

Moving towards Global Culture; Representations and Outcomes in the Contemporary Malayalam Film

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Abstract

The dawn of modern mass communication and wide tourism promoted by the Globalisation brought dramatic changes to nations and cultures which had previously seen little change for centuries. Each scientific or social innovation has brought unforeseen and unintended consequences in everyday life and therefore it is reflected in the multiple aspects of cinema like theme, setting, characters and language. Identified by its fresh and unusual themes, urban-oriented plots, technically advanced production and the use social networking sites for online marketing, the Malayalam film industry experiences a daring new wave that somehow challenges the established cultural order. Primarily referring to a film, 'Diamond Necklace' (2012) and 'Bangalore days' (2014), this paper attempts to analyse the impact of globalization that resulted in 'cultural hybridisation' in the Malayalam Films.

KEYWORD: Globalisation, Mollywood Industry, Urban-oriented, Anglophonic.

In the beginning the world was one, devoid of boundaries and barriers. Gradually it was divided on basis of geography, colour, religion, culture etc. Now again, because of the very phenomenon, globalization, the constructed boundaries and barriers are breaking down. The world gets connected across and shrinks. "Globalization as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole", remarks Roland Robertson(8). This leads to the diffusion of cultural and social values resulting in a phenomenon called "cultural hybridisation"(Trigo,6)

Hybridity expresses a state of "inbetweenness," as in a person who stands between two cultures(Habib,166). Cultures have always influenced each other mainly through travel, trade, and in the past- through conquest. As populations today travel and settle around the globe, however, the rate of cultural diffusion is increasing spectacularly. When the dominating global culture influences a region, its reflection is prevalent in the local art forms especially in the films, a medium that transmits culture electronically.

Indian cinema industry unlike any other is enriched with its sub-variants among which 'Mollywood' is exceptional in its form and approach. While most of the Indian film industries still hang on to the old themes and approaches, the Malayalam cinema has gone further to attain a world class level. Identified by its fresh and unusual themes, urban-oriented plots, technically advanced production and the use social networking sites for online marketing, the Malayalam film industry experiences a daring new wave that somehow challenges the established cultural order.

It's a popular saying that even if we go to the moon, there will be a Malayali with his Tea shop to welcome us. The story encapsulates our penchant for travelling to far-flung places for a living. Once upon a time the Malayalam films used to tell the stories lingering around a village/ town in Kerala and its natives. But now the setting

has changed hugely. The spotlight is on Malayalies in diaspora exploring how they fit into the foreign society and how they find it hard to fit in back to Kerala society. The issues concerning the global Malayalies become a subject matter to the films like *Escape from Uganda*, *English*, *Pravaasi*, *Akkasha Gopuram*, *Diamond Necklace*, *Bangalore Days* etc. This shift in attention towards the world wide Malayalies, not just the Gulf Diaspora, is a new step in the history of the Malayalam films. Such films bears the mark of the cultural diffusion and changing moral values. At many instances, consciously or unconsciously it shows inclination towards the global culture. The characters and plots that appear on the silver screen are either representations or outcomes of a hybrid culture. Perhaps, what happens here is an “appropriation of global modernity” (Connell,80). Primarily referring to a film, ‘*Diamond Necklace*’ (2012) and ‘*Bangalore days*’(2014), this paper attempts to analyse the impact of ‘cultural hybridisation’ in the Malayalam Films.

Set in Dubai- ‘*maya nagaram*’ (the city of illusion) *Diamond Necklace*, directed by Lal Jose, provides a glimpse for the majority of Malayali audience of the life in a altogether different part of the world. It tells the story of an extravagant doctor, Dr Arun (Fahad Fazil) and how his life changes as three women cross his life. The international setting of the movie offers new possibilities for characterization and plots. Arun has been for long, living beyond his means, enthralled by the sights and scenes that the magical city has on offer. He comes from a middle class family, gets caught in the whirl wind of money and women. He lives in Burj Khalifa, at the top of the world-symbolical of his stature like how the Shakesperian heroes are at the beginning of the Tragedies.

Consumerism is a complex issue that is tied in with globalization. With its encouragement of consumption and creation of artificial needs, it makes one blind. The movie begins with a song that encapsulates the unrestrained life style of Arun representing the spoilt Indian youth in the global realm. He is far away from his home and is not accountable to anyone. It is noteworthy that not even his senior doctor, a sister like character, Savithri Akka (Rohini), supports him at the beginning.

In *Globalization: Capitalism and its Alternatives*, Sklair states that the purpose of “global capitalism is to persuade people to consume not simply to satisfy biological needs, but in response to artificially created desires in order to perpetuate the accumulation of capital for private profit, in other words to ensure that the global capitalist system goes on forever” (62). To consume more, one needs to have more money where credit cards-which is still a new concept to the majority of Indians-come to rescue. Arun is shown to have gone beyond the limits of credit card usage. A slang phrase for credit cards is plastic money, plastic refers to the plastic construction of credit cards, as opposed to paper and metal currency. Perhaps, it also intends to mean the detrimental effect of using a “plastic“ product. Also it is an erroneous reference to credit cards as a form of money, which they are not. Although credit cards do facilitate transactions, they are a ‘liability’ rather than an ‘asset’. The movie tracks the downfall of Arun as his ‘liability’ expands and strangles him ruthlessly.

With the migration to Dubai, his value system also changes. Dubai is a happening place where the worlds meet and consequently a culture has been developed which is consumed by the people who come to live there. Dr. Arun also gets adapted into that frame of culture. He becomes a global citizen. While completely lost in the illusive world, Arun intentionally avoids contact with anything that represents reality

including home. He is not bothered to collect what his mother sends from home with his friend (Sreenivasan) who is from his village.

Arun wakes up from his dream only when he gets a call from his mother from her sick bed. The reality calls him back forcibly then. He flies to home after three years. With the change in the back drop, we see drastic changes in Arun too. He goes to bathe in the pond with his childhood friend-Sharath(Kailash) and exclaims how lucky Sharath is that he can enjoy bathing in chlorine-less water, Government job etc. This shift in his attitude is sudden and unbelievable. And later part of the movie proves that he still bears the stamp of opportunism.

While at home, the presence of his mother weakens Arun's aspirations. Once he comes back to Kerala, to his own house, he becomes powerless. It's the money that makes him a king and when it fades away, we find him in a helpless state. His unwillingness is not taken into consideration as others decide upon his own marriage. It is not shown that he meets the girl until on the wedding day, neither it is told that he demands it. The pressure from his mother and his current financial crisis force him to marry Rajasree(Anusree).

The theme of 'duplication' is another aspect of the movie. To replace the diamond necklace that Arun steals from Maya(Samvritha) he approaches the local market dealers. Due to the greater number of agencies involved at an international level, it is easy for products to be copied and duplicated. They use advance technologies which leaves no trace of doubt between the original and the duplicate. The necklace in the movie complicates the relationship between Maya and Arun. For grabbing the necklace he exploits their relationship and proves to be an opportunist.

The film Diamond Necklace weaves the tale of a man who is a victim of terrors hidden in global modernity. Yet after watching the whole movie, a doubt arises if the film itself gets trapped in the vicious network of consumerism. Many of the scenes market certain brand products in the guise of narrating the story. Even title of the film joins the hidden agenda. Like most of the non-resident Malayalees, Arun embrace a hybrid culture. He is not a product of it, but a prey.

While the movie Diamond Necklace as a whole reflects global modernity and its issues, the movie Bangalore days has an altogether different story to tell. It innocently mirrors the ripples of cultural transformation at various levels. Unlike Diamond Necklace in which Arun occupies the centrality, Bangalore Days distributes equal prominence to multiple characters.

The writer-director Anjali Menon in her debut film Manjadikkuru, portrayed the theme of homecoming while interestingly, in Bangalore Days, she narrates the tale of a few youngsters in Bangalore who go away from home. Arjun (Dulquer Salmaan), Kuttan (Nivin Pauly) and Divya (Nazriya Nazim) are cousins, who arrive at Bangalore for different reasons. Kuttan is a software Engineer, Divya a newly married girl and Aju a "new generation" gypsy. Out of the three, Aju is exceptional and therefore his character invites attention with regard to cultural context.

Like in Diamond Necklace, the main setting of the movie, Bangalore gives liberty for the presentation of the plots in the story. Bangalore is the place where the Malayali youth is found today. It is a place where every Malayali wants to go—"anganea choodhichal aethu Malayaliya veendennu parayuka?"- regarding the job-posting of

Kuttan at Bangalore) . This indicates the trend of urban migration, claiming the reasons such as attractive income, educational and medical facilities, better basic amenities, high wages acted as pull factors. More than the social factors, it is assumed that Bangalore is attractive for its cosmopolitan-hybrid culture. But interestingly, once out of the state, Kuttan realises- vellavum, mannum, pennum nammude nattilea thanne aanu nallathu”. But ironically, at the end he marries a foreigner who comes to India in search of culture, which is another paradoxical phenomenon- the global cultural exploration.

A rendezvous for worldwide Malayalees; that has become the mushrooming matrimonial sites today. Widespread influence of such sites, replacing the so called-brokers- match makers is highlighted in the movie. These sites offer the pleasing details of the prospective bride and groom and they go forward with it. On the first night, Das’ indifference to their hasty marriage is made clear as he attends a video call with his business partners in USA. This is an instance when the distance between countries lessens simultaneously that between husband and wife increases as Appadurai says, “globalization has shrunk the distance between elites, shifted key relations between producers and consumers, broken many links between labor and family life, obscured the lines between temporary locales and imaginary national attachments” (Appaduari,9).

The character played by Kalpana is remarkable. She represents the generation of house wives who get trapped in the four walls of the patriarchal system suppressing their ambition to fly high. When she gets a chance to come out of her hamlet, she grabs it and embraces drastic change. Even though she spends most of her time at the flat, she makes friends and attempts to become a ‘society lady’. Being a house wife, her transformation is surprising that she even learns the foreign language. This signifies the transformative power of the mass media. She gets exposure to the current world through the TV Channels. Her search for civilization(“parishkaaram” as Kuttan says) takes her to USA. Emptying the cultural baggage here, she starts for new pastures. Rajasree’s(Arun’s wife in Diamond Necklace) endeavors to conform to the new world can be paralleled at this instance. The picturisation of both the characters are humorous and therefore it is vital. Kuttan’s mother’s intimidating attitude towards her unsophisticated husband and her own makeover can be critically analysed in the light of Homi Baba’s theory of Mimicry. A clash between what she considers as superior and what appears to her as inferior makes her to adopt the opportunistic method of copying the dominant culture. This suppresses her own cultural identity and leaves her to a state of hybridity. “The discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence” (Babha,86) and ambivalence provides scope for humour. When she is about to fly to USA, she enquires about the food at the flight- ivaru choorum kuuttanumokke tharumo?...Mulagasyamo?, which naively betrays her inner anxiety and hesitation to leave her“home”.

Aju’s character type is new to Malayali audience. He is a product of the hybrid culture and therefore he does not fit into any stereotypes. He is described by Kuttan as “ee pratheekshyayude pollaappil ninnokke pande rakshapettavan...oru new generation naadodi”. He has no home , for that reason world is his home. He questions everything that he finds outmoded. Regarding the formality of changing the second name of Divya after her marriage, he thinks, it is like transferring the ownership of vehicles.(athantha transfer of ownershipoo, peru maattan..aanungalu mattunnillalo?).

Free from the strings of the patriarchal obligations, he implicitly criticizes treating women as commodity. His exposure to the changing world makes him an iconoclast.

As the world is getting smaller, globalization is bringing about trade of cultures and ideologies; there had been a significant change in the attitude towards marriage in modern India. Due to the presence of a workaholic environment in common households of urban India, marital incompatibility is the apparent outcome of such a situation. Hardly spouses get the time to share their thoughts and affections with each other and a growing dissatisfaction instigates the sacred marriage to turn into a grim divorce. Arjun is a victim of this social disaster. He is abandoned by his divorced parents. He elopes from his school and learns to live on his own.

Later in the movie, Das enquires Arjun about his parents and it discomforts Arjun. Then he opines that marriage is a “legal punishment”, either a lifelong sentence or payment of heavy fine. In his case he has to pay the fine. Due to globalization and the IT boom, the Indian social life has become more faster. In order to stand out in one’s own field of occupation, hardly any interest grows in the minds of individuals to ponder and judge other’s personal matters like divorce. Hence, unlike earlier days, the divorced couple is saved from the critical glare of the society. But in most of the cases children suffer heavily. When Aju is asked about his parents and home town, he does not have an answer to offer. He replies “ividokke thannea”, meaning-around here . He is homeless yet he finds it home where ever he goes. Here, for him the world becomes a single place that serves as a frame of reference as Roland Robertson argues which makes him a “new generation naadodi” .

There are mainly two approaches to study changing culture in the context of globalization. The first and widely accepted approach looks at the detrimental effects-“massive acculturation, worldwide homogenization, and ethnic annihilation” (Trigo,⁶) of cultural globalization. With the second approach one focuses on the globalization’s positive consequences: For this globalization is defined as “a process in which goods and people, ideas and behaviors, technology and information are freely exchanged and disseminated between different cultures worldwide.”(Trigo) This movie employs both the approach.

As the movie travels through the labyrinth of cultural transformation, Serah’s (Parvathy) character gives a new dimension to the movie. Serah the influential radio jockey is a paraplegic. But she has come out of her limitations and made a mark of her own. She enlivens the campaign for the use of the term ‘differently-abled’ instead of disabled . When Arjun realizes her inability, it upsets him but his feelings for her gets deep. The movie doesn’t ask for sympathy towards Serah but it projects her as a strong woman who lives a normal life. Serah’s mother talks about her with pride and she is even ready to migrate to Australia for providing the best facilities to her daughter. As a response to the world wide wakefulness, much changes have been happening in the Indian society with respect to the approach to the differently-abled. Their social acceptance will do much to pave the way for such persons to interact in society with great confidence to overcome their weakness and this message has successfully conveyed in the movie. It skillfully depicts the changing attitudes and stigmas as well as providing a facility to train the differently-abled so that they may achieve personal independence.

Both the movies share a few facets of the modern cultural revolution. They are upper class oriented, urban movies. For the reference sake, the location changes to Kerala for a few minutes. The change in the backdrop enables the easy appropriation of global modernity. The use of English language is also another pivotal aspect of globalization. The characters speak English more frequently and it is hardly understood by an average Malayali. With the language used in many of the recent movies being a mix of English and Malayalam, the titles are also picked up from the English vocabulary. This trend has become more pronounced in the last couple of years. This perhaps indicates the process of anglicisation of Malayalam movies. The question of the authenticity of translation in conveying the original ideas is valid here. The appropriation of English language to express the experience of the Indian society can be challenged at this instance. But when the subject- the society itself changes, the medium also has to undergo change accordingly.

The dawn of modern mass communication and wide tourism brought dramatic changes to nations and cultures which had previously seen little change for centuries. Each scientific or social innovation has brought unforeseen and unintended consequences in everyday life and therefore it is reflected in the multiple aspects of cinema like theme, setting, characters and language. Mario Vargas Llosa believes that “all countries of the earth experience this process(cultural transformation), some more quickly than others, but it is not due to globalization. Rather, it is due to modernization, of which the former is effect, not cause”. This substantiates Tomlinson’s opinion- “globalization is really the globalization of modernity”. Modernity is dispersed through Globalisation. Globalisation has many things in its grip including the local culture. Therefore it’s natural to see the representations and outcomes of globalization within the films as a reciprocal interaction of it.

Primary Source

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