

## FEMININE TOXICITY EMBODIED: A CRITICAL STUDY OF STEFFI'S CHARACTER IN JOTHISH SHANKAR'S PONMAN

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of feminine toxicity through the character of Steffi in the 2025 Malayalam film *Ponman*. Traditionally, women in Indian cinema have been represented as puppets who play roles dictated by the patriarchal order. Steffi, however, occupies this conventional space while also weaponizing gender roles to her advantage. Drawing on poststructuralist feminist theories, psychological frameworks, and a critical analysis of the film, this study examines how the heroine employs emotional manipulation, strategic victimhood, and performative vulnerability as tools of control within personal and social relationships. Her character demonstrates how femininity can be strategically mobilized to evade responsibility while appearing to comply with patriarchal prescriptions. The paper further investigates how subtle forms of power exercised in intimate spaces challenge existing discourses on gender, feminism, and power. Ultimately, it argues that toxicity transcends gender binaries, leading to psychological manipulation and discrimination.

**Keywords:** *Gender roles, femininity, power, feminine toxicity.*

### INTRODUCTION

The paper entitled "Feminine Toxicity Embodied: A Critical Study of Steffi's Character in Jothish Shankar's *Ponman*" explores the concept of feminine toxicity through the character of Steffi in the 2025 Malayalam film *Ponman*. Traditionally, women in Indian cinema have been represented as puppets who play their roles according to the whims and fancies of the patriarchal world around her. The character of Steffi comfortably occupies the space defined by traditional gender roles, while simultaneously weaponizing those very roles to her advantage. This study utilizes an interdisciplinary approach combining post structuralist feminist theories, psychological frameworks, and a critical analysis of the film, to demonstrate the heroine's emotional manipulation, strategic victim play and performative vulnerability as tools of control within personal and social relationships.

The 2025 released black comedy thriller movie *Ponman* directed by Jothish Shankar is set in the coastal areas of Kollam and the plot is adapted from the novel *Nālañcu Ceruppakar* by G. R. Indugopan. The movie revolves around the character P P Ajesh, a small-time gold dealer played by Basil Joseph who lends 25 sovereigns of gold for the wedding of Steffi, the sister of Bruno. Ajesh belongs to the 'common man' category who earns his bread by fighting with the stark realities of life and he finds lending gold as a means of earning money. He gives the gold to Steffi under the condition that it has to be repaid through wedding gifts. The money collected as a part of wedding gifts falls short and the family could manage to get only an amount equivalent to thirteen sovereigns of gold. Since Ajesh is so particular about returning the money or gold as he is only a

dealer, he demands the return of twelve sovereigns of the gold, leading to a tense conflict with Bruno and Steffi's husband Mariyano. When Ajesh demands Steffi to return the gold, she was so adamant that she would not do it and asserts her authority over it blaming the inefficiency of her brother Bruno.

Steffi is entrapped in the pressure of marriage and the expectations of her family. Like many other girls, she can also be considered as a victim of the unjust dowry system. But what makes Steffi peculiar is the way she turns the table after accepting the gold. Steffi doesn't want to place herself in a bad light at her husband's family by losing the gold even though she is not completely satisfied with her marriage to Mariyano. Mariyano is a prawn farmer from the coastal village called Thalavettichira, notorious for the way they handle people. His family is also depicted as a demanding one where his mother finds the dowry obtained from Steffi's family as a resort for paying the balance of the dowry needed to be given to her eldest daughter and the rest to be utilized for the marriage of her youngest daughter.

The film towards moving to its climax underlines that dark realities of dowry associated with marriage and the pride and reputation it brings to the life of the women after marriage. The movie tries to dismantle the concept of gold given as dowry and establishes the very notion that human relations and empathy should champion in spite of the age-old societal restrictions and customs associated with marriage and fuelled by patriarchy. The film portrays some bitter realities of life where we see a woman weaponizing traditional gender roles to her advantage. Coming to the character of Steffi, we can see that she uses emotional and psychological manipulation as a tool to exercise power over others by her strategies of strategic victimhood and performative vulnerability.

## METHODOLOGY

Steffi, played by Lijimol in the film shows how femininity can be strategically used to escape from the responsibilities of the world by adhering to gender roles prescribed by the patriarchal world. The paper attempts to study how power that acts in a subtle manner which is exercised in the intimate spaces challenges the discourses in gender, feminism and power. The paper also shows how toxicity can transcend gender binaries and how it leads to psychological manipulation and discrimination. The various discourses on gender and power commonly focus on the patriarchal world where men are portrayed as the oppressors and women as the victims. While this view has often been perceived by the majority of people in our world, it's necessary to overlook the ways in which how these gender binaries are being challenged over and over by some women who exercise power in the form of emotional and psychological manipulation.

An exploration of poststructuralist feminist and psychoanalytic theories suggests that the movie is a critique of traditional gender representation in Indian cinema. For many centuries, women were represented as passive sufferers and submissive who plays victim in a patriarchal world. For over a long period, women have been represented in Indian cinema as virtuous victims or seductress. In recent years, there is a shift in the portrayal of these women characters. In movies like *22 Female Kottayam*, *Uyare* and *The Great Indian Kitchen*, there has been a shift towards more complex characters. In the movie *Ponman*, the character of Steffi illustrates how femininity can be used as a tool of exploitation and as a form of power used for personal gains to oppress others. But this paper attempts to investigate how the very same femininity is used as a toxic weapon in intimate spaces

and shows how it transcends gender binaries and how personal and social life of people around is affected. "There is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured" (Butler 18). Here Steffi appears to be someone who falls to the so called feminine-self portrayed by patriarchy, but the way she tries to establish her pride and dignity by twisting the very same ideals places her at a different pedestal.

Toxic femininity is a form of internalised misogyny where you restrict yourself deliberately to traditional feminine ideals prescribed by the patriarchal world. "Toxic femininity isn't just being nice to survive a man's world—it's wielding traditional gender roles to gain power over other women or avoid accountability" (Marcotte). This form of femininity can be used as tool for women to dominate others while portraying themselves as weak and vulnerable. It helps them to escape from the responsibilities of life by adhering themselves to gender stereotypes. As Judith Butler states, gender is performative. It means gender is constituted through repeated behaviour and practices. Within this framework, femininity itself becomes a script that can be both internalized and weaponized. Steffi's character demonstrates this dynamic vividly. "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 25).

At the outset of the movie, Steffi is portrayed as a good woman who is soft spoken, shy and reluctant. Her attire itself is appealing to the aesthetics of idealized femininity. She wears a salwar along with dupatta and speaks gently to people around. She is portrayed as a family girl who prioritizes family over herself. As Butler writes, "gender is a strategy of survival within compulsory systems" (26). Steffi's mother is very eager to get her married. In Kollam's dowry driven society, they struggle to meet the demands. Steffi's brother Bruno is represented as jobless and carefree who also get into troubles. As per the traditional norms, men are meant for work and women are meant for kitchen. Girls are traditionally raised with restrictions and boy with demands. Both these expectations are equally dangerous. "Girls are weighed down by restrictions, boys with demands—two equally harmful disciplines" (Beauvoir 365). This is a norm that is internalized in the minds of men and women in the society. The character of Steffi fits into this very same category where she doesn't go for work and intend to get married and settle down. She even considers it as others responsibility and burden to secure her a good future. She despises her jobless brother for not taking caring of her future. Thus, Steffi becomes a synonym of toxic femininity where she weaponize her gender to take advantage of others and to escape herself from the worries of the world. "Patriarchy has no gender." (Hooks 78) Thus, Steffi participates in patriarchal expectation and even benefits from it. The notion of gender roles is strictly cultivated in her through social norms. As Judith Bultler suggests, "Gender is performed", she performs a passive and domestic femininity as strategy and not as her identity. She expects others to secure her future rather than building one of her own. Steffi's character says to Ajesh about Bruno at a point, "You better take the money from Bruno as he is a well-built man and he can pay it by doing labour... Bruno has never thought the fact that he has a sister to take care of and to be married of" (Shankar *Ponman*). This statement clearly marks her conviction that keeping a sister's life safe and secure is the responsibility of a brother or the men surrounding her. Even the same notion is asserted by Bruno's mother. She also blames Bruno for the troubles happening related to dowry. Rather than rejecting the notion of dowry that stands against the freedom and space of women she simply asserts it as the responsibility of her son

to find means to arrange the gold for his sister's marriage.

Steffi's relationship with the character P.P. Ajesh, played by Basil Joseph, further reveals her strategic manipulation of traditional gender expectations. When her family is unable to gather enough dowry to get her married, Ajesh proposes a business-like arrangement: he offers to finance the wedding expenses in exchange for the cash gifts received during the ceremony. However, when Steffi's mother is unable to return the excess gold given by Ajesh, neither she nor Steffi shows any sense of guilt or obligation. Their indifference toward repaying the debt reflects a deep-rooted entitlement masked as vulnerability. "Some women wield their 'nurturing' roles like weapons—disguised control through dependence and guilt" (Chesler 78).

Here the cultural norms around marriage are exploited and the gender roles underscore their departure from the stereotypical "angelic" feminine ideal often seen in Malayalam cinema. Instead of being passive or morally upright, these women manipulate the very roles that traditionally constrain them, embodying a form of feminine toxicity that challenges both patriarchal and feminist expectations. Rather than being a fierce woman fighting against the dowry system that's exploiting her life and other people around, she accepts the system of injustice and inhabits them so deeply that she transforms that passivity and vulnerability to a kind of emotional trap to which Ajesh is entangled to.

Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity becomes relevant in the character of Stephy. Steffi displays "the desire to be recognized without recognizing the other" (Benjamin 52). She thinks it's the responsibility of other people to protect her life while at the same time, she never values the lives of people around her often turning a blind eye towards them. She doesn't show the courage to reject the marriage proposal of Mariyano, nor try to discard him even when she realises the attitude of his family. Though she tells Ajesh that Bruno has thrown her away to a macho man whom she doesn't like much, she tries to remain in the framework of the so-called ideal wife after the marriage with the gold she got. "When women hate themselves, they reinforce the very system that oppressed them" (Caitlin Moran *How to Be a Woman*). She enjoys the privileges of a wife by hiding the reality from Mariyano's family.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, on a close examination, we can see that Steffi is a character who sticks on to the dictates of the patriarchal society, but uses the very notion of femininity and the submissive status quo to stand behind and imposes the responsibility of a family into a man's shoulder. Her toxic femininity is well established through many scenes in the movie which is also supported adequately by other women characters like Steffi's mother, Mariyano's mother, sisters et al. Though she changes her mind in favour of Ajesh towards the end of the film, she again confirms to the patriarchal dictates by uniting with Ajesh. A highlight of the film is that, it has successfully thrown light on the ill practice of dowry associated with marriage. Though the character of Steffi may seem to be a hapless woman who gets entrapped in the marital constrictions, she marks her space as some one who utilises the scenario wisely and steers away the responsibility of her plight upon her family, especially her brother. Steffi portrayed effectively by Lijimol stands out as an embodiment of feminine toxicity and shrewdness in the frame work of patriarchal hegemony.

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