



Research Paper

The Muted Trajectory of Casteism in New Wave Malayalam Films

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ABSTRACT: The paper aims to understand and depict the absence of revolution and under-representation of caste that exists within the Malayalam film industry even today. The 4th largest Film industry in India, renowned for its relevant thematic delineation remains taciturn on the subject of caste in the face of the increasing popularity of Malayalam Cinema and its New Wave films. By addressing this concern, it questions the fundamental ethics and values behind Malayalam cinema and urges the general public to step out of the unresponsiveness over social issues such as caste and communal hatred that are unfortunately still at large in a highly literate state such as Kerala.

To achieve this objective, this study will collate analyses of various new wave films such as 'Ee. Ma. Yau', 'Kammattipaadam', 'Kumbalangi Nights', 'Kismath', etc, celebrity interviews that have previously discussed the challenges faced by the subaltern specifically from the film industry. Examining these divisions exposes the subjugation and epistemic violence that leads to further suppression of the voiceless from within the industry. This paper thereby proposes to establish a consciousness outside of the marginalized narratives of Cinema.

KEYWORDS: Casteism, Subjugation, Epistemic Violence, Voiceless, Suppression, New Wave Films, Marginalized Narratives.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The general understanding of Caste is often linked to a social differentiation on the basis of religion, specifically Hinduism. According to the Caste system followed holistically in the Indian society, it divides people into 5 separate castes namely, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Sudras, and the Untouchables otherwise called Dalits. This system is known to be one of the oldest surviving models of segregation in society that has fragmented people into hierarchical conventions that allow certain people the catbird seat simply based on birth and religion. This raises the question as to why this predominant societal structure is still relevant today despite its sectarian ideals. Jai Shankar Prasad in his book '*Dalit Politics and Literature*' begs to differ in pointing towards Hinduism as the core belief that has been emulated in Indian culture for centuries. He instead believes that the caste system was deliberated into a construct by the upper caste Brahmins to self-serve and cater to their best interests. He further elucidates that some of the major literary texts in Hinduism were written by Dalit saints such as the Veda Vyas and the Ramayana without which the conception of Hinduism itself would not have been possible.

Thereby, Jai Shankar Prasad challenges the prevalent favoured narrative around the contemporary social discourses by disagreeing with the perceptions and prejudices behind the classical literary texts, supposedly said to have been designed to subdue the Sudras and the Dalits. The Vedas doesn't endorse birth-based discrimination or denial of any kind of opportunity for human beings. On that account, caste-based discrimination can be identified as the manipulation of those in power or those sitting in the comfort of their precedence.

Consequently, Kerala has followed a different system instead of the four-fold division mentioned above. To replace the sectors were Malayali Brahmins who formed the theocratic class, Samantha Kshatriyas, and the Nairs who formed the military elite and ruling class. Anyone outside of these sects were considered as Sudras or the lower castes. Even yet, it differed from the rest of the Indian stereotypical norms by its matrilineal practice within its castes such that even women only married those of their same caste or those higher to them but never lower. Although the origin of this system is only speculated, Kerala's caste system was known to be one of the most complex and perhaps, the most extreme social orders observed in all of India. A change was only brought about post-Independence when the constitution of India banned casteist and racial discrimination

on all grounds. Yet outlawing discrimination meant that India still recognized caste-based distinctions such as General, Backward, Scheduled Class, and Schedule tribes thereby promoting a sense of positive discrimination rather than the complete elimination of these confounding dogmas of faith. So, even though it can be said that the situation in Kerala has evolved into a system much less severe, quoting Ramanujan who says that the existence of an Indian way of thinking is history and yet “On the contrary; India never changes, under the vaneer of the modern, Indians still think like the Vedas” (Ramanujan).

A 2018 crime datum of Kerala showed the rising atrocities against Dalits as well as Scheduled tribes of which the conviction rate was only 7.9% according to the NCRB, portraying the blatant disregard for the matter in question both politically and socially. Similarly, the multitude of inter-caste crimes and violence that might even go unreported serve to show the retirement of the subject itself in a society where it is still a major social concern.

Films are generally defined as a reflection of society. It is, therefore, revolutionary in this case due to its paramount importance in substantially influencing the public, especially those who can afford it and receive a wide range of understanding. So to speak, the Malayalam film industry has been renowned for its unique plots and interesting storylines that most often hold relevant social problems as their central theme. With the arrival of New wave films, Malayalam cinema achieved even more glory for its progressive and reformatory thinking that gathered attention from people worldwide. But has the newfound glory led to further silence on the national subject of concern? The answer to this question only comes by addressing the industry and its films that attained such esteem.

NEW WAVE IN MALAYALAM CINEMA

Since the golden age in Malayalam cinema, the industry went through a rough patch between the years 2000 and 2010 due to the shift in language from literary Malayalam to a more colloquial one thereby losing the vitality and strength of its solid scripts. But with the start of the 2010s, Malayalam cinema was once again restored to its former glory through its unusual, peculiar themes and new narrative techniques. The new thematics employed were a firm reflection of Keralite society and lifestyles rather than following global trends. Part of the impact was because the new generation had begun to take over the film industry replacing the older customs with a happening contemporary approach. However, despite its apparent cumulative and reformatory movement through New wave films, the industry fails to represent or even acknowledge the predominance of caste within the Keralite society. Instead, these films are most often seen reinforcing upper caste practices if at all there is any mention of it. Nonetheless, any roles within the industry such as actors, filmmakers, and producers are most often people of the upper castes and receive recognition accordingly. Similarly, just as Hrishikesh Ingle terms the portrayal of inter-caste romance in films as inherently tragic; It could be applied to the Malayalam film industry that repeatedly illustrates epistemic violence by collocating religious sectarianism.

A movie that perhaps pronounced the onset of the new wave of films was *‘Twenty:20’*; a film produced in 2008 known to be the biggest multistarrer ever to be made in India. The film sets forth the story of two families of the biggest ‘tharavaadus’ in central Kerala and their family feud. At any rate, the movie which was a production venture to provide funding for the AMMA (Association of Malayalam Movie Artists) gave every lead an upper-caste character while its minor roles were left unidentified by caste. Even so, the film only yields an apparition of being non-discriminatory while identifying those minor roles as casteless. The leading roles of upper-caste characters are glamorized simply by playing hero. The under-representation of lower caste roles does not necessarily mean bad news in this context but the glorification of one over the silent ‘other’ redefines subjection to conformity.

‘Thattathin Marayathu’ translates to ‘Behind the Veil’ is yet another inter-faith love story produced in 2012 that unravels slowly to be one of the few tales that end with a happily-ever-after unlike other inter-faith or inter-caste romances. Other than the title that suggests the despotism within the heroine’s orthodox family, more so ever because she is a woman; she also hails from a background of wealth and political influence. The hero on the other hand is a middle-class, Hindu ‘Nair’ boy who falls in love with her ethereal beauty. Customary to Malayalam films and their subtle caste bias, once again the hero is portrayed, not as wealthy but an upper-caste nonetheless, filled with the implicit suggestion of a natural ‘hero’ with a ‘virtuous’ personality. This insinuation is not novel in the industry that holds deeply ingrained prejudices based on caste and has echoed them since time immemorial. ‘Brahmins’ were depicted as Innocent and intelligent, ‘Kshatriyas’ as brave and ‘Nairs’ as modest in such a way that caste becomes more than a system of social segregation but indicators of personality in films. The heroine is portrayed even more bleakly as nothing but a pretty face behind the veil to make the hero shine in his inadvertent chase for love. Not remarkably as subtle as the other movies, this film makes a wanton commentary on the subject in a dialogue between the hero and his friend, “What did you say? She’s a Muslim... She turned around and looked at me! If she’s a Muslim, I’m a Nair” where he expresses his enthusiasm in receiving a gesture that implied she returned his feelings for her. The dialogue assumes a sense of ego-centrism around his caste that speaks for itself and the film industry.

'*Oru Vadakkan Selfie*' draws parallels with '*Thattathin Marayathu*' in ways more than one. For one, Vineeth Srinivasan is the man behind both the movies' screenplay and therefore, set in the same locale as well. The movie is about an Engineering student and aspiring filmmaker Hero who chases his dreams to impress a girl he falls in love with and thereby embarking on a train journey with her. Once again, the hero played by Nivin Pauly is a 'Nair' character aimless and clueless in his ambition, but takes on an effervescent, virtuous persona just as his one in '*Thattathin Marayathu*'. Nair aside, the character written by Vineeth Srinivasan and played by Nivin Pauly once again thinks out loud in a dialogue with his friend of his intent to work alongside a Gautham 'Menon' disregarding any talent or skill behind the person, spotlighting his upper-caste surname alone. Vineeth Srinivasan who was the artist behind both the screenplays recognizes that he does not cover harsh realities in his films, which he states in an interview with Film Companion South. From the interview alone, it may be determined that it is not his intent to glorify an upper-caste considering that in another interview in 2022, he mentions how he looks up to Tamil director Gautham Menon for his aesthetic screenplay and techniques but in spite of that, the dialogues and additional commentaries about the surnames are questionable in their objective specifically on the preface of caste.

A tragedy like '*Ennu Ninte Moideen*' is what most films around India mean when it covers an inter-caste or inter-faith love story. A Malayalam cinema plot favourite is perhaps the themes of inter-faith love stories that highlight these gaping holes in its society just as this film is based on a real-life story of a Hindu woman and a Muslim man. What gathers attention to it however is the conflict in because she is an upper-caste Hindu woman juxtaposing her religion and caste with her identity as a woman, both simultaneously forcing her to sacrifice her freedom in the name of love. But if the roles were reversed or altered by caste, a movie of suitable comparison would be '*Kismath*' wherein a Muslim man once again falls in love with a Hindu woman but of a lower caste. Regardless of their caste, both films deal with the resignation of women to a life of suffering and loss. However, it is only their gender that shifts the power dynamic between the two castes. The convoluted climaxes of both the movies encapsulate the death of the male lead characters leaving the women abandoned and portrayed as empty carcasses that serve as memories of the person they used to be. The heroines cannot escape the patriarchal construct be it in character or script leaving them no choice but to end in tragic demise. Kanchanamala and Anita, upper caste and Dalit respectively are expected to lead lives tending to the men in their families, be it one of privilege and power or one that has to constantly repair their broken structure personally and socially. Muslim men are also subjected to the same severe orthodoxy as casteism in Hinduism which places honour and propriety over the value of human life.

"Ennu Ninte Moideen is truly a fairytale...precisely because it is cruel" (Nair)

Furthermore, the actress who plays the Hindu upper-caste woman named Kanchanamala in '*Ennu Ninte Moideen*' - Parvathy was repeatedly mistaken for having the surname 'Menon' after a journalist associated her with her caste. Parvathy later issued a statement that clarified her actual surname as 'Thriuvothu Kottuvetta' when she expressed displeasure in being associated with her caste and after continual requests to drop the 'Menon'. Ensuing her response that sought an identity solely based on her achievements and skill alone, people took to accusing her of disowning her caste. The actress counter stated through a status update on Facebook with due discretion,

"I am just a person trying to get her name right...I am not the religion or caste I was born into, alone... Because, I am a person first." (Parvathy).

She wishes that people would progress in their thinking by remedying antiquated feudal structures and instead live in healthy co-existence.

From 2016, movies saw better representations of Dalit experiences and marginal narratives through '*Ee. Ma. Yau*', '*Kammattipaadam*', and '*Pulimurugan*'. '*Ee. Ma. Yau*' written by PF Mathews was a reflection of the setting and atmosphere of a novel that didn't receive as much recognition as it deserved, caught by surprise when the audience took a liking to the film. Mathews' works often revolve around death and believes it doesn't end there. Surreal and exceptionally honest, the movie creates a wide gap with the others continually observed in the industry. Setting itself apart simply by its refreshing and candid narrative, the themes are dark and yet so raw that it cannot be critiqued without appreciation for its ingenuity. The drama that ensues before a corpse is not new to tradition as several other cultures embody the same with variations in customs. However, the difficulty of providing the deceased with a proper burial in the life of a poor man hasn't changed despite the eons that have passed by or the growth of civilization. The movie is very similar in terms of thematic context to '*Rudaali*' by Mahasweta Devi where the protagonist cannot afford tears because of the rituals and proceedings required to fulfill after death, leaving no space, time, or money for bereavement.

'*Kammattipaadam*' signifies the difference in meaning for the castes in terms of development. Land to the upper caste is a commodity while to the lower, it is a means to improve their basic standard of life. This

Malayalam movie directed by Rajiv Ravi encapsulates what land means to Dalits. The film is an overall metaphor for life as the three characters that form the major chunk of the narrative each represents a displacement in themselves and a longing, different from the urge to survive. The characters instantaneously take up delinquent roles because they cannot afford a consciousness, to exact right from wrong, or to fear time in prison. Just as love and loss inch them toward reformation, it is too late to stop the destruction they've onslaught and are caught in the trap they set up for the sake of revenge. Their lives are representative of all backward castes who are left with no choice or means to survive and have to choose between living a life of repression and exploitation or leading their lives by sacrificing their consciousness. On one hand, the development narrative is transcended by capitalism while on the other, development means a possibility for improvement in one's life. For one, it's a livelihood and for the other, an identity. Ravi intends to break more than one stereotype such as caste and complexion by employing dark-skinned characters who are also Dalits to kill the under-representation of Dalit actors who hardly ever make it to see success in the industry. In this way, Ravi sets a milestone from other directors of this industry by setting new standards and breaking out of the societal structures and domineering gaze of judgment. "I went through hell getting the film censored. It looked like they didn't want the film to come out in the form that I conceived," said Ravi when asked about the censorship board's reaction to the film in an interview with Firstpost. His unconventional concepts in film hoped to set an example for many others to follow even though the subject matter of concern is yet to be uncovered from its grave of silence.

For the rooted industry, '*Pulimurugan*' was a breakthrough in ways more than one. Its strong visuals using top-end technology catered to film enthusiasts all around the world. But another milestone it had accomplished was in giving the star Mohanlal a role that wasn't an upper-caste Hindu character. Acclaimed for its stunt sequence and crystal visual and sound effects, the features apart present a film that is sexist, hostile and destructive in nature which is frequently overlooked as harmless humour. The movie has intensity lacking substance, propelling toxic masculinity and offensive (supposedly) subtle jokes raise the question of the authenticity behind a film. The audience's enthusiasm and excitement at the climax of the movie takes New wave cinema a couple of steps back from progression as it reinforces severe brutality and degeneration through sporadic sexist commentary and a chain of offensive jokes and a poignant antagonism towards nature merely for support the character's antics of heroism. So as the film takes one step forward to exclude caste as an important background characteristic, it is canceled out by its alpha male domineering perspective that remains in the dark either because the audience fails to realize it or solely due to the subject being a dispassionate one.

2019 films such as '*Veyilmarangal*' (Trees Under the Sun) and '*Kumbalangi Nights*' shed good light on the true experience of lower caste and the real impact it has on their livelihoods - a concern that hasn't yet been addressed by mainstream media directly. '*Veyilmarangal*', the lesser-known of the two follows the story of a Dalit family that is fighting dispossession and humiliation after a cataclysm leaves them homeless. The family seeks out hard manual labour again for a livelihood battling harsh social segregation and facing the brunt of caste politics. Each of the characters' stillness and quietness is not one that is voluntary but voicelessness that results from relentless subjugation. The silence is broken in the climax that reveals the injustice poured out to them in an unkind world - both nature and people are cruel, and painstaking with no room for betterment or relaxation. There is no conspicuous disclosure on caste or gender politics just as the modern-day Malayalee society is discerned but they are inextinguishable entities that govern everyone's lives. Many aspects of the films set this idea forth satirically such as when nationalism is nurtured in people like a law but the law pays no respect to human lives that strive for it. '*Veyilmarangal*' is a film that clearly states its intentions far from commercialization, a rare element in today's cinema but as expectations would have it, didn't receive the acclamation or even attention it deserved.

Kumbalangi Nights is perhaps a movie that moves to remake, if not efface Kerala's matrilineal history. The plot unwinds in a poor lower-caste family of four brothers not blood-bound but tied together nonetheless in bonds of love and support. A central theme in the movie is compassion which allows understanding amidst pain and suffering. Similarly, all female characters are given room to choose and decide for themselves without having to put up with harsh judgment from anyone thereby vanquishing the elusive efforts of the industry in reviving the male patriarch. On the other side of the movie is the quintessential male-dominated family with Shammy who controls the household as the head of the house, Simmy - a compliant wife, her younger sister and mother whom she wants to protect. The genre of the movie quickly shifts into a thriller when Simmy steps out of docility and he reveals the abusive nature of similar-minded individuals in society. Shammy carries out his role throughout the movie via repetitive tensions that arise between the family and he is representative of all misogynistic men that simmer into masculine roles by manipulating and gaslighting their inhibitions for self-sacrifice and high morale. Screenwriter Syam Pushkaran rewrites his old mistakes, as well as old cinema,

thought processes away from glorification and bastardization of people according to their stereotypes. He not pulls out women from the narrative of powerlessness but also breaks men out of toxic masculinity and stigmatization, allowing them moments of catharsis and reinventing norms of definition. *'Kumbalangi Nights'* is, therefore, a beautiful manifestation of the society that reforms itself through this groundbreaking narrative to replace old ones.

Another movie from 2019 titled *'Unda'* revolves around several police officers assigned to a Maoist - affected area in Chattisgarh following the main character Mani played by Mammooty. The battalion hails at Bastar with a sense of pride about the advancement and progression of their state but what they come to face is where all civility, culture, caste and the fabric of society are questioned. *'Unda'* is an attempt at a realistic discourse of an ordinary cop, much contrary to the unrealistic hero of Murugan in *'Pulimurugan'* conflicted internally between feelings of compassion and resolve. This film is another plot far from the concepts of mainstream cinema that despite its weak storyline exposes the various struggles in identity in all its characters, regardless of caste and the adversities of each experience in all its rawness. "Despite being a story about a Malayali posse, *Unda* looks at all Indians." (Rangan)

New Wave films have shown a certain over time from breaking stereotypes to seeing an increase in iconoclastic writers that pursue the art of filmmaking for more than just commercial appeal. The changing times have seen a rejection of the prevaricates of the brutal feudal system. However, the inadvertent truth that remains is that it is still practiced and still a matter that is hushed by the privileged.

II. CONCLUSION

Although there have been discussions on the Dalit populations in Kerala, among the writers and directors, only a few male names for themselves in the industry. Dalits working in any profession have always had to work harder than the average person to make their livelihood and many a times, hardly see any hope for their future. This unbreakable, daunting reality is the trope most frequently portrayed in films as well that raises the context of casteist bias, politics, and distinctions as concerns that still play a predominant role in society. While movies of other genres see a happy ending and flickers of hope, movies that discuss caste if not ignorance of the lower castes or glorification of the upper castes provides no respite for the suffering, even if it is simply a manifestation. Instead, they reinforce the same cyclical stereotypes of Dalits chained to their distress and tribulations as though they're destined to live a destitute life of exploitation and rarely explore the subject of overcoming these differences communally. A protest in the subject matter of concern is yet to be seen in the Malayalam Film industry and it's audience who don't dare to break their vow of silence.

These films so far are nothing but obscure examples of social realities and have hardly set foot in the principal debate. New Wave films cater to the aesthetic sensibility of the new generation but it is still contentious what the 21st-century definition of realistic cinema refers to. Nonetheless, the responsibility to alter societal constructs begins with an understanding of the times.

"In order to understand today's world we need cinema, literally" (Zlavoj Zivek)

The purpose of Cinema is not to merely reflect present-day society but as an indication of the changes that need to be brought upon. Malayalam cinema has tried to produce this change over time with efforts to represent those underprivileged sectors of society. However, as the film industry holds the power to be a propellant of change, it can only be elicited from an audience that is unbiased and open to unlearning generational cycles. Therefore, it can be said that one cannot partake in the real essence of cinema without the people; people irrespective of these tiers of differentiation and distinction that separate man from one another and detaches further from a humanitarian lifestyle.

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