

Article

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Between the Mirror and the Chair: *Victoria*

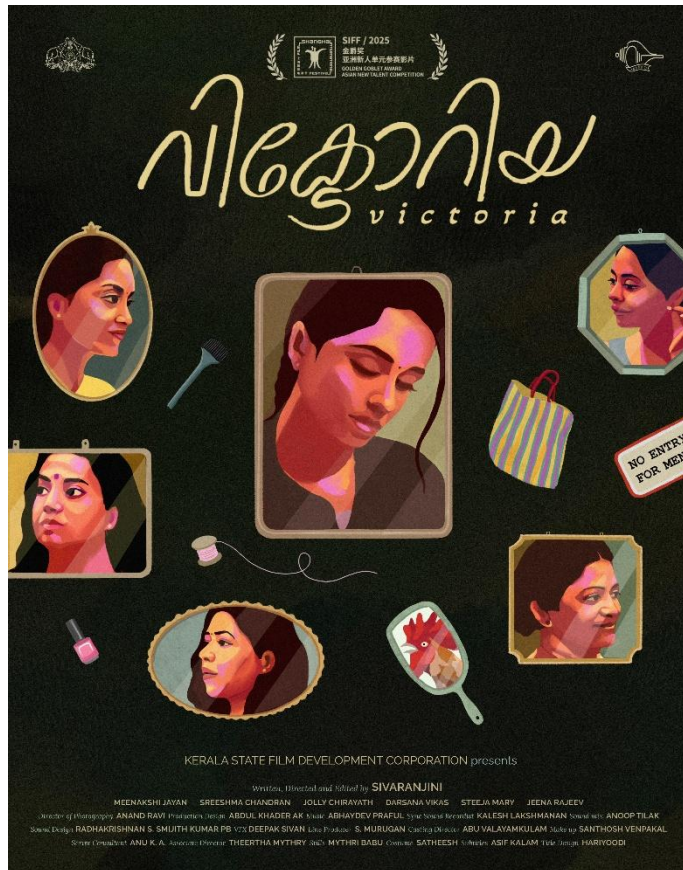


There's a special kind of courage in minimalist mileage; courage in small spaces speaks the volume in some frequent motions. The debut film by Sivaranjini J- an emerging independent filmmaker from Kerala- *Victoria*, takes place mostly inside a small salon nestled in a Kerala suburb. One day, one room, air thick with steam, glass streaked, clutter crowding every shelf. Meenakshi Jayan plays the title character, a young beautician named Victoria, who begins this particular morning knowing that she will run off later with a man outside her faith, far beyond what her strict Catholic family is used to. Nothing is given us any details of how she

reached that decision. We land right into motion - dryers, fingers brushing skin, and thoughts spiral without sound.

Out of stillness, comes stark focus - Sivaranjini picks one place, one span of hours, inner turmoil humming beneath routine labour. Eighty-four tightly wound minutes unfold without filler or drift. She shapes something unusual today in Indian film: a story built by women, lived through women, set where women gather. It depicts how much a woman carries – love, belief, duty, endurance – all while leaning close to pluck the other's brow.

Victoria's salon is more than a backdrop. It's a claim. Sivaranjini has a "Men Not Allowed" sign on her doors. She honours it. For eighty-four minutes, male figures do not walk onto the screen; those that depend on her (boyfriend phoning nonstop, father whose hand once struck, norms in place) only emerge through the lines they make, the marks they leave behind, the silhouettes that flout above the glass. What's more than keeping men out of sight while still carrying their weight on the camera is one of the best moves we have seen in Malayalam cinema in a while bringing their weight to be there.



The film knows that the beauty parlour is one of the few middle and lower class spaces in Kerala that is functionally, practically, unapologetically feminine. Women don't come here essentially for threading or facials, they come here to exhale. Conversations in a beauty parlour are looser, more confessional, funnier, more alive.

Sivaranjini observed this as a citizen anthropologist embedded in a beauty parlour in her neighbourhood. The film is constructed on these observations, nothing feels staged. The conversation between the women in the space seems overheard, silences earned, gossip has history. The only man physically in the space is the rooster- the bird that Victoria has saddled from a neighbour to be sacrificed at St George's Church in Edappally. He wanders the parlour, disrupts routines, lights off alarms. It's no easy to read between the lines. If an audience does not want to read too hard, the symbolism isn't subtle. Of course, Sivaranjini isn't preaching her symbolism. His presence lends an almost mythical undercurrent: the rooster is the last patriarch that can escape before they lock the doors behind him, and even he won't survive.

The film rests and rises on Meenakshi Jayan's shoulders, and she shoulders it with almost supernatural skill for a feature-film first timer. Sivaranjini discovered her after rounds of auditions in Angamaly and Chalakudy and demanded that she train for three months at a real parlour, pick up the Angamaly dialect, and execute all the beautician work – waxing, facials, threading – before the camera, with no doubles and no shortcuts. The reason wasn't mere verisimilitude. It was that the film uses long, continuous handheld shots where Jayan's hands are always busy. There was simply no space for play-acting.

The weight of Jayan's performance exists somewhere in the space between the hands and the face. Her hands are forever busy, forever working, forever professional. Her face is calm, intent, sometimes warmer than we might expect from someone so good

at their job. But the entire weight of the performance lies in those brief seconds when the professional mask slips- not into melodrama, but rather into a little flicker, a brief nothing, a stillness that holds all the things she couldn't say out loud. The film's greatest insight, carried entirely on Jayan's shoulders, is that people can wear masks of professionalism while they suffer beneath them, and only a keen, compassionate eye will see through them. Sreeshma Chandran, playing Victoria's pregnant friend Leya, is the one who sees- who sees the telltale sign of a slap that no one had bothered to notice before because no one had been paying attention.

Jayan saves her moments when Victoria's mask breaks for times when the tears come least expected, a bathroom breakdown, a whispered word to a friend- and in these moments, Jayan is living. We don't get the slightest sense of drama in how the emotions travel. This is the hardest thing an actor can do: to cry without crying, to suffer without putting suffering on display. Jayan does it every time, and the Golden Goblet Award for Best Actress at the 2025 Shanghai International Film Festival isn't for pyrotechnics. It's for the quiet strength, the intelligent physicality, the understated intensity of a performance the audience can feel in their bones.

Cinematographer Anand Ravi (the credited DOP) works within a methodology designed by Sivaranjini: long takes, handheld camera, natural light supplemented with minimal artificial sourcing, and no fixed wide shots that would give the parlour a stable, traceable geography. The camera moves with people, not around them. It tracks Victoria as she moves from station to station, follows the

conversation from customer to beautician to wall mirror and back, swings to register a new arrival without announcing the cut.



This approach has several effects. First, it creates genuine spatial anxiety – the audience never quite knows where they are in the parlour, and as the film progresses and more customers arrive, the space feels increasingly full, which is physically true but also emotionally legible. Victoria's world is closing in. Second, it means that performances couldn't be broken into discrete fragments and assembled in editing. What we see has the quality of something lived through, not assembled. Jayan and her co-stars had to stay in character through long stretches of unbroken action, which is why the training mattered so much. Third, and most importantly, the handheld camera carries subjectivity. It is the one 'character' that is anxious on Victoria's behalf – that registers her physical tension in its own tremors, that moves closer when she's threatened and pulls back when she finds momentary relief.

The art director built a fully functional parlour set inside the state- owned Chitranjali Studio in Thiruvananthapuram – apparently a meticulous reconstruction. This material authenticity is the foundation on which the film's realism rests.

One of the biggest delights Victoria offers is the cinematic mileage through its secondary characters. The film, in fact, deserves a lot of praise for the excellent work of the whole ensemble. Steeja Mary, playing as Deepa, a customer who can't stop making up stories adds to the comic relief in a very natural way. Jolly Chirayath (as Shyamala), who is a first time visitor to the beauty parlour, who with the social awkwardness of someone new to this very female and quite intimate space slowly comes out of her shell. Darsana Vikas (as Jeena)- the parlour owner, has a reserved air of command. The film shows that it takes her seriously - she is the boss of Victoria and also her implicit protector, running the place with the pragmatic and heartfelt warmth of someone who has lived through it all.



The dialogues of these women with Victoria add layers to the movie - they are humorous, detailed, and sometimes even

touching. At the same time, they make a political point in a very light way that does not involve a debate in fact, when a group of girls from the school suddenly start singing about the traps of life, it is a scene full of happiness and a kind of mild revolt that remains hidden without any promoter and it is over before it can be turned into a political statement. Sivaranjini, in fact, realizes that a space like this one does not need to be politicized by doing arguments, it just needs to be shown.

The ensemble acts as a structural element that anchors Victoria's personal drama within a community. These women are unaware of the hardships Victoria is going through. They haven't been informed about the slap, the elopement plan, the boyfriend's fluctuations. But, it is their being around her, their laughing, their grumbling, their banding together that silently creates a kind of support structure even if mistakenly they are not aware of it. The movie, in fact, through a soft voice, hints at the idea that this is how women have survived under patriarchal systems over time: not by way of heroic resistance but by accumulating small acts of solidarity in enclosed spaces.

Along with the depiction of the rooster and its realistic portrayal, Sivaranjini pointed out that the bird is from a real world. She mentions that, actually the rooster seen in the film is the same one she saw in the real-life parlour where it was kept and was awaiting its sacrifice on the occasion of the St George festival, which is celebrated in Edappally. The rooster here is a very nice example or a tool to take forward the story of the film. Being a little aggressive, humorous and even ridiculous, the rooster also brings something sad and tragic in the film - the symbol of

sacrifice - which, in fact, happens to both the animal itself and the protagonist Victoria, who also had been chosen as a sacrifice. There is one other scene in the film where a rat snake tries but fails to go up the wall, and it happens to be one of the few outdoor shots of the feature. Some reviewers see it as a powerful symbol of male intrusion into a space coded as feminine — a man who simply cannot enter. Others, though, feel this might be the one moment where Sivaranjini's symbolism becomes a little too on-the-nose. They make a reasonable case: the rooster works as a symbol partly because of how present it is throughout the film. The snake, by contrast, appears only once, and to some, it can feel less like a subtle allegory and more like a fairly direct illustration- though that's just one perspective among several.

We never see the boyfriend of Victoria, he is only heard over the phone, and what is more important is his reliability as a character lessens and less. It is a very disturbing factor the voice of the boyfriend within the salon, a male voice appearing and disrupting the female space as well as women's presence, filled with hesitations and faltering tones, as if he had already found a way to justify his abandoning Victoria at the last minute. The film's most formally exacting comment on the patriarchy is that, It does not matter that the male does not enter the room, he can still make himself feel in this space in his absence. Without coming into the room, he can create the feelings of fear, pressure, and the threat of abandonment. He is only a mere voice, a symbol of authority, unreliability, or that disembodied masculinity which organizes women's lives from outside the room. The parlour door showing the warning "No Entry

For Men" may exclude his body, but it surely does not exclude what he stands for. Throughout the day, Victoria keeps him within herself through her anxiety which is kept hidden by her professional make-up and through the discovering of bruises by her pregnant girl friend.

Somewhere thought it is felt that the boyfriend's character could have been developed more to display his complexity through his actions and expressions this is quite a justified critique. But, within the film's setup, this seems to be a reasonable decision because here the boyfriend is hardly given a persona but rather is an emblematic character, symbolizing the oppressive nature of male-dominated societal norms. While creating a deeply impressive character in Victoria, the film chooses a remarkably restrained and realistic ending. Rather than offering a dramatic moment of closure, Sivaranjini allows Victoria's inner resolution to unfold quietly and with subtlety. For some, this openness may feel understated, but it also reflects the film's commitment to realism — trusting the audience to sit with the emotions and interpret the change in their own way. Another aspect some viewers may notice is the film's measured pacing. Despite its concise runtime of under 90 minutes, the lively conversational energy of the parlour sequences in the first half settles into a quieter rhythm later on. Rather than building toward a more dramatic or conventionally climactic turn, the film spends additional time with its customer moments- a choice that feels less like hesitation and more like an intentional embrace of stillness and connected texture.

Victoria is a production under the Kerala State Film Development Corporation's

women and Dalit filmmakers grant scheme. This method of financing, perhaps unnoticeably, is nurturing some of the most innovatively designed and culturally deep films in the landscape of contemporary Indian cinema. That is why it matters. Sivaranjini is part of a set of female filmmakers from the Malayalam film industry, making films that can only be understood as art cinema, or a significant stakeholder of the new wave of Malayalam cinema, even in commercial cinema's current revival, who a lot have succeeded in producing a body of work of which commercial Malayalam cinema still remains being challenged. Victoria shows how politics in Malayalam women's cinema don't have to be loud, grandiose, or validated by men. All they need is a filmmaker who understands what she sees and trusts its significance - one who can make a world out of a "No Entry" sign and a cock and a girl's face filled with quiet suffering and turn that into something as big as anything in movies.

The journey may not seek absolute perfection, and that perhaps is part of its charm. Some viewers may find certain symbolic layers open-ended, the realistic ending quietly restrained, or the boyfriend's

presence intentionally elusive. Yet these remain small reflections within a film of remarkable sensitivity and artistic confidence. Its formal grace and emotional resonance remain deeply compelling, making Victoria an experience that stays with the viewer well beyond its final frame. Some minor imperfections in a film of such a high degree of merit cannot overshadow the outstanding formal excellence and high emotional tension of the film. Sivaranjini J has Really made a very fine debut with her great control, insight, and political acumen. Meenakshi Jayan carries out a part with the kind of emotional control and physical precision that any actor in any language would be proud of. In collaboration, they have made a picture whose central charactera beauty salon in suburban Kerala turns for its 84-minute duration into the whole world, a place where women not only breathe freely but also carry everything, and in the company of each other, find something that is not quite a rescue but close enough to matter.

In Victoria, feminism is not a loud cry- but a soft voice- the kind of a whisper that stays with us long after the final frame.

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