim at emphasizing the need and importance of personal fulfillment and continuous development of each individual breaking the barriers of age.

Chapter 3

Ageism on the Silver Screen

Cinema is the domain where stories are narrated through the lens of imagination, creativity and expression. The existence of ageism emits profile over the career of the women, mainly those who have enhanced the industry for several years. When throwing lights upon on the journey of career of the women in the film industry it is possible to unearth the challenges and prejudices that grows along with the period of time. Getting limited roles and pressure from the cinema sphere often leads to casting that characterized by subtle shades of meaning and visibility. It portrays the multi-faced aspects of ageism and gender that makes impacts on women, particularly those who belong to the cinema world. Ageism in the field is apparent in discriminatory exercises and narrow opportunities for women once they enter the middle-aged category. Older actresses experience troubles while ensuring that leading roles are maintained and there is a high tendency to prioritize young talents over them. These instances provide to the fact of lack of characterization of mature women in varied roles. The stereotype that usually younger women manifest roles in the promotional advertisements and media attraction and coverage easily which give way to the disempowerment of older women in the same industry.

One of the main factors associated with the aspects of ageism on women in the film industry is beauty standards. They undergo pressures to observe the beauty standards set by the industry and the society we live in. This pressure negatively impacts their self-regard and decisions about pursuing transformation and revamping. Narrow beauty standards for female actresses are repeatedly fortified in favored media according to the studies of the genre.

Unrealistic beauty standards are sustained because of the consistent appearance of idealized images in the movies, television shows, and advertisements.

The widespread use of social media also contributes to the press experienced by the female actresses, particularly the leading roles to meet the beauty standards, especially if they belong to the middle-age category. Their opinions about their physical appearance are influenced by the atmosphere that sustains unrealistic ideals and is made it possible by the usage of filters, photoshop, and carefully chosen photographs. The studies show a concerning link between the cultural beauty standards and women's mental health. The press they feel to match with these beauty norms result in negatively impacted mental health condition including anxiety, depression and dissatisfaction about self-body image and insecurities. The societal norms often seek youthful appearance on the screen as per the standards prevalent in the industry and outside. These create the difficulties that women encounter as they get older impacting their opportunities and roles whereas male leading roles are not much bothered about the beauty standards. It can impact their mental well-being as well as their career prospects.

There is a great tendency and a historical trend of leading roles played by aged men contributing gracefully to the purpose of the movies. Men despite of aged or not continue to secure leading and prominent roles and portrayal of diverse characters and women find themselves in a condition where beholding to the stereotypical expectations. In many movies, the female character having same age as the male character gets to play the role of the male character's mother or as their sister or more elder roles. Many regional film industries pose such casting choices and one such instance can be sighted from a Malayalam film named 'Balyakalasakhi' released in 2014 in which actress Meena plays the mother of Mammooty who is twenty-five years elder than her. In this film, Mammooty plays the leading male role as 'Majeed' and Meena who is way younger than him plays the supporting role as his mother.

She was only thirty-eight during that time and Mammooty was sixty-three years old. An actress named Isha Talwar was casted as his heroine and she was only twenty-seven back in 2014, when the movie was released. A huge age gap can be seen in the casting of both male and female leads in this particular movie. A similar instance is that in a Malayalam movie called 'Big B' released in 2007, Nafisa Ali who is five years younger than Mammooty in real life played the role of his mother. The movie stars him as the leading role and Nafisa as a supportive mother role. When we trace back to old film era, we can see similar instances prevalent in the industry. In the film *Thulavarsham* released in 1976, Kaviyoor Ponnammamma played the mother of Prem Nazir as Balan in the movie. She was only thirty-one at that time and Prem Nazir was sixty-two years old. These movies *Balyakalasakhi* and *Thulavarsham* are major indicators of the age-based disparity existed in the Malayalam film industry back then and even still. Also, the movie *Thulavarsham* depicts how ageist biases prevalent can be traced back to the seventies. It clearly demonstrates a reversal of age-based casting norms.

According to the research of International Federation of Actors, 63.8% of women and 51.2% of men in the movie industry have career span of 11 to 15 years. This 12% disparity shows the percentage of female actors who have ended their acting career earlier than the male counterparts. Women's participation in the motion picture industry has broadened the gender gap. As per the studies, the audience preferences have been set on a certain age and gender combinations. Once women in the industry starts to age, they get to play limited roles but young male talents also play fewer roles as well. During the Venice Film Festival in 2006, an actress Meryl Streep remarked "what films have you seen lately with serious roles for 50-year-old women in the lead?" she adds these roles are the roles they write for women her age and they are typically horrific or dragon-like (Dean).

When it comes to the topic of how elder people, especially women are portrayed in the films, it is obvious that they are mostly seen in the supporting roles and repeatedly surrounded by the stigmas of unattractiveness, vulnerability and weakness. Women are more marginalized than men to a higher extent and they are often characterized as maternal figures or non-sexual creatures while young female talents are overtly sexualized and objectified. Even as male characters start getting older, the ages of their romantic interests remain practically unchanged and this can be one of the reasons why female actors same age as the male actors' lag. Mammooty is seventy-two years in the real life when the movie *Bramayugam* was released in 2024 and he was also portrayed as an aged character named *Kodumon Potti* in the movie. The movie portrays the character's unchanged romantic interests and practices though he is an aged person. There is a fact that we seldom see any female leading roles of age with such romantic desires or practices in the Malayalam movies. Women of age have been shifted to the roles of wives, mothers and sisters generally. Substantial roles are seldom written for older women and even if they are written it is unfortunate that they are still not given to them. The representation of their sexuality is often depicted in a form of mockery and they are mostly shown as characters who carry family and cultural values.

Mass media has a significant role aiding ageism against female celebrities in the industry and it represents the culture in which it exists and reveals a frequent reinforcement of narrow beauty standard for women, particularly for older women. The interplay between the media and culture often results in the propagation of negative stereotypes and certain stigmas along with the spread of discriminatory practices and beliefs based on age. The media often spotlights the changes that occurs physically with the ageing process which choose youth above experience. The captions and headlines medias use for public attention and attraction have the ability to propagate preconceived notions and sway public general

opinion. Casting choices that clearly favor young female actresses over talented older women with experience for substantial roles serves to the concept that youth is more marketable and publicly more acceptable. The notion that the older actresses are comparatively less relevant and unsuccessful in the field might be influenced by the lack of portrayals of them in leading roles. The popular medias focus more on the attention of physical appearance of female actors and examine their changes over time in all aspects which can overshadow their achievements on a professional level.

The fact that medias emphasize on the physical attributes of women over their potential contributes to a culture that elevates women exclusively for their attractiveness. “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figures which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness”. “The presence of women is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey). The usage of terms such as ‘past her prime’, ‘aging gracefully’ etc. suggests the idea that there is an expiry date for older women’s acting career. While sharing contents and interacting with the audience of social media platforms, the discussions, comments and sharing views associated with age can serve to the reinforcement of ageist beliefs.

Media sources also examine and cover their private affairs, romantic relationships, cosmetic procedures they undergo all contributing to imbalanced depiction of women across various age groups especially the category of older women. Moreover, by presenting contents that promote existing ageist viewpoints and regards, media plays a significant role in

providing to the sustainability of industrial norms and standards. This may deeply impact people's expectations towards female celebrities being marginalized. Addressing ageism as an issue in the film industry, these media outlets need to develop more inclusive and respectful reporting techniques. It can challenge age-based prejudices and manifest a more equitable industry by highlighting the potentials and accomplishments of them despite of their age.

Another disparity existing in this domain is unequal pay and it can intersect with gender-based pay differences. The fact that it is challenging for older women to negotiate pay on the same level with male actors despite their age or younger female talents. It mainly showcases the multi-facets of female celebrity's acting career and public perception in the movie business. A Malayalam actress Parvathy Thiruvoth who is an exclusive member of WCC mentions about the casting couch in Malayalam film industry in an interview. Older actresses might have less negotiating strength because of the scarcity of leading roles for them. Comparing themselves with their male counterparts, they encounter difficulties to advocate for equal pay distribution and shows a tendency to compromise with the available roles due to lack of opportunities. As majority of the older women are casted in stereotypical roles, such as mothers, grandmothers and wives can contribute to income inequality. These financial differences maybe further influenced by the fact that these traditional and stereotypical roles may not command the same level of pay as nuanced and complex characters. They find themselves in a situation where they are excluded from high-paying roles and sponsorships which maintains the concept that their star value and market value declines with age. The absence of transparent guidelines and defined norms can make it more difficult for the actresses to compensate on a reasonable pay. The intersectionality of age and other variables such ethnicity and race can compound inequal pay biases.

Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) is an organization for women working in the Malayalam cinema industry founded on 1 November, 2017 based in Kochi, Kerala. WCC aims to bring public awareness against misogynistic practices and intends to be a cohesive voice for the welfare of female artists in the industry. It provides a platform for women technicians to voice their concerns and they will also resolve any disputes that may arise by serving as arbitrators with the producers. The members of the organization have requested the intervention of the government in formalizing wage structures and welfare schemes for female artists working in the industry. These schemes include maternity pay and tax subsidies for production crews with at least thirty- percent women representation. The Kerala government was also asked by WCC to initiate more technical courses linked to movie production that provides direct employment opportunities for women in the industry and ensure female reservations in government owned studios. Additionally, it intends to celebrate the contributions made by women to the cinema domain by holding exhibitions and presenting end-of-year awards for Malayalam films that pass the Bechdel test.

Cyber-shaming or bullying can be seen as an act of openly criticizing or ridiculing individuals on online spaces and platforms, usually associated with their appearances, conduct and choices. This can be considered as reaction to individual choices or publicized events. It often carries negative information and take benefits of the hidden identities and wide reach of internet. Cyber-bullying can cause profound effects on a personal and professional level of the elderly women actors in the industry. They may undergo increased emotional distress due to such act. Unfavorable comments, harassment, and cyber-attacks can cause them depression, anxiety, frustration by badly impairing their mental health. Consistent and effective cyber-bullying can undermine their self-esteem and self-worth, especially when the attacks are on attributes like appearance, age, personal relations etc. this may influence how women of age view themselves and their value in the workforce.

Open criticism through online platforms would affect the industry's perception of them limiting their chances of securing substantial roles. Their reputations and public preview might get tarnished by such online harassments and negative remarks, especially when false rumors can spread very rapidly affecting how public and their workforce community views them. Cyber-bullying may result in a strong sense of estrangement and isolation. In order to avoid such harassments and public engagements, senior women actors withdraw from their social media handles. The act of bullying online has cumulative effects which includes a series of mental health problems such as stress-related disorders. It may instill a fear of handling technologies among elderly women actors. As mentioned above they have a tendency to quit the usage of social medias or other digital platforms out of the fear of encountering online harassments. It involves the elements of sexism and racism along with the component ageism which can be very discriminatory and hurtful.

There is a noticeable difference in the terms of accomplishments and awards of older men and women in the cinema sphere. Senior male actors are often praised for their longevity and their performance in the later time period is viewed as a testament of their continuing potential while aged actresses may face comparatively less options available to them which would negatively impacts on the acknowledgement of their work.

Malayalam film industry had witnessed a stellar comeback of many celebrated actresses on the big screen during previous times, not just to play the traditional roles but to make their presence felt. Manju warrier is one among those actresses those have made a massive comeback and she is one of the most respected and well-known actresses in the Mollywood industry. At the age of seventeen, she started her acting career and appeared in multiple super-hit Malayalam movies. She could succeed in establishing herself a name by taking wide parts in many films from a young age. In the year 1998, she got married to Dileep, one of the most popular actors in the industry and ceased her career as an actress. She

withdrew from the industry when the scope of her acting profession was at its peak. She announced the news of separation with her spouse, actor Dileep in 2014 and made a stellar comeback with the film ‘How Old Are You’ released in 2014 written by Bobby Sanjay and directed by Rosshan Andrews. She was awarded a Filmfare Award for best actress based on her outstanding performance in the movie. When the movie was released, Manju was around the same age as her character ‘Nirupama’ in the movie.

For decades, male actors have been good at playing the role of the man who urges to get married, years after years, while women would have long quit the field by the time, they were thirty or would be casted unfairly as motherly figures or grandmothers of men elder than them. However, Manju Warriar could step her foot back in the Malayalam cinema and pull leading roles effortlessly. Apart from a few exceptions like her, the industry has been unfavorable to many skilled senior women actresses in the industry.

Over the past ten years, Manju Warriar has not only celebrated herself as a star in her own right but also as a role model for the filmmaker’s writers to take note of. Her triumph as a leading character defies the prevalent notion crafted by the patriarchal society, that audience dislike to see women over the age of twenty-five on the silver screen, and that movies that cast older female in substantial roles will never be successful. It is not about the question of women playing older roles. It is not necessary to act one’s age when they act on their own. This is all about how skilled have been denied opportunities they truly deserved because of their advanced age. This is an ‘unfortunate trend’ that seems to have been shaken throughout the last ten years. Manju Warriar’s comeback through the movie ‘How Old Are You’ after a fourteen years break was more of a test than a declaration. If it had not succeeded or her subsequent films also failed as well, she too might have followed the same path as her forebears and disappearing into oblivion.

Conclusion

This study investigates the widespread issue of ageism present in a youth-favored society, especially in reference to the context of the Malayalam film industry—and spreading awareness of its negative effects on individuals as well as society. Through an in-depth study of ageism theory, gender-based inequities, and cinematic depictions, important understanding of the complex components of these diverse issues are uncovered.

It is essential to keep resisting ageist conduct and views in the future, both on and off screen. Politicians, journalists, media professionals, activists, and society as a whole must work collectively to dismantle ageist systems and develop welcoming, respectful, and decent circumstances for individuals of all ages. The primary goal of the research project was to examine the ways in which ageism manifests itself, in particular with respect to middle-aged women in society and within the realm of cinema. Two Malayalam films *How Old Are You* and *Udaharanam Sujata* are used as case studies to demonstrate how ageist stereotypes are both reinforced and defied. The goal was to provide insight into how film both reflects and influences society views on ageing by examining how people other than young unmarried women are portrayed and dealt inside the stories. Particularly in the movies, especially “How Old Are You” provides insights to the atrocities and disparities a middle-aged person, particularly a woman experiences in an ageist society. The life instances and common elements such as undying affection and concern for their daughters, priority to the family needs these female characters “Nirupama” from *How Old Are You* and “Sujata” from

Udaharanam Sujata share explores the various aspects of ageism and through the transformation of these two middle-aged mothers that “Age is just a number” is proved.

In addition, it intended to bring attention to the gender-based inequalities prevalent in the Malayalam cinema industry, specifically with concern to older actresses' representation and avenues. It is to challenge ageist and gender-based discrimination and encourage more accessibility and equality in the film firm by bringing these systemic prejudices to light. This would assist establish a more varying and realistic cinematic environment. An improved understanding of the fundamental reasons and consequences of age-based discrimination, as well as how it intersects with other types of injustice and what structural barriers it poses to people of all ages is gained through the investigation of ageism theory. The need for combating ageism at the systematic, institutional, and interpersonal levels has been emphasized by situating it within broader cultural and social settings. In a nutshell, this effort is a call for change to tackle ageism in all of its manifestations, eliminate myths, advocate equitable representation, and promote intergenerational cooperation. Advocate for changes in law, encourage discussions, and create awareness in order to establish a more age- and inclusive society where people feel respected, accepted, and able to build satisfying lives.

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**AGEISM UNVEILED: AN EXPLORATION OF MIDDLE-AGE IN MALAYALAM
MOVIES**



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of the requirement for
the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in English Language and Literature*

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project titled “Unveiled Ageism: An Exploration of Middle-Age in Malayalam Movies” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Ms. Sayoojya C S, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

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I hereby certify that this project entitled “Unveiled Ageism: Dispelling Myths and Promoting Equity Across Generations” by Navya Prasannakumar is a record of bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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Unveiled Ageism: An Exploration of Middle-Age in Malayalam Movies

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The project, titled “Unveiled Ageism: An Exploration of Middle-Age in Malayalam Movies” deals with how ageism is ingrained in a youth-favored society in different aspects and the challenges experienced by middle-aged people particularly, women. The project is divided into three chapters and includes an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter is a theoretical exploration of the ageism and the areas its aspects work. The second chapter is the analysis of two Malayalam movies *How Old Are You* and *Udaharanam Sujata* to support the project’s intention on examining how middle-aged women are affected by the ageist perspectives in a society. As the second chapter is worked with the reference to two Malayalam movies, the third chapter addresses the ageist and gender -based disparities that are pervasive in the film industry, particularly Malayalam film industry.

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Navya Prasannakumar

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Works Consulted

Introduction

Ageism is the prejudice against older people on the basis of negative and unfavourable preconceptions. It is so pervasive in every culture that people often fail to recognize it. Ageism can take root in a very young phase of life. Individuals begin to learn as young children that growing older is an undesirable process and that people who are older are incapable of taking care of themselves. The media sources carry these kinds of negative messages. Advertisements guaranteeing to make "unsightly" age lines disappear, or television shows depicting senior citizens as powerless and frail, casual remarks made by friends and relatives can also spread ageist messages. The messages of antiaging face treatments, satirical birthday cards about becoming older, and ageist jokes are obvious: Growing older is something to be avoided. Both youngsters and senior citizens might be the target of ageism. However, because of the tendency in society to glorify youth, prejudices and hostility based on age are more likely to affect older people (Weir).

Ageism being a form of age-based discrimination has an extended history that spans back to ancient civilizations. Elders were respected for their knowledge and experience in many traditional civilizations, and they were significant members of the society and decision-makers. But as civilizations changed, perceptions towards aging began to shift. As industrialization and modernization expanded, youthful individuals became recognized more and more for their physical ability and productivity, whereas older people were often overlooked or regarded as challenging. Perspectives of aging have been moulded by a variety of religious and cultural convictions throughout history. For instance, getting older was considered as an accomplishment and an indication of expertise in certain cultures, but it was also linked to decline and loss of value in other cultures.

The term "ageism" was initially coined in 1969 by sociologist Robert Butler, whose work has been credited with enabling the idea of ageism come into its own. Butler observed that there were disparities in job, healthcare, and social prospects amongst older people due to the widespread negative viewpoints and discriminatory actions against them. Ever then, there has been a rise in the awareness of ageism, which resulted in advocacy campaigns and legal amendments to fight discrimination based on age and enhance age-inclusive communities. But ageism continues to exist in many ways, which underscores how essential it is to keep up the fight against biases and misconceptions about aging. In his seminal work "Why Survive? "Being Old in America, published in the year 1975, Butler examined the social and psychological components of aging and highlighted the challenges that older people have in a culture that promotes youth. He advocated against the generally accepted notion that aging is a period of decline and dependence and in support of a more optimistic and inclusive perspective of aging.

Butler's ageism theory puts a strong emphasis on the significance of eliminating age-based prejudices and stereotypes in society as well as the diversity and endurance of older persons. In an effort to combat ageism and advance age-friendly policies and services, he stood for more awareness and campaigning. Butler was an outspoken advocate of senior citizens' rights as well as their welfare throughout his career, and his efforts established the groundwork for the field of gerontology and research of ageism. Advocates, lawmakers, and researchers striving toward creating an age-inclusive society are still inspired by his legacy.

Middle-aged women today have to deal with a complicated social landscape full of challenges and issues related to their age group. They still face prejudice at work, cultural norms that are generally accepted, and familial expectations which often diminish and undermine their worth, regardless of progress made in the area of gender parity. They face a wide range of challenges that influence their experiences and prospects, from subtle ageism

to explicit discrimination based on their age or gender. Through this project, an attempt is made to shed light on the complexity of middle-aged women's lived experiences and advocate for further support and recognition in the society as it explores many issues and dilemmas that they deal with.

Ageist views, conduct, and attitudes are capable of much more than simply depreciating and undermining one's self-esteem. Emotional and physical well-being, feeling of dignity, interactions with others, and even financial well-being can all be profoundly affected by age prejudice and bias. In contrast to racism and sexism, ageism is often viewed as more socially acceptable, yet like those problems, it takes time to overcome. To address issues like racism and gender prejudice, the majority of organizations of today have departments devoted to diversity, equality, and inclusion. But age prejudice is seldom taken seriously, even in those areas. Ageism is a peculiar-ism' as it is still widely accepted in society in several ways. It influences various societal organizations and sectors, such as the legal system, the workplace, the press, and the sectors of social care and health care.

Ageism has adverse impacts on people's health and wellbeing that are substantial and severe. Ageism is linked to deteriorating mental and physical health in older adults, as well as increased loneliness and social exclusion, greater financial instability, lower standards of life, and an earlier mortality. It has been estimated that ageism is contributing factor of around six million incidents of depression worldwide. It has an adverse influence on people's health and well-being as it combines with and amplifies various kinds of bias and disadvantage, such as those related to sex, race, and disability. In addition, ageism is frequently reinforced by negative perceptions that misrepresent aging. Employment discrimination, digital divide, health-care disparities, social isolation, intergenerational conflict etc can be seen as the current challenges and trends existing in a society which pose strong ageist perspectives.

This project aims to conclude that almost every culture and social groups in general and film industry in particular hold the potential to demonstrate strong aspects of ageism by tracing its roots back to the Preconceptions, portrayals and casting choices.

How Old Are You is a Malayalam film released in the year 2014 written by Bobby Sanjay, produced by Listin Stephen and directed by one of the finest directors in the industry, Rosshan Andrews. He is known for his versatile filmmaking and has contributed to movies spanning various genres through his direction. He is well known for his ability to handle different genres such as drama, thriller and the most relevant, social issues. *How Old Are You* is one of his notable works, that showcases and explores themes related to women empowerment, prejudices faced by middle aged people and their struggle to meet societal expectations.

Udaharanam Sujata is a Malayalam movie released in the year 2017 directed by Phantom Praveen, adapted by Naveen Bhaskar and produced by Martin Parakkat and Joju George. This movie is a remake of a Hindi language film named *Nil Battey Sannata* (The New Classmate). The director is a potential filmmaker in the Malayalam film industry and he is known for writing as well as directing. The movie *Udaharanam Sujata* is one of his notable works that explores the central theme of a middle -aged single mother's selfless efforts to ensure a bright and better future for her daughter.

There are three core chapters to this project. The first chapter "Breaking barriers: navigating the complex landscapes of age-based discrimination" focuses on the theory of ageism and explores its aspects especially the disparities middle-aged women face. Chapter two "Chronicles of age" takes two Malayalam movies *How Old Are You* and *Udaharanam Sujata* as references to prove the concept of ageism mentioned in the primary chapter. The final chapter "Ageism on the silver screen" in association with the movies, deals with the ageist

and gender-based discrimination existing in the film industry, particularly Malayalam film industry.

Chapter 1

Breaking Barriers: Navigating the Complex Landscape of Age-Based Discrimination

Ageism refers to stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age, according to the World Health Organization. Aging is considered a universal experience and process, but it is nevertheless widely accepted in our culture. Furthermore, ageism has two distinct targets: other-directed ageism, which is when people stick to the belief that other older people are wise or slow, or ageism that is directed at other individuals. Self-directed ageism is another form of ageism, which means that it is directed towards oneself. For instance, an individual may have negative feelings about getting older (“Ageism-Global”).

The divergent means by which ageism manifests can be categorized as implicit ageism and explicit ageism. Unconscious biases or stereotypes that affect attitudes and behaviors towards individuals based on age can be defined as implicit ageism and openly expressed discrimination or prejudice based on age can be defined as explicit ageism. Many negative effects on the body and mind are not innate, but they do have a complex relationship and start to accumulate early in life. In contrast to other domains where culture influences aging, the majority of aging-related physical failures are not predicted. Ageism amplifies discrimination that has been practiced for a lifetime. It is interconnected with other biases such as misogyny, racism, ableism, homophobia, and classism because any of these prejudices, especially compound ones, are likely to worsen as the targets get older. In contrast to other types of biases such as ableism, sexism, or racism, ageism is a systemic kind of oppression that affects all people. Despite the fact that ageism is universal, people may not accept it as seriously as they do other forms of inequality.

Three levels of ageism are: micro (individual), meso (social networks), and macro (institutional and societal). Interpersonal ageism occurs when someone applies ageism to themselves, whereas institutional ageism occurs when an institution maintains ageism by through its actions and regulations (“Ageism | OHSU”). Additionally, ageism might change based on the situation. hostile ageism refers to condescending views about people based on their age, such as considering elderly folks to be infantile and in need of assistance with everyday duties. Hostile ageism, on the other hand, consists of overtly aggressive attitudes regarding age, such as considering teenagers to be violent or dangerous. Depending on whether a person is aware of it or not, it might be classified. It is referred to be explicit ageism if they are conscious of it and implicit ageism if they are not. Using a medical setting as an example, implicit ageism would occur if a doctor unintentionally treats older and younger patients differently. Ageism can take in various forms, including in the workplace.

Some examples of ageism prejudices in the workplace include the refusal of the relevant authority to hire people based on their age rather than their experience, asking applicants about their age during job interviews that are irrelevant, perceiving younger people as unskilled and not trustworthy, considering middle-aged people as outdated and unfit, implementing policies that unfairly favour one age group over another, and holding unfavourable stereotypes about both younger and older workers. It is a threat to the workplace harmony and productivity. Ageism in interpersonal relationships can manifest as a tendency to undervalue or neglect the abilities or expertise of family members due to their age, to make crude and inappropriate jokes about someone's age, to disregard someone's concerns because of their age, or to take advantage of someone's age for personal gains. Ageism is a widespread issue that impacts people in various social contexts.

Ageism is pervasive, yet it's often overlooked or given less attention than other forms of discrimination. This emphasizes how crucial it is to bring attention as other forms of bias,

leading to age-related that remain unrecognized. Ageism is interrelated across all facets of people's lives and is not confined to just one area. Social interactions and health might be impacted by discriminatory employment practices. A thorough comprehension of ageism requires understanding and knowledge of these linkages. Ageism has a significant impact on people's quality of life. Age-based discrimination can seriously affect mental health and result in feelings of isolation and limited options. By emphasizing these consequences, ageism's seriousness and scope of influence are brought to light. Understanding the cultural and historical context of ageism emphasizes how historical events and cultural norms shape societal attitudes toward aging. By acknowledging that perceptions of age are influenced by larger cultural forces, this recognition adds depth and complexity to the study of ageism.

The World Health Organization recognizes that gender plays a critical role in understanding the evolution of public policy related to active ageing. It acknowledges the difficulties women have throughout their lives, which might differ in severity depending on the nation ("Ageism-Global"). These challenges encompass issues like education, health care access, nutrition, employment, caregiving, and inheritance. This strategy underscores how crucial it is to deal with gender-based prejudices and stereotypes throughout a person's life in order to guarantee a fulfilling old age. When it comes to healthy aging, gender also has a big impact on the experiences of aging, especially for older women.

The expression "the double standard of aging" is heard so frequently that it almost seems obvious. Compared to the situation of male, women's social worth has been more strongly linked with their physical attractiveness, and these assessments of women's worth decline more sharply with age than those of men. Extending beyond heterosexual prejudice, it appears that seeming old is seen more harshly for women across variety of cultures as well as, presumably, for individuals of other sexual orientations. Garner B A, an editor in chief of

Blacks Law Dictionary has encapsulated that “Women lose their social worth simply by growing old”. Men are more likely than women to be assessed and rewarded for their accomplishments.

In political economies where women find it difficult to simultaneously contribute to the production of goods and human reproduction, gender has become particularly important. This challenge favours male dominance over production and, consequently, wealth, making women dependent on them in relationships that require great deal of unpaid labor and an exploration that is frequently disguised as familial love. Nonetheless, the practices that organizations use to distinguish women and men, masculinity and femininity remain largely rooted in those mutually exclusive but varying extents. Affiliation with these types of employment can become a matter of gender identity, with the notion of men being the breadwinners on the account of their productive work and women being objects of desire due to their attractiveness. In light of this, masculinity and femininity have been shaped developing the sets of gender values that define manhood and womanhood and hold both genders responsible.

In a world characterized by changing societal norms and relentless pursuit of youthfulness, middle-aged people find themselves navigating a complex world full of age-related biases. Growing older involves developing maturity and turning into a more mature, responsible and considerate adult. Some people hold a negative perception of aging, viewing it as a setback that lessens the pleasure they may have derived from their own personal development. Many people consider aging as a challenging process that causes them to lose their confidence and experience the lack of productivity. Over the past century, industrialization and modernization have resulted in significant declines in older individuals' social and cultural status. Individuals, especially middle-aged people now need to work more

swiftly and efficiently due to the industrial age and technical improvements to remain competitive. These modifications have decreased the necessity for and visibility of older individual's activities.

Ageism, thus can be defined as prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes separately, these elements can be considered as behavioural, affective, and cognitive. As a result, age stereotypes are fixed ideas that exaggerate the characteristics, qualities, and actions that a particular group of middle-aged people share. Age stereotypes can directly contribute to presumptions about a middle-aged person's abilities in both mental and physical aspects as well as their social skills, political and religious beliefs, and other traits. So, they tend to internalize the negative and damaging stereotypes of ageism that continue to be spread widely throughout society today and tend to confine themselves to age-related preconceptions, which turn them weak, unhealthy, and even less open to accept new learning opportunities. It is increasingly understood as a risk factor associated with increased anxiety, stress, depression, feeling of desolation and lowered life satisfaction.

Interpersonal conflicts can arise at any stage of life, from early adulthood to old age. According to the life span literature, as people get older, they are exposed to a variety of social contexts. People's daily lives are characterized by their interactions with family members, acquaintances neighbours, coworkers and friends. But family plays the major part especially in the life of women undergoing middle age. These social exchanges might have detrimental effects in addition to positive ones. Interpersonal issues are the detrimental causes of stress out of all the issues that arise on a daily basis and interpersonal tensions are better indicators of psychological well-being than other types of everyday occurrences such as work overloads.

Referring to a poem 'middle age' by Kamala Das, "Middle age is when your children are no longer friends but critics, stern of face and severe with their tongue" ("Middle Age -

Kamala Das: About the Poet | PDF”). This poem captures sense of isolation, agony and sadness of a middle-aged mother. It portrays the harsh realities and difficulties of middle-age, when children grow into adults who no longer need their older parents. It also reflects the absence of love in inter-personal relationship of a middle-aged woman, especially one who experiences motherhood. The poem has conveyed the expressions of a mother who is left alone in her middle age by her child. Here the mother is not glorified but neglected and detached from love and care. She laments over the loss of her son’s love and attention through her middle age while he was grown up to be a critic and not a companion. This poem can be a major example conveying the effects of ageism in a woman’s interpersonal life especially a mother on her middle age era.

The role of mass media in influencing cultural values has been a topic of debate for a while. The media, at the very least, reflects the existing values in a culture. The portrayal of how men and women represent how ageism and sexism are deeply embedded in the social structure. The portrayal of people based on their age in films, Television shows, and commercials is known as ageism in the media. Older persons are often underrepresented or stereotyped which contribute to societal prejudices and misconceptions. Analysing how age-related stereotypes are portrayed in the media sheds light on how these portrayals design public perceptions. Ageism intersects with racism, sexism, and ableism, the other forms of discrimination. Individuals may experience additional prejudices based on their age along with other aspects of their identity. By encouraging narrow and unrealistic image of old age that does not accurately reflect the diverse and varied reality of contemporary life, the media can contribute to ageism and sexism. Ageist and sexist stereotypes that are already present in traditional media can be further strengthened by social media platforms. Age-based prejudices in the media is a reflection of socially acceptable cultural norms and beliefs.

Unfortunately, during the pandemic, ageist narratives and pictures became more present in both traditional and social media.

Although it will require patience, changing attitudes can begin with addressing language. We interact with each other by words and actions. Giving backhanded compliments, speaking in a condescending tone or loudness, employing belittling descriptions, and employing "elder speak" are some forms of subtle disrespect directed towards senior citizens. It's critical to understand that, regardless of age, everyone is aging. Spending some time recognizing and resolving own ingrained worries and internalized fears can help. Acknowledge each person's role in the contribution to this shift by adjusting thoughts, language, and adjustments in actions.

Chapter 2

Chronicles of Age: Analysis of middle-aged portrayals in *How Old Are You* and Udaharanam Sujata

The movie *How Old Are You* is one of the brilliant works in the Malayalam film industry that showcases and explores themes related to women empowerment, prejudices faced by middle aged people and their struggle to meet societal expectations. The plot revolves around a middle-aged woman named Nirupama Rajeev, who leads a routine life as a selfless wife and mother. The story narration takes a twist and turn when she gets a totally unexpected opportunity to meet the honorable President of India, resulting in a crucial revaluation of her life choices and a strong reply and comeback against those prejudices she faced due to her middle age. The movie stars Manju Warriar as the leading role and her performance was acclaimed as enthusiastic and considerable success. The character which Manju Warriar plays in the film serves as a lens through which the storyline touches upon the stereotypes and formidable hurdles faced by middle-aged individuals, especially women in our society. The movie is an excellent and compelling choice for analysis on the context of theory of ageism.

As mentioned above the movie is centered on a ‘thirty-six’ year old woman named Nirupama Rajeev who works as a UD clerk in the Revenue Department. Her husband, Rajeev Narayan works at Akashavaani and desires of migrating to Ireland for a better standard of life and better education for their daughter. Nirupama as a wife and a compassionate mother aspires to accompany her family in their journey of life in Ireland but everything goes in vain as most Irish companies turn down her job applications because of her age. Unlike the other family members including her husband and daughter, she does not have any kinds of higher

aspirations. She just wants to accompany her family so that she can take good care of her them, especially she can be there whenever her teenage daughter wants her support and care. These are said to be the only typical aspirations of an Indian woman, who is especially in her middle age and a mother too.

The movie begins with the scene itself that Nirupama attending an interview where she fails because she is just 'thirty-six' and not thirty-five. See the conversation between the interviewers and Nirupama "I think we have a bit of problem here Mrs. Rajeev because definitely you are aware of the age bar we have for this job and it is thirty-five. "But I am I am just thirty-six" (*How Old Are You* 00:04:00--00: 04:12). In her life, everything was normal and nothing interesting or extraordinary was there and she craves for a change. Nirupama is initially shown as an indolent person who leads a very normal life and showcases a massive transformation eventually throughout the storyline. Nirupama also gets looked upon by some of her colleagues in a satirical manner. She as an enduring and loving mother, cares for her dearest daughter selflessly and it's her daughter the prime reason for her desire to migrate to Ireland.

On her thirty-sixth birthday she meets her daughter in a bakery after her school for a quite quality time. There her daughter makes an indirect common joke about her mother's diminished vision that directly associated with the loss of health for the middle aged and ageing people. "It is time for you to start wearing specs" (*How Old Are You* 00:13:51--00: 13:55). In the same scenario, her daughter's friends happened to come across them in the bakery and addresses Nirupama as 'aunty' which is against her liking. Her daughter simply leaves it by saying they use the term 'aunty' to address women who are above the age of thirty -five but she feels kind of insecure about her age and the process of being aged (*How Old Are You* 00:13:59—00:14:10). To support her feeling, she also makes a statement that "none of these are applicable to men" (*How Old Are You* 00:14:10--00:14:11). This phrase

can be applied to one more scenario in the beginning of the movie itself. When she happens to encounter with an aged lady whom she sees every day in bus asks her whether it was her brother who was seen with her on the other day at passport office. Nirupama replies ‘no it was my husband’ with a simple smile and ignores it (*How Old Are You* 00:09:15—00:09:22). The discomfiture of her husband being mistaken for her younger brother further troubles her. This scene can be considered as one of the examples of differences that occurs in the physical appearance of the male and female once they involve in the process of ageing. This scene supports the common notion that generally men look younger than women in the middle age, though they are of same age. The fact that this is due to their additional experiences gained and physical, psychological and emotional struggles underwent due to the process like menstruation, gestation, lactation, nurturing, care giving etc. are conveniently forgotten. At the end of the bakery scene, Nirupama reveals her daughter that she failed her interview to go to Ireland because of her age and unintentionally disappoints her (*How Old Are You* 00:14:40—00:15:18).

Following these experiences she had on her birthday, she instantly feels a need for a little change and goes for dyeing her hair flattered by the hair dresser’s advice for her to look ten years younger. Here she can be seen as a representative of middle-aged women who is conscious about their physical appearance associated with the process of ageing. Also, the need for looking younger to be accepted in a society which is so prone to ageism and unlike other discriminations, this particular one lacks activists and hence articulation. When talks about another aspect of ageism, that demonstrates the tendency to ignore and underestimate the skills, knowledge and opinions of the family members and disregarding someone’s concerns due to their age, Nirupama’s daughter’s attitude and behavior towards her mother clearly supports this. She makes an inappropriate joke “if I start arguing with you, I will become old” (*How Old Are You* 00:21:54—00:21:59) to disregard her mother’s thinking at

the age of thirty-six. She experiences dismissive attitudes from her husband and daughter who is a minor and they undermine her worth as middle-aged woman (*How Old Are You* 00:34:40—00:36:16). In addition to this, her professional urges are belittled, reflecting the ageism concepts prevalent in her workplace. She faces ageist bias on institutional level. Such encounters foreground systematic ageism and strengthens the notion associated with middle-aged people. As an older employee and as a woman she is often overlooked for opportunities. She experiences subtle and undisguised ageist attitudes and indirect offensive ageist jokes from her colleague who is around same age as her (*How Old Are You* 01:03:32-- 01:03:38). It shows the multi-faceted nature of age-based biases.

The story narration takes a turn when she gets summoned to the local police station and acknowledges that she has been invited for an informal breakfast and a conversation with the honorable President of India. She learns that a question which her daughter posed to the President who visited the school was the reason for such invitation. Generally middle-aged people are insecure about revealing their age or someone adding to their age while any conversation. Nirupama feels disappointed when she acknowledges that her age is written as thirty-seven instead of thirty-six in the newspapers that had the news of her meeting with the honorable President of India (*How Old Are You* 00:46:30—00:46:40). Unfortunately, on the day of the meeting, she faints in front of the President and the whole scenario turns out to be a disaster. She becomes a topic of talk in the town and the laughing stock on Facebook. The social media users created ‘Nirupama Jokes’ and made critical and dishonoring comments about her age attempting to marginalize her based on the societal expectations. These instances she deals with reflects the reality of the society which is so obsessed with the idea of ageism and gender bias in online spaces and platforms where individuals, particularly women face negativity and intolerance based on their age. With this incident, she even faces the issues of being criticized by her own family members especially her daughter (*How Old*

Are You 1:05:08-1:05:25). Later she ends up in a sentimental situation where she has to witness her husband and dearest daughter fly to Ireland without her. In the scene where Rajeev confesses the news of their departure, Nirupama shows a concern as she cannot accompany with them to Ireland. Rajeev says “it is not a right thing to leave parents behind all alone, if everyone else leave for Ireland” (*How Old Are You* 01:08:17—01:08:20). This instance shows that how a middle- aged woman’s dream and aspirations are determined by patriarchal undercurrents at play in the society. According to a middle-aged family-oriented woman, her own self aspirations and dreams are among her least priority.

One of her old classmates, Susan David, a successful businesswoman pays a totally unexpected visit to her life and reminds her of the potential and highly spirited woman she used to be during her college life and inspires her to unearth her younger self. One day she sets out to visit an old lady who she would meet every day in the bus, both of them not knowing each other’s name, after she gets to know that the old lady is sick. She turns up at her house with the organic vegetables she grew in her own terrace garden and the news of her pure organic vegetables spread quickly as the sick woman shares the details with her employer who is a well-known business man.

The whole story narration takes a turn and the destiny of a thirty-six years old middle-aged woman starts to change with this incident. The business man was impressed by the quality of Nirupama’s fresh organic vegetables and asks her if she could be able to provide same quality fresh organic vegetables for his daughter’s wedding in just four months. For this she encourages all her neighbors to join her in this journey by cultivating vegetables on their rooftop as well, and it turned out to be a massive success. In between she faces pressure from the family, her husband and daughter calling her to Ireland to stay with them and take care over the family (*How Old Are You* 02:00:05—02:00:22). But she hesitates to go as she realizes she has more dreams to achieve despite her insecurities based on her age, more works

to do including her commitment to supply organic vegetables. Her husband seems unhappy with her hesitation and strongly implies that she is neglecting her duties and care for her daughter as a mother (*How Old Are You* 02:01:19—02:02:20). This scene clearly represents the social pressure and the pressure within the family or from inter-personal relationships faced by middle-aged people, especially women to hold on to traditional roles, finite opportunities for self-growth and career development. She gains confidence and reminds her husband who was never a support system to her to expect only what is given to her.

The same old friend who inspired and helped her for a massive rediscover of her younger self encourages her to present a seminar with a high valued and important audience including state minister and collector. Nirupama showcases her excellence on her speech framing the topic of organic farming by prioritizing bio vegetables garden in all housing projects and it delights all the officials attended her seminar. An ordinary middle-aged woman who raised an extraordinary question to the President once fainted at the moment of meeting, has woke up again and thinks to begin from where she failed.

Once again, she meets the honorable President with her family and this time to consider her vision of organic farming idea nationwide. Thereby she is trying to prove age is just a number. Finally, Nirupama is able to answer the great question that her daughter raised to the President. “Who decides the expiry date of woman’s dreams?” (*How Old Are You* 02:07:47—02:07:52). Her transformation from an indolent woman who was obsessed about her ageing and leading a very extra ordinary life, putting her talents behind on the behalf of her age to a steady and sprightly lady is the whole point of the film.

The movie *How Old Are You* addresses the social norms and stereotypes associated with her age and the challenges she faces on the notion of ageism. The film underscores how each individual, especially women of our society, can be freed from these societal

expectations related to the concept of ageing. Its narration of the story supports the idea that age should not limit or restrict anyone's potential to excel in any field they like or they feel like they belong to and contribute to the society, mirroring the issues of ageism in culture. The film also digs into the value and importance of recognizing and accepting the experience and wisdom one gained and that comes with age. By depicting the leading character Nirupama's journey of resilience and self-discovery the movie promotes more egalitarian and a respectful society for people of all ages, especially the category of middle-aged people who face prejudices based on their age on a daily basis. Through the portrayal of a middle-aged woman reclaiming her identity and manifest her actual worth, the movie turns out to be an impressive and convincing commentary on the interrelation of ageism and gender bias.

The movie *Udaharanam Sujata* is one of the notable works in Malayalam film industry that explores the central theme of a single mother's selfless efforts to ensure a bright and better future for her daughter. The narration follows Sujata, a middle-aged single mother who belongs to lower-middle-class strata of the society working menial jobs to provide nourishment, protection and better educational opportunities for her daughter. Sujata's daughter Athira is academically gifted but the family's financial status threatens her dreams of becoming successful and thus she begins to perform academically weak and blames her single mother for their financial constraints. To change her daughter's attitudes and academic performance, she decides to enroll in the same school where her daughter studies. The film spotlights the hardships faced by both mother and daughter as they confront expectations of the society they live in, economic constraints, and pursuit of better academics. Sujata as middle-aged single mother goes through various discrimination based on her age, her educational qualification and her living conditions. Sujata struggles to meet daily needs but her determination to ensure quality education for her daughter keeps her hardworking and optimistic. This film stars Manju Warriar and Anaswara Rajan as the leading roles. The

character which Manju Warriar plays in the film acts as a lens through which stereotypes and hardships faced by middle-aged individuals, particularly women and single mothers in the society we live in.

The major instance that shows ageist perspective in this movie is when Sujata wanting to continue her education at her middle age. The scene where Sujata applies for her admission to the tenth grade and the principal's reaction to her joining school at middle age can be seen in the ageist perspective. It was quite surprising for the principal when he learns about Sujata's decision to continue schooling at this age and he initially says no to her because of her age. "He implies that there are other systems of education for people like Sujata who is a middle-aged woman" (*Udaharanam Sujata* 00:46:32—00:47:20). Also, her daughter Athira gets angry with her and later begs her to not attend the school as she fears embarrassment just because Sujata is a middle-aged woman and it's against the societal stereotypes. When she starts attending classes, she becomes a target of age-based discrimination and mockeries from her younger classmates. The students find it as strange for someone her age to be in the same class as them which leads to the concept of skepticism. They initially underestimate Sujata's ability to excel in academics when compared to younger students.

Sujata's decision to return to school summons the existing social norms and she experience stigma on the social level for going against the traditional roles expected of women, especially of middle age. Instead of supporting her mother's aspiration to continue education, her family itself tries to restrict her due to her age and gender. It challenges stereotype that educational and successful aspirations are only meant for young people. The act of her mother embarrasses Athira and she pretends to not have acquaintance of her at school. Sujata as a selfless mother, works more menial jobs including working late in the night in small restaurants and saves more money for her daughter's education along with paying out the family debts. It underscores the strong determination and resilience of a single

mother, especially near her forties to break through age- based barriers to provide a secured future for her child. It questions the prevalent notions that a society poses about the capabilities and desires of each individual based on their age.

During a mother-daughter argument, Athira accuses her mother of earning money by prostitution as she sees her mother coming late home every day (*Udaharanam Sujata* 01:40:34—01:41:46). She feels devastated about her daughter's suspicion on her and their relation goes all-time low. This instance depicts the assumption of youth that disregards and underestimate the abilities and skills of middle-aged persons, particularly women. Her daughter's perspective that her middle-aged single mother can only earn money by prostitution and she is not capable for doing any other decent jobs represents the societal attitudes towards such individual.

Coming to the end of the film, Athira realizes her mistakes, corrects it and passes SSLC examination along with her mother and she fulfills her mother's aspiration see her daughter as a District Collector. The movie ends with a scene where Athira as a District collector answering to a question 'what inspired her to choose IAS as her career?' with 'she didn't want to become a house help' and she is inspired from her dear mother who tutors mathematics to economically backward children in their colony for free. Though there was a change by the end, the initial portrays are of ageist related.

The plot clearly unfolds the themes of motherhood, strong determination, societal stereotypes and prejudices faced based on age. Through the portrayal of struggles and win of Sujata, a middle-aged woman, especially a single mother, the viewers are encouraged to rethink and act against the age-related biases existing in the society and to understand the potential for personal development and accomplishment at any stage of life, despite of age.

In both movies *How Old Are You* and *Udaharanam Sujata* age is portrayed as a barrier that women must overcome and in both of the films Malayalam actress Manju Warrier is starred as the female lead. Both movies explore the concept of motherhood and their transformations were for their daughters than themselves in the first place. The notions that the society preconceived about what is expected of women particularly at middle age create struggles for their personal and educational goals. These movies explore the theme of transformation of women, both without family's support especially their daughters as a common element. Family members, friends and the society everyone lives in find it hard to accept their decisions, which raises the hardships faced when breaking free from age-based norms. These resemblances highlight wide social issues of ageism, particularly concerning women, the ones who experiencing motherhood and their choices of life. Both the movies aim at emphasizing the need and importance of personal fulfillment and continuous development of each individual breaking the barriers of age.

Chapter 3

Ageism on the Silver Screen

Cinema is the domain where stories are narrated through the lens of imagination, creativity and expression. The existence of ageism emits profile over the career of the women, mainly those who have enhanced the industry for several years. When throwing lights upon on the journey of career of the women in the film industry it is possible to unearth the challenges and prejudices that grows along with the period of time. Getting limited roles and pressure from the cinema sphere often leads to casting that characterized by subtle shades of meaning and visibility. It portrays the multi-faced aspects of ageism and gender that makes impacts on women, particularly those who belong to the cinema world. Ageism in the field is apparent in discriminatory exercises and narrow opportunities for women once they enter the middle-aged category. Older actresses experience troubles while ensuring that leading roles are maintained and there is a high tendency to prioritize young talents over them. These instances provide to the fact of lack of characterization of mature women in varied roles. The stereotype that usually younger women manifest roles in the promotional advertisements and media attraction and coverage easily which give way to the disempowerment of older women in the same industry.

One of the main factors associated with the aspects of ageism on women in the film industry is beauty standards. They undergo pressures to observe the beauty standards set by the industry and the society we live in. This pressure negatively impacts their self-regard and decisions about pursuing transformation and revamping. Narrow beauty standards for female actresses are repeatedly fortified in favored media according to the studies of the genre.

Unrealistic beauty standards are sustained because of the consistent appearance of idealized images in the movies, television shows, and advertisements.

The widespread use of social media also contributes to the press experienced by the female actresses, particularly the leading roles to meet the beauty standards, especially if they belong to the middle-age category. Their opinions about their physical appearance are influenced by the atmosphere that sustains unrealistic ideals and is made it possible by the usage of filters, photoshop, and carefully chosen photographs. The studies show a concerning link between the cultural beauty standards and women's mental health. The press they feel to match with these beauty norms result in negatively impacted mental health condition including anxiety, depression and dissatisfaction about self-body image and insecurities. The societal norms often seek youthful appearance on the screen as per the standards prevalent in the industry and outside. These create the difficulties that women encounter as they get older impacting their opportunities and roles whereas male leading roles are not much bothered about the beauty standards. It can impact their mental well-being as well as their career prospects.

There is a great tendency and a historical trend of leading roles played by aged men contributing gracefully to the purpose of the movies. Men despite of aged or not continue to secure leading and prominent roles and portrayal of diverse characters and women find themselves in a condition where behold to the stereotypical expectations. In many movies, the female character having same age as the male character gets to play the role of the male character's mother or as their sister or more elder roles. Many regional film industries pose such casting choices and one such instance can be sighted from a Malayalam film named 'Balyakalasakhi' released in 2014 in which actress Meena plays the mother of Mammooty who is twenty-five years elder than her. In this film, Mammooty plays the leading male role as 'Majeed' and Meena who is way younger than him plays the supporting role as his mother.

She was only thirty-eight during that time and Mammooty was sixty-three years old. An actress named Isha Talwar was casted as his heroine and she was only twenty-seven back in 2014, when the movie was released. A huge age gap can be seen in the casting of both male and female leads in this particular movie. A similar instance is that in a Malayalam movie called 'Big B' released in 2007, Nafisa Ali who is five years younger than Mammooty in real life played the role of his mother. The movie stars him as the leading role and Nafisa as a supportive mother role. When we trace back to old film era, we can see similar instances prevalent in the industry. In the film *Thulavarsham* released in 1976, Kaviyoor Ponnammamma played the mother of Prem Nazir as Balan in the movie. She was only thirty-one at that time and Prem Nazir was sixty-two years old. These movies *Balyakalasakhi* and *Thulavarsham* are major indicators of the age-based disparity existed in the Malayalam film industry back then and even still. Also, the movie *Thulavarsham* depicts how ageist biases prevalent can be traced back to the seventies. It clearly demonstrates a reversal of age-based casting norms.

According to the research of International Federation of Actors, 63.8% of women and 51.2% of men in the movie industry have career span of 11 to 15 years. This 12% disparity shows the percentage of female actors who have ended their acting career earlier than the male counterparts. Women's participation in the motion picture industry has broadened the gender gap. As per the studies, the audience preferences have been set on a certain age and gender combinations. Once women in the industry starts to age, they get to play limited roles but young male talents also play fewer roles as well. During the Venice Film Festival in 2006, an actress Meryl Streep remarked "what films have you seen lately with serious roles for 50-year-old women in the lead?" she adds these roles are the roles they write for women her age and they are typically horrific or dragon-like (Dean).

When it comes to the topic of how elder people, especially women are portrayed in the films, it is obvious that they are mostly seen in the supporting roles and repeatedly surrounded by the stigmas of unattractiveness, vulnerability and weakness. Women are more marginalized than men to a higher extent and they are often characterized as maternal figures or non-sexual creatures while young female talents are overtly sexualized and objectified. Even as male characters start getting older, the ages of their romantic interests remain practically unchanged and this can be one of the reasons why female actors same age as the male actors' lag. Mammooty is seventy-two years in the real life when the movie *Bramayugam* was released in 2024 and he was also portrayed as an aged character named *Kodumon Potti* in the movie. The movie portrays the character's unchanged romantic interests and practices though he is an aged person. There is a fact that we seldom see any female leading roles of age with such romantic desires or practices in the Malayalam movies. Women of age have been shifted to the roles of wives, mothers and sisters generally. Substantial roles are seldom written for older women and even if they are written it is unfortunate that they are still not given to them. The representation of their sexuality is often depicted in a form of mockery and they are mostly shown as characters who carry family and cultural values.

Mass media has a significant role aiding ageism against female celebrities in the industry and it represents the culture in which it exists and reveals a frequent reinforcement of narrow beauty standard for women, particularly for older women. The interplay between the media and culture often results in the propagation of negative stereotypes and certain stigmas along with the spread of discriminatory practices and beliefs based on age. The media often spotlights the changes that occurs physically with the ageing process which choose youth above experience. The captions and headlines medias use for public attention and attraction have the ability to propagate preconceived notions and sway public general

opinion. Casting choices that clearly favor young female actresses over talented older women with experience for substantial roles serves to the concept that youth is more marketable and publicly more acceptable. The notion that the older actresses are comparatively less relevant and unsuccessful in the field might be influenced by the lack of portrayals of them in leading roles. The popular medias focus more on the attention of physical appearance of female actors and examine their changes over time in all aspects which can overshadows their achievements on a professional level.

The fact that medias emphasize on the physical attributes of women over their potential contributes to a culture that elevates women exclusively for their attractiveness. “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figures which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness”. “The presence of women is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey). The usage of terms such as ‘past her prime’, ‘aging gracefully’ etc. suggests the idea that there is an expiry date for older women’s acting career. While sharing contents and interacting with the audience of social media platforms, the discussions, comments and sharing views associated with age can serve to the reinforcement of ageist beliefs.

Media sources also examine and cover their private affairs, romantic relationships, cosmetic procedures they undergo all contributing to imbalanced depiction of women across various age groups especially the category of older women. Moreover, by presenting contents that promote existing ageist viewpoints and regards, media plays a significant role in

providing to the sustainability of industrial norms and standards. This may deeply impact people's expectations towards female celebrities being marginalized. Addressing ageism as an issue in the film industry, these media outlets need to develop more inclusive and respectful reporting techniques. It can challenge age-based prejudices and manifest a more equitable industry by highlighting the potentials and accomplishments of them despite of their age.

Another disparity existing in this domain is unequal pay and it can intersect with gender-based pay differences. The fact that it is challenging for older women to negotiate pay on the same level with male actors despite their age or younger female talents. It mainly showcases the multi-facets of female celebrity's acting career and public perception in the movie business. A Malayalam actress Parvathy Thiruvoth who is an exclusive member of WCC mentions about the casting couch in Malayalam film industry in an interview. Older actresses might have less negotiating strength because of the scarcity of leading roles for them. Comparing themselves with their male counterparts, they encounter difficulties to advocate for equal pay distribution and shows a tendency to compromise with the available roles due to lack of opportunities. As majority of the older women are casted in stereotypical roles, such as mothers, grandmothers and wives can contribute to income inequality. These financial differences maybe further influenced by the fact that these traditional and stereotypical roles may not command the same level of pay as nuanced and complex characters. They find themselves in a situation where they are excluded from high-paying roles and sponsorships which maintains the concept that their star value and market value declines with age. The absence of transparent guidelines and defined norms can make it more difficult for the actresses to compensate on a reasonable pay. The intersectionality of age and other variables such ethnicity and race can compound unequal pay biases.

Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) is an organization for women working in the Malayalam cinema industry founded on 1 November, 2017 based in Kochi, Kerala. WCC aims to bring public awareness against misogynistic practices and intends to be a cohesive voice for the welfare of female artists in the industry. It provides a platform for women technicians to voice their concerns and they will also resolve any disputes that may arise by serving as arbitrators with the producers. The members of the organization have requested the intervention of the government in formalizing wage structures and welfare schemes for female artists working in the industry. These schemes include maternity pay and tax subsidies for production crews with at least thirty- percent women representation. The Kerala government was also asked by WCC to initiate more technical courses linked to movie production that provides direct employment opportunities for women in the industry and ensure female reservations in government owned studios. Additionally, it intends to celebrate the contributions made by women to the cinema domain by holding exhibitions and presenting end-of-year awards for Malayalam films that pass the Bechdel test.

Cyber-shaming or bullying can be seen as an act of openly criticizing or ridiculing individuals on online spaces and platforms, usually associated with their appearances, conduct and choices. This can be considered as reaction to individual choices or publicized events. It often carries negative information and take benefits of the hidden identities and wide reach of internet. Cyber-bullying can cause profound effects on a personal and professional level of the elderly women actors in the industry. They may undergo increased emotional distress due to such act. Unfavorable comments, harassment, and cyber-attacks can cause them depression, anxiety, frustration by badly impairing their mental health. Consistent and effective cyber-bullying can undermine their self-esteem and self-worth, especially when the attacks are on attributes like appearance, age, personal relations etc. this may influence how women of age view themselves and their value in the workforce.

Open criticism through online platforms would affect the industry's perception of them limiting their chances of securing substantial roles. Their reputations and public preview might get tarnished by such online harassments and negative remarks, especially when false rumors can spread very rapidly affecting how public and their workforce community views them. Cyber-bullying may result in a strong sense of estrangement and isolation. In order to avoid such harassments and public engagements, senior women actors withdraw from their social media handles. The act of bullying online has cumulative effects which includes a series of mental health problems such as stress-related disorders. It may instill a fear of handling technologies among elderly women actors. As mentioned above they have a tendency to quit the usage of social medias or other digital platforms out of the fear of encountering online harassments. It involves the elements of sexism and racism along with the component ageism which can be very discriminatory and hurtful.

There is a noticeable difference in the terms of accomplishments and awards of older men and women in the cinema sphere. Senior male actors are often praised for their longevity and their performance in the later time period is viewed as a testament of their continuing potential while aged actresses may face comparatively less options available to them which would negatively impacts on the acknowledgement of their work.

Malayalam film industry had witnessed a stellar comeback of many celebrated actresses on the big screen during previous times, not just to play the traditional roles but to make their presence felt. Manju warrier is one among those actresses those have made a massive comeback and she is one of the most respected and well-known actresses in the Mollywood industry. At the age of seventeen, she started her acting career and appeared in multiple super-hit Malayalam movies. She could succeed in establishing herself a name by taking wide parts in many films from a young age. In the year 1998, she got married to Dileep, one of the most popular actors in the industry and ceased her career as an actress. She

withdrew from the industry when the scope of her acting profession was at its peak. She announced the news of separation with her spouse, actor Dileep in 2014 and made a stellar comeback with the film 'How Old Are You' released in 2014 written by Bobby Sanjay and directed by Rosshan Andrrews. She was awarded a Filmfare Award for best actress based on her outstanding performance in the movie. When the movie was released, Manju was around the same age as her character 'Nirupama' in the movie.

For decades, male actors have been good at playing the role of the man who urges to get married, years after years, while women would have long quit the field by the time, they were thirty or would be casted unfairly as motherly figures or grandmothers of men elder than them. However, Manju Warriar could step her foot back in the Malayalam cinema and pull leading roles effortlessly. Apart from a few exceptions like her, the industry has been unfavorable to many skilled senior women actresses in the industry.

Over the past ten years, Manju Warriar has not only celebrated herself as a star in her own right but also as a role model for the filmmaker's writers to take note of. Her triumph as a leading character defies the prevalent notion crafted by the patriarchal society, that audience dislike to see women over the age of twenty-five on the silver screen, and that movies that cast older female in substantial roles will never be successful. It is not about the question of women playing older roles. It is not necessary to act one's age when they act on their own. This is all about how skilled have been denied opportunities they truly deserved because of their advanced age. This is an 'unfortunate trend' that seems to have been shaken throughout the last ten years. Manju Warriar's comeback through the movie 'How Old Are You' after a fourteen years break was more of a test than a declaration. If it had not succeeded or her subsequent films also failed as well, she too might have followed the same path as her forebears and disappearing into oblivion.

Conclusion

This study investigates the widespread issue of ageism present in a youth-favored society, especially in reference to the context of the Malayalam film industry—and spreading awareness of its negative effects on individuals as well as society. Through an in-depth study of ageism theory, gender-based inequities, and cinematic depictions, important understanding of the complex components of these diverse issues are uncovered.

It is essential to keep resisting ageist conduct and views in the future, both on and off screen. Politicians, journalists, media professionals, activists, and society as a whole must work collectively to dismantle ageist systems and develop welcoming, respectful, and decent circumstances for individuals of all ages. The primary goal of the research project was to examine the ways in which ageism manifests itself, in particular with respect to middle-aged women in society and within the realm of cinema. Two Malayalam films *How Old Are You* and *Udaharanam Sujata* are used as case studies to demonstrate how ageist stereotypes are both reinforced and defied. The goal was to provide insight into how film both reflects and influences society views on ageing by examining how people other than young unmarried women are portrayed and dealt inside the stories. Particularly in the movies, especially “How Old Are You” provides insights to the atrocities and disparities a middle-aged person, particularly a woman experiences in an ageist society. The life instances and common elements such as undying affection and concern for their daughters, priority to the family needs these female characters “Nirupama” from *How Old Are You* and “Sujata” from

Udaharanam Sujata share explores the various aspects of ageism and through the transformation of these two middle-aged mothers that “Age is just a number” is proved.

In addition, it intended to bring attention to the gender-based inequalities prevalent in the Malayalam cinema industry, specifically with concern to older actresses' representation and avenues. It is to challenge ageist and gender-based discrimination and encourage more accessibility and equality in the film firm by bringing these systemic prejudices to light. This would assist establish a more varying and realistic cinematic environment. An improved understanding of the fundamental reasons and consequences of age-based discrimination, as well as how it intersects with other types of injustice and what structural barriers it poses to people of all ages is gained through the investigation of ageism theory. The need for combating ageism at the systematic, institutional, and interpersonal levels has been emphasized by situating it within broader cultural and social settings. In a nutshell, this effort is a call for change to tackle ageism in all of its manifestations, eliminate myths, advocate equitable representation, and promote intergenerational cooperation. Advocate for changes in law, encourage discussions, and create awareness in order to establish a more age- and inclusive society where people feel respected, accepted, and able to build satisfying lives.

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