

Article**V K Joseph****Evolving Cultural Imaginary in Recent Popular Malayalam Cinema**

Some observations are made as introductory comments to point out the importance of examining certain ideas which have gained prominence in the mainstream Malayalam cinema over the last three decades, through their cultural reading. The term Cultural Reading means studying cinema culturally. Cultural studies do not mean the study of culture, rather, it is to study them culturally. It is a means of analysis and, definitely, an approach. Subsequently, we have to consider what culture is. One may come across various types of definitions and explanations. The simplest and most fundamental answer to this is given by Raymond Williams. Culture, according to him, is ‘the whole way of life’. It is an

extensive conceptual system which encompasses the whole practices that a community adopts or engages in as a part of their way of life. The cultural and political reading of the film is possible only through a blending of the critique, trial and inquiry of them. Mostly, what is being explored here is not about the aesthetics of cinema. We are exploring how the political and cultural meanings are manifested through the attitudes and ideas, internally and externally, in the popular and art films.

The most important survival factor of a nation and people is its culture and the practice of culture. Culture is not something stagnant over time, nor is it monolithic in nature which has matured fully as an eternal

specimen for all ages. It is dynamic and constantly changing. It assimilates new thoughts and ideas and is ever altering itself. The most elementary unit of the film is the shot. A single shot can be made up of several frames. If we re-analyze and split the shot, we get to the images. The image is the element of the most basic and smallest meaning in the text of the film. Images do not always have broad meanings in their content or appearance. But with the help of the cultural and political connotations they have accumulated from each person's point of view, they can produce broader and different meanings. We accept the world of meaning in literature on the basis of the meanings it produces. But in cinema, meanings are produced through totally different processes.



What is an image? Factors like our locality and relationships in the world are determined on our perspectives of them. When we say we see the world, it is based on how we identify, interpret, and understand the images around us (objects, nature, people, events, images, sounds, etc.). The movie is a cultural product of visual- auditory images and their functioning. We need to think about how these images and their narratives appear in the political and cultural expressions of a society. The images created by visuals or visual traps within the narrative structure of these films need to be explored further beyond the rudimentary level of investigation

about meanings that they reflect or carry on the exterior, as they actually transform themselves into the carriers of perpetually made images of perspectives, beliefs and values that they transcend the spacio-temporal bounds.

That is why an image which is harmless and cozy in literature quickly assumes extensive semantic dimensions making social and political readings possible. Thus, factors like the name of Mammooty's character (Narasimha Mannadiar), the role and the customs in the movie *Dhruvam* appear to have political insinuation or interference in the field of vision. This is made possible through the use of images and metaphors. This acquires cultural and political meanings through the readings that expand beyond our mere plain visions. Hence, we need to examine how films produce inner meanings.

The use and juxtaposition of the visuals and sounds create an experience different from the meanings given to the words and expressions within the literary forms. Literary descriptions of the same scenes fail to generate the feel of the visual experiences as that of the men walking through the mist accompanied by distinctive sounds, or of a building hidden in the fog, or of a shadowy figure appearing in the dark. Film unfurls a vista of representations. It also opens up a narrative world of power relations and power practices. Power, domination, inequality, exploitation and persecution based on nation, race, religion, caste, creed, gender, etc., govern the political, social and economic laws and customs of any society on the globe.

In India, it is more or less determined on the basis of caste and creed. The visibility created by the dominance, power and economic supremacy of the prominent castes in the contemporary

Indian society is very evident. Similarly, the exploitation, inequality and marginalization of the lower castes make them vanish from the social spheres.

The present era in which the right wing Hindutva assumes power and presents and propagates the *Savarna* (upper caste) elitism as the Indian values and the Hindu cultural values, is also a period of suicides of the lower classes. Films play a major role in formulating an ideological environment conducive to shaping the public perception of lower life and humanity, and in generalizing the cultural hegemonic discourses of upper caste Hinduism. In mainstream cinema, the upper caste and lower caste, or the rich and the working class, are visually represented through the binaries of refined/ unrefined, mature/ immature, and master/ servant.



The last three decades have also passed through the thick of political and cultural storms. The collapse of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, and the rat race for the boundless consumeristic luxuries and ensuing avarice inaugurated by globalization and marketization, the extraordinary circumstances of the anti-Mandal Commission struggles, and the fragmentation of Indian society since the demolition of the Babri Masjid have all driven humans back to the old and fanciful realms of nostalgia. Our films are changing in such a way that erases the memories of society's struggles against inequality, exploitation and forms of power.

The memories of social struggles, persecution, oppression, humiliation, caste discrimination and injustice suffered by the majority of human beings are obliterated through our films. Instead, it brings into the fore the imaginary and unreal virtues of feudalism and *Savarna* dominance to the memories and discourses of the present. Diligent observation and reading of the politics and culture put forward by the mainstream films is very important. Such studies will help to clarify how caste, creed, religion etc., work in Malayalam cinema. It is with the findings of such analyses that critiques of the *Savarna* elements in cinema, the anti-Dalit, anti-women and anti-minority ideology have emerged. The discoveries and criticism that *Savarnata* (upper casteism) is a stowed away concept in popular films have helped to carefully alert and craft the themes of later New Generation films. Although there are the golden feudalism signs in Malayalam cinema from the earliest times onwards, I think it appears violently in Joshi's '*Dhruvam*' (The Pole). Through this kind of films the concepts of who the enemy is and who the savior get constructed. Later on, the feudal ideas, lords and old princely states began to emerge as saviors.

1992 was the year when Babri Masjid was demolished and the public sphere as well as the people of India were divided on religious lines. *Dhruvam* (The Pole) was released the same year. The crucial turning point of the film is that all the Hindus are divided on one side and Muslims on the other side in order to eventually eliminate the Muslim villain. Until then, the villain and the hero were at war and it was common for followers to line up on both sides, regardless of caste or religion. But just before the final battle in *Dhruvam*, the Hindu driver, who had sided with the Muslim villain, defects him to join the camp of Narasimha Mannadiar.

This is a kind of religious polarization. It has many political and social connotations in the Indian context and in the Kerala milieu. The protagonist Narasimha Mannadiar is the inheritor of the feudal legacy and representative of a past glorified by the reactionary Hindutva ideas. At the beginning of the film, there is a story told about this old royal family. If any of the subjects had any grievance, they would have to ring a bell placed in front of the palace gate. Everyone in the palace avows to see that the complaint is resolved. Thus, the film constantly tells our subconscious that we have overthrown the kings and rulers who loved justice and the people so much in the name of democracy.

The name Narasimha itself is meant to evoke mythical memories and faith. Narasimha Mannadiar is the embodiment for the obliteration of the enemy. Here, the enemy and the incarnation are of two political/religious/ caste representations. One can see that the once defeated feudal landlordist elitism, which was eliminated through the long struggles of the Renaissance movements, the Communist Party and the Left democratic movements in Kerala, is brought back passing off it in disguise since the 1980s.



The social norms and practices that Malayalees had forgotten or were forced to forget like *Tharavad* (homestead), *Tharavaditham* (family pride), *Tharavattumaha* (family superiority),

Kudumbaparambaryam (family legacy), *Jati Mahatmyam* (caste supremacy), *Utsavapolima* (colourfulness of festivities), *mantras*, *Homam/ Yagams* (sacrificial fire), etc., made a bold pageant through these films. *Thekkini* (southern block in the traditional house), *Vadakkini* (northern block in the traditional house), *Kindi* (container in houses for holding water), *Nilavilakku* (ceremonious lamp), *Mutthachan* (Grandpa), *Muthasshi* (Grandma), *Thampuram* (respectful term for a lord/ lordly elder brother), Temple, *Aaltara* (a banyan tree base turned into a platform), *Tulsithara* (traditional structure around holy basil), *Pratishta* (shrines of deities), all began to pop up repeatedly. Anti-Dalit, anti-feminist, anti-minority and anti-democratic ideas were widely propagated within the normal logic of these kinds of cinema. All the narratives were limited to the locale of a very small *Savarna* minority. On glorified themes of nostalgia and imaginary as well as unrealistic sense of history these movies began to build their abodes. Majority of others were branded as villains, smugglers, vagabonds or clowns. We will have to ask why 75 percentage of the other population does not have a story to tell when we look into the films of the last quarter of the century.

A microscopic study of how the representations of power, inequality and otherness are integrated into the general fabric of cinema will bring out a number of realities. There have been many studies on the stereotypes of Muslims in Malayalam cinema. Muslim characters are portrayed as extremists/ polygamists/ reckless divorcees/ gluttons/ nymphomaniacs and debauchees. The themes and narrative features of Malayalam cinema were used as tools for Othering. Films have also played a role in creating a perception that the Muslim community is mysterious, reactionary and keeping off from the local indigenous culture.

In a 1987 release *Tuwana Thumpikal* by Padmarajan, the prototype of the films that narrate the above mentioned themes can be seen. This movie along with the concept of its protagonist needs to be studied separately. Only one scene in it can be elaborated further. It also points its fingers towards the changes in the attitudes of the Malayalee community. It heralds the steps towards the feudal lord-underworld hero dual in later Malayalam movies. Ravunni Nair (Jagathy Sreekumar) is a tenant of Jayakrishnan's (Mohanlal) large *tharavadu* in the feudal dynasty heritage. When all the attempts by the hero to evict him fail, the hero and his friends under intoxication grab Ravunni Nair and tie him up and take him in the car boot. He was taken to a large dam and threatened with murder. Everyone enjoys the plight of the tenant begging for life as something humorous. He is let free on the assurance that he will be evicting on his own if he is let to live, and also on that the incident will not be disclosed to anyone. Meanwhile, the audience is enjoying all these placing themselves in the shoe of feudal hero. The tenant, who was the agitation hero in the landlord-tenant conflicts in the 1950s, is portrayed in motley in the eighties. Their posterity forgets the historical lessons that the majority of the people of Kerala were tenants or agricultural laborers once and that their struggles had made the fabric of the modern democratic Kerala, and they are turning against themselves assimilating the logic of the cinema.

Later, this feudal landlord subjugates an entire society with Mohanlal's body language in movies. Mammooty's characters also created patriarchal forms of leadership, ancestral glory and domination in common sense. An analysis of many films like *Rajavinte Makan*, *Aryan*, *Irupatham Nootaandu*, *Sphadikam*, *The King*, *Valyetan*, *Hitler*, *His Highness Abdullah*, *Godfather*,

Manichitrathazhu, *Commissioner*, *Aaraam Thampuram*, *Devasuram*, *Ravanaprabhu*, *Narasimham*, *Chronic Bachelor*, *Friends*, *Sethuramayyar CBI*, *Rajamanikyam*, *20:20*, *Pazhashiraja* and *Classmates* will attest to this.

Unlike other arts, visuals and images in film scenes are constantly engaged in social and cultural discourses during one's viewing and stimulate many areas of imagination. Images produced and broadcast on film and television meant for addressing our vision complete the cycle of their meanings traversing through the spatio-temporal memories and historical contexts. Therefore, the political and cultural constructs made by these films are so important. *Ustad*, directed by Sibi Malayil, is strewn with the elements of common sense pervasions and definitions of family, relationships, power, society and employment. The contradictions and the common sense concepts of the binaries like brother/ sister, father/ daughter, society/ individual, savior/ destroyer, good/ evil, domestic/ public space, etc., play a significant role in determining the reactionary ideological environment of the film. The hero of *Ustad* is Parameswaran, and *Parameswara* is God itself. When he arrives in his homeland, he is a gentleman, a family man, and the incarnation of love. In the city, he is an underworld hero.

The hero in the *Aaram Thampuram* is Jagannathan. Jagannathan (God) is both Savior and Destroyer and Omniscient. In this film, Jagannathan who is in the garb of divinity, shifts from the shoe of a saviour and lord into the feudal political concepts. It makes more sense in the present context of fascist politics that Jagannathan is also the super goon hero of the underworld operations and a Brahmin who is destined to safeguard a country, its rituals, religion and the aspirations of the people. Inside and

around the Kovilakam, he assumes the role like Ustad Parameswaran, the protector of the family, women and also the leader of the people.

In *Aram Thampuram*, an entire village is forced to move into the colours of some imaginary feudal nostalgia that subconsciously fills a community, a country and a nation, just as Jagannathan calls himself 'Thampuram'. The film manages to entertain as well as inform. All these films, starring the representatives of the old feudal system, have become carpets for a particular *Hindutwa* political ideology. These heroes have an authoritarian style. He does not take part in any socially responsible and democratic activities and agitations. He is a person who returns from the city or jail as a vengeful, hateful person. Often, he is labeled as one being persecuted by existing democratic regimes. Ranjith who was dubbed a star screenwriter after *Devasuram*, made it a specimen copy and a convention, in turn, giving it wide acceptability. Through the decorated language of visual images the ideas that were not actually present in the lives of the Malayalees were led to the accept the extreme right politics. Created by Ranjith, these Mohanlal characters apparently carried the cultural and political symbols of *Hindutva* politics on their heads along with violence, misogyny and dictatorship. His names themselves are of the gods: Jagannathan, Parameswaran, Neelakandan, Induchudan, and so on.

Thus, all these became the stepping stone and the cultural red carpet for the murderous *Hindutwa* concepts.

All these male-centric films carried within them the anti-feminist and anti-Dalit sentiments as they pursue the feudal as well as the clerical values. As sexual imbalance and secrecy restrict and rule our society is divided into the domains of male-female visions. The social sphere of vision is divided into the feminine sphere of submission and tolerance, along with the masculine sphere of domination and cleverness. He addresses his emotional desires and delusions into the woman in a way that satisfies the look or vision of the man who has been manipulating and determining property and power for centuries, and prepares her accordingly. That is how a woman is transformed into an object of desire. Vision creates a distance, and restlessness. It also creates an urge for subjugating and possessing.

I will conclude this by reminding you about one of the most anti-feminist dialogues appeared in a Malayalam cinema ever. This is what the hero tells the heroine in *Ravanaprabhu*: "I need a woman simply to kick with the back of my leg when I come home back in the middle of night drunken and totally inebriated, and to romance with under a blanket during the seasonal showery nights, to give birth to my children and to take care of them, and eventually, one day when I breathe my last and burnt in the pyre of the souring mango tree logs in the southern compound, I need one to lament and wail. Are you ready for the same?"

The film ends on the happy note where the female lead decides to live with the protagonist, as is a token of acceptance of this dialogue.

Mr. V K Joseph is the President, Fipresci-India, based in Trivandrum.