

POPULAR SHADES OF 'COLOURISM': AN ANALYSIS OF HUMOUR AND BODY POLITICS IN KERALA'S VISUAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Indian cinema in general and Malayalam cinema in specific, with its unique beginnings in the realistic idealism of the black-and-white era and its gradual shift in the 80's to the imaginary male-centric spaces, is well critiqued upon as a shedding of social responsibility. Contemporary Malayalam cinema however, is praised for its 'new generation cinema' wave, which has apparently shed both its fetish over rustic settings, anti-political undertones and patriarchal violence, to embrace an urban, post-political life of the supposed 'new generation' Malayalees. Such cinemas however, continue to remain within the monochrome panorama of the old generation which refused to acknowledge the social other and continued to position the dark-skinned, short statured, plump bodies as a site of violence and humour where the physical body plays a part in the politics of subaltern subjugation. The indirect implication of course being that such bodies are not suited for a civil society, who remain incongruent with the realities of the modern spaces by either being violent and antagonistic or comic and out of place. The paper aims to broadly define and delineate the practices of casteism and visual untouchability being practiced in Malayalam visual media. It also tries to establish that the Malayali psyche remains receptive to humour rooted in blatant racism and casteism in Kerala's modern cultural artifacts such as cinema and television productions. The primary texts of this study will be films of the present decade as well as a selection of comedy sketches from Malayalam television.

KEYWORDS: *Humour, Visual Culture, Caste, Popular Cinema, Malayalam, Dalit Representations, Body Humour*

INTRODUCTION

“... the function of laughter is to accompany and give voice to what may be called the derogatory impulse in man, his tendency to look out for and to rejoice over what is mean and undignified” (Sully 119-20)

The Indian cinema has amassed accolades from all around the globe for its grim and realistic representations of the lives of the marginalized right from the Apu Trilogy to the Slum Dog Millionaire. The nation's film oeuvre, especially those in the Malayalam medium, has its clandestine but unique portrayals of caste in the bleak but idealistic realist cinemas of the black-and-white era which are accused of catering only to the “popular reformist logic of the ruling classes” (Wankhede). Its gradual shift to imaginative spaces that transcend even the social realities in the recent decades have also been read as a commodification of the industry by the globalized market merely to sell (Raj 184).

It is also an attempt to scintillate the upper caste consciousness through evoking communal memories of caste. The media-induced nostalgia contributes to hedonic and non-hedonic entertainment experiences and influences psychological and subjective well-being (Wulf et al.).

Further, while the monochrome panorama of the old generation Malayalam cinema, the film industry that caters to the cinematic audience of Kerala, a southern state in India where a film industry in the vernacular language Malayalam flourishes, refused to acknowledge the social other, the contemporary cinema continues to remain on the same lane as it continues the positioning of the dark-skinned, short-statured, plump bodies as a site of violence and humour. The indirect implication of course being that such bodies are not suited for a civil society, which remain incongruent with the expectations of the modern spaces by either being violent and antagonistic or comic and out of place. A similar political position is taken up by the comic strips of mainstream dailies where the politics of the body plays along the politics of subaltern subjugation.

The study traces the casteism in contemporary Malayalam cinema in general, along with certain comedy sketches which were aired in the past five years. The paper aims to broadly define and delineate the practices of casteism and visual untouchability being practiced in Malayalam cinema. In lieu of an introduction to casteism in Malayalam, specific instances of casteism in the history of Malayalam cinema will be drawn and analyzed. It also tries to establish that, even after achieving Scandinavian standards of living and highest literacy in the country, the Keralite psyche has continued to remain casteist and thus, still turns a deaf ear towards the blatant racism and casteism of Kerala's modern cultural artifacts especially in the visual culture.

Contemporary Malayalam cinema is celebrated to have been rejuvenated by the 'new generation cinema' wave, has shed its fetish over rustic life, male machismo, and melodrama, to embrace an urban, post-political life of the supposed 'new generation' Malayalees (Venkiteswaran). Such cinemas however, continue to be sites of body-shaming and casteist slurs where are produced and normalized.

A similar political position is taken up by the comedy reality shows, where teams of comedy artists are pitted against each other, much like any other music or dance reality show, where the ultimate goal is to defeat the other parties and in the process of which churn out humour in whatever possible way. Such spaces become a public exhibition of Malayali's caste consciousness and prejudice.

Akin to the theoretical positioning of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin and White Masks*, the perpetration of an ideology that denigrates the dark-skinned individuals, from which a consciousness that celebrates fair skin and elite qualities emerges, can be posited as the result of such representations (Fanon 14). Hence, these representations where the humour is elicited through the belittling of dark skinned individuals hinting at their caste identities, work to create a consciousness which perpetrates an ideology of hatred towards the marginalized communities. A sense of inadequacy is churned through such portrayals as being dark-skinned becomes a handicap and an encumbering experience, which is similar to what is theorized by Fanon in his work.

Skin Colour and Caste

It is pertinent to the validation of this paper that whether skin colour can be linked with caste. The focal point of this paper is based on the popular cultural assumption that, the skin tone becomes a marker for dalit/advansi identity. In one of the comedy films of Malayalam, *Friends*, the character played by Sreenivasan, a dark-skinned comedian is asked whether there are songs that can be sung by advansis like him, a remark that is solely based on the skin colour of the actor and thereby tries to validate the social prejudice that there is a nexus between skin colour and caste identity (Siddique).

Again, expository dialogues would either link the characters with having no family heritage i.e. no savarna background, or is placed within a 'colony', the 'geographical other' where Kerala's 'avarnas' dwell in large numbers due to flawed land distribution policies of the government. There is one instance in which a dark-skinned character is asked about his caste upon which another character says that he has no caste worth mentioning.

According to PraveenaThali, the Malayalee identity is placed within a visual culture that has been completely immersed in a casteist ideology where terms such as black, colony, construction worker, dark and plump female body itself can elicit humour. "The dark skin and the above mentioned bodily indicators act as signifiers to denote certain social categories. . . This is a newly found outlet for the casteist mentality which earlier used to find outlet through blatant insults and calling caste names" (Thali).

Dark skinned Body as a Site of Violence or Docility

If one is to survey the history of Malayalam cinema or any Indian cinema for that matter, one would see that dark-skinned bodies primarily fill two major character types: one, the rowdy/villain who is routinely defeated by the 'fair' hero and two, the comic figure donning the role of a dedicated follower of the fair hero, the docile body which is often the butt of ridicule and albeit friendly violence. As sites of violence, ignorance and immorality, dark-skinned bodies are very often associated even directly as dalit/advansi identities or are made fun of.

With the rise of super stardom in Malayalam and the subsequent celebration of the upper caste religiosity, is explicated by Meena T. Pillai as "growing ritualisation in the public and secular spheres, rearticulation of a Hindutva ideology, feudal nostalgia" has cemented this divide with even the most successful dark-skinned actors such as Kalabhavan Mani being relegated to the roles as mentally or physically challenged singing folk/dalit songs (Pillai 109-110, Parayil72)

The ever popular trope of male friend duo in Malayalam cinema and television has also maintained this dichotomy of fair and handsome hero with a dark and dull side kick. From Mohanlal and Sreenivasan to Ramesh Pisharody and Dharmajan, these characters serve as perfect foil to each other where the former elicits humour while latently violating the dark-skinned bodies. The former is portrayed as the intelligent, educated, popular and of course fair-skinned, the other stands as the stark opposite of all this to create humour that is deeply rooted in colour bias. The latter often portrays characters that are intellectually and socially inferior to the former such a servant or beggar and is often physically abused when they make mistakes. When they step out of the line to act as equals to the former, the narrative often ends with them learning their place as they are too inept to be the superior character.

Dalits and English Education

Another important point of ridicule is with regard to education, which a dark-skinned person i.e. a dalit is not entitled to have. The highest grossing Malayalam cinema of 2016, Pulimuruganin which a character asks the title character' nephew commenting on the dark-skinned body of yet another whether people with such looks will be given admission in colleges (Vysakh).

Education, especially English education, was instrumental in providing social justice to the Dalit community in India. By ridiculing the eligibility of Dalits to gain education or speak English, these dialogues scintillate the latent caste prejudices of Kerala's upper caste consciousness and the notion that dalits are undeserving of such opportunities offered by the modern state.

The film has similar portrayals of Adivasi bodies, garbed in attires that are not traditional to any adivasi community in Kerala. They are mere docile objects always either servile or are at the mercy of the hero. In the movie, the tribe and its leaders deemed the protagonist as a demigod, showering him praises and narrates his exploits in a reverential manner (Vysakh).

Dark-Skinned Women on Screen

Dalit and Adivasi women are always at the risk of being at the butt of ridicule here, as not only does they have to conform to the notions of 'fair beauty', which the grand narratives of Kerala hold dear. Her behavior, dress and language too will be under watch and will be ridiculed if she dares to move out of the stereotypical, pigeonholed place as the illiterate, loud mouthed figure exemplified by comic tropes donned by actresses like KulappulliLeela or Philomena.

In one of the mostsuccessful comedy flicks of 2016 titled Action Hero Biju with NivinPauly in the lead role of a just police officer named, BijuPoulose, who deems it a crime to be smitten by a dark-skinned and plump woman. One of the crimes that the cop accuses him of is that he fell in love with a short, plump, and dark-skinned character. In another instance, a character who is described as short and dark-skinned is described as a sexual predator, who could have been considered a lesser nuisance if he had looked any better (Shine).

A much similar and may be even more extreme forms of such characterizations occur in the comedy shows of Malayalam, which cater to the satisfaction of Kerala's patriarchal, savarna middle-class, who are the major consumers and producers of Kerala's culture and aesthetics. The shows lay bare the casteist idea that, a dark-skinned woman should not become educated or speak English. Such figures are constantly ridiculed for opting western or fashionable clothing instead of conforming to the society's desires. Interestingly, female characters are often played by men dressing up in women's clothing, with extra make-up to darken their faces reminiscent of Hollywood's blackface era.

While the claims of having an unconventional outlook towards the portrayal of women and their individuality in the contemporary cinema are being celebrated by the mainstream media, there are multiple ways in which bodies of Dalit women are being ridiculed and made a site of new age untouchability. While dark-skinned male bodies are inevitably linked to violence and villainy, typecasts which even well established national award laureates like Kalabhavan Mani could not avoid,

dark-skinned female bodies are the main objects of humour in Malayalee visual culture. These bodies are often portrayed as docile beings often characterized as sex workers, gossip mongers or as socially excluded ones who cannot deserve or elicit love or attention. Their bodies become the source of humour based upon their lack of worth, much like any humour that derives from disability. Their skin tone becomes a social disability for them as it makes them ineligible for education, talent, or beauty.

In a comedy sketch shown in MazhavilManorama, a channel owned by the largest media house in Kerala, a dark skinned woman is asked whether her colony has become the "States", implying the United States of America solely because she was garbed in a modern attire ("A Man asking"). Dark-skinned bodies are asked to not speak English, as it is only fit for the white skinned. When this woman steps outside her stereotype, she is shown her place by the other character, to wear rural clothes and never western. The sartorial choices or the language is obviously not an issue of parochialism or an aversion toward western modernity, as it is made clear by the character that the problem is with such a dark-body doing so, perhaps echoing casteist exhortations of the past, to keep education 'pure' and 'safe' from the apparent impurity of anavarna mind and intellect.

These scenes that present themselves as a jarring note to the ideas of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, as the ones that he chose as ways for the emancipation of the dalits i.e. adoption of English education, Law and western clothing. Characters refuse to accept the Indian law and ascribes to casteist notions of how caste or skin colour are to be used as markers of exclusion even in the realms of personal preferences.

CONCLUSIONS

It becomes evident that although Malayalam cinema tends to avoid and sweep under the carpet any mention to caste or casteism, it continues to practice casteism through discrimination in terms of skin colour. As attempts to end caste discrimination in the real world, the 'reel world' continues to promote a politics of hatred. A brief survey of the cinemas of the new millennium, will reveal that instead of reducing casteist slurs and references, it has continued to remain as a site of discriminatory humour.

The rise of troll pages in social media has led to a larger democratized network for the creation and dissemination of humour on a daily basis. While there are umpteen trolls that ridicule the dark-skinned bodies, prominent troll pages such as the International Chalu Union have taken a bold step in changing the fabric of humour in Malayalam, with continued rejection of casteist and racist trolls. Along with the rejection of such humour by prominent troll pages, one can see the rise of groups and individuals such as "Stop Media Violence", who have started raising their voices against the ridiculing of dark-skinned bodies. A criticism however, is that most among such social media communities continue to avoid the casteist aspect of such trolls and thus only touches on the surface of the issue (Raj).

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