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## **Capitalism and the Construction of Corpo-Realities: A Study of Select Malayalam Short Stories**

**Sheniya Jose P  
Dr. Abida Farooqui**

The paper makes an attempt at tracing the construction and mobilization of various corporeal identities under the Capitalist regime, in the light of select Malayalam short stories. It also delineates how metamodern elements have outrun postmodernity in addressing questions of existence and survival, especially in the lives of the marginalized. The imposition of a deceptive homogeneity and an illusion of equality by Capitalism for the mobilization of bodies and their commodification is highlighted here. The paper also tries to capture how Capitalism ascribes a uniform consumer subjectivity to people as a whole, who are further ensnared by the market in an unending chain of dissatisfaction and unsatiated desire. The paper also focuses on the debasement of certain lives as 'bare life', which is the life of a political outcast, and the transformation of the body as a cultural artifact, a site of political inscriptions, an object of fetish, a biological entity and a marker of socio-political identity and class distinctions, especially in the Capitalist world.

**Key words:** Body, Corporeality, Marginality, Bare Life, Capitalism

### **Introduction**

This paper aims at analyzing the construction and deployment of bodies in the Capitalist politics in the light of three Malayalam short stories which have captured critical acclaim. It also throws some light

on how the Capitalist regimes in the Twenty First century go hand in hand with metamodern elements, pushing back postmodernity in addressing the questions of existence and survival, especially in the Third World where the equations of life, existence and survival are inseparably entangled and overlapped. Trying to highlight the question of the marginality of certain bodies in the competitive world where even desire as well as the body of workers assumes the shape of commodities, the paper further elaborates on how with the super imposition of a deceptive homogeneity on bodies of desire, and the mobilization of such bodies, the Capitalist society camouflages the underlying disparity between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ and entraps them both in an unending chain of unsaturated desire. The forced degradation of the lives of the marginalized into ‘bare life’ or a life of denial, vulnerability and ‘political exception’ is also unraveled. The status of the body as a site of political inscriptions, as a cultural artifact, as an object of fetish, as a commodity, and as a biological entity, is emphatically brought about in this paper. It also lays stress on how bodies become markers of socio-political identity and class distinctions, especially in the Capitalist world.

How Capitalism produces bodies, apart from making them productive, is elucidated by Steffan Blayney and Joey Hornsby in their introduction to *The Body Productive Rethinking Capitalism, Work and the Body* (2023, p.3). They argue that multiple political identities articulated through our bodies like that of race, gender and sexuality are all constructed and mediated through the transactional logic of Capitalism. The invisible and all-pervasive web of Capitalism and its imperatives working behind the construction of corporealities are brought to light in this paper with the close reading of the selected stories. The stories selected are “*Ananda Brandan*” which can be roughly translated as “The Man with the Happiness Brand” by an emerging Malayalam writer Vinoy Thomas, “*Vartha Sareeram*” or “The Body of News” by Santhosh Echikkanam, and “Solapur” by Benyamin.

The story “*Ananda Brandan*” revolves around the life of the protagonist Nijesh whose name itself, meaning the god of Truth, paradoxically stands for the erosion of Gandhian values of Truth,

Swadeshi movement, self-reliance and modesty in desires which could have been an apt solution for the encroachment of Capitalism and the globalized market along with the waves of modernity and post modernity engulfing a village of weavers in Kerala. Nijesh is said to have been conceived in the conflict of desires that takes place between his mother Yasoda, who has ‘modern’ tastes and desires and his father Narayanan, who is a Gandhian keeping modest desires. The writer says: that night as she was undressing her husband, Yasodha’s mind was obsessed with the thoughts of a glossy clean shaven face, coat and cigarette smoke. But Narayanan, as usual, was the same mixture of non- violence, handwoven clothes, poetry and renunciation which made up the old Nationalist Movement (Thomas, 2019, p. 25).

Nijesh and his allegiance to the Capitalist values is aptly pointed out with the instrumental role he plays in the introduction of plastic covers in the village which is ironically used by his ascetic father for preserving jackfruit seeds till the next season. The victimization of Nijesh by the brand market and his insatiable desire for a ‘branded identity’ that he tries to buy from the market along with goods are sarcastically illustrated by the writer when he is said to have spent the amount of loan that has been granted to him from the Cooperative bank on buying branded clothes and accessories from a mall in the nearest city. The nature of desire that Nijesh has is very much Capitalistic in nature because it forms a nexus from which there is no escape. As Todd McGowan puts it:

Capitalism has the effect of sustaining subjects in a constant state of desire. As subjects of Capitalism, we are constantly on the edge of having our desire realized, but never reach the point of realization. This has the effect of producing a satisfaction that we don’t recognize as such. That is, Capitalist subjects experience satisfaction itself as dissatisfying, which enables them to simultaneously enjoy themselves and believe wholeheartedly that a more complete satisfaction exists just around the corner, embodied in the newest commodity. (2016, p.11)

When his father sees his arrival with the packets of readymade branded clothes, he irritatingly thinks about his own past

which is intertwined with the history of the weaver's street, the textile industry in India at large, and the intrusion of the values of marketization. He thinks that even after hundred years of the founding of the first brand of readymade shirts in England, that is Charvet founded in 1838, only the upper caste/ class people in Kerala had the right to use dhotis. Even during his own father's time, though the weavers used to produce fine handwoven fabrics using the techniques taught by German missionaries, their own kids used to cover up their nudity using tender areca nut fronds and yam leaves. Naturally he gets alarmed at the lifestyle of his own son who only spends without producing anything.

Nijesh introduces western brands in the street which was sustaining itself in a self-reliant way, using its own products, the clothes with minor damages that cannot be exported and hence were sold out at cheap affordable rates. Even the discipline pursued by Nijesh at the parallel college, that is literature, is Capitalistic in that it does not produce something in a direct way other than making some intellectual investment in the form of ideology. This is conventionally the discipline of the leisurely class who can afford to day dream and to get detached from the harsh realities of everyday life. His school mate, Prasanth, on the other hand, pursues the traditional occupation, helping his parents with weaving from class five onwards, and by the time he reaches class ten he becomes an expert in weaving. He cannot afford to join the coaching classes for getting admission to Medicine or Engineering even after passing his Higher Secondary Examination scoring full marks for science. Still, he is optimistically committed to all traditional occupations like weaving, rearing cattle, agriculture etc., even while doing his Bachelor of Science. The writer implies that the undergraduate education of Prasanth and the intrusion of the globalized market into this small street of weavers were happening simultaneously, when he says that demand for the handwoven floor mats was growing high among the star hotels in the West at that time (Thomas, 2019, p. 29).

Prasanth like all other hardworking weavers in the street cashes in on that opportunity and grows wealthy enough to become a potential lender for Nijesh to fulfil his ‘brand mania’. Nijesh’s exploitation of the still proletarian psyche of Prasanth, who enjoys funding for the branded fashion sense of his own idle and unproductive friend, goes into the extreme of having a purely sexual relationship with his object of love, Anisha and heartlessly disowning her later because her lack of taste and a sense of brand in choosing undergarments (2019, p.32).

Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* (1987, p. 46) states that Capitalist society functions on a “surplus repression” where happiness arising from the fulfillment of desires is not a criterion to gauge the “break from repression”. He elaborates: “the individual lives his repression ‘freely’ as his own life: he desires what he is supposed to desire; his gratifications are profitable to him and others; he is reasonably and often exuberantly happy”. The smooth functioning of the Capitalist system demands such a repression which is reflected in the temporary gratification of Nijesh’s desires.

Nijesh keeps on updating himself and the levels of his sensibility transcend the conventional mindset of his contemporaries. He meets Anne Maria Tom, a nurse from Ernakulam working in Switzerland, on his bimonthly visits to a western branded wear shop which culminates in their marriage and his consequent immigration to Europe. The philosophical puzzle game, which is a ritual that the bride and her father-in-law engage in before her entry into the in-law’s house, begins with the father in law’s question that throws some further light into the governing theme of the Capitalist market and its practical values. Narayanan quotes the Malayalam proverb which says “beautiful jackfruits would not yield much pods” meaning external beauty is useless and unproductive. His proverb holds true as far as the toiling life of the working class is concerned. But Anne Maria quips back from a Capitalist utilitarian mindset saying that the only practical method for knowing about the core of a jackfruit, without probing it using a knife, is by judging the perfection of its appearance. She hints at the importance of following practical values rather than foolishly following empty proverbs (Thomas, 2019, p. 33).

The postmodern phase of Nijesh takes place in Europe where he easily accepts the lesbian sexuality of Anne Maria again underscoring the importance of being pragmatic for the success of life. Father Sakharias who has been invited to Switzerland by the Malayali Christians including Anne Maria's auntie, in their attempt at simulating Kerala in that foreign land, reveals the truth regarding brands to Nijesh, sipping Cognac and talking about Tequila, the world-famous beverage brands. He tells Nijesh about his own father who was an illicit brewer of alcohol in Naranganam, a remote village in the high ranges of Idukki. He says his father's liquor had a secret recipe which was very famous among his customers which would have become a world-famous brand like Cognac and Tequila, had he not been killed in an accidental fall from a cliff, chased by the Excise police. Raising the cross in his rosary as an example, he emphatically says that founding a brand is still a distant dream in the consumer culture of Kerala. He points out to the dire reality of the Capitalist society where even religion and its symbols have been degraded into branded commodities to be sold in markets.

How different corporeal identities, which are largely defined by their purchasing power, are ascribed to people by the Capitalist regime, cleverly camouflaging it by the superficial homogeneity of consumers, is unraveled in this story. As Theodor Adorno opines in *Minima Moralia* (2005, pp.102-103), each society would like to impose a homogeneity on people erasing differences and thereby enabling smooth governance. He states: "That all men are alike is exactly what society would like to hear. It considers actual or imagined differences as stigmas indicating that not enough has yet been done; that something has still been left outside its machinery, not quite determined by its totality".

Nijesh's quest for truth as a buyer of various identities culminates in Tahiti Island in French Polynesia where he metamorphizes into a seller for the first time. He launches into the market a branded spirituality that he founds sitting under a tree in meditation continuously for five days, parodying Buddha's meditation. Nijesh, the god of the Capitalist truth, finds out the tenets of a branded spirituality which are based on the facts that the world is inherently



happy but human beings do not realize that happiness because it resides within. Each person is a brand in itself (Thomas, 2019, pp. 38–39).

“Ananda Brandan” also resonates with the modern, postmodern and metamodern identities of several characters like Nijesh, Anne Maria, Anisha and Father Sakharias. Perception of an individual sense of absurdity originating from the self-reflexive nature; resorting to sexual intimacy and friendship as means of stabilizing social ties, and a positive concern for self-fulfillment are described as some of the traits of modernity (Giddens, 1990, p. 102). These characters represent such traits in one way or the other. The swinging nature of meta modernism between the extremes of “earnestness and irony, commitment and detachment, optimism and reluctance, naivety and skepticism, and the yearning for utopia and the awareness there is none” (Bargár, 2020, pp. 3–5) is duly reflected in the characterization of Nijesh. The story encapsulates his navigation along the edges of a modern and postmodern identity, finally settling down in a metamodern identity.

Santhosh Echikkanam’s story “*Vartha Sareeram*” on the other hand captures the ruptures taking place in the everyday life of the proletarian class as they get entrapped in the lures of the Capitalist world without even posing the simplest form of resistance. The crux of the story lies in the introduction of TV and VCR in a remote village in a well-off upper middle-class family and how their working-class neighbors celebrate the event thinking that they can watch movies without spending money. They forget to close the door of the hut as they hurry up to watch the midnight movie, without even caring to feed the sick, feverish child with the gruel which is left behind in the kitchen. The story poses questions regarding the hierarchy of needs and the concept of scarcity that becomes contingent on the socially defined needs. It also showcases how the worker’s body itself becomes an extension of the work and a product in itself under the Capitalist regime.

Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late Capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again... The only escape

from the work process in factory and office is through adaptation to it in leisure time. This is the incurable sickness of all entertainment (Adorno, 2005, p. 109).

The grandma in the story updates her general knowledge through radio and the news read out by her son Kelu and keenly keeps herself informed of the happenings in the world. She prefers watching the action movies of Jean Claude Van Damme to the Malayalam action movies. She yearns for media visibility and wishes her photo published in the obituary column of the newspaper even at the cost of skipping the funeral rites. When the notice about missing people is read out by the newsreader with their photos displayed, the grandmother feels that they are very lucky to get such visual representation on the screen. Her desire for visibility grows into the hyperbolic extent of scolding her own adolescent granddaughter for not absconding and thus having lost the chance for such representation on the visual media. She dreams of the moment when she transforms into a news item (Echikkanam 268). She swings from one media to the next in a crazy desire to get updated of the news.

The entire family seems to revel in the visuals which fraudulently satiate their desires or give them a deceptive feeling of satiation. They satiate their desire for good food with the visuals of chocolates in the TV advertisement and the desire for social justice with the way the action hero beats the corrupt ministers. Even when they get back home to experience literal starvation awaiting them in the form of the broken mud vessel and the presence of the stray dog inside kitchen, the grandmother can satiate herself listening to the radio for the midnight music broadcast of a “Western Band” and the “English News” following it. The delusional experience given to the spectators by movies being one of the “culture industries” is explained by Adorno (2005, p.99) that movies “create the illusion that the world outside is a seamless extension of the one which has been revealed in the cinema”.

The abject poverty of the family is indicated with the picture of hut which does not have a proper door, the way the sick child’s head is covered with a plastic cover instead of using a muffler and an

umbrella, and the gruel for supper. Kelu, the sick child's father is a sand loading laborer who takes black tea with rusk once he is back from work late in the evening. But he does not hesitate to buy two newspapers and to read them out for his illiterate mother.

The class distinctions of the people who own the TV and the neighbors who visit their place to watch it, are clearly defined by the writer with the implicit reference on caste, the red oxide floor, the preparation of their daughter for Engineering/ Medical entrance examinations, which is an obvious class marker in Kerala taking into consideration the huge expenses it incurs, and the patriarchal way the family dines. But the world of media unites them and deceptively erases all class distinctions.

This can be substantiated with the social status Nijesh gains though he is unproductive and contributing nothing to the social Capital. Being the smartest guy in the weaver's street, everyone wants him to be prim and proper. As he has a flair for literature and gift of the gab, even the Party considers his company as desirable. That is how he was granted a personal loan given for start-up business from the cooperative bank which is usually granted only to those staunch followers of the party who work for it (Thomas, 2019, p.25). The purchasing power of the middle-class people in the story "*Vartha Sareeram*" is reflected by the specific brand of television that they buy which further grants them a better slot in the hierarchy of social status. The deceptive feeling of unity and equality is remarkably ephemeral and does not go beyond the partaking in the culture industry and its products.

The focal point in Benyamin's story "Solapur" is yet again the marginalized bodies under Capitalism and how their spatial status changes as they acquire market value as commodities. The shift from the margins to the center of the market does not alter their political status but on the contrary, further enhances the chances of exploitation. The story also underscores how, even while upholding the superficially imposed homogeneity of consumers, the Capitalist market celebrates the uniqueness of commodities, especially the uniqueness of bodies with a difference. The story foregrounds the political alienation of certain bodies and the deliberate denial of their human rights, including

the right to live, and the right to have human dignity. The story delves deep into the way a marginalized couple, Sobhi and Hanumantha are forced to sell off their intimate sexual scenes recorded on a mobile phone which is lent to them by an exploitative middleman (Benyamin, 2018, pp. 23–29).

The journey that Sobhi and her husband Hanumantha undertake to the city of Solapur, crossing the borders of their own village seems to be a voluntary one on the peripheral level. On scrutiny the forced nature of the journey and the way the marginalized bodies are hurled out of their habitat by the prevailing market forces are revealed. They have to lie to the acquaintances in the bus stop that they are going to Solapur to buy some clothes. The comments prompted by the lie, like if they have won some lottery or have been lent some black money, point towards their abject poverty which is further highlighted by the scenes of the draught-stricken village shown through the windows of the bus as they cross the village.

Hanumantha's mother hates Sobhi only because her lower caste background and her work as a sweeper in the village market is inferior to that of farming as far as occupational status is considered. Her body is more exposed to marginality, being a woman, a Dalit, a village dweller and owning lower class status. Naturally, it is she who has to sell her kidney to save their son, who was a cancer patient.

The journey that the couple daringly undertakes is metaphorical in that it also problematizes the physical boundaries of their own bodies. The contours of their body are more susceptible to invasion and violation in the city. The right of the subaltern to own their own bodies is all the more challenged in the city. Their vulnerable corporeal status forces them twice to surrender the claim over their own bodies. First, when Sobhi is forced to sell her kidney and secondly, when the couple is forced to sell their own sexuality.

The body is a cultural fact. Now, in any culture whatsoever, the mode of organization of the relation to the body reflects the mode of organization of the relation to things and of social relations. In a capitalist society, the general status of private property applies

also to the body, to the way we operate socially with it and the mental representation we have of it (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 277).

The journey also problematizes the marginalized people's right to the city. The marginality of their bodies is not only defined in a spatial sense, but also in the way they get access to human rights. Their vulnerability skyrockets as they cross the physical boundaries of the village and enter the city. Their bodies attain curios status, and become aesthetic artifacts because of their uniqueness in the market. The Economic laws regarding demand, prize and availability rule the market world of the city. When the object, here the body, is scarce, the demand hikes and the price increases accordingly.

The ironic role that the mobile phone plays in their victimization sets off their inferior status according to the parameters of wealth, class, and occupation of space. They cannot afford to have a mobile phone, do not even know how to use it and even for charging it, they have to rely on the owner of a saloon near the village market. Their poverty is directly proportionate to the digital divide. The poorer they are, the lower is their access to media. Their poverty, ignorance, lack of access to media and the denial of right to own their bodies are mutually interdependent, one resulting in the other. Still the phone, acting as a tool of the 'culture industry' victimizes them.

It is noteworthy that the middleman Gopal, who cleverly entraps Hanumantha into this delusional world of the digital media and informs him of the scope of their corporeal status as valuable commodities, is the son of a local policeman. He is literally pimping the legal system and it is the very custodians of the system who betray the stakeholders. Hanumantha's and Sobhi's predicament can be aptly explained with the concept of Bare Life introduced by Giorgio Agamban. It is the "life of the *homo sacer* (sacred man), who may be killed and yet not sacrificed" (2017, p.10). He proceeds to explain that the politicization of *zoe* or the simple fact of living marks a turning point in modernity and a radical shift in the political and philosophical categories of classical thought (2017, p.8). In any case, however, the entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the polis—the politicization of bare life as such—constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a

radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought (2017, p.8). Agamben describes the enigma inherent the construction of *homo sacer* or the ‘sacred man’ whose killing is authorized by law; the one who can be killed by anyone with impunity and nevertheless not to be put to death in ritual practices. In other words, he finds the contradiction involved in the “sacredness” of a man whose right to life is not given legal and political protection by the state and who is in a state of “exception” but still not eligible for a religious sacrifice to gods. He investigates what constitutes “the specificity of *homo sacer*: the unpunishability of his killing and the ban on his sacrifice” (2017, pp. 61-63) Hanumantha and Sobhi and all marginal lives at large can be said to have a “bare life”, the life of exception, which is given no guarantee or legal protection by the state.

The subtle way how Hanumantha gets trapped into the web of the market dramatically unravels their poverty and struggle for survival. It was three months ago when Gopal, the most educated guy in the village and the son of the local policeman, approached Hanumantha and showed him some nude pictures and porn videos on his mobile phone. Hanumantha was shocked because it was his first experience of watching such pictures. Then Gopal shrewdly instills in his mind that the demand for such fair skinned women is on the decline and dusky complexioned rustic women are more sought after these days. Slowly he introduces the huge amount such videos will fetch in the market; that they can make more amount of money at a single stretch than the whole amount that they can make toiling on the farm for a lifetime (Benyamin, 2018, p. 27). It is the bankruptcy of Hanumantha as well as his ignorance that makes him take the bait.

The way ‘Patel Sahib’ scrutinizes the body of Sobhi is the way a commodity is weighed up in the market. He explains that they were asked to present themselves in person to verify the authenticity of the video. If such videos are shot with hidden cameras without the knowledge of the people involved, they, the producers of such videos will have to bear the brunt (2018, p.28).

The vulnerability of the marginalized bodies is further highlighted when the couple are sent away with a meager amount of money and a new phone to capture the pictures of the ‘nestlings’ of girls in the village using hidden cameras (2018, p.29). Both the purely physical/ biological value of the bodies of the marginalized and the virtual value and possibilities of them are explored by the market. Being the real owners of such bodies, they are situated at the tail end of the market and are not able to make profits. Baudrillard (2005, p. 277) opines that the structures of production and consumption prompt the subject to simulate a split representation of their body; both as a capital and as a fetish or consumer object. In both representations there is either a psychical or economic investment in it. The body as a capital has been already exploited by the Capitalist class as the poor workers engage in labor and produce something. The biological value has also been exploited by the transaction of the healthy kidney. Finally, the fetish value is going to be explored and exploited as the story concludes.

## **Conclusion**

According to Pierre Bourdieu (1984, p.81), “physical appearance and body size are embodied forms of class inequality. The body becomes a marker of social class when certain embodied properties are the product of class-related practices and a symbolic value is bestowed upon physical features”. These three stories introduce the body as a cultural construct and markers of social class. Nijesh is forced to guise his body as a site to display the equations of the Capitalist culture. His postcolonial body assumes the shape of a mannequin to exhibit new fashion trends and lifestyle. His life is equal to a walk on the runway. The working-class body in “*Vartha Sareeram*” is a delusional extension of the screen and a real extension of the work place. The illusory equality that the high-class owners of the television and the low class ‘groundling’ spectators is transient. The screen unites them only to be split again by questions of corporeal identity such as wealth and labour. As far as the third story is concerned, the peripheral bodies in “*Solapur*” contradictorily occupy the central position in the market, both as an object of fetish and as a biological

entity only to be exploited and to experience an ultimate denial of their human rights.

These stories exemplify how material goods become markers of fixed social status and how they act as more fluid containers of the individual self. The branded materials that Nijesh yearns to own, the television and the Video Cassette Player that the middle-class neighbors purchase, the radio that the grandma keeps and the smart phone Gopal lends to Hanumantha, are all makers of corporeal identity. Being commodities in themselves, they accelerate the commodification of bodies. They become the extension of the bodies which own them or else the bodies are inseparably extended into them. This inseparable twinning is what the Capitalist world plots to achieve.

The stories selected also elucidate how the quest for the new results in the creation of the self. “The ideal of self-realization through commodity exchange is a powerful cultural narrative, running through both the manipulations of marketing and the literary imagination alike” (Reith, 2019). Hence, commodities in these stories whether they are bodies, branded goods or identities lead to the creation of the self in intricate ways. They also reveal the dark side of the dynamics of consumption, the market being a site of danger and conflict, of unsatiated desires and unfulfilled identities, especially when its pleasures are associated with the marginalized people.

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