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Remapping The Boundaries: Emergence Of Local Color Realism In Malayalam Cinema

Abstract:

The paper entitled Remapping the Boundaries: Emergence of Local Color Realism in Malayalam Cinema is an enquiry into the recent trend of local color seen in Malayalam films. Malayalam film industry has always been credited for its realistic plot and experimental trends. Recent films shows a shift from the mainstream high-culture to the local, ordinary popular culture. Common people, common man's language and customs becomes the main plot of the film. Local color realism appeared in the American literature after the Civil War years which focused on a particular region or locale and its specific particularities. This trend of local color realism is recently seen in the use of various districts of Kerala as a major element and thematic background to the story. The use of topography and dialects particular to the region contributes to the celebration of diversities.

Keyword: Local color, Realism, Films, Dialects, Topography.

Introduction

Standing in a world filled with media, it is impossible to neglect film as an ideology framer. Malayalam film industry has always been appreciated for its realistic plots and new trends. The second decade of the twentieth century witnessed a paradigm shift in the Malayalam cinema in terms of subject matter and style. It differed from the mainstream realism in its choice of local or rural instead of urban subjects and its interest in the customs of populations otherwise invisible in the literary landscape. The superstar mainstream films gave way to the more realistic, new experimental films. Common people, common man's language and life, popular music, regional slang, cultural and ethnic minorities began to appear in the Big screen. One such new generation trend in recent Malayalam cinema is the emergence of local color.

Local color or regional literature is fiction and poetry that focuses on a particular region or locale and its specific particularities. A Glossary of Literary Terms defines local color as "the detailed representation in prose fiction of the setting, dialect, customs, dress and ways of thinking and feeling

which are distinctive of a particular region". This mode of writing became dominant in the American literature after the Civil War. According to the Oxford Companion to American Literature,

In local color literature, one finds the dual influence of romanticism and realism since the author frequently looks away from ordinary life to distant lands, strange customs or exotic scenes, but retains through a minute detail a sense of fidelity and accuracy of description (465).

It includes nostalgia or sentimentality apart from realistic portrayals. In such films the setting, speech and social structure and customs of a particular locality become important conditions affecting the temperament of the characters and their ways of thinking, feeling and interacting.

Region as the Lead Actor.

The local color has marked its entry and has created a space for its own in the Malayalam cinema. As part of globalization attempts have been made to destroy diversities of cultures and to form a single mainstream elitist culture. It is here that Malayalam cinema breaks off and forms the new trend of local color realism. This trend is recently seen in the use of various districts of Kerala as a major element and thematic background to the story. Districts like Idduki, Kozhikode, Thrissur, Kochi etc have now evolved as main characters in Malayalam cinema. Mollywood is now remapping the territories and enriching its culture through the numerous portrayals of diversities of Kerala.

The effectiveness of regional writing depends to a large extent on the depiction of setting, the time and place in which a story's events occur. Two means of conveying setting that are commonly found in local color literature are the use of detailed descriptions of locations and the use of dialects-distinctive forms of language spoken in particular areas or by particular groups of people. According to the American critic Donna M. Campbell setting is an inseparable part in local color realism. "The emphasis is frequently on nature and the limitations it imposes... The setting is integral to the story and may sometimes become a character in itself". In films like *Ustad Hotel* the culture and cuisine of Calicut is accurately depicted. The film has many references to Malabari cuisine, including long sequences of cooking, of main characters enjoying cooking and of actors talking about food. In one of the most famous scenes from the film, the obsession with a good cup of *suleimani* (black tea) and the paraphernalia that surrounds it is shown. According to the director of the film, Anjali Menon, all these cultural factors are signifiers from within the location that propel the story ahead.

The city of Thrissur becomes a lead actor in the films *Punyalan Agarbathis*. *Punyalan Prvt Ltd*, *Pranchiyettan* and the *Saint and Georgettan's Pooram*. These films are rich with the topographical features particular to the city like the Thrissur Pooram, the character's love for elephants, *Thekkinkad Maidan* and the *Vadakkumnathan Temple*. The film *Georgettan's Pooram* directed by K. Biju focused on a bunch of friends in Thrissur. The town, including its accent and customs, was always on the background of this Dileep-starrer and was so important to the story line like the actors. The title of the

movie refers to the Thrissur Pooram which is an icon of the district itself. The movies mentioned above focuses not just the plot but the people, the place, their urban legends and life. It is their culture that these movies present.

The semi-urban metropolitan world of Kochi features in films like Chotta Mumbai, Da Thadiya, Annayum Rasoolum and Amar, Akbar, Anthony. These films have managed to create a true image of the culture and lifestyle of Kochi. The elements of metropolis like the malls, shopping centres with its high culture has been blended effectively with the low-brow common ordinary culture. One of the main sources of income for the natives of Kochi is tourism. The camera frequently pans over foreigners who have come to Kochi. The cinematic city of Kochi teems with underworld activities where mercy is a meaningless word. But films like Amar, Akbar, Anthony and Da Thadiya realistically shows the local color of Kochi.

A major protagonist in recent Malayalam films is the district Idukki. Films like Idukki Gold, Maheshinte Prathikaram and Kattapanayile Rithwik Roshan faithfully portrays the true life and nature of Idukki. Maheshinte Prathikaram and Kattapanayile Rithwik Roshan realistically depicts the socio-cultural aspects as well as the natural locales like Idukki Dam, Munnar and Vagamon. Kattapana, a major urban centre of the district is the main setting of both the films. The culture of the people residing in those areas as well as their slang of language is accurately portrayed in them. In films like Kattapanayile Rithwik Roshan and Idukki Gold even the title derives the name of the district which has actually worked as a promotional factor for the local color of the region.

A Song for each City.

In many of the local color films songs stating the topographical features of the locale are incorporated. These songs were able to convey an actual description of many unheard yet equally attractive places around the region. One such song occurs in the film Maheshinte Prathikaram where places like Kuyilmala, Kiliyar, Kuthirakkallangadi, Udayagiri, Painav, Kallar, Pambadumpara, Munnar, Udumbanchola and Kootar are verbally described along with the visuals of life and travails of the ordinary people of Idukki. It becomes a love song for Idukki. If the song “Malamele tirivech...” is a love song then “Poorangalude Pooram...” from the film Punyalan Agarbathis is an education for those who don't know Thrissur and a dose of nostalgia for those who call Thrissur home. Annayum Rasoolum revisited the Kochi song “Kayalinarike Kochi Kayalinarike...” which is an ode to Kochi. The film is set in Fort Kochi and therefore the song is a perfect fit. There is a poignant line that despite the throbbing heart, with all the furious trading in rubber, tea, spices, coir; the loading and unloading of ships, there is hunger and unemployment. The song captures the desperation of the native people. The ‘monchathi Koyikkode’ also features in the song “Kalbil then ozhukana Koyikkode...” from the movie Goodalochana where it describes not only the landscapes, like Mittayi theruv, Nadakkav , Meenchandha, Puthiyappa beach etc, but also the exquisite cuisine of the district as well as the cultural

aspects particular to the region. Thus each film becomes a minor narrative of the region that constructs locality in terms of a unified, coherent and collective visual experience.

Authenticity of the Dialect.

Language is considered as culture. If one loses his language it means he has lost his culture. So in local color literatures dialects are used in order to lend authenticity to the character and the tale. As Jennifer Sommer writes in her article *Writing in Dialect in Fiction: a History and Study*,

Local color celebrated the experiences of all the people with their varying accents. The writing attempted to be authentic and differentiate the regional differences as there was a new awareness of these differences. Diversity became a ...trait to celebrate. Local color was one way to join all the different accents, and writers felt that distinctions needed to be made. More and more, dialect was singled out as the central feature of realism.

The usage of the regional terms that are in use in these dialects enrich both the film and the language as films popularise these slang phrases. Thrissur and its rustic dialect is one of the most bankable elements in the box-office. As Times of India states "In recent times, Thrissur's most popular appearance was in Renjith's *Pranchiyettan and the Saint*. With an unbelievable finesse, Mammotty brought alive the character 'Ari Pranchy' and the Thrissur slang with utmost perfection". Other major films which showcase Thrissur slang are Georgettan's *Pooram*, Punyalan *Agarbathis*, Punyalan *Prvt Ltd* and *Jamnapyari*. 'Ishta', 'gedi', 'kiduvanu' etc are some of the most popular and oft used expressions in Thrissur slang which were featured in films.

The 'buddies' and 'teams' of Fort Kochi have made Kochi slang one of the much loved dialects of Kerala. As Indian Express states "Mixing English words with Malayalam prepositions, the chant-like lingo was probably popularised by the actor Sreenath Bhasi". Through films like *Da Thadiya* and *Honey Bee*, he popularised phrases like 'karayalle Bro' and 'Ente pavam Jango'. Other such popular slang words popularised by local color films are scene contra, poli, piece (chick), muttu (really good), namma Kochi etc. The 'Koyikkodan' slang also comes alive in films like *Ustad Hotel* and *Goodalochana*. Words like changayi (friend), kachara (problem), chopp (red) etc used in local color films made people get familiarise with Kozhikode slang. Idukki also becomes a great contributor with expressions like annanne (what's up), da uvve (hey man), achayi (father) etc. The film *Kattapanayile* Rithwik Roshan popularised the slang words chettayi (brother) and saho (friend) which became quiet viral. Through the use of dialects these films were able to capture not just the feel of the locale but also the cultural and ethnic nuances which will be lost if the mainstream Malayalam language is used. They portrayed the common folk sympathetically which removed Malayalam cinema from the clutches of the elitist upper class culture and also the pretentious valluvanadan language used by the previous generation of filmmakers.

According to American History through Literature,

Describing a locale, a time, and a set of characters removed from the concerns of the city dwellers who read high-culture journals, local color stories provided an imagined space containing the roots of the nation, a site of unchangeable values and authentic traditions.

The local color films serves both as a destroyer and preserver. Through them the mainstream, accepted, elitist culture is subverted and the soon vanishing customs, dialects and regional aspects are preserved. These films, instead of exploitation of and superiority towards their subjects, merely demonstrate the cultural differences. This movement can be seen as a part of the celebration of differences. Its function was not just to mourn or feel nostalgic about one's local culture but to promote a certain story of contemporary cultures and of the relations among them.

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