

## From the Margin to the Frames: The Ideology of the New-Gen Malayalam Cinema

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Received: August 3, 2022

Accepted: August 17, 2022

Online Published: August 20, 2022

### Abstract

The new generation (new-gen) Malayalam films have clearly made a turn from the previous generations of films varying from the melodrama, new wave and the middlebrow films. Though there are differences in technology used as well as content, the major difference was the treatment of individuals in a modern sense. The new-gen Malayalam films was global in its representation of characters. The distinct margins were removed and the society was presented as a whole.

**Keywords:** Malayalam, Cinema, Margin, Frame, Character

**Contribution/Originality:** This paper investigates the ideology of the new-gen movies by analysing how the new-gen films find themselves distinct from the previous generation.

### Introduction

Malayalam cinema has been criticised for its misrepresentations of marginalised communities. There are attempts to foreground the marginalised lives in recent times. Still, the inclusion of the marginalised remains to be a question. The attempts of the marginalised to enjoy the privileges of the upper caste, upper-class communities fail miserably. Instead of being a modern individual, these representations attempt to make the marginalised a replica of the mainstream by imitating the latter as represented in *Chappa Kurish* (Thahir, 2011). And for the marginalised lives this transformation which is given as the only means to be modern fails miserably. This is compensated by representing their existence as dependent on the mainstream, but an entry to the mainstream is possible, these movies say, only through imitation. A marginalised individual's attempts to prove his/her innocence or claim his/her presence ends up

in tragedy as he/she is trapped by the system as shown in *Pra. Thoo. Mu.* a film by Jithin Issac Thomas in the anthology *Freedom Fight* (2022), *Jana Gana Mana* (Antony, 2022) and *Nayattu* (Prakkat, 2021). An attempt to include those who are in the margin by blurring the line between never happens. Instead, an escape to the mainstream is offered to these characters. If this line between the margin and the mainstream blurs it is shown as a threat as in *Malik* (2021). This paper is looking at the possibilities of the blurring of the line that demarcates the margin and the mainstream lives and how cinema responds to this very idea. This paper argues that the new-gen Malayalam movies are an extension of the feudal structures. Though the new-gen Malayalam films look progressive in their representations of the marginalized and the minorities, the reminiscent of the feudal past is underlying beneath all these structures. This paper interrogates how the feudal and the modern ideologies work together in escalating certain ideologies in the new-gen Malayalam films.

### **The Exotic Other**

Those who are in the margin are presented as the ‘other’ of the mainstream. Usually, the camera is placed in the mainstream. The margin remains as an exotic imagination representing the ‘other’ of the city where the educated and civilized live. In the 1990s few movies discussed the city as a place where the individual gets a chance to meet modern individuals and lifestyles. Though the city was presented as a meeting point, something similar to a purgatory in which both parties meet, the city was presented as the cultural other of the village. The hero from the village is innocent and fragile but those who are in the city are corrupted, crooked and dangerous. *Naadoodikkaattu* (Anthikad, 1987), *In Harihar Nager* (Siddique & Lal, 1991), *Nagarathil Chennu Raapaarkkaam* (Thampi, 1990) are few of those movies. The city is presented as the world of opportunities but a similar type of narrative revolving around this narrative suggests the innocence of the village space. The feudal structures were retold nostalgically. *Devasuram* (Sasi, 1993), *Dhruvam* (Joshy, 1993), *Aaram Thampuram* (Shaji Kailas, 1997) are some of the movies in which feudal justice is delivered in its full capacity. While these movies focus on the lives of the hero who comes from a feudal background and solves the problems, the new generation (new-gen from hereafter) movies treat these in a different manner. The feudal hero ensures that justice is delivered in a direct way, usually

delivering feudal justice in the absence of the police as Madhava Prasad points out (Prasad, 2000, p. 95). The modern hero prevents the threat caused with the help of the system. In this aspect, new generation Malayalam cinema acts like one of the ideological state apparatuses defined by Althusser. To read it in another way, the institutions of the modern state are controlled by the feudal order. This very collaboration ensures the ‘safety’ provided by the margin.

### **New-Gen Malayalam Films**

The new-gen Malayalam movies place themselves different from the structural as well as thematic dimensions of the films of the previous generations. This was a shift from the upper caste, upper/middle-class livelihoods to the margins representing the struggles, dreams and achievements of those who are in the margins. Venkateswaran reads it as ‘a fresh air from the suffocating narratives in which the superhero was at the centre of everything’ (Venkateswaran, 2021). The *valluvanadan*<sup>1</sup> slang which was ‘the language’ widely spoken in Malayalam cinema has been replaced by the local dialects in Idukki, Kottayam, Alleppey, Kasaragod, Malappuram, etc. marking the existence of life and culture different from the exotic other represented through types in the previous decade.

The compression of time, as Venkateswaran puts it, is another characteristic of new-gen Malayalam cinema. Events take place during a day or a few days, or at a particular point in time. In *Nayattu*, the accident becomes a turning point in the story. In *Chappa Kurish* it is the missing mobile phone. This event creates a whirlpool in which the protagonist is trapped. The new-gen heroes lack the feudal aura the previous generation had. The new-gen heroes suffer and struggle and sometimes end up in a helpless situation, unlike the masculine hero who succeeded in defeating the villain and solving the riddle. Venkateswaran reads this vulnerable hero as a subtext to the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) a movement that reflected and represented the rights of women in cinema. Apart from this, the new-gen Malayalam cinema is closer to the notions of

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<sup>1</sup> Valluvanaadu was a princely state in Kerala which now includes the whole of Perinthalmanna, Mannaarkkaad and Ottappalam taluks, and parts of Ponnani, Tirur and Ernad taluks. *Valluvanaadan* slang was the Malayalam popularly used in the films.

gender equality and political correctness (Venkiteswaran, 2021). In addition to this, the companion of the hero who was presented as the rational other of the hero to highlight the abilities as well as intellectual capabilities of the hero disappeared from the films. Instead of comparing the hero with someone who is not as good as the hero, the former is just an individual who lacks a facilitator and is left to face the realities himself. This the new-gen hero is liberated from the clutches of the feudal structures even if he comes from a feudal family or class.

The caste and class work the same way though there are visible efforts from various parts to make the film more politically correct and appear modern in all its sense. But these efforts do not help those who are in the margins. The films *Nayattu*, *Jana Gana Mana* and *Pra. Thoo. Mu.* depict how the people in the margin are deprived of their rights. Though they are placed in the limelight the plight or the suffering of these characters are presented as the results of the actions of the individual. This gives a tragic vision of the life of these individuals in the margin. An effort to escape into the mainstream expecting a better life and dignity which the margin does not offer, presented as the 'other' of the mainstream in different ways, is presented as a useless effort.

### **Crossing the Boundary**

Leaving the boundary is always seen as a threat as one is leaving his/her space and attempting to fit into a different space. *Nayattu* tells the struggles through which Maniyan, Sunitha and Praveen- three police officers of lower rank had to go through. Maniyan and Praveen confront Sunitha's cousin Biju who was summoned to the police station for troubling Sunitha and her mother. They end up in a scuffle and Biju is placed in the cell but released because of his Dalit<sup>2</sup> identity and political influence. While the trio was returning from a wedding party their vehicle collides with a motorcycle killing the rider who was later identified as Jayan, a close friend of Biju. Rahul, Maniyan's nephew who was driving the vehicle at the time of the accident goes hiding leaving the three responsible for the death of Jayan. The three flee to Munnar to seek asylum when they realised the police wants to frame them in the case because of political

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<sup>2</sup> Dalit is considered to be a lower caste and excluded from the varna system which consists of the *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vysyas* and *Shudras*. The Dalits are considered to be untouchables and belong to the lower stratum among the castes.

pressure. The police find them and during the chase they find Maniyan hanging in a tree leaving a video recording to his daughter saying that he is not a murderer. The police arrest the two and try to make Maniyan responsible for the accident and death of the Dalit youth.

Maniyan comes from a Dalit background and was part of the system. In one of the earlier scenes, we see Maniyan creating evidence to frame the minister's daughter's lover as a thief. In a similar fashion, he too has been framed. His act of bringing Jayan to the hospital is not seen as an act of the responsible individual but read as an attempt to fabricate that they were trying to save him after the planned accident. Maniyan is trapped within the system and he does not get the chance to prove his innocence. Though Dalits do not have the political representation or the capital to influence claim their demands in Kerala, by placing the Dalit political organisations in a position to influence the ministry, the real plight of the Dalit representative in an attempt to become part of the system has been made futile. Maniyan's dream of making a better life for his daughter becomes unsuccessful as the system in the form of his community prevents him from proving his innocence before the judiciary.

In *Pra. Thoo. Mu.* the protagonist Laxman, a septic tank cleaner, is being crushed under the feet of the local politician. The movie, shot in black and white, is a direct blow to the masked progressive identity of the Malayali psyche. The story is narrated by the protagonist's father, one of the witnesses of the whole act of revenge leashed out on the angry young man who questioned the careless deed of the politician while they were cleaning the septic tank.

In the opening scenes, we are shown the leader's family having food at their dining table while the three come to clean the septic tank. The leader communicates with them through the window from the first floor in a friendly manner. The friendly tone changes when the Laxman enters the dining room calling out the leader for his mistake. Though the family of the leader, his supporters and the police do not do anything until the protagonist beats the leader. The union of septic tank cleaners narrates before the press the events that had happened on that day. The protagonist is arrested by the police for attempting to molest the leader's wife. This alternative reality which is widely accepted challenges the narrative of the protagonist's father. Even the media has been subscribed to the version of the minister when they meet the cleaners' union at

the press conference. It would be worth analysing how the marginalised are presented in the new-gen movies.

### **Blurring of the Margin as the Threat to the Order**

The new-gen Malayalam movies use the marginalised groups (Dalits, Muslims and transgenders) to create an impression of reality and to remind others of their plight (R, 2019, p. 221). The marginalised are brought to the centre and they are presented as individuals who struggle to survive not as victims. But the representation itself is problematic. Crossing the boundary is presented as a warning to those who want to be. Also, the act of interacting with those who are in power, even if one is part of the same system alienates the marginalised. The marginalised are not given a platform to present themselves and tell his/her story. Maniyan is denied a chance to prove his innocence and to explain his version of the story.

*Jana Gana Mana*, on the other hand, gives the impression that the film is representing the voiceless. The court scenes in which Aravind Swaminathan argues for human rights connects a series of events that happened in the recent past which received the media's attention. Though the case revolves around the murder of Saba Mariam a faculty who stood for students, the plot brings in a series of issues that unmask and question the progressive as well as the impartial approach of the court towards those who are from the margins. The privileges of the upper class unveil themselves while the film tries to prove that it is trying to ensure that the voiceless are heard in the court and given justice. The encounter in which the accused are killed is similar to the situation in which Maniyan finds himself helpless. The police wanted to frame the marginalised and ensure that they are not heard, thus they are not presented as victims but as offenders.

The movie, *Jana Gana Mana*, uses the marginalised to prove how they have been fabricated for the benefits of the state- represented by the police and the minister. The court itself takes it for granted that the accused who have been killed in a police encounter as the culprits for their appearance. Though Aravind unveils the hypocrisy, the film fails to cover its flaw in presenting Saba Mariam as a socially committed individual. This scene suggests that Vidya's character acts like a catalyst in the main plot. The injustice faced by Vidya and various other students from the marginalised communities are not addressed. They were mentioned to prove

how inclusive certain individuals are. That is why Vidya is heard only after her death. Saba Mariam meets Anpumani, Vidya's father at the reception begging for something. Anpumani meets Saba Mariam later begging for help to get his daughter Vidya's body. The data reveals there were many suicides and Vidya's was counted as one of them. When Anpumani meets Saba, she was busy preparing for the celebrations. The death of a student values only in the court as there were no protests or gathering in contrast to the death of Saba. Vidya is outside the realm of the sheer element of privilege that Saba has. In representation the film refers back to a series of incidents that received media attention in the recent past- the lynching of Madhu in Kerala ("Kerala Lynching Case", 2018), the police encounter that killed four accused of raping and killing a veterinarian in Hyderabad (Apparasu, 2022), and the institutional murder of Rohith Vemula in the University of Hyderabad (Shankar, 2016). Instead of reading these examples of injustice the film uses replica of these incidents to converge the main plot as a fight between two individuals. Instead of pointing at the society to think about these discriminations the film easily finds a victim- the minister as the individual responsible for these thus washes of the blood from the hands of the society.

### **Margins to the Structures**

The marginalised is branded as troublemakers or one who can be easily manipulated. They work for those who are in power. Though the films attempt to present themselves as inclusive by bringing the marginalised from the margins to the mainstream. But these characters are kept within different restricted frames/structures that reveal and act as a virtual margin that restricts their mobility. Maniyan is framed as a murderer- though Praveen and Sunitha try to defend the attempt to frame Maniyan as a murderer they fail miserably before the structures. The four victims of the police encounter are framed as individuals with a criminal background and their physical appearance itself is needed for the court to identify them as the perpetrator of violence. Maniyan's recorded confession/statement is deleted by the police who framed him as the cause of the accident. In a similar fashion, Laxman is framed for attacking the minister while the former was found misbehaving with the minister's wife. The press conference is a declaration of the rights of the marginalised. Laxman is entering the house from the septic tank, and the old woman who interferes while everyone is beating Laxman demands to take him

downstairs and closes the door. His presence itself is a disturbance to them. What makes the representation of the marginalised different in these moves is the way they have been placed. Their presence itself is unwanted- Laxman was not supposed to question the minister for using the toilet when he was cleaning the tank, Vidya does not belong to the academic space, and Maniyan does not have an agency to communicate with the world and prove his innocence.

Here, these films become fine examples of the ideological state apparatus. Althusser defines the Repressive State Apparatus as that which works using violence and the Ideological State Apparatus as the one that functions by ideology (Althusser, 1971, p. 145). In the context of these films, they are reminding the existence of the margins through the ideologies of the feudal structures. The individuals remain in the form of numbers, as Vidya was counted as one of the research scholars who committed suicide in the recent past not as a victim of the brutal system.

These movies appear to be inclusive in nature- bringing into the limelight certain issues the marginalised face and discussing them as in *Jana Gana Mana* or presenting their helplessness creating sympathy in the spectator as in *Nayattu* or *Pra. Thoo. Mu*. The Ideological State Apparatus works in a way that creates an impression that the Repressive State Apparatus is responsible for the plight of these individuals. The state 'identifies' the marginalised as culprits based on their appearance. If we analyse the screen presence of Maniyan, most of the time he is outside of his office space. When he is inside the police station, it was when the police decide to take him into custody. Laxman's representation is not different from the two. The minister is demanding him to forget the incident and clean the house before leaving. He is framed as an intruder who misbehaved with the minister's wife, to read it in another way, he is a threat to the system.

Althusser discusses the coexistence of both Ideological State Apparatus and Repressive State Apparatus (Althusser, 1971, p. 145). These films use them both to create a sense of realisation of the dangers that happen in crossing the margins. Instead of showing the system as inclusive, these films present them as an extension of the social reality which is a superstructure that has been supported by its feudal ideologies.



## Conclusion

We have seen how the feudal structures and ideologies work in new-gen Malayalam movies in a modern way. The hero in the new-gen Malayalam movies is no more a proponent of the modern ideologies, to put it in another way, the hero does not act as a representative of the feudal system, instead, the modern heroes act as passive proponents of the feudal ideology. Society becomes responsible for maintaining the social orders following the systems of class, caste and feudal laws. The other elements of the system work together to ensure the stability of the system which is nothing but the maintenance of the feudal order. The protagonists Maniyan, Laxman and Vidya go through a very bad situation because they leave their 'comfort zones'-spaces defined by the system for them. When Maniyan decides to safeguard Sunitha and her family as a representative of the system as well as one of her colleagues, the very attempt to ensure the safety and individual rights of a Dalit woman is presented as a dangerous thing to be done. The price he had to pay for that was his life. This can be read as a warning to those who try to use the possibilities of the law to help the Dalit woman who comes from the margin. Even the same law that was supposed to help Maniyan and Sunitha becomes helpless before the system which is represented by the politician, political force and police force. Praveen becomes a witness to these for supporting Maniyan in his act of kindness. Here Maniyan's duty is never read as it is as the police department tries to frame Maniyan by reading the fight between Biju and Maniyan as a fight between two individuals by neglecting the fact that Maniyan was speaking for Sunitha based on her complaint. The right of Sunitha and Maniyan are curtailed and the system ensures that those who are in the margin are either restricted or eliminated. Similarly, Laxman's entry into the house is presented as a forbidden act. He goes furthermore, climbs the stairs and demands to treat him as a human being. He too was framed and ensured that his narrative is not heard anymore and is shadowed in the narrative of the minister. He is beaten and humiliated as a punishment for breaking the boundaries. He gets justice only through his representation and this is done in the form of not engaging in their work. This very situation is critical as every other labourer has to sacrifice his income as a means to get a chance to raise their voice and make them heard. Vidya's teacher does mention her 'place' where she belongs to. The system, instead of using a hero as a representative of the feudal system, focuses on the

victim who challenges the system. The new-gen Malayalam movies focus on the victim creating a sense of sympathy as well as fear. The fear acts as a means to the ideological state apparatus. The victims are neither heard nor appeared before society to tell their stories of discrimination they had to face. They live in documents and the narratives of other people. A scholar like Vidya committed suicide, but the entire campus is busy celebrating the annual day. In contrast to this, the entire student community demands justice for Saba. The way identities and individual rights work differently for different individuals based on their relative positioning near the margins is made visible in *Jana Gana mana*. The new-gen Malayalam movies use narratives, situations and characters to suggest the plight of those who challenge the feudal structures by crossing the boundary. Instead of a hero 'fixing' the social order, the entire system works on its own. The new-gen movies have their formulas of converting the films into fine examples of ideological state apparatus in a society that is feudal in nature. The feudal forces ensure their existence by undergoing a mutation in the form of new ways of representing things and individuals as inescapable of the boundaries and rules of the feudal system.

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