

# Malayalam Cinema from Politics to Poetics

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Spring 2007 Issue of KINEMA

## MALAYALAM CINEMA FROM POLITICS TO POETICS

INDIA IS the leading producer of films in the world with over 1000 films per year. The tiny south-western state of Kerala where a language called Malayalam is spoken has surpassed West Bengal as a major centre of art films. Its most important filmmaker, Adoor Gopalakrishnan is hailed as the living Satyajit Ray.

Since the beginning of the 1970s, with the strong film society movement supported by the literary traditions of the state, Malayalam cinema has excelled in politically *engagé* films with artistic inclinations. When the Golden Age of Tamil and Telugu movies ended, Kannada and Malayalam cinemas came to the fore. Although, they too had their share of stars, the director came to be recognized as the most important person behind a film. The "new cinema" distinguished itself from the outset for its thematic excellence. Even the mediocre films initiated by the early involvement of writers and leftist theatre personalities concerned themselves with social and political issues such as tribal emancipation, illiteracy, land distribution and trade unionism. A straightforward love story would have deeper allegorical layers evoking Fredric Jameson's hypothesis that "all third world texts are necessarily allegorical...the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society."<sup>(1)</sup>

The films of John Abraham, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Govinda Aravindan, T.V. Chandran, M. P. Sukumaran Nair, Shaji Karun and several others are testimony to this hypothesis. These filmmakers have used cinematic allegorization of history questioning its objectivity and neutrality. They have drawn attention to ethnicity, race, religion and language in the postcolonial nation exploring "the potentiality of cinema to incarnate the contradictory and pluralistic discourses occupying the national space."<sup>(2)</sup>

### The Beginnings

Kerala does not have an early filmmaking tradition. The first film, *Vigadakumaran* was made by J. C. Daniel in 1928, a decade and a half after Bombay. Since we know very little about this first endeavour, *Marthanda Varma* (1931) is generally considered as the first Malayalam film. Unfortunately, its director, Sunder Raj, who adapted to screen a best-seller by a famous writer using the pseudonym of C. V. Raman Pillai, neglected to acquire the copyright. Hence, the film never saw the light until the National Film Achievers succeeded in acquiring a copy, which, by then, was badly damaged.

The first talkie in the Malayalam language was *Balan* (1938), produced by T. R. Sandaram. The film set the precedence for a series of films in the 1940s that favoured talent from outside the state boundaries. The popular entertainment format continued unchanged until the mid-1960s in the rest of the subcontinent. Folklore, mythology and family dramas were extensively exploited with some "interior drama" and dream sequence thrown in to justify the song and dance. Attention was made to the equal distribution of roles regarding the Hindi, Christian and Muslim religions. This often resulted in formula films, which lacked cinematographic logic. Another popular stereotype was the deceived and deserted maiden. A young girl would be seduced and abandoned when she got pregnant. While contemplating suicide, she would be saved by a passing Samaritan; or the child would be born and the repentant father would return and ask forgiveness. The Happy End! The box office success was the main criterion for these films.

*Chemmen* (*Prawn*, 1965) by Ramu Kariat, about the fishermen of Kerala, is considered a landmark in the sense that it played an important role in bridging the gap between good cinema and entertainment. The film conforms to the paradigm of commercial cinema from its subject matter - a melodrama on the transgression of social laws epitomized in the love of a Hindi boy for a Muslim girl - to its employment of popular Hindi actors. It received the National Gold Medal in 1966 and paved the way for the recognition of Malayalam cinema nationwide.

Malayalam films also pioneered the sex wave of the 1970s in the North Indian cinemas. A commercially successful film would be sold for a trifling sum for distribution outside Kerala and then it would be interpo-

lated with what the masses were supposed to be starved for and sold to theatres of not so familiar milieu. Titillating titles like *Rathi nirvedam* (*Sexy Dreams*) or *Avalude ravukal* (*Her Nights*) soon gave Malayalam cinema a bad reputation.

### Emergence of Art Cinema

Adoor Gopalakrishnan is the most celebrated Malayalam filmmaker today. Graduated from the Film Institute of Pune (Poona) in 1965 and with the support of his colleagues and other intellectuals, formed the *Chitrallekha Film Co-operative* and organized an international film festival as an initiation to the establishment of film societies, which set the mood for a golden period in Malayalam cinema. As he explains, he prepared the audience before starting his film career.

The predominant theme of Adoor's films is power and servility in the context of vestiges of feudalism and colonialism. The social conscience of the artist in his creative journey, which recognizes no boundaries, is also explored frequently. In a career that spans over thirty years, Adoor has made only nine feature films. The long pauses are "to forget what I did before" says the filmmaker, "each film is a reaction to the one that precedes it."

The protagonist of his first film, *Swayamvaram* (*One's Own Choice*, 1972) is a middle class intellectual with aspirations to become a writer. He suffers from a crisis of conscience under the burden of the compromises he is obliged to make. Shot on location - a first for Malayalam cinema - this neorealist rendition of a run-away couple's struggles effectively documents the conflict between the individual and the social system in the demoralized world of poverty.

In his second film, *Kodiyettam* (*Ascent*, 1977), the ascent of the streaming pennon going up the flagpole during a village festival serves as a metaphor for the ascent of the protagonist to self-realization. The parallel between the spiritual and intellectual development of the protagonist and the passage of India from colonial rule to independence is also very transparent. Adoor who comes from a Kathakali<sup>(3)</sup> family explains,

The structure of the film is that of a festival in a village temple; the audience can never suspect that everything is manipulated from outside. Only later, you realize that you also have contributed to that conglomeration of the people. That is the festival. The real climax of the festival, the spiritual climax is the 'becoming,' which is expressed with the fireworks at the end of the film. There is an interaction between the festival's qualities and the characters' situations. Slowly they develop into one, becoming one, so that finally in the union, you see the emotional outburst that matches the fireworks.

*Elippathayam* (*Rat Trap*, 1981), often considered his best work, is on the vestiges of feudalism. The film begins with the camera panning on certain objects - an old oil lamp, an empty chair, a wood carving...(and at the end we come back to these objects.) "The carving is the protector which is called 'Viali,' a mythical animal," Adoor explains:

It is used as a decorative piece in front of the main door, but here it looks as if it is descending on the fate of the house. This is a house, which has seen the good old days of feudalism when the landlord used to live in glory on the produce of his land without ever directly cultivating it. The people who tilled the land were kept away. The feudal system has now vanished but its values have remained. The protagonist inherited the vestige of those values without the supporting wealth to go with it.

In other words, he is the rat and the trap. In the beginning, we see a rat chase and in the end, we come back to it.

Structurally, the film is divided into six departures from the house, or rather, what Adoor calls "from one state of being to another." The first three departures are of the rats and the next three are of the humans. The younger sister runs to freedom; the older sister is helped out by her illness and then the brother who has been refusing this change is chased around by the anonymous people of the village (representing humanity although they are left in the periphery), caught and taken out. Although, unlike the rat, the landlord comes out of the water. He is given a chance to redeem himself.

In *Mukhamukham* (*Face to Face*, 1984), political issues move to the forefront. The film deals with the

spiritual crisis of an ordinary man. *Anantharam (Monologue, 1987)* is about the creative process as the protagonist presents his experience to the audience. The film operates on three levels: the experience, memory of that experience and the rendering of that experience. The outcome is the adversity of the society to out-of-the-ordinary.

*Mathilukal (The Walls, 1989)* returns to the theme of the creative journey of a writer's mind explored in *One's Own Choice* and *Monologue*. It is about a writer who, while in prison, creates a woman who is supposed to be on the other side of the wall, and then falls in love with her. Adapted from a story by a well-known Malayalam writer, Muhammad Basheer, who was imprisoned during the Quit India movement, the film chooses to present the woman as a creation of the artist's mind although in the original story, there was an actual woman. *The Walls* raises the question of the limits of a creative mind, which is above all, and at the same time, bound to all.

*Vidheyan (The Servile, 1993)* treats the theme of power and servility in its most pathetic form. "Around World War II and immediately after, a small number of Christian families sold their small land in Kerala and moved to Karnataka, the neighbouring state," explains Adoor. "The film takes place in the 1960s when the "patels" (village chiefs) still have some power even though they have legally lost it after the revolution. The migrants have no money and no voice to raise. They are at the mercy of people who seem to have power. Naturally, the protagonist feels fear and servility. It is necessary for human beings to say "no" at a certain point in life. If he could set up a small resistance at the beginning, he would have saved himself all the humiliation. He could not do that because he thought he was servile as a foreigner... The irony is that the "patel" of the story does not have his power anymore. The colonizers also come to an unwary land and start trading in things people don't really need. They tell people with no buying power, "Buy now, you can pay later." But if you can't, they take your land...That is the psychology of colonization."

*Kathapurushan (The Protagonist, 1995)* is an attempt to epitomize the eternal struggle of the human spirit to assert itself. The film progresses with reference and in response to some of the most significant historical events in the country such as the national freedom movement and independence (1947), the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi (1948), the Kerala land reforms (1959), Naxalite uprising (1968), state of emergency (1975-77) and the return of the Left Political Front to power (1980-82) while tracing the rational yet difficult course of the development of a middle class mind which ultimately finds release in creativity. The changing attitudes in changing political climates are presented with subtlety, as is the attitude towards the "Father of the Nation" Gandhi, whose assassination is mourned with utmost grief early on but whose presence in the story is gradually reduced to a photo on the wall.

The protagonist has fought all his life for a social order that would ensure equality and freedom from poverty and oppression. When the party, which has made use of him and other devoted artists finally comes to power, it establishes itself as an institution of the government. It develops its own mechanism and becomes oppressive. It tries to annihilate individual dissent. "The establishment itself, irrespective of ideology - it can be a capitalist system, socialist system or monolithic system - has the character and methods to suppress individual expressions. That is why at the end of the film when the protagonist finds out that his novel is banned, he becomes sarcastic and laughs," explains Adoor.

*Nizhalkkuthu (Shadow Kill, 2002)* was inspired by a brief news item Adoor came across about the last surviving hangman of the former princely state of Travancore (in the present state of Kerala). The hangman was brought to the capital from his village a day earlier to carry out the execution decreed by the Maharaja. The focus of the film is on his night before the execution, which he spends drinking and gossiping to stay awake. One prison officer tells the story of an innocent thirteen-year-old girl who was attacked. The hangman begins to replace the characters of the story with his own family. He imagines that the girl is his own daughter. But when the narrator reveals that the "culprit" is the man to be hanged the next morning and who is in fact innocent, the hangman collapses.

Through the turmoil of one man with his conscience, the film questions the justice system, which can punish the innocent. Unlike the stereotypical hangman as a brute without feelings, Kaliyappan is a sensitive man who is still remorseful of the execution he had carried out earlier. He is also reputed to have communication with the Hindu Goddess of Nature, Kali and to have the power of healing. Ironically, the source of his power to heal is the same rope that sends his victims to their death. This rope is seen hanging from the ceiling

of his prayer room. He cuts a few strands, and burns them to offer to Kali and passes the ashes to those seeking a cure. The time frame is also significant in the film. It is the early 1940s when India is embracing Gandhi's non-violence doctrine.

### Other voices

Adoor was not alone when he pioneered the film movement of the 1970s. The late Govinda Aravindan (a cartoonist by profession), considered by many as the poet-philosopher with a vision, staying between the lyrical, mystical and transcendental, made his first film, *Uttarayanam (Solstice)* in 1974. Unlike Adoor's conventional storytelling style, which is marked by the realism of Satyajit Ray or Mrinal Sen with a distinctly Kerala style of lengthy exposition and detailed development of narrative, Aravindan's approach to narrative was a substratum of emotion rather than emotion being an adjunct to narrative. He also showed deep compassion for the eccentric, the marginalized and alienated. His last film, *Vastuhara (The Dispossessed)*, 1990, which is considered his most accessible, is an attempt to integrate two very old cultures of India - Keralite and Bengali - and at the same time draw attention to human sorrow and tragedy. The story is about a young Malayalee officer's encounter with a middle-aged Bengali widow who is lost in the Kafkaesque bureaucracy of the refugee department. The film cuts between the lush green landscape of Kerala and the urban bleakness of Calcutta's *bustees* (slums) to heighten the spiritual alienation of the characters. Arguably, it conjures an important phenomenon of Bengal in the 1960s, the Naxalite movement, in a rather superficial fashion and takes the conventional "Bengali radical" approach to the romance that springs between the young officer and the refugee girl (who actually is his cousin). Nevertheless, the overall effect is very powerful.

John Abraham made only a few films but his works reveal an entirely original creative world of filmmaking and aesthetic experience. *Amma Ariyan (Letter to Mother)*, 1986, in the form of an open letter from a son to his mother, weaves facts and fiction and fragments of memory as the protagonist goes looking for the identity and subsequently, the home of a young man who had committed suicide. An analysis of the extremist movement of the late 1970s and the search for identity in the post-colonial world ("Dutch, Portuguese, British - Kerala is a hybrid culture," the protagonist exclaims), the film is considered Abraham's most significant work. His *Odessa Films* and film society (named as a homage to Eisenstein) remain a tribute to a talented artist who died prematurely in 1987.

Shaji N. Karun was Aravindan's cameraman in almost all of his films. A graduate of the Film Institute in Pune, his experience with the self-taught Aravindan was a good example of mutual exchange. Karun's first film, *Piravi (Birth)*, 1988, is based on a true story that happened during the emergency measures imposed by the prime minister of the time, Indira Gandhi. In this dark period of Indian democracy, the police force became particularly brutal. Many citizens were taken into custody and "disappeared." *Birth* narrates the story of one father's fruitless search for his son while opening to discussion the question of the importance of the individual to society and the society's responsibility to the individual.

Karun's second film, *Swaham (My Own)*, 1994 is also a political statement. In a sense, this film starts from where Adoor's first film, *One's Own Choice* stops. Karun is more interested in the aftermath of the tragedy. What happens to a family when the breadwinner suddenly dies? Despite almost one hundred percent literacy in the state and many women joining the work force, the loss of the male head is still the cause for the disintegration of many families.

*Vanaprastham* (1999) raises the ultimate question that faces every artist. Am I being admired for who I am or what I stand for? During the late 1930s, little Kunhikuttan begins his apprenticeship in Kathakali, Kerala's most noble art form. At the age of eighteen, he is forced to marry Savithri. The loveless marriage produces one daughter, Sharada. As Kunhikuttan excels in his art, his personal life becomes more and more dismal. When he meets Subhadra, a young woman married to high society, his world turns upside down. Subhadra is lost between dream and reality. Her passion for Arjuna, the hero of Mahabharata leads her to believe that her name is not incidental. She is his lover. She falls in love not with Kunhikuttan (who may be a great artist, but comes from another class), but with what he represents.

T.V. Chandran can easily be called a "woman's filmmaker." Women hold the centre stage in his films although quite often, they are rather idealized. *Alicente Anweshnam (The Search of Alice)*, 1989 questions the sanctity of marriage. "In my films, I always take a stand against considering women as commodity," explains Chandran. "My women characters always rebel. They always come out of the placidity of domesticity. Alice

is relieved when her husband disappears. "What would have happened to me if this man hadn't run out," she reflects. She would have remained a housewife for the rest of her life, happy with lies and domesticity. Now she goes out and searches her own identity. She does not weep or look for another man to protect her as we see in many movies. There is a man who is interested in her but she stops him. She says, "I don't want a shoulder to cry on." She decides to be on her own.

Chandran's 1994 feature *Ponthan Mada (Life and Death of an Indian Peasant)* provoked dialectics on the relationship between political ideals and stark realities and the place of the individual in this "ordered" disorder. The film is the story of a poignant friendship between a village chief (Thampuran) and an untouchable Mada. It is also a good example of colonialism and racism promoting what Edward Said defines as "the difference between the familiar "us" and the strange "them."<sup>(4)</sup> The "us" stands for the Occidental and British in colonial terms and the three upper Hindu castes in racial terms. "Them" stands for the Oriental and the Indian in colonial terms; the outcast and the untouchable in racial terms. The fact that Thampuran has lived in England for many years and has a light complexion heightens the allegory. Although Mada becomes privy to the deepest secrets of his master-friend, he still has to climb a tree to meet him at his window. As an untouchable, he cannot enter the house. The distance between "us" and "them" is too vast. Mada is always there when Thampuran needs him, but he cannot expect Thampuran to reciprocate this loyalty. The remarkable (perhaps the obvious) thing is that he does not expect anything. He knows his place.

Chandran's concern has always been the individual's relationship to institutions - from family to the State. "People relate to an individual in terms of an institution," he says.

The artist is the only one who does not need any institutions; he is placed outside. Institutions suppress the individual...Take the position of untouchables like Mada. Even after sixty years of independence, their position has not changed much. They are always there to wait for you. You never know what kind of individual lives they have. There are many Madas in Kerala and the rest of India. When there is an election, they are asked to vote, but they never know what is happening. In *Life and Death of an Indian Peasant*, there is a man running away, who drops a piece of red cloth. Mada picks it up; it's the communist flag but he does not know that. For him, it is a red cloth. This was the failure of communism. They could not reach people at Mada's level. They could not reach women either. Men make revolutions, women stay home.

Another successful film by Chandran is *Danny* (2001), a story about a simple man out of step with the ways of the world and ill at ease with the order of things in life. He is tossed around by chance encounters and he always finds himself on the fringe. As he lives his life in the limbo of time, history sweeps past him. The film questions several preconceived notions about the patricentric institutions of the family and the social roles of the father and husband inscribed in the narratives of masculinity. It problematizes the discrepancy between the given social roles and the individual.

## Trends

Jayaraaj drew attention to his work with *Desadanam* (1996), a film about a precocious child who is catapulted on a spiritual quest. The film created controversy with its subject matter, which some circles considered as Hindu revivalism in Malayalam cinema. Advocates of this theory would argue that such tendencies could be found even in Shaji Karun's work and *The Protagonist* by Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Partiality to rituals has always been a strong characteristic of Malayalam cinema. An impressive film such as *Kazhakam* (1965) by Sukumaran Nair about a young woman whose existence revolves around Lord Krishna abounds in rituals. What worry the critics is the ideological implications of the jargon of spirituality.

*Agnisakshi (With Fire as Witness, 1998)* by R. Shyama Prasad created controversy as to whether the filmmaker used the medium of religious rituals as Hindu propaganda. The narrative takes place in the early 1930s against the backdrop of the struggle for freedom from the British rule, when Unni accepts Devaki as his wife with the God of Fire as a principal witness and brings her into his temple. Soon, the romantic dreams of the young wife are shattered when her husband immerses himself totally in his religion. Devaki finds comfort in idealizing her freedom fighter brother but is prevented by her extended family to contact him. Feeling like a prisoner, she walks out one day and becomes an advocate of the rights of women and other underprivileged individuals. Unni suffers silently. Devaki's revolutionary endeavours do not last long and she seeks salvation in an *ashram*, a spiritual retreat. The film gives more importance to scenes of religious

rituals than logically developing the characters or justifying their sudden changes.

Jayaraaj's *Kaliyattom* (*The Play of God*, 1997) adapts Shakespeare's *Othello* to realities of Kerala against the backdrop of the Indian traditional art form, Theyyam. This film is also imbued in rituals, not necessarily religious. The nuances of the costumes and traditions are lost on the audience unfamiliar with Theyyam, but the film provides visual entertainment with the rich colours of the masks, the dances and the catchy musical score.

One of the pressing issues for this tiny state is the exodus of men to the Gulf States as workers. Some wives do not see their husbands for several years. Despite success stories, several men return empty handed. *Garshome* (1998) by P. T. Kunhi Mohammed focuses on the effects of economical migration on the individuals and their families. Intellectual Nazrudden spends several years in the oil-rich Arabian Gulf to support his family that he left behind in India. An idealist to the core, he is not involved in get-rich-quick schemes. As he returns poorer than when he left, discontent begins to brew in his family. But he is determined never to go back. He pawns his wife's jewelry and borrows money from loan sharks to start a hardware shop, which is confiscated by Sales Tax authorities that he refuses to bribe. Nazrudden has no choice but to return to his solitary existence in the Gulf. The scenes in which he meets his idol Mahatma Gandhi add a surrealist dimension. The film has universal appeal by its humanistic subject matter since the plight of immigrant workers is not much different in many other parts of the world.

Murali Nair, who has made his home and his fame elsewhere is the *enfant terrible* of Malayalam cinema. He won the Camera d'or at the Cannes Film Festival with his first film, *Maranasimhasanam* (*The Death Throne*, 1999), a satire about the arrival of a Death Throne, the latest invention from America. The honour of sitting on the throne falls on a poor villager who is conveniently and falsely accused of murder. *Pattiyude Divasam* (*A Dog's Day*, 2001) carries the satire further in the story of a poor old couple who receives a very expensive gift- a pedigree dog. In *Arimpara* (*The Story that Begins At the End*, 2003), the cinematic adaptation of Malayalam writer O.V. Vijayan's short story of the same name, Nair's satirical talents reach an absurdist dimension. The protagonist, a happily married middle-class man, grows a wart on his chin which gets bigger and uglier. People start moving away from him but he refuses to get the wart removed. One day, he tries to cut it off and falls unconscious. When he regains consciousness, he finds that his family has left him. In his loneliness, he hears the wart talking to him until he is engulfed by it, turning into a big elephant. Nair is the most talented and the most original Malayalam filmmaker of the new generation, unfortunately, his sharp sense for satire has made him akin to a *persona non grata* in his homeland.

Fascination with rituals, pessimistic family dramas that turn women's tears into objects of beauty, picture postcard settings exploiting the remarkable beauty of what tourist brochures call "God's Own Country," and reliance on syrupy background music continue to be part of Malayalam films. Filmmakers who highlight local colour are often reproached by critics for seeking foreign festival attention while melodramas that look like they were made in haste come and go without a trace. There seems to be a paucity of ideas among the young generation, or perhaps the discerning eye to choose the most appropriate ideas among the proliferation of many seems to be lacking. If a Malayalam film receives international acclaim today, it is usually made by one of the older and established masters, from Gopalakrishnan to Jayaraaj. Then there is Murali Nair.

Note: The directors' statements are from these interviews the author made with Malayalam filmmakers between 1997-2007.

## Notes

1. Jameson, Fredric. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Bloomington/London, Indiana University Press and BFI, 1992.
2. Dissanayake, Wimal (ed.) *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, Bloomington/ Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1994.
3. The origins of this dance-drama go back to the open-air performances of about five hundred years ago. They used to last all night. There are over one hundred arrangements, which are all derived from the two epics of Indian mythology, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The dance incorporates elements of yoga and

traditional "ayurvedic" medicine. The facial expressions, hand movements and ritualistic gestures are highly symbolic.

4. Said, Edward "Orientalism Reconsidered," *Race & Class* 27, no 2:1-15. 1985.

### **Author Information**

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