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Emasculated Identities: A Critique of the Representation of Comedians in Malayalam Cinema

Abstract

Cinema has always a source of power and influence promoting new standards in the society while reinforcing the existing ones. As a medium with immense sway over the human psyche, cinema has a significant ability to shape ideas and create stereotypes. My paper is built around a few Malayalam movies with a view to examining the meanings behind the role of cinema in popular culture and demonstrating the richness of this medium as a source of signification for cultural criticism. The study attempted here is a modest one and aims at analyzing the treatment of humor and the marginalization experienced by the comedians of Malayalam cinema, pointing to a discussion of its function and the implications in the industry. An exploration of the themes and portrayals of comedians in Malayalam cinema would throw light on how representations have evolved through time and how they influence the vision of society and culture with respect to those characters who make us laugh with their antics and gimmicks. The issues addressed are: How is humor treated in Malayalam

Cinema? What are the constraints or politics involved in the representation of comedians? Are they still being cast in the same old stereotypic manner or has the representation really changed over the years? The misogyny of the mainstream media, and particularly the film industry, has often been discussed in academic circles. However the intention of this study is a broader examination of gender-related issues where the question of masculinity, is addressed in the portrayal of humorous characters in Malayalam cinema.

Keywords: Cinema, Comedians, Gender, Humor, Influence, Malayalam, Marginalization, Masculinity, Politics, Representations, Society, Stereotypes.

1. Introduction

Cinema has always been a source of power and influence, promoting new standards in the society while reinforcing the existing ones. As a medium with immense sway over the human psyche, cinema has a significant ability to shape ideas and create stereotypes. The geographical, political and social background of Kerala, along with the cultural, and linguistic influences have provided nurturing, along the historical way, giving it a distinctive Malayali ethos. The mindset of the Keralite, however, has not been limited by its narrow geographical parameters and in a logical inverse proportion of size, this tiny state of Kerala has made a mark in the domain of world cinema forcing the global audience not only to take notice but also to take them seriously.

Cinema is one of the ways by which society inculcates its dominant role models, ideas and codes of behaviors. Though much of the ideas and patterns are based on inequalities, it cannot be refuted that popular culture forms perpetuate them. The misogyny of the mainstream media, and particularly the film industry, has often been topics for academic deliberations. However the purpose of this study is a broader examination of gender-related

issues where the question of masculinity, is addressed in the portrayal of humorous characters in Malayalam cinema. My paper is built around a few Malayalam movies with a view to examining the role of cinema in popular culture and demonstrating the richness of this medium as a source of signification for cultural criticism. The study attempted here is not a very exhaustive one; nevertheless it aims at analyzing specific characterizations in a sampling of Malayalam films. The focus is mainly on the treatment of humor and the marginalization experienced by the comedians of Malayalam cinema, pointing to a discussion of its function and implications in the industry. The article proposes to look at media stereotypes of a category of male characters from different perspectives and gives insights into the impact, societal costs, and solutions to such stereotypical representations.

The study is an exploration of the stereotypes that exist in the Malayalam movies of the past and the present and examines how these representations reflect the ideology of the time period during which the movies were made. The issues addressed are: How is humor treated in Malayalam Cinema? What are the constraints or politics involved in the representation of comedians? Are they still being cast in the same old stereotypic manner or has the representation really changed over the years? The investigation and analysis will be summed up with the conclusion arrived at in the light of a somewhat diligent study of some of the popularly acclaimed movies made in the language.

2. Hegemonic masculinity and Subordinate Masculinity

It was in the 1990s, that the Masculinity Studies, began to problematize the issue of certain categories of men who do not necessarily fit into the accepted notions of masculinity and power. The impressions of manhood reinforced by movies that celebrate machismo are so strong that the unmanly, ineffectual, clumsy characters become negative stereotypes never to be emulated. It is in the second category that the comedians figure as objects of ridicule to set off the heroic traits of superstars. It is in actuality a particular type of masculine

belligerence that manifests in movies as scenes of torture and other forms of sadistic humiliation of comedians in movies. It is in the light of this observations that the following question arises. Do all men have power? The performance of masculinity actually is dependent on a lot of factors like race, class, caste, position and sexuality.

As MacKinnon says in *Feminism Unmodified*(1987), masculinity defines men, rather than the reverse. “By men I mean the status of masculinity that is accorded to males,” but not to those persons who are “defined as subordinated by force as women are”. According to her men must work constantly to keep this masculine control and dominance in place, and the place of subordinated men, including gay men, is rendered ambiguous in this account (170).

Hence it becomes necessary to interrogate the constructions of masculinity and also look at the tense and complex relationship between hegemonic masculinities and subordinate masculinities. Hegemonic masculinities are those identities that are centred on power and have social approval. Subordinate ones possess neither and it has never been easy for them to resist the hegemonic models either.

3. Malayalam Cinema

A broad survey of the history of Malayalam cinema clearly reveals that despite the changing times much of what was subordinate ages ago, still continue to remain the same. Access to the mainstream, let alone the hegemonic, remains a pipe dream for many.

It has been established unequivocally that popular culture forms reinforce gender stereotypes, and prime the sexual identity of those who follow them. The stereotypes are tools that allow those in the majority to keep those in the minority in positions of limited or subordinate power, particularly through messages to other members of the majority group facilitated by the mass media outlets. As males have always been valued as the dominant group in any society, the qualities preset for the category include power, authority, aggression, intelligence, physical strength and fortitude. The very need of the dominant group

to achieve self-esteem enhancement can affect the stereotype formation of a particular subordinate or minority group drastically. Stereotypes are not just unrealistic at times; they are erratic generalizations that promote the formation of negative expectations about other categories of individuals leading to further undesirable stereotyping. These types of portrayals often show such stereotyped groups as having less favorable characteristics when compared to the members of the dominant majority. Thus stereotypes help in building negative impressions and images not only in the media, but also in everyday society.

David. J. Schneider's view as expressed in *The Psychology of Stereotyping* is significant. According to him stereotypes are bad because they emphasize the negative rather than the positive features of groups.

Stereotypes which were assumed to be larger reflections of the culture rather than of individual experiences with people from these groups, promoted a negative evaluation (prejudice), which in turn justified discrimination (9).

Movies often make use of visual messages to harm and perpetuate misleading myths about the marginalized and also other members of various cultural groups. There is a lot of reliance on simplistic and unflattering stereotypical representations, and much of what we get to see on the screen are fabricated stereotypes of a masculine vision.

From the time of the inception of cinema, the primary role of comedians has been to relieve tension between intense situations with their eccentric or wild antics. There is almost always a purpose to the introduction of these characters in the plot. However even when they form an active part of action in the plot, their contributions are rarely remembered when the story comes to a happy and successful conclusion. Their role in the cast ensemble is made to appear insignificant even when they succeed in creating a lasting impression in the minds of the viewers.

An exploration of the themes and portrayals of comedians in Malayalam cinema would throw light on how representations have evolved through time and how they influence the vision of society and culture with respect to those characters who make us laugh with their tactics and gimmicks. A few comedian stereotypes commonly seen in Malayalam cinema have been identified for study in this paper

1. Side-kicks/assistants/servant boys

It is possible to identify a surprisingly large number of character types that exist primarily for the purpose of being a foil, usually to the main character. These characters serve to highlight the hero's heroic trait, usually by contrast. Typically they are a foil to the hero, and this is often underscored by their dramatically different appearance. Strong vs. the weak, the handsome vs. the ugly, the brave v the cowardly, tall vs. short are among the most common ways of setting up a contrast. Comical representation of such characters help to reinforce the qualities of the protagonist with ease. The geeky comic relief character is one who worships the hero and whose primary purpose is to stand around and marvel at everything the hero does, explaining exactly why it should be so impossible. Sidekicks often serve as foils to the hero by being something the hero himself is not.

Examples: PremNazir- AdoorBhasi ("Cochin Express"), PremNazir- Bahadur("C I D Nazir")

Sathyan – Bahadur("Yakshi"), , Mammooty- Innocent ("Chronic Bachelor", "No 1 Snehatheeram Bangalore North"), Mammooty-Shankarady ("PapayudeSwanthamAppoos") Mohanlal- Sreenivasanin all the three movies of the DaasanVijayan series.

These sidekicks are often the friends and helpers of the main hero. In earlier movies, especially those featuring Nazir with AdoorBhasi as side kick, Bhasi has a role almost

of equal importance, observing and even aiding the action(see fig. 1). The hero and the sidekick have reciprocal bonds of loyalty and friendship. Sometimes they are even powerful contenders displaying qualities of equal astuteness and courage. Nazir-AdoorBhasi (“ArakallanMukkaalKallan”).Unfortunately the trend has changed in the later movies and characters who were previously placed on the same plane as the heroes were gradually obliterated.



Fig. 1

Bahadur was an actor cast most often in servant roles typifying qualities like fear and cowardice and paying obeisance to the hero(see fig. 2). Mammootty’s role as the Cbi officer in the CBI series is a celebrated one. But the other actors Jagathy and Mukesh who assist him in the investigation are made to appear as less astute than the hero. The bias in attitudes towards comedians in cinema is indicative of common stereotypes where they are thought to be as less intelligent than the protagonist. Their role in the main plot is often limited to that which enhances the hero’s stature and show of prowess. Most of the times they are used for extolling the virtues of the hero and they accorded roles that are unquestionably subservient and meek. Mammootty-

Innocent (“Chronic Bachelor”, “No 1 Snehatheeram Bangalore North”), Mammooty-Shankarady (“PapayudeSwanthamAppoos”)

Innocent and Sankaradi both highly talented actors have not only been victims of Mammooty’s rage and arrogance in many movies, but have also been on the receiving end of his abusive language on many occasions.



Fig. 2

Often the sidekick is younger or almost the same age as the hero. But occasionally it is possible to come across an older side kick. The older sidekick actually fulfills some kind of non- intrusive parental role, which the hero might lack from having no family. The younger hero dominates due to his superior position or status, but requires the more experienced sidekick for advice. A typical example of such a character is Warriar in Devasuram(see fig. 3). The hero’s attitude towards this character who is not necessarily a comedy character but one portrayed by the noted comedian Innocent in Devasuram is supercilious and arrogant at times despite the assertion that he is a father figure for the hero.



Fig. 3

2. The abused character

Another pathetic stereotype is a down-trodden side kick who is abused throughout the story as a means for evoking laughter. This involves a self-negation especially when the victims of abuse are portrayed as deserving the treatment they receive. Such characters are depersonalized, and silenced. Such characters are also objects of derision and mocked at sometimes even for their physical appearance. Srinivasan's appearance has often been a source of hilarity for the audience in Malayalam cinema. But the comment made by the hero in movies like "AkkareAkkareAkkare" are highly revolting and distasteful. He is kicked and bullied by Mohanlal in the pretext of humour(see fig. 4). Another classic example is the character of JagathySreekumar in "Yodha" and "Kilukkam". In the celebrated singing match the hero wins not because of his superior singing skills, but because he strips off Jagathy's dhoti before a jeering crowd and forces him to stop singing in what had become by now more of a fighting bout than a music competition. In "Kilukkam" Jagathy's encounter with the Hindi speaking goon in Kilukkam is hilarious to say the least. But when there is an over reliance on scenes where someone is mercilessly assaulted and the audience laugh hysterically it means something else. This in effect a form of emasculation

many characters have been subjected to in Malayalam cinema. Mohanlal's overbearing machismo requires his companions to be roughed up and abused without even a reason. Srinivasan in "AkkareAkkareAkkare", Kalabhavan Mani in "Summerin Bethlehem", Jagathy in "Kilukkam", HarisreeAshokan in "Punjabi House" are a few examples.



Fig. 4

3. Comedians with a villainous streak

JagathySreekumar's character in "MeesaMadhavan" is another character who undergoes some sort of emasculation (see fig. 5). Here the semi villainous and preposterous Jagathy, who is caught in the trap of his own making, finally gives in without much struggle in the end. His defeat is effected through the subtle use of the device of blackmail. Emasculation positions him as inferior and JagathySreekumar is observed as going through several rounds of oppressive treatment that undermine and rip to shred his personhood and identity. The villainy offers justification for the kind of treatment meted out to such characters.



Fig. 5

4. Mentally challenged/Differently-abled characters

Images of mentally/physically challenged characters serve to reinforce and re-inscribe masculine supremacy. This is indeed another objectionable stereotype in mainstream Malayalam cinema. Another peculiarity is that such characters are depicted as ludicrous and struggling to find a love interest. And they are almost never given song sequences to act in. Mala Aravindan, KuthiravattomPappu are some actors who have assayed roles of retards in the movies of the 80s.

Earlier it was not uncommon for the comedians to have love interests alongside the romantic plot involving the central characters. They are the Beta Couple who make a secondary pairing which becomes a foil to the primary relationship. And the girl would either be the heroine's friend or confidante or at times even the maid. Old movies also had romantic sequences and songs pictured on the beta couple. Comedians like S.P.Pillai, AdoorBhasi, Bahadur have been fortunate to have acted in innumerable song sequences. "Keladi nine njan", "Oruroopa note koduthaal", "ViralonnillenkilumVeeranallenkilumbharthaavuningalmathi", "Pineapplepolorupennu" are examples(see fig. 6).



Fig. 6

This practice has been totally upended in the movies of the recent times where the side kick with his impaired masculinity can never qualify to be lover and is considered totally undesirable by the other characters. The exceptions are the movies that feature characters with disabilities and deformed physical appearances in somewhat serious central roles. “Su SuSudhiValmeekam”, “Kunjikoonan”, “Chakkaramuthu”, “Sound Thoma”, “VasanthiyumLekshmiyumPinneNjanum” to name a few with such characters in the lead roles(see fig. 7).Mentally challenged protagonists, not necessarily in humorous roles feature in the movies “Adimakal”, “Karimadikuttan” and “Ormakkayi”. It cannot be considered a coincidence that this disability qualifies them to find their love interest only in women who have been stigmatized due to reasons pertaining to morality and societal restrictions. Stories are contrived and manipulated in such a way that the audience are made to feel uncomfortable accepting a romantic relationship between a desirable heroine and a lesser man. This only serves to perpetuate a controlling image of comedians as highly dysfunctional.



Fig.7

5. Farcical Protagonists –

A similar stereotype can be found in the farcical portrayal of the protagonist in movies featuring comedians in central role. Classic examples are “Vadakkunokkiyanthram”, “PaavamPaavamRajakumaran”, “ManiyampillaiAdhavaManiyam Pillai”, “DhimTharikida Thom”(see fig.8). In all these movies the generally subaltern women characters are delineated as superior, intellectually and appearance-wise, once again to reiterate their preeminence over men who do not conform to the masculine standards prescribed by the patriarchal society.



Fig.8

6. Dim-witted ones

Malayalam cinema has not actually had a very long tradition of films celebrating male friendships. Movies on male camaraderie is more of a recent development following the success of some Bollywood movies. Earlier attempts at the introduction of the theme of male friendship can be seen in movies like “AkkareNinnoruMaaran”, “Aniyathipravu”, “Ramji Rao Speaking” etc. to name a few. But later on focus was soon shifted from the aspect of male bonding to the creation of a dim-witted character in the group as a comic relief to evoke mirth and laughter. Misery and discomfiture suffered by these characters become the source of mirth and laughter for the viewers. The intention is never to evoke emotions akin to sympathy or sorrow as much of the trouble is shown as being brought by the folly of the characters themselves. Eg.Jagadeesh in the “Hariharnagar” series, “Godfather”.

7. Cowards

The classic stereotypes portray the cowardly characters as somewhat effeminate, weak, helpless, dumb, in need of rescue, and incapable of or unwilling to fight back unless they are absolutely forced to defend themselves. Specifically, they are depicted as dependent and forever whimpering (Suraj in “Pokkiri Raja”, “Chattambinaadu”). Many of them are like the male counterparts of ‘damsels in distress’ who are perpetually getting themselves into trouble, and waiting for the hero to rescue them.

8. Effeminate men

Any man who does not conform to society’s rigid and narrow definition of masculinity is in danger of being labeled an effeminate man, a feared and hated stereotype deserving rebuke and ridicule. Dileep in “Chandupottu”, Jayasurya in “101 Weddings” are typical examples(see fig.9). The resolution of the problem involves the attempted de-feminization and subsequent masculinization of the man who has to either accept the challenge and transform himself or stay forever the comic butt to be laughed at. The character of Marykutty played by Jayasurya, in “NjanMarykutty” to some extent subverts the prevailing discourse of masculinity.



Fig.9

The braggarts/New rich/miser are some of the most common humorous stereotypes in Malayalam cinema. Nedumudi Venu, Shankaradi, Odivil Unnikrishnan are a few actors

who have donned these kind of roles to perfection in movies. Very rarely are these characters cast in serious roles and presenting them in a ludicrous light offers great scope for mirth and hilarity.

In the depiction of stereotypical cowards even the position in the social hierarchy is of no consequence. Malayalam cinema abounds in cowardly policeman and unscrupulous politicians stereotypes. The portrayal of teachers, and retired soldiers are not flattering either. Classic examples being the male teachers in Premam, and the school teachers in the movies “My Dear Kuttichathan” and “Kakkothikaavile Appuppan Thadikal”. The innumerable roles of ex-military male characters attempted by the veteran actor Shankaradi are hilarious no doubt. But they also lead one to wonder if such depictions do not cross the limits of propriety and decorum. Whether or not ageism is the politics that operates in such derogatory portrayals is an issue to be addressed.

4. Observations

The type of portrayals, as described above, often show such stereotyped groups as having less favorable characteristics when compared to the members of the dominant majority. The bias in attitudes towards comedians in cinema is indicative of common stereotypes where they are thought to be as less intelligent than the serious characters. Their role in the main plot is often limited to that which enhances the hero's stature and show of prowess. Most of the times they are used for extolling the virtues of the hero and they accorded roles that are unquestionably subservient and meek.

Kaja Silverman in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* argues for the contesting of the current ideology that asserts masculine dominance. "Our dominant fiction," she writes, "calls upon the male subject to see himself, and the female subject to

recognize and desire him, only through the mediation of images of an unimpaired masculinity.” This is truer of movies than most forms of popular culture.

The heroes are mostly high-born men, placed in superior positions to perpetuate beliefs about the superiority of males. And the comedy characters are those subordinated to a hegemonic power under the unifying concept of the subaltern, developed by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*. Indian postcolonial critic GayatriChakravortySpivak defined subalterns as people “removed from all lines of social mobility” (Morton 66). Subaltern Studies group, formed in the late 1970s by some Indian academics Ranajit Guha, leader of the group, defined the subaltern as “a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way”(35). Societal hierarchy highlights his subaltern condition. In Malayalam cinema the comic character is the typical colonial subject obliged to suffer and receive harsh treatment everywhere but unable to stand up for himself against injustices meted out to him.

Stuart Miller has explored the nuances of male friendship in his *Men and Friendship*. “...their relationships with other men, which could be a true echo of their own manhood, are generally characterised by thinness, insincerity and even chronic wariness (Seidler 16). Mervyn Nicholson observes in his *Male Envy: The Logic of Malice in Literature and Culture* that:

Male bonding is a process of domination of other males, by which some gain benefits from subordinating others....These unities of men, moreover, arise only in a context of strict subordination by rank: they express control-power over others (31).

It is possible to discern the more dominant partner in all the male teams mentioned above. Seemingly inseparable, they do not actually complement each other. What happens is a bonding where one, despite all individual accomplishments, remains faithful and docile assisting the other to enhance his power and authority. The characters analysed in the paper are to a great extent men, who are happily acquiescent in their ancillary positions, allowing their more dominant partner, who is the hero to walk away with all the credit and glory when the movie comes to a close.

5. Conclusion

The scenario in world cinema is different and accords great respectability to comedy roles and the actors donning them. Right from the age of silent movies, comedians have been given a pride of place, a position that has remained intact even to this day. Actors like Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, Woody Allen, Eddie Murphy, Steve Martin, Jerry Lewis, Rowen Atkinson, Adam Sandler, Jim Carrey are all revered not only as kings of comedy, but as great actors whose contributions have enriched the medium of cinema in the true sense of the term(see fig.10, 11,12). Stereotypes are not easily broken in any popular culture form, not to mention cinema. Stereotypical depictions can impress upon the youth and contribute towards creating standards for conformance.



Fig. 10



Fig 11



Fig 12

Cinema does play a significant role in managing and shaping the male experience, but in a way drastically different from how the female experience is described in this media. As far as women actors are concerned, it is a fact that very few women have made a name, in the Malayalam film industry, as actors capable of handling humour with the adroitness of male comedians. The few women who have achieved success have done so by repressing all elements of femininity and emphasizing their idiocy or ungainliness. All these factors have led to the development of a different sense of humour by women. As the feminine kind of humour is complex and requires to be dealt with in detail separately, women comediennes do not form part of this study.

The analysis attempted here reveals that, it is precisely through such representations of gender, sexuality and narratives of human relations that young boys are shaped into their role as adults. By giving greater prominence to the under-represented categories, Malayalam cinema can raise people's awareness of inequalities, and that would be a step forward towards dismantling the systems that perpetuate the oppressive ideologies.

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