

The Vicissitudes of Modern City: The Spatial Hierarchy in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

Sherin B.S

This paper intends to discuss how city spaces provide the spectacle in contemporary cinema in Malayalam unsettling the village/city dichotomy. But the spectacular city spaces in these movies also recreate city spaces into class, caste and religious markers. On the other hand, the spaces occupied by Muslims, Dalits, immigrant labourers and homosexuals who are often depicted as goons, criminals, addicts and alcoholics provide the margins which serve in the backdrop of the glitter and glamour of emerging city spaces. These dark spaces in the plot, demarcated as urban slums and dump yards, are often contrasted by synoptic and unified images of the glorified city and its inhabitants. Following Lefebvre's argument of space as a social construct, the paper goes on to explore the recreation of a modernist model of urban space playing the tactics of inclusion and exclusion in these movies. Analyzing, the production of these spaces also reflects the political character of the processes of production involved in the making of these spaces, highlighting the ethos of cultural and political choices that the spectator of a capitalist/consumerist society empathizes with.

Key Words: Kochi Cinema, Urban Studies, Space, Heterotopia, City and Cinema

Often labeled as the harbingers of a new wave in Malayalam cinema, some young directors with their penchant for international

movies and have witnessed a predominant engagement with international cinema during their campus days, have been experimenting with new themes, modalities and ways of film narratives, redefining the sensibilities of the movie going public in Kerala. Bordering somewhere between the aesthetics of the mainstream cinema and the parallel trends of the eighties and before,¹ these movies reach out to a wider audience than the previous generation movie makers who made the so called art-cinema in Malayalam. In personal interviews they prefer to claim the lineage of Padmarajan,² who made movies for box office success than to the internationally renowned art-movie makers in Malayalam.³ These movies centering on the dislocated Malayali youth whose anchors can be fixed in any city not only in India, but even in the burgeoning capitalist economies like Dubai or western cities, bring in the flavor of the global citizen in political affiliations and decorum. While focusing extremely on the spatial reality of the city, these movies also recreate city spaces into class, caste and religious markers. The othered spaces that appear in these movies subsequently stand for the spaces occupied by Muslims, Dalits, immigrant laborers and homosexuals who are often depicted as goons, criminals, addicts and alcoholics. These dark spaces in the plot, demarcated as urban slums and dump-yards, are often contrasted by synoptic and unified images of the glorified city and its inhabitants. This paper attempts to look into the ways in which the modern city creates its own spatiality in selected movies reflecting the incapability of certain social existences to escape the ideological abstraction imposed by hegemonic dominance. Analyzing the production of these spaces also interestingly reflect the political character of the processes of production involved in the making of these spaces, highlighting the ethos of cultural and political choices of Kerala society.

The spatio-temporal structuring of social life in Malayalam films defines the material constitution of redefined hierarchies in relationships in the renewed consumer capitalism of urban spatialities. The social production of the unified urban space in the new generation movies carries along with it conflicts of uprooting, commoditization, forced structuring of landscapes, alienation of the dispossessed and so on. Before coming to the spatiality of social life in these movies it

is interesting to go through the politics of spatial representation in Malayalam movies over the years. From the pre-globalization era to the early half of this decade spatial hierarchies in Malayalam movies always played on a village/city dichotomy. This worked in terms of the innocent and pristine village locations, versus the brutal and the humbug city. This narrative of the treacherous city luring the innocent villager, starting with the movie *Nagaram Nandi* (1967), one of the earliest attempts of realism in Malayalam movie came to stay in Malayali cultural imagination for long. The prototype of city imagination in the Malayali collective consciousness aptly represented through the archetypal song “*Nagaram Nagaram Maha saagaram*”⁴ whose first few lines can be translated roughly as – city the great ocean where lies fun and frolic in the surface, but hides beneath vortices and treachery- gets reproduced in many forms through many directors. (One of the recent portrayals is that of Blessey’s *Palunku* (2006)). The village location that is highlighted through these movies would be the pristine *valluvanaadan*⁵ geography, that relies on an upper caste aristocracy of the *valluvanadan* dialect, and this landscape would be the nostalgic site of the exiled hero’s childhood innocence, teenage love and the roots that shape his sensibility. Beyond the coherent portrayal of this apparent village innocence lies the undetermined realm of feudal hierarchies, caste and class markers, often covered up through a structured narrative of rural naivety. The spatial constitution of these villages, project the feudal property relations, and caste structures. The local tea shop, where the major socialization takes place will be frequented by men, mostly of lower castes, and the hero visits the place as a major intervention, but definitely not as a participant in the eating or drinking processes that goes on there, which are meant for the lower castes. The hero’s role here, as the structuring presence behind this hierarchical constitution, is quite significant. There will be barber shops, perhaps a ‘parallel college,’ and in more recent movies a telephone booth, but all these establishments belong to people lower in hierarchies either through caste or through other forms of marginalisations. This space is also the location for the discussion of politics, communism and newspaper stories, but those are insignificant in the plots and are performed by minor characters. The upper caste

hero of Bharathan's movie *Keli* (1991) who runs the pan shop is disabled. The structuring of this feudal spatiality takes place more through a manipulation of caste and caste based structures. For instance, the Nair or Brahmin socializing space is often attached to temples or within the backdrop of beautiful scenic landscapes. Padmarajan's acclaimed movie *Thoovaana Thumbikal* (1987) plays on this structuring of dual spaces while dealing with the two female characters. The meetings between Clara, the prostitute and the feudal landlord Jayakrishnan take place in hotel rooms, under the dark sky of the night, and in the transit space of a railway station. The subalternity of Clara is accentuated through her fisherwoman costume in the song sequence, whereas the meetings between Jayakrishnan and his prospective wife take place in the temple, in the village landscape during the daylight and also in the modern space of the campus. In spite of the narrative that gives a romantic rendering of Jayakrishnan's obsession with Clara, the movie resolves the issue when Radha takes him back to the solid spaces of temples and aristocracy from the transitory nature of Clara's spatial locations. No wonder Clara is presented as an outsider who comes from nowhere and goes nowhere in this space of stability. The conversation between Jayakrishnan and Radha on Clara takes place in the solid space of the huge temple. When Jayakrishnan refers to Clara as someone who came from nowhere and went nowhere Radha's response is that then let her go that way, while the camera feeds on stone paved walkways, huge temple walls, wooden structures and similar visuals. Even in more recent films, this portrayal of the village as the unified haven of Malayali aristocracy remains unadulterated, though the intervention of modernity is visibly pronounced in movies like *Devasuram* (1993), *Araam Thampuran* (1997) and the like, in terms of modern education, expensive cars, and the use of English language and so on. The material constitution of social life in these movies reflects the notion of a space forming and space contingent reality. Edward Soja, in *Postmodern Geographies* reflect on how space and social life mutually determine each other: "If spatiality is both outcome/embodiment and medium / presupposition of social relations and social structure, their material reference, then social life must be seen as both space forming and

space contingent, a producer and a product of the spatiality” (129). In these portrayals the village space, determined by the feudal hierarchies also determine the limits and extents of socialization.

The village functions more or less like heterotopias that create the illusion of a perfect well- arranged real space in contrast to the messy, ill constructed and jumbled world of modern man. Within this illusionary heterotopia, the structuring takes place through structuring the daily life of the subaltern, by what Foucault calls the curious exclusions, by alienating them to other spaces (p.23.) The city in this world of structured harmony is a ‘deviant heterotopia’, where the village innocence will be deflowered. Uprooted from these familiar circumstances to the city or town, the site of unstructured spatiality the hero often finds it disturbing cuts a sorry figure, and may work on an exile hiding his aristocracy.⁶ In the absence of the feudal formulas of space formation the hero is in a limbo, whose constant urge is to get back to the unified village serenity, which is a product of this hierarchical constitution of power and at the same time structures the entire hierarchy. These movies create a coherent village space that cleverly hides the uneven equations of power through the sunny manifestations of village purity. If a parallel study of Malayalam literature of the time is taken up, the spatial holdings in modern literature often points towards a similar hierarchy. M. T. Vasudevan Nair’s Koodallur and Kamala Das’ Nalappattu are two spatial icons in Malayalam literature that Kerala cherishes nostalgically. M.T.’s movies repeat the same hierarchy, where modernity is clubbed into the aristocratic space of Nair *tharavaadu*,⁷ and often there will be a lament over the dissipating feudal values and customs.⁸ If the instrumental and disciplinary power that organizes space here is that of the feudal power equations, in the new generation movies, the structuring forces are different.

The new generation movie trend in contemporary Malayalam film industry represents a wide break from the conventional representational strategies adopted by mainstream cinema so far in terms of its perception of stardom, narrative technique, gender and humor to mention a few. Breaking away from the conventional

orthodoxies of the south Indian film industry through innovative technical and narrative skills, these directors try to place Malayalam films in the wider frame of international cinema than owing allegiance to the obsolete stereotypes in the generic Malayalam movies. The visual opulence of Amal Neerad movies or the laid-back realism in Anwar Rasheed movies is unprecedented visual experience in commercial Malayalam cinema. Amal Neerad's debut movie *Big B* created a new visual culture in Kerala with a juxtaposition of slow motion and fast shots, perfect editing and crisp one-line dialogues. The movie became a box office hit with camera playing well between black and white shades of light. The plot of the movie that strictly derided strict adherence to previous anti-hero images, boldly presented a Muslim protagonist after many years with Mammooty playing the main role. There were also attempts in this movie to move away from the stereotypical roles assigned to women in the movies of the time with Nafeesa Ali playing the key role. The plot of a revenge story where Bilal (played by Mammooty) ends up killing the villains behind the murder of his foster mother along with his brothers is anything but a repetitive theme for action movies in Malayalam, but for the massive technological explosion that Neerad presents in this movie. The effective use of western costume, weapons, fighting and gun-shot scenes that resemble Tarantino movies and the verbal violence of the marginalized language of Kochi gave a shock treatment to the complacency the industry was witnessing in terms of aristocratic heroes, aristocratic tongue and the village serenity. What is interesting in *Big B* or the following movies like *Bachelor Party* or *Sagar Alias Jackey* is the shift to the city in the spatial location of the movie. There had been attempts earlier to use cities like Dubai or Mumbai in movies of the past. The shift away from the spatial dichotomy between the *valluvanaadan* aristocracy and the treacherous city loudly visible in these movies sticks to the concept of a spatial minimalism in a vague sense of the term, bringing down the cost of production and presenting a new visual experience for the viewer. The new spatial aesthetics followed in these movies bring in the increased use of urban structures lending an altogether novel cinematographic experience for the average Malayali viewer. The budding mall culture in Kerala

and the significantly pronounced structures of urban town planning form the visual spaces in these movies. The clichéd paddy fields of earlier films are replaced by urban spatiality where the scenic presence of green flamboyance has been replaced by the urban structures. In song sequences this shift is evident. No more paddy fields or flower gardens for the visual background for songs, and during the song sequences or scenes where a general focus on nature has been demanded earlier, the urban metropolis forms the provider of visuals. The title song ‘chillaane’ in *22 Female Kottayam* (2012) in the urban splendor of Bangalore or the scene that follows the hero’s self-realization in *Spirit* (2012), where in the backdrop of the soothing music Raghunandan, the hero comes out and experiences the morning reality of his urban elite township are marked differences from the earlier portrayal of landscape to reflect emotions. The children going to elite schools, women watering the landscaped gardens, pictures of morning walk and jogging in well planned walkways are the visuals before Raghunandan, followed by a scene of him feeling the rain drops in his balcony. Behind him in the background, there is the huge multistoried apartment complex under construction, but the unfinished building is not presented as part of a concrete jungle, but the color scheme of the frame easily gels with the greyness of the up-coming building. Then the camera shifts to the scenes beyond him, where the spectator watches again the signs of architectural exuberance, a group of multistoried apartments overlooking the back waters. This visual splendour presents the city life as a marvelous haven, the desirable destination for the ordinary Malayali, and presents a reality beyond her reach, gives her the vicarious pleasure of being a part of this new bourgeois aristocratic life style and at the same time alienating her from the daily experiencing of this reality which is unaffordable for her. The empathy with this system comes as an illusionary “right to the city” as Lefebvre puts it, which is also the right to the urban life. The multistoried buildings in the urbanscapes, its pubs and expensive eat outs, apartments with waterfront, resorts and clubs meant for leisure, which are very much a part of the bourgeois elite are concretized and the everyday life of this illusion becomes materialized through an ‘exclusionary’ strategy. In the rest of the paper, I will briefly explain

the way in which this strategy works in contemporary Malayalam movies, especially in the ‘new-wave’⁹ movies.

The urban space in these movies, space as how de Certeau defines as the ‘practiced place,’ is the intersection of myriad dreams. What orients, temporalizes and situates this place will be shops, malls, luxury cars, and innumerable other images of a unified urbaneness, that may appear approachable for the viewer through modes of naturalizing in the cinema. The taxonomy of this spatial order needs further examination. The actualization of space in the narrative gives a panorama of experiences which spatialize a multitude of human states: disease by relating them to multi-specialty hospitals (the example of heart transplantation in the movie *Traffic* (2011), travel by relating it to expensive vehicles, sleeping, waking up etc. to beatific visuals inside luxury apartments, eating by relating it to classy restaurants and so on. It is not easy to achieve this naturalization except in terms of a contrasting visual, from where the collective consciousness of the population can distance. The deviant heterotopia on the other side of this spectrum provides the much required contrast, from where the viewer can distance herself and fit into this illusionary utopia. In the movie *Traffic* this spatial game is very evident, where the space is visibly divided into the urban utopia and the peripheral ‘other spaces.’ The spatial holdings of the subaltern in *Traffic*, the cluttered apartment of the lower middle class/ working class and lower caste police constable is also the space of corruption, the obstruction that one needs to overcome to fit into the urban utopia. The temporality of two hours is spatialized in this movie, through the distance to be covered between two multi-specialty hospitals in two cities, where one dies and another one comes back to life. The office of the modern police officer, who strictly controls the journey traced through the visual mapping of roads and audio tracking represents the microcosm of this spatiality where the subaltern spaces are deliberately marked out as problem spaces, and their skills are effectively exploited and discarded. The deviant elements in the urban paradise are well marked: the corrupt driver, who takes up the mission and fits into the order of the urban paradise by enabling the expensive and important cardiac surgery possible, the doctor who fails because of his immoral wife

whose journey into the forest and out of the traces the dark corners of the woman's fallen morality and finally Bilaal Colony, the last obstruction to be faced in terms of the Muslim slum, a place of movie-maniacs, riots, uncivilized existence, away from the planned highways of civilization. The corrupt driver becomes useful to make this marvel possible, people in Bilaal Colony join the game, but eventually becomes pawns to be used and discarded to the margins. The spectator can easily distance herself from these dark spaces and identify with the liberal and progressive ways of the city, which in reality the Malayali population is not yet ready to embrace.

I would argue that the liberal relationships in terms of living together, pre-marital sex, open relationships, social drinking involving women etc., celebrated in these movies are yet alien to Malayali morality,¹⁰ but the spectator is left with no choice than to accept it in terms of the contrast provided between the urban dreamscape and the subaltern ghettos. As much as these movies make use of Kochi as the urban splendor, the ghettoization of Kochi's periphery works up in these movies. Mattancherry and the other peripheral spaces in Kochi¹¹ are portrayed as places of goons and 'quotation' teams, popularized through the classic *Big B* (2007)¹² dialogue: "*Kochi pazhaya Kochiyalla...*" meaning Kochi is not the same Kochi any more. This dialogue has become the prototype of a static subalternity in the later movies that use this image of Mattancherry or Fort Kochi. If *Big B* provides an equivocal representation of this space, where the Muslim hero, stardom of Mammooty, the cinematographic collage of slow-motion scenes and stylish costumes present an appealing picture of a mysterious underworld, in later movies the ghettoization takes place as a contrast of the order and unified visual of the city.

The shifting of camera between the dual existences of Ansari and Arjun the main characters in *Chaapa Kurishu* (2011), shows how the visual representation of the city satiates the desire in materializing the mediocre dreams of fitting into the 'everyday life' of the urban bourgeois. The narrow streets of the ghettos portrayed, the lack of sophistication of these spaces, and the street vendors and dirty toilets, like the synchronized sophistication of the city give the homogenised image of a manufactured repulsion. Thus, the subaltern

spaces in these movies become “the pure negative image” to quote Lefebvre, “created by the pure world in its false and illusory and euphoric and presumptuous insistence upon the self” (p.156). The image of the city, presented through the fragments of spatial markers of the elite thus becomes the iconic representation of a social need, only way of distancing oneself from the subaltern space. Between the two fragmented realities the spectator unambiguously chooses the “ideal,” an illusionary right to the city. This right is not just the right to enter the city; the right to urban life comes along with this. But what makes this right illusionary is the illogical and unrealistic division of the city between the right-bearing subjects and the dispossessed. The modes of public transport (bus, boats and even trains to an extent), road-side spaces, waiting shed near bus bays etc. are all reserved for the subaltern. There is a defamiliarization of the familiar taking place here, where the journey by the bus would be distanced and alienated, as something which is not part of our lives. The strangeness of the journey by bus is contrasted by the familiarization of the glamorous spaces that include designer studios, luxury apartments, luxury cars, and posh restaurants which would look suddenly accessible and a part of the everyday reality of the spectator. Thus, the city space, feeding on the desires of the average spectator, makes her part of a dream which in reality is not a lived reality.

The fragmented glimpses of this city is threatened by the alien from the other space the tribal chief in *Salt n Pepper* (2011) who needs to be carried from the forest to the city as an anachronism, the Muslim terrorist in *Anwar*(2010), the homosexual in *Ritu* (2009), the fraudulent immigrant from North India who is killed and disposed in the urban dump yard in *Ee Adutha Kaalathu* (2012), and the inhabitants of the anarchic ghetto of the immigrant labourers in *City of God* (2011) are all victims of this spatial hierarchy. In the alternate reality created by these visual spaces the repetitiveness of working-class life and monotony are distanced through erasing them from the urbanscapes. The ordinariness of their lives is absent from the geographies of city spaces presented here. By arranging contrastingly on both sides of the spectrum the panoramic view of the city and its subordinated ghettos, these movies achieve the familiarization of the

bourgeois life, produce the psychological need to access the urban life and satiate the same need in an illusionary experience. It is precisely this kind of an illusionary reality that John Berger talks about in *Ways of Seeing*:

Capitalism survives by forcing the majority, whom it exploits, to define their own interests as narrowly as possible. This was once achieved by extensive deprivation. Today in the developed countries it is being achieved by imposing a false standard of what is and what is not desirable (196).

Adding on to the class element in these movies, there is an overt focus to alienate the elements of discontent in the Malayali society. 'Non-secular' Muslims, homosexuals and immigrant labourers who do not fit into the norms of Malayali aristocracy are ghettoized and pushed to the dark space from where the modern Malayali can easily distance and dissociate.

Endnote:

- 1 Somewhat resembling the middle cinema trends.
- 2 Padmarajan initiated a new epoch of movie making in Malayalam, anchoring on the ethos of Malayali cultural milieu, at the same time making movies promoting a particular wavelength of Malayali modernity. Padmarajan's movies are often problematic in terms of gender and the handling of subaltern identities, yet very popular as it upheld values of the emerging middle class, ethics and priorities. Often a blend of feudal sentiments and Nair aristocracy clubbed with emerging modern aspirations, Padmarajan marked a shift from the realism in Malayalam movies of the previous decades to a different world of bourgeois ethos and humbug. Branded as middle cinema, his movie making created a new aesthetics.
- 3 I mean the parallel cinema trends initiated by directors like Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Aravindan initially carried on by Shaji N. Karun and T.V. Chandran of late.
- 4 All Malayalam words are italicized.
- 5 The particular region in Northern Kerala, whose dialect is taken for granted as the aristocratic Malayalam, as it is copied in movies and literature. Interestingly modern writers in Malayalam, the cultural icons of Malayali modernity like M. T. Vasudevan Nair and Kamala Das hail from this region and speak and write in this tongue. For a long time this dialect used to be the standard dialect in Malayalam movies. However, I must say there are conscious attempts to break this linguistic supremacy through experimenting with diverse dialects. Renjith's *Pranchiyettan and the Saint* (2010) and Anwar Rasheed's *Rajamanikyam* (2005) are movies in this vein.
- 6 The aristocratic hero of *Mazhavil Kaavadi* (1989), who pretends to be a barber in the re located town space, is an example.
- 7 The term for ancestral home, which resonates aristocracy.

- 8 M.T's movies like *Panchaagni* (1986) and *Alkoottathil Thaniye* (1984) mark the conflict between feudal values and modernity and resolve this in favor of a negotiation with tradition.
- 9 The term new wave is used by film critics to refer to the new trends in contemporary Malayalam cinema, while many of the directors who belong to this genre reject it.
- 10 Kerala is still reported to be rigid in terms of conventional morality. Rigid moral standards regarding relationships and social life are maintained in every walk of life. If what we hear about the moral policing stories in Kerala is to be trusted these movies and the life they portray are still far from the reality of ordinary Malayali.
- 11 The concern in *Filmic Ghettos of Mattancherry* a documentary directed by Hashir K is about how contemporary movies portray Mattancherry as an urban ghetto.
- 12 The first movie of Amal Neerad, which kind of inaugurated the new trend.

Reference:

- Abu, A. (Director). (2011). *Salt N' Pepper* [Motion picture]. India,
- Abu, A. (Director). (2012). *22 Female Kottayam* [Motion picture]. Film Brewery Productions.
- Anthikkad, S. (Director) (1989). *Mazhavil Kavadi* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Aravind, A. K. (Director) (2012). *Ee Adutha Kalathu* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Berger, J. (2008). *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Books.
- Bharathan. (Director) (1991). *Keli* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Blessey. (Director) (2006). *Palunku* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- De Certeau, Michel. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Vol. 1. (Steven Rendall, Trans.) University of California Press.
- Foucault, M. (1986). "Of Other Spaces". (Jay Miskowicz Trans.). *Diacritics*, 16 (1), 22–27.
- Hariharan. (Director) (1986). *Panchagni* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Hashir, K. (Director) (2010). *Filmic ghettos of Mattancherry* [Documentary]. India, Malayalam.
- Kailas, S. (Director) (1997). *Araam Thampuran* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Lefebvre, Henri. (2006). *Writings on Cities*. Trans. and ed. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. Blackwell Publishing.
- Neerad, A. (Director) (2007). *Big B* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Neerad, A. (Director) (2010). *Anwar* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Padmarajan. (Director) (1987). *Thoovanathumbikal* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Pellissery, L. J. (Director) (2011). *City of God* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Pillai, R. (Director) (2011). *Traffic* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Rasheed, A. (Director) (2005). *Rajamanikyam* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Renjith. (Director) (2010). *Pranchiyettan and the Saint* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Renjith. (Director) (2012). *Spirit* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Shashi, I. V. (Director) (1993). *Devasuram* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
- Shashi, I. V. (Director) (1984). *Alkoottathil Thaniye* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.

- Shyamaprasad. (Director) (2009).*Ritu* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
Soja, Edward. (1989). *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. Verso.
Thahir, S. (Director) (2011). *Chappa Kurishu* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.
Vincent, A. (Director) (1967). *Nagaram Nandi* [Motion picture]. India, Malayalam.

Dr. Sherin B.S

Associate Professor

Department of Comparative Literature

The English and Foreign Languages University

Hyderabad

India

Pin: 500007

Email: sherinbs@gmail.com

Ph: +91 9494860517

ORCID: 0009-0004-8741-3568