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Body as a Site of Interrogation: Malayalam Cinema and the Forbidden

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Abstract:

There has always been a fascination with human sexuality, making it a primary category of analysis (a discourse). Malayalam cinema (or Kerala society) is no exception to this. Cinema is a site where the sexuality/sexual fantasies of a milieu as well as the changing socio-cultural matrix get embedded. It grants the spectators what they unconsciously desire—a space where their sexual urges and desires are on ‘reel’, enabling them to be a part of what is played out before them. Sexuality, like most other aspects of life, has become thoroughly caught up in and restructured by the expanse of power systems in the Kerala context. Violence, cabaret, bathing and bedroom scenes have been a part of Malayalam cinema. It offers one of the many platforms where questions of body, desire and sexual pleasure are debated (through the male/female/queer body). The sexually charged bodies that appear on screen pose a challenge to the proscribed that rule the ‘space’ (the real world) they inhabit. The attempt is to analyze contemporary popular Malayalam cinema and its portrayal of sexuality, locating it within a modern milieu.

Keywords: sexuality, eroticism, Deleuze, Marcuse, projective identification

Underlying the socio-cultural organization of human reality are basic libidinal wants and needs. Fundamental changes in the social structure involve corresponding changes in the instinctual structure (for it bears upon a socio-historical field). There has always been a fascination with human sexuality, making sexuality a primary category of analysis (a discourse). Malayalam cinema (or Kerala society) is no exception to this. Gratification of man’s instinctual needs (associated with nature and the primitive) is incompatible with civilized society. Culture constraints not only societal but also biological existence; not only parts of the human being but the instinctual structure itself. The ‘forfeiting’ of libido, its rigidly enforced deflection to socially constructive behaviour and expression is ensured in every culture (constriction and what is ‘prohibited’ varying with culture and milieu). Power and desire operate as ‘interrelated’ within a larger social system. Uncontrolled Eros is ‘deadly’ for their destructive drives strive for a ‘gratification’ which culture (the reality which moulds the instincts as well as their needs and satisfaction being a socio-historical one) cannot grant. The unrestrained pleasure principle comes into conflict with the natural and human environment. Man’s desire is thus organized by his society which concurrently represses (the current Kerala context of moral policing and protest marches like the ‘kiss of love’ provides ample evidence of this) and transubstantiates his original instinctual needs. Though civilization masters and represses desire, it (desire) continues to exist and poses a ‘threat’ to society and its sense of ‘morality’ as the mind develops by incorporating the

community's shared artifacts accumulated over generations. The effective subjugation of the instincts to repressive controls is imposed not by nature but by man. Repressing of impulses incompatible with the reality takes place to minimize conflicts with reality. As Marcuse (drawing on Freud) puts it, the conflict between civilization and sexuality arises from the circumstance that sexual love is a relationship between two people, in which a third can only be superfluous or disturbing, whereas civilization is founded on relationships between larger groups of persons (*Eros* 41). Culture places itself in antagonism to sexuality—for it threatens time and again to destroy civilization and forces culture to bring forth every possible reinforcement against it. The restrictions imposed on the libido operate on the individual on two complementary grounds—as external objective laws and as an internalized force. The societal authority is absorbed into the 'conscience' and into the unconscious of the individual, and works as his own desire and morality. The individual lives his repression 'freely' as his own life—he desires what he is supposed to desire; his gratifications profitable to him and others. Sexuality becomes a 'public fixation' to be supervised, controlled and kept under surveillance. Cinema paradoxically becomes a location where the external 'laws' (a shared social space through visibility—a 'third space' by blurring off the real and the screen space) come to be flouted, yet maintained through retroversion. The 'forbidden' is placed before the spectator, for him to 'enjoy' without 'guilt' (what cannot be consciously accessed -desire- is defensively projected into another to evoke the thoughts or feelings projected).

Cinema grants the spectators what they unconsciously desire—a space (linked with the milieu) where their sexual urges and desires are on 'reel' (and not 'real'), enabling them to be a part of (and even 'feel') what is played out before them. The psyche of the individual spectator (also a 'witness' of the film) is of importance as a projective identification (a psychological projection in which the 'other' becomes the very embodiment of projection, leaving the projector 'asexual') takes place while viewing (as a spectator). Cinema produces satisfaction by allowing the spectators to identify with their own vision as 'omniscient' (situating the 'spectator' at the 'omniscient' position; at the centre of vision) and by inviting the spectators to project their sexual 'fantasies' onto the film characters. The film narrative (repeatedly) addresses the concerned spectators in their imaginary role as physical witnesses to the events of the fictional world, and triggers emotional responses in the spectators by guiding their attention to the significance of an event that is related to a certain emotion (here sexual pleasure). There is a simulation of emotions in allegiance with the film, its characters, story, and audio-visuals. There emerges a desire for and pleasure in cinematic images—a desire for the fantasy world unraveled before him/her. In a Deleuzian sense, there is no division between his/her (spectator's) consciousness of a film and the film itself. For the duration, while the spectator watches it, while he/she (the spectator) is conscious of it, the film *is* the real world. By utilizing features of editing, narrative method, *mis-en-scene*, performance etc., films produce specific 'signs' by means of which meaning is created and through which the experience of cinema is defined. A doubling of belief occurs where the spectator, while watching, a film, believes, that the action on screen is not real; that it is imaginary, but at the same time, believes—unconsciously—that the scenes unfolding on the screen are real. Situating desire in this cinematic context, erotic moments become fleeting

instances of ‘sexual freedom’ (also moments of voyeuristic pleasure) which in reality conceals its oppressiveness beneath a gloss of enjoyment.

Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns of the regulated social order. The state functions (cinema as a form of social control yet compliant with the censor board a ‘state apparatus’) as the arbitrator of sexual justice—a ‘regulator of sexuality’—implying the ability of the state to produce “state effects” by striving to ‘discipline sexuality, and even desire. Sexual transgression (as in the movie *Parinayam*, 1994 based on the *smarthavicharam*, a ritualistic trial for adultery, of Kuryedath Thathri) poses a severe challenge to positions within instantiated social hierarchies and to ones very identity. Taboos (amorphously exist) attached (fear of transgression and prohibition affixed to all that is ‘erotic’ or ‘sexual’) express the primal necessity of erecting a protective barrier against excessive desires. Human beings are driven away from the forbidden by terror and drawn towards it by an awed fascination. Taboo and transgression reflect these two conflicting urges—taboo forbids transgression but fascination compels it. Eroticism (dependent on individual’s sexual morality as well as the culture and time in which he/she resides) in general is also an infraction of the laws of taboos. According to sociologists like Marcuse the social order would change profoundly if human sexuality were liberated from excessive social repression. An excessive repression of libidinal instincts amounts to the repression of the human as a social and political being. For repression, argues Marcuse, serves not just “civilization” abstractly but particular historical forms of civilization. Whereas human community requires some very basic repression of sexual and aggressive impulses, “the specific historical institutions of the reality principle and the specific interests of domination” have introduced “surplus repressions” (*Eros* 37). Since the dominant social power structure is fundamentally threatened by human potential for the unbridled sensual, measures are taken by society to bridle it.

Sexuality, like most other aspects of personal life, has become thoroughly caught up in and restructured by the expanse of power systems in the Kerala context. Cinema is a site where the sexuality/sexual fantasies of a milieu and the changing socio-cultural matrix get embedded. Violence, cabaret, bathing and bedroom scenes have been a part of Malayalam cinema. The prostitute, the vamp and the subaltern woman are some of the sexually charged bodies (like Silk Smitha or Shakeela) traceable in early popular cinema. While eroticism in early Malayalam cinema was mostly envisaged as an experience situated in human life (as an object of passion and poetic contemplation, visualized with less explicitness), contemporary cinematic texts consistently etch ‘pseudo liberation’ of sexuality (amounting to confessing repression) through its ‘modern’ ‘free’ discourse. Though it no longer projects desire as ‘male’, it inadvertently enforces a male-centric, coercive view of sexuality (with the woman objectified even when cast in the role of a ‘New Woman’ as in *Trivandrum Lodge* or ‘de-sexualized’ as in movies like *How Old Are You* 2014). The face, body (usually plump to the extent of vulgarity) and audio-visual mechanisms, (apart from clothing that clings to the body, lighting and camera movement) are drawn upon to evoke the erotic—the body movements, contortions of the face or sounds in moments of passion or sexual pleasure. The implied positioning of the spectator within these exchanges, and the intertextual references to

other screen faces create a choreographic interface, which forms a rich site of meaning-production ('a signifying system'). It provides an analytical framework to expose the pedagogic, aesthetic, and performative and socio-cultural values that underpin movies. While a deliberate absence of morality makes the audience think over its presence, contemporary Malayalam cinema, through its blatant depictions, also points towards a socio-cultural context that fervently tries to mark itself as 'modern' and 'free'.

Contemporary Malayalam cinema approaches desire and sexuality in an entirely different manner making it difficult to differentiate whether the cinematic space induces desire, or real life desire prompts its transfiguration onto the screen space. The body (here on screen), as Susan Bordo has put it, is not only a 'text of culture' but a 'direct locus of social control' (13). Sensuous themes have been experimented in Malayalam cinema since its inception. Linguistic explicitness and transgressive representations mark the 'modern' Kerala visuality. Like the exoticized female body (on screen and film posters), the male bodies represented are heavily influenced by society's expectations (unambiguous in the casting of the hero, *Pulimurukan* 2016). A patriarchal ideology, its control, shapes not only the female body but also leaves the male body vulnerable. A significant 'event' in the figuring of the erotic (through a prostitute, which was blasphemous at the point in time) in the public sphere of Kerala was *Avalude Ravukal* by I V Sasi (1978, followed by Bharathan's *Rathinirvedam* 1978 and its portrayal of extremely erotic scenes by Jayabharthi; its remake by TK Rajeev Kumar in 2011). Initially condemned and labeled 'titillating', the late 1990s saw the film recouped as a 'bold', 'progressive' portrayal of the 'subaltern' prostitute. The very title (*Her Nights*) is an invitation to witness the unveiling of the 'sexual escapades' in a prostitute's life ('night' signifying sexual activity and promiscuity, spilling over to evocate the dark, unknown and mysterious mind of 'her'). Surprisingly, the film posits a 'well read' prostitute, indicating her intellectual capability and depth of thinking, trying to take her beyond her sexualized body—as a marker of her emancipated status. The central women characters (Clara, Bhadra) in later movies like *Thoovanathumbikal* (by Padmarajan, 1987) or *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* (1999, by TK Rajeev Kumar where desire becomes a weapon of revenge) may be seen as extensions from the point of reference. This trope is taken onward in later films like *Susanna* (2000), which received public attention as an iconoclastic representation of the prostitute/sexual figure. Similar movies move beyond the established canons of 'female desirability' and 'availability' despite their shocking sense of morality (though generically neither pornographic nor romantic). While early movies like *Nidra* (1981, remake in 2012), *Thakara* (1980), *Vaishali* (1988), *Adharvam* (1989), *Njan Gandharvan* (1991) have incorporated desire and eroticism through visuality (the way in which the camera sensuously glides over the female body taking the 'gaze' of the spectator along its contours), Malayalam cinema's 'deliberate silence' on so called Keralite morality (a stereotypical morality) broke to 'explicitness' (audio-visually) with the 'New Generation' movies. While movies like *Ore Kadal* (2007), *Ritu* (2009), *Chappa Kurishu* (2011), *22 Female Kottayam* (2012), *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012) became noted examples which took a divergent route on screen with their experimenting story and treatment of the intricacies of man-woman relationships as well as sexuality and acknowledging of emotional and sexual desires; those like *Leela* (Ranjith, 2016; the hero weaves an elaborate sexual spectacle around

the ‘idea’ of having sex with a nubile young girl resting on the trunk of an elephant) left a disturbing silence through its depiction of innumerable male desires. The composition, structure and development of the female characters and their relationship with other characters hint at the shifting moral values in Malayalam films (and Kerala society). While *Ore Kadal* dealt with desire and unhappy marital life, and the heroine’s (Meera Jasmine) ‘fall’ into an extramarital relationship, *Ritu* and *Chappa Kurishu* placed desire and sexuality in a ‘modern’ context of IT, texting and internet browsing. *22 Female Kottayam* on the other hand portrayed aberrant sexual desire (through its victim, Tessa (Reema Kallingal). Unabashedly immoral and celebrating voyeurism without a hint of guilt, *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012) came to represent ‘modern sexual freedom’ (local discourses of sexuality especially in the context of local being predominantly understood as shaped by global and transnational discourses) not through visuality but through script. Steeped in suppressed desires, the camera does not try to titillate by lingering on female anatomy but leaves it to the characters to express their feelings through crass talk and sexual exploits of its characters. The heroine Dhvani (Honey Rose) does not hesitate to play up her ‘assets’ to enjoy it and makes herself the object of raw desire (hinting at the new definitions of morality in contemporary Kerala). *Kanyaka Talkies* (KR Manoj, 2013) delves into the matrix of the body, desire, forbidden pleasures and guilt linking it with religion.

Malayalam cinema offers one of the many platforms where questions of body, desire and sexual pleasure are debated (through the male/female/queer body). The changing face of Malayalam cinema in accordance with the varying socio-cultural values and demands of the audience get etched on screen. The sexually charged bodies that appear on screen pose a challenge to the proscribed that rule the ‘space’ (the real world) they inhabit. As against popular commercial cinema (‘coming out’ with movies like *Mumbai Police* 2013 or *Ka Bodyscapes* 2016 banned due to its explicit take on sexuality), soft-porn movies (unlike the ‘popular’ where sexual deviance is ‘bridled’ by the time the movie concludes) ‘trap’ the actresses in the ‘brand’ of movies they create. It tied actresses like Silk Smitha, (but it did not in the case of actresses like Jayabharathi who were able to get over their ‘promiscuous’ on screen image and be established as ‘heroines’) forever to the ‘body-icon-desire’ image on screen—a commanding body that gives a superior presence even when the role is small. The sexualized bodies in contemporary cinema attach themselves to raw sensuality and forcefully project a sense of the revolt of the body unleashed in a society that *was* and *is* still in the grip of a moral double bind—its inbuilt orthodoxy despising a sexually charged body (almost always female—a ‘sexual conservatism’ rooted within a patriarchal/heteronormative ideology that seeks visual pleasure through ‘erotic bits’), at the same time, its suppressed and voluminous lust greedily devouring the body, its sensuality. The moral values, together with the ambivalent sexual imagination existing in the social space of Kerala are reflected in the cinematic space candidly in contemporary popular cinema. The body now makes itself available to the celluloid and scripts a challenge through its sensuality. Cinema contemplates desire from the different perspectives of politics, religion body and sexuality—desire for cinema, for the body and all that is unattainable in *real* life, but is in *reel* life and the few hours at the theatre. What emerges is a socialization of the unconscious into ‘a mass form of pleasure-drills’, and an exercise of control through the command to transgress, rather than to

repress (for every position of desire calls into question the established structures/order of society)—an increasingly pervasive superficial sexuality in a world of ‘desiring machines’.

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