



Family, Sexuality and Class in the Popular Malayalam Cinema of 1980s

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Abstract: *The paper, in a cursory manner, explores the linkages between sexuality, law and class in the popular Malayalam cinema of the 1980s. It argues for the need to investigate plot-elements of the films of this period such as rape as pointing to an unresolved tension that the middle-class had with the wider society stemming from its own colonially instituted 'distinction'.*

Keywords: *Sexuality, Middle-class, Law, Popular cinema*

I. Introduction

The question of sexuality in Malayalam cinema in accordance with a potential for the description of general historical development has to be investigated along multiple lines: the formation of the nuclear family and its relationship to the broader society and institutions of law, unresolved questions relating to sexual behaviour and its place in the formation of modern family, a crisis of masculinity and its resolution apropos a burgeoning bourgeois economy, ways in which these problems intersect with notions of caste and gender etc. would be a few key points in such an enquiry. This paper is an attempt to look at a few popular Malayalam films from the 1980s to examine the mutual imbrication of rape or anxieties around sexual deviancy as a significant plot element and the sphere of law as one of the important sites for articulating the strained construction of the middle-class family contrasted to and threatened by the many destabilizing intrusions made by various forms of “illegality”. The question of ‘sexual indiscipline’ and the many vicissitudes it takes is a key question

that binds these filmic texts. The middle-class is here signalled more as an aspirational category and an identificatory point for the viewer and was constructed as a contrast to the forms of illegality mentioned above. The space of the household in these films is arranged in terms of new modes of visibility where new objects such as the television, video cassette player, or the motor car are neatly organized into visual frames that invoke intensities of desire. But this organizational decorum of the middle-class family is disrupted through a narrative intervention, enacted through a traumatic episode or revelation most often linked to the problem of 'sexual indiscipline' or the narrative trope of rape either from within the space of the family or from outside of it. The classification of the films based on the exact origin of this intrusion, i.e., whether it comes from within the family or from an exterior site that is already cast in the shadow of obscurity and inaccessibility from the middle-class point of view, is an important starting point to understand the specific nature of the class anxieties staged in these films. Through a close reading of some of the films from the 80s this paper would make a few reflections, though in a cursory manner, on the contradictions in the self-image of the class which hinges on, on the one hand, its own self-description in terms of its acquisition from modernity of cultural attitudes, taste and a liberal outlook and, on the other, its inheritance, in terms of its social location and relations of power, the privileges of colonially reinforced caste/class hierarchies.¹

II. Sexual discipline and the depiction of rape

Let us first take the question of sexual indiscipline usually manifesting as extra-marital affairs that threaten to destabilize the middle-class family. The film *Kanthavalayam* (1980, I V Sasi), a strange film for its plot structure and characters, presents such a case of unbridled passion fracturing the fabric of a middle-class family. In the first scene we are introduced to the well-educated and anglicised Hans family eagerly waiting for the arrival of Mr

Hans on a Christmas eve. But instead of Hans, a person named Stanley Green (Mohan Sharma) who introduces himself as an official in the navy, arrives carrying presents from Hans. While they engage him during the dinner, Green says he knows Hans through his sister whom he names as Evelyn (Sreelatha Namboodiri) who happens to be Hans's co-worker. The name Evelyn brings about a sudden and unexpected reaction from Mrs Hans who drops the vessel that she was holding breaking it into pieces – symbolically pointing to the fracture of the family itself. The name Evelyn curiously provokes allusions to the words Eve and Evil, an implicit association which is corroborated by her depiction later in the movie. A few scenes later the news of Hans's suicide reaches his home crumbling the hopes of Mrs Hans and her children. Subsequently we see an already hurt Mrs Hans trying to dissuade her daughter Mary (Seema) from having a relationship with Stanley Green, which culminates in her accidental death. Stanley takes Mary to the city where he finds a job for her and plans to get married to her. This is complicated by two further developments: the revelation that Stanley had already been in love with a brahmin woman who gave birth to his child, and Mary's own attraction to an obscure and unnamed character in the film played by Jayan who later rapes her. The trope of extramarital affairs destroying a joyful family continued for a time and in films like *Aham* (1992, Rajeev Nath), and *Patheyam* (1993, Bharathan) we come across characters who enter into forms of self-torture in order to become ascetic subjects of modernity. These films depict, from within the view-point of the middle-class family the problems created by extramarital affairs and sexual indiscipline in general suggesting a new economy of desire within which the institution of family can be placed.

¹ The paper will look at the films of Joshi (1952-), I V Sasi (1948-2017) and P G Vishwambharan (1947-2010) who started their career as directors in the mid-1970s and produced many highly successful films over a period of time.

Another common instance where family could be at risk was the episode of rape. Most of the time the question of rape in films is raised in terms of its visual representation catering to heterosexual scopic pleasures for the male viewer. One case in point is the film directed by I V Sasi, *Varthamanakalam* (1990), which can be included in the rape-revenge category depicting the turbulent journey of a woman, Arundhati Menon (Urvashi), subjected to sexual violation multiple times and who later becomes a prostitute. A rich businessman, Jameskutty



Fig. 1 and 2 Arundhati remembering her past.

(Balachandra Menon) with a terminal illness fancies her as his mistress and ‘buys’ her from the brothel through a strictly economic transaction. After his death, she comes to the cottage where they spent their time together and slips herself into the memories of their life. What is striking is that there is an apparent contradiction in a flashback scene between the image of Arundhati remembering the violent episode of rape and the actual depiction of the event. (Fig 1 and 2) Though the viewers are invited to identify with the woman’s character in recalling the horror of rape, the depiction of rape scenes include frames that leaves out possibilities for scopic pleasure.

Apart from the way frames are constituted what is striking is the relation the rape episode has with the narrative. The significance of rape as a plot element is clear from the presence of many actors in the film industry such as Ummer, Janardhanan, and T G Ravi who were typecast as rapists in the movies of 1970

and 80s. The way rape related to the larger plot structure varied in these films and a brief look into it will make the various narrative functions it performed. In many of the films by Joshi, for example, the episode of rape acquires only an incidental place within the narrative – often happening, as in the case of *Iniyum Katha Thudarum* (1985, Joshi), or revealed at the fag-end, as in the case of *Kodathi* (1984, Joshi), helping the narrative to reach a conclusion. The fact that the rape incident does not have any role other than escalating a narrative resolution makes it a relatively unimportant event not requiring any critical response. The two villain characters in *Aa Rathri* (1983, Joshi) played by Cochin Haneefa and Lalu Alex are presented as seducing and raping women without any moral compunction. Their acts, except the one of raping the heroine, do not receive any narrative interest in the story at all. In *Kodathi* the truth about the rape is revealed in the courtroom at the end of the film in order to exonerate the middle-class hero who had to own up the murder of his friend to save his sister who had mistakenly committed the murder in an attempt to save herself from a rapist.

Kanthavalayam provides a narrative justification for rape. Jayan, who was considered to be a symbol of masculinity at the time, plays an important role in this film, that of an unnamed character who calls himself *manushyan* or Man. Jayan's character is presented as one who unexpectedly appears on the scene saving women from molesters and then taking them in his car to a location that is not stated in the film initially. He intervenes in a confrontation that Mary has with a rich man who was disturbing Mary and takes her to a brothel (which at this point we understand was the place where he was taking all the other women) after saving her. The narrative later provides a justification for the rape by way of Mary's own falling in love with him after the rape incident. The question of consent and force in the sexual act is complicated by this retroactive romance of Seema's character and serves as an

example of the misogynistic character of Malayalam cinema. But apart from this there are other questions that need to be raised in relation to rape, because it was not only a question of representing women and violence on screen but also of rape becoming a major trope serving the self-constitutive fantasies of the middle-class.

A film where the class conviction of its own elevated identity and civic nature confronts its self-contradictions through a justification of rape is the film *Maniyanpilla Athava Maniyanpilla* (1981, Balachandra Menon). The protagonist of this film Maniyanpilla (Maniyanpilla Raju) suffers from an emasculation and overcoming this by becoming a productive member of the society is the main narrative goal. Maniyanpilla is sent to the city to work as an aide to the family of a college professor (Jose Prakash) helping them with the household chores. Rahim (Venu Nagavally), who worked in the house as a driver, is another character in the film whose position is shown to be submissive one. The professor's wife makes sexual advances to him which he rejects due to his moral uprightness and doesn't engage the lady. The woman devises a plan to remove him from the job and Rahim, without any ado, disappears from the narrative after telling Maniyanpilla how difficult it is for a man of conscience to work under such condition. In another plot development the professor's daughter behaves very rudely with Maniyanpilla and slaps him once for a mistake on his part. An important moment in the story is when Maniyanpilla rapes the professor's daughter as a revenge to the humiliation meted out to him – which is justified as, Maniyanpilla says, he is a *purushan* (man) and a *thozhilali* (worker) revealing the class dimension of the sexual drama and rape as class revenge.

Discussions on the representation of rape in cinema often focuses on the visual aspects of it relying on the question of male gaze and scopic pleasures it affords. The brute force and violence associated with it are also rightly emphasised. But a closer look at

the relation that rape episode has with larger plot structure may open up a few larger questions related to the nature of the middle-class family. The rest of the paper analyses a few scenes from 1980s film in order to understand how such questions were relayed through a complex web of associations made between rape, family and the law.

I. Class, society and the legal order

One of the ways in which the middle-class films carve out a specific space of the family is by constructing spatial binaries. The film *Ee Shabdam Innathe Shabdam* (1985, P G Vishwambharan) starts with a reference to the *shabdam* (noise) made by a group of youngsters boozing and partying in a house located near a hospital thereby disturbing its functioning. The first scene establishes the difference between spaces like hospital or family contrasted with the indiscipline and social irresponsibility of the space occupied by the youngsters. The owner of the hospital Ramachandran (Mammootty) repeatedly complains to the police with no effect as the youngsters always succeed in duping the police. It is against this metaphorical reference to *shabdam* as noise that the habitat of the middle-class family gets defined. Ramachandran is a successful doctor and his wife Sharada (Shobhana), a gynaecologist in the same hospital, is presented as a humane and sincere person who often helps her patients who are poor.



Fig. 3 Ramachandran and Sharada watching an ‘English movie’ in Pushpa’s presence.

In a seemingly comic scene in the film, Ramachandran and Sharada decide to watch an “English movie” and are suddenly reminded of the presence of his sister, Pushpa (Rohini) in the house. (Fig. 3) Their initial hesitation to watch the movie in the presence of Pushpa is lessened when Ramachandran says he would find a way to divert her attention from the movie. He continuously asks for a glass of water or some juice which make Pushpa shuttle between the kitchen and the living room even as a paradoxical acknowledgement is sought from his sister of the sexual nature of their mutual desire. The English movie becomes a point of self-identification for the class indicating, perhaps, a disciplined form of sexuality which needs to be corroborated by the wider society to establish its own identity. The oddity of the scene is that they both don’t want the sister to watch the English film for the explicit scenes it might have, but at the same time, require her presence as a witness to the desire they share for each other – turning themselves into an object of vision. It is true in the case of movies like *Kodathi* where the romantic trifling between the characters Rajendran (Mammooty) and Sindhu (Jalaja) is witnessed by a child who, presented as innocent and asexual, is not aware of the fact of their mutual love but functions as a symbolic validation of the prospective family.

‘If the case of *Kodathi* or *Ee Shabdham* refers to the ways in which the middle-class couple sought a recognition from within the family or the same class, a few other films would portray its relation to an exterior world often presented in terms of the threat of intrusion and disruption of its own serene existence. The film *Iniyum Katha Thudarum*, for example, is the story of a sincere customs officer Raveendran (Mammooty) who takes a strong stand against some high-profile smuggling gang led by Alexander (Thilakan) who conspire to trap him. Raveendran later is arrested for the murder of Alexander who, in fact, had escaped to another country. Raveendran has to suffer only for his sincerity and

uprightness both from the underground smugglers and a legal system that is incapable of delivering justice. While he was in jail Alexander's sons visit Raveendran's wife Nimmi (Jayapradha) and her daughter who were staying with a family friend. They rape Nimmi and drowns her daughter thereby persuading Raveendran to take revenge after he is out of jail.

These films are important to understand how family is depicted as strained between impotent law and forms of illegality. The patriarchal figure – who often takes up the role of the avenging hero – seems to be placed in relation to these through which his status as the protector of the family is established. It is also to be noted that the characters in these films related to law or law-enforcement do not really express the nitty-gritty of the bureaucratic nature of the modern state – but largely the story is told in moral terms in contrast to the more recent films where the characters are embedded within a complex web of bureaucratic exertions which plays a central role in the unfolding of the narrative – a point that we will come back to later.

The scene in *Ee Shabdham* that I discussed earlier eliciting the gaze of the other for the validation of middle-class desire and social existence is contrasted later with another scene where the same character, Ramachandran, played by Mammooty, has been shown as chained to a chair as a hostage and subjected to witnessing the rape and murder of his wife by the youngsters that we see at the beginning of the film. (Fig. 4) This scene could be one of the most dramatic visualisations of the helplessness of the tragic middle-class hero – not able to respond to the intrusions by an exteriorised criminality. Despite being a witness to the tragic murder of his wife he fails to prove it in court where the case is dismissed as lacking solid evidence. To this Ramachandran responds by saying: “I have no other witness than myself.” (Fig. 5) The lack of evidence in cases of rape has been a matter of intense feminist scrutiny –

but here the scene brings out a different question of relationality that acquires some significance, i.e., between Mammootty's act of witnessing which has to be corroborated by another witness and then, the legal order itself. The story presents a reason for this – the law is already corrupted by a more affluent class. Somebody from the political class, a member of the parliament (Jose Prakash), who happens to be the relative of one of the rapists presents himself in the court and produces alibi for the accused which the court trusts without any hesitation and acquits them all.



Fig. 4, 5 and 6 Ramachandran as hostage, “I am my own witness”, Judge with a lowered head

What could be the significance of this lack of evidence? The proceedings in the court scene can be compared to the exploits of another character in the film *Aa Rathri*, Abdu, who produces false witnesses in the court in exchange of money. Abdu is very adept in manipulating and duping the court-procedure and producing intricate arguments in order to prove himself right. Later, in an interesting narrative twist, Abdu realises that he had produced a false-witness to save the man who had raped his own sister who was separated from him in childhood. The sister later commits suicide leaving Abdu grief stricken and remorseful. The transformation of the character after this is intriguing – initially, Abdu is presented as a Muslim and as the story progresses, after his sister's suicide, his real identity is revealed as an upper-caste Hindu, the social segment that constitute this class. The film also carries some indications of how the legal system, notions of evidence, and the manipulable nature of law – all have to be located

outside the moral universe of the middle-class. Thus, for example, Seema's confession in *Kodathi* contains a truth which the court is unable to decipher and therefore, placed outside the ambit of law establishing the moral austerity of the middle-class. In another court-room scene from the film *Ee Shabdham*, the reference to shabdham which indicated the noise of indiscipline as I argued earlier, is substituted by Mammooty's own voice resounding in the hall that bears the conscience of the middle-class.

The depiction of court-room scenes themselves are very interesting. The film *Arambham* (1982, Joshi) shows Justice Devarajan telling his wife that he should never fail in the court and his wife, never in the house. This also shows the spatial divisions and ideological bifurcation of two sets of truth-orders distinct from each other – submission to which renders one true subject of the ethical domain. If the judge's access to truth enables him to deliver justice, for the woman truth is constituted by the wifely duties including the protection of her sexuality. The judge's role as a transcendent and neutral figure is of crucial significance for the visualisation of the courtroom scenes usually presented in the films with the judge seated in an elevated position compared to other characters who have assembled to subject themselves to or witness the trial and judgement. The risk of failure suggested by Justice Devarajan accounts for the narrative crux of the drama presented in these films which is evidenced from the image of the Judge sitting with a lowered head or face expressing moral compunction in the court-room while the hero exposes the failure of law in some of the films of the period. (Fig. 6)

Within the bourgeois regime, a true acknowledgement of the civic existence of middle-class life will come only by the universalisation of its moral codes, that is, of education, taste, culture etc. except economic equality. But such a universalisation through revolution or a thorough-going reform will also abolish

the social and cultural distinction that this class inherited from the colonial period. The absent witness in the film that Mammooty refers to is the social apparatus itself to which question of the efficacy of law is linked to. Law becomes truly operative, as it were, only when it comes to be related to a totalising notion of society. Most of the family dramas of the period, therefore, is the staging of this self-strife the middle-class carried within it.

I. Conclusion

What I have tried to show is that the popular blockbuster movies by directors like Joshi are more complex than we take them usually to be. These films exhibit a concern with the social existence of the middle-class seen from its own point of view and in complex relation to wider society. The formation of the family and sexuality, especially, the trope of rape, form very important axes of the narratives of these films, and as I have argued points to the contradictions of the class itself.

Janakan (2010, N R Sanjeev), *Puthiya Niyamam* (2016, A K Sajan) and *The Great Father* 2017, Haneef Adeni) etc. are more recent films that repeat some of the motifs related to family and sexuality from the 80s films. *The Great Father*, for example, with Mammooty in the lead role, dramatizes the strife between the father of a sexually molested girl and a police officer investigating that case to find and punish the rapist, eventually in the final scene, only to collapse the distinction between the two characters when the police officer agrees to settle the scores outside the law thereby validating the patriarchal father's position. *Janakan* and *Puthiya Niyamam* also follow roughly the same narrative pattern. The father figure in these films is constructed in terms of his ability to protect the family. A case in point is *Drishyam* (2015, Jeethu Joseph) where the father dodges the whole legal system to safeguard the interests of the family. Though these films could be placed in continuity with the 80s popular films, an important shift in accent also has to

be noted – the question of law and its enforcement acquires a centrality in the structure of narrative unravelling compared to the earlier movies. Thus, many of these films can be likened to procedural dramas in which the major part of the plot revolves around this legal skirmish which has to be presented with minute details where law is no more simply powerless or corrupt, as if the gaze organizing the narrative structure is now realigned in comparison to the popular films of 1980s.¹ This might seem counterintuitive if one looks at the ending in a film like *Drishyam* which ultimately points to the failure of law, but more than the narrative ending which is symptomatic of some form of resolution, what is more interesting might somehow be the substance of the narrative totality itself. The fact that questions of law acquire a new resonance by becoming the point of narrative interest and the new ways in which a new reformed middle-class relates to it needs to be a focus of further analysis.

Filmography

Aa Rathri. Dir. Joshi. 1983.

Aarambham. Dir. Joshi. 1982.

Aham. Dir. Rajeev Nath. 1992.

Drishyam. Dir. Jeethu Joseph. 2013.

Ee Shabdham Innathe Shabdham. Dir. P G Vishwambharan. 1985.

Iniyum Katha Thudarum. Dir. Joshi. 1985.

Kanthavalayam. Dir. I V Sasi. 1980.

Kodathi. Dir. Joshi. 1984.

Maniyanpilla Athava Maniyanpilla. Dir. Balachandra Menon. 1981.

Patheyam. Dir. Bharathan. 1993.

Puthiya Niyamam. Dir. A K Sajan. 2016.

The Great Father. Dir. Haneef Adeni. 2017.

Varthamanakalam. Dir. I V Sasi. 1990.

¹ An interesting example for this from the 1980s is

Yavanika

(1982) by K G George, a writerly film one might say, where the moral framework of the popular film is suspended and the story unfolds through the investigation carried out by the police officer Jacob Eerally (Mammootty) where long sequences of interrogation, availability of evidence etc. take precedence.