

Hierarchization of Urban Space and Stereotyping: A Study on the Representation of People and Places from the Urban Margins in Select Malayalam Films

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Abstract

In the neo-capitalist era cities are an amalgamation of varied spatial formations. Many cities exist within a city. In other words, cities are fragmented and hierarchized on the lines of ethnicity, religion, language, race, caste, and gender. Malayalam cinema in the 21st century has been predominantly urban-centric and Malayalam films especially the new wave Malayalam films have tried to represent the cultural transformations undergone by the Kerala society post neo-liberalization and the rapid urban sprawl that swept Kerala. However, these films have also stirred up controversies concerning the problematic stereotyped representation of Marginalized people hailing from squalid and poor regions of cities in Kerala. This study will analyze select films set in urban spaces of Kerala with violence and organized crime as the main theme and will try to understand the nuances and various dimensions of the representation of the people and places in the margins in films. This paper's objective is to delineate the fine line that demarcates the attempts to genuinely represent social issues with the judgemental, biased, stereotypical representations.

Keywords: *stereotype, hierarchization, urban space, everyday life, spatial justice*

Introduction

In the neo-capitalist era cities are an amalgamation of varied spatial formations. Many cities exist within a city. In other words, cities are fragmented and hierarchized on the lines of ethnicity, religion, language, race, caste, and gender. The spread of neoliberalism globally has exacerbated the fragmented and hierarchized nature of cities around the world. Henri Lefebvre has stressed the economic significance of urban space in the perpetuation of capitalism. According to him, each mode of production produces its own space, and the space produced under capitalism is reflective of the characteristics of the capitalist system (Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 53). David Harvey discusses specifically the impacts of the neoliberal form of capitalism to highlight the social inequality that has arisen as a result of neoliberal policies at an economic and political level (Harvey, "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction" 151–58). He argues that economically, neoliberalism especially in the global south has widened the gap between the haves and have-nots and politically it has weakened the militant strength of the working class. In addition to the widespread breeding of social inequalities

neoliberal capitalism also has a spatial dimension. In the words of Harvey, the result of economic inequality "is that we now have divided cities; gated communities here, impoverished communities there. The city is being dissolved into micro-states of rich and poor" (Harvey, "Neoliberalism and the City" 12). The hierarchic organization of urban space into gated communities of the elites and the ghettos of the poor and the marginalized has also fermented the thriving of organized crime and violence. Neoliberalism gave paramount importance to entrepreneurial freedom and the state's role was to promote the smooth flow of capital and to create an ambiance congenial for the accumulation of surplus capital (Harvey, "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction" 145). The state's complete surrendering of the economy to the private sector had many repercussions. The privatization of profit triggered a counter-response from society in the form of crime. Harvey calls the increasing phenomenon of crime a "privatization of redistribution of wealth". Organized crime and violence in the ghettos can be read as a reaction from society against the flawed and unjust socio-economic and spatial development (Harvey, "Neoliberalism and the

City” 12). In cities across the globe, the flawed spatial organization of cities by the state can be held accountable for the proliferation of organized crime mafias in urban underbellies.

Crime and Urban Space

Even though many theories and studies correlate crime rates and urban space, there are only a few empirical studies to support these theories. However, establishing a positive relationship between crime and underprivileged urban spaces is out of the scope of this study. Instead, by studying select Malayalam films with organized crime and violence as the leitmotif, this study analyzes how certain films represent people from disadvantageous spaces as criminals while there are also films that while exploring the theme of crime refrain from falling into the trap of producing unnuanced representations of people from margins as hardcore criminals. The argument put forward by this paper is that films that have made an effort to explore the theme of spatial justice and also represent the everyday lives of the inhabitants of the disadvantageous spaces have succeeded in portraying marginalized lives in a neutral or positive light while the films that are silent on the issues of spatial justice and everyday life have ended up producing representations that are stereotypical, biased, unnuanced and onesided.

Spatial Justice and Everyday Life

For this study, it is important to define what is spatial justice. Social justice has a spatial dimension and that dimension is crucial for actualizing social justice. Edward Soja defines spatial justice in broad terms as “an intentional and focused emphasis on the spatial or geographical aspects of justice and injustice. As a starting point, this involves the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them (Soja). The social spaces of human societies are not pre-existing voids, but they are actively produced by human beings through their intellectual and physical labor (Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 26). But under late capitalism, the underprivileged are often robbed of their right to possess, use, and appropriate space. The issue of spatial injustice in the neoliberal era has found a voice in many 21st-century Malayalam films. This study will

specifically look at the films *Kammatipadam*, *Parava*, *Malik*, and *RDX* to find out how the issue of spatial justice is dealt with in these films and how that has affected the stereotypical tropes about people from the margins.

With the advent of neoliberalism, capitalism became more dependent on consumption rather than production in the realization of value. Consumption takes place in space and consequently, space achieved importance in the thriving of capitalism. This development also made space a site of resistance against capitalism. In Harvey's words “The main center of discontent within the capitalist dynamic is increasingly shifting to struggles over the realization of value - over the politics of daily life in the city” (Harvey, “Neoliberalism Is a Political Project” 10). Even though urban everyday life in commonsensical understanding appears mundane and irrelevant, it has huge significance in the world order when analyzed critically. Everyday life is regulated and organized through space. Under capitalism, separate spaces are assigned for the three different aspects of everyday life namely; work, leisure, and private life. Capitalist space is thus characterized by the functions rigidly assigned to everyday activities (Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 38). Lefebvre says that capitalism imposes an organized passivity on the everyday lives of the people and this passivity weighs more heavily on socially weak communities (Lefebvre, *The Everyday and Everydayness* on JSTOR 10). The everyday life of the people living in disadvantageous spaces is more treacherous in comparison to their elite counterparts. But despite the tyrannical imposition of passivity from above, everyday urban experience is also a site of resistance. Many Malayalam films have represented the subversive potential of urban everyday life and spatial practices. The inclusion of spatial practices and the everyday life of the inhabitants of a particular urban space in narratives can contribute immensely to making an authentic representation of the urban experience of that space. This study will pay close attention to the representation of everyday life in select Malayalam cinema.

Malayalam Cinema and Territorial Stigma

Kerala is one of the most rapidly urbanizing regions in the Indian subcontinent. This change in Kerala is also reflected in cultural texts like cinema. Malayalam cinema in the 21st

century has been predominantly urban-centric and Malayalam films especially the new wave Malayalam films have tried to represent the cultural transformations undergone by the Kerala society post neo-liberalization and after the rapid urban sprawl that swept Kerala. However, these films have also stirred up controversies concerning the problematic stereotyped representations of marginalized people hailing from squalid and poor regions of cities in Kerala. The literal meaning of the word stereotype according to the Cambridge dictionary is “a set idea that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong”. The existing stereotype about men from ghetto-like spaces in cities is that they are inherently violent, most likely criminals, weirdly and shabbily dressed, alcoholics, and drug addicts. There are film narratives that reinforce these stereotypical ideas through distorted and one-sided representations and there are also films that tell stories of people from the margins without resorting to stereotypical tropes. What the select films for this study namely *Kammattipadam*, *Parava*, *Malik*, and *RDX* have in common is that all films are set in underprivileged regions in the cities of Kerala. Except for *Malik*, all the other films are set in Ernakulam, the largest city in Kerala while the locale of *Malik* is a fictional coastal region on the outskirts of Thiruvananthapuram city. Apart from the locale, these films also have the common theme of violence and crime of varying nature. These particular films are selected as representative of stereotypical and non-stereotypical film representations. *Kammattipadam* and *Parava* are films that are neutral representations while *RDX* is a typical film that stereotypes slum dwellers. On the other hand, there are films such as *Malik* that are ambiguously placed in a grey zone as their content is a mixture of positive elements as well as stereotypical elements.

Kammattipadam is a Malayalam that sheds light on the hierarchized nature of Ernakulam city by portraying the disturbing disparity between different spaces that exist within a city. It tells the story of a group of people belonging to a Dalit community who have lost their cultural and emotional roots in the process of rapid urbanization that swept Ernakulam post-neoliberalization. In capitalist cities, the land also became a commodity like human labor. The commodification of land by the capitalist forces to

facilitate the expansion of urban space and to meet the needs of the growing population marginalized the lower class, lower caste people who inhabited the agricultural lands in the margins of the city. The right to possess land is the primary requisite of spatial justice. A place can be lived, used, appropriated, and customized only if people have the right to possess that place. However neoliberal capitalism uses a tactic called ‘accumulation by dispossession’ where marginalized people are evicted and displaced from their land for commercial purposes ultimately intended for the accumulation of surplus capital. The song ‘para para’ at the beginning of the film ends with an aerial shot of a vast expanse of lush green paddy fields. But as the film progresses this same space is represented as gradually shrinking in size and getting divided into small plots of land. Finally, the house of the character Ganga is shown as isolated into a ghetto-like space stifled by narrow gullies and dull grey concrete walls.

Frederic Engels commenting on the housing problems of 19th-century capitalism said that the squalid, overcrowded slums in the cities are never abolished but are merely shifted to another location. Slums situated in the central regions are cleared citing reasons such as beautification and better sanitation, but these cleared slums are to appear again in periphery areas of the cities later (Engels 74–77). Engels wrote about this phenomenon in 1872, but unfortunately, even in the 21st century, the process elucidated by Engels is happening in many third-world countries like India in the name of slum clearance and development. The politics of land is a major theme in *Kammattipadam*. The spatial representation of the film depicts the gradual encroachment of the urban center towards the regions that were once on the margins. However, only the land on the margins is assimilated into the urban center while its inhabitants are displaced elsewhere. The depiction of the politics of land in *Kammattipadam* corroborates the concepts of Engels and Harvey. The visual narrative of *Kammattipadam* also contextualizes the themes of crime and violence through proper character development and by depicting the socio-economic and political reasons for the proliferation of organized crime. Tremendous changes in the topography of their living space had a twofold result in the lives of the characters like Balan and Ganga. Primarily they were

alienated from their traditional life and culture dependent on agriculture. Secondly, this alienation drove them to a path of crime and violence for survival. (Kammattipadam). In the climax of Kammattipadam, Krishnan coming to avenge the death of his friend Ganga tells the villain Surendran that they (people from disadvantageous spaces) are like street dogs because they will stick together in the face of any adversities. The words of Krishnan are reflective of the fierce loyalty that people in the gangs from ghettos have for each other. Lefebvre's proposition that "class struggle is inscribed in space" implies that the disparity in material wealth between classes is also reflected in space (Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 55). That is the upper class elites have an abundance of space while the lower classes face scarcity of space. This explains the congested, overcrowded, squalid nature of the neighborhoods inhabited by the working class, lower castes, religious minorities, and racial minorities. The scarcity of space has two reactions on the community. The first reaction is the intense competition for the limited resources. The other reaction is the development of a closely knit intimate relationship between the people sharing the limited space. It is a positive aspect of urban living that most of the popular narratives overlook. However, the film *Parava* (2017) directed by Soubin Shahir highlights the strong brotherhood and camaraderie that exist within the urban youth from less privileged neighborhoods. *Parava* is set in Mattancherry and it tells the story of the members of a local cricket club named Six Four Mattancherry. The lives of the members of the club are thrown upside down by an incident in which their dear friend Imran gets killed in a skirmish with a local drug addict gang. *Parava* differs from stereotypical films by depicting a gang of young friends as victims of violence. In most stereotyped films the people from the margins are the perpetrators of violence and crime but *Parava* highlights that crime and violence are only one aspect of the culturally rich urban quarters and people living there could also be on the receiving end of violence. By faithfully representing the everyday life aspects of the characters such as people going to work, playing cricket, romantic relationships, trivial conversations, pranks, and playful jokes the director has not only given individuality to the characters but also evaded the possibility of producing a

stereotype representation. Modern Everyday life is characterized by monotonous linear repetition (Lefebvre, *The Everyday and Everydayness* on JSTOR 10). This monotony could be disrupted through creative activities and festivals. *Parava* has depicted such creative spatial practices that break the oppressive linear repetition of everyday life like kite flying and pigeon flying. These are practices that are inextricably rooted in the particular urban region of Mattancherry. By representing the practice of these activities in the terraces of the closely packed buildings and busy narrow streets the director has used the activities as a marker of the urban subculture existing in Mattancherry. These activities are examples of people appropriating their lived space according to their heart's desire. This right for the appropriation of space is an indispensable aspect of spatial justice. Even though drugs, crime, and violence are present throughout the narrative *Parava* is a positive representation of urban community living. This is because of the sensitive depiction of everyday life, and spatial and cultural practices of the characters (*Parava*).

Malik (2021) directed by Mahesh Narayanan is set in a coastal region consisting of two fictional villages Ramadapally and Edavathura inhabited by religious minority communities. The film overtly discusses issues related to spatial justice such as the eviction of people from their land for developmental activities (proposed harbor project), loss of traditional means of living (fishing), and the right to appropriation of space. The character development in the film is also deep and convincing as the narrative is clear on the journey of the main characters Sulaiman Ali and David toward the world of organized crime. The poor socio-economic situation pushed them towards crime. The narrative depicts Sulaiman Ali as the guardian of the local population and he achieves his popularity by standing up against the state and capitalist forces to safeguard the interests of the local people. He becomes a popular leader who fights for spatial justice by opposing the eviction of people from their land even though his activities are illegal and violent. But despite the portrayal of spatial issues, a few sequences in the film are portrayed in a way that reinforces stereotypes against the Muslim community. The scene where the local Mosque authorities forbid Christians seeking asylum from a natural disaster citing their religion

and also the sequence which shows arms and ammunition getting smuggled from Middle Eastern countries to Kerala are contents that strongly reinforce the stereotypical view that Muslims are bigots and they are potential terrorists. Thus Malik despite being sensitive toward the issue of spatial justice fails to become a neutral or positive representation of the life of the people on the margins (Malik).

RDX (2023) is a film directed by Nahas Hidayath that glorifies the violence of Robert, Dony, and Xavier while vilifying an entire urban settlement named Maharaja Colony. The heroes are from noble respectable families and they live in big, spacious almost luxurious houses. On the other hand, the villain gang led by Paulson lives in a colony of shacks made of red bricks and unplastered walls. This contrasting representation of living spaces itself is a narrative tool for creating stereotypical binaries. Depiction of irregular, disordered, and congested built environments can contribute to the effect of territorial stigmatization in Cinema (Damodaran and Gorringer). It implies that the lives of the people hailing from disorderly spaces are also disordered. The trope of the knight in shining armor is used to justify the violence of the hero gang as they only resort to violence to safeguard the modesty of a woman or only when their family is attacked. However, the entire Maharaja colony, from children to old is depicted as engaging in violence for the fun of it. Unlike in the case of Parava, the characters from the margins in RDX lack individuality and the script gave little effort to their character development. They ended up being stock characters. Paulson's gang was depicted as purely evil men who do not even hesitate to brutally attack infants and women. The film is silent on how these characters develop into criminals and how they live their everyday lives. However, the film paid attention to justify the expertise of the Hero gang in physical combat by bringing in the Karate school angle. RDX is a quintessential stereotype film that vilifies the people dwelling in impoverished and disadvantageous spaces (RDX).

Conclusion

Among the select films, Kammatipadam is a neutral representation, Parava is a positive representation and

RDX is a blatantly stereotypical film. Malik is a problematic film that has both positive as well as negative elements. The treatment of the issues of spatial justice and everyday life is crucial in the effect produced by films dealing with crime and violence in urban regions. Films that are sensitive towards the issue of spatial justice, films that contextualize violence, and films that expertly depict the everyday experiences of the characters are less likely to reinforce stereotypes, while films silent on these issues have higher chances of becoming creations that promote territorial stigma.

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