

Questioning the imagined Identities: (Re)thinking Stereotypes in 'Usthad Hotel' and 'Thattathin Marayathu'

Communication & Journalism Research
7 (2) pp 1-6
©The Author (s) 2018
Reprints and Permissions:
masscomhod@uoc. ac. in
ISSN 2348 – 5663

Dr. Rajesh James *

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sacred Heart College, Thevara

Abstract

It is high time to revisit how Malayalam cinema has discursively formulated and circulated certain ideologies by which communities such as Muslims and Dalits are stereotyped and (mis)represented in the context of the emergent communal divides, cultural exchanges and social reorganizations happening in Kerala. Malayalam Cinema, particularly mainstream commercial cinema, constructs and propagate certain stereotypical images of Muslims as people of repressed sexual desires, as people of terrorist lineages, as money minded and food crazy people. The paper analyses films such as *Usthad Hotel* (2012) and *Thattathin Marayathu* (2012) as representative texts that carry this ongoing ideological victimisation. Using theoretical inputs from Ella Shohat and Sherene Razack, the paper explores dominant ideologies such as Caste, Hindutva and Islamophobia in these films that determine the visual grammar and the consequent victimisations of the marginalised and the 'precarious identities' in the Malayalam filmscape.

Key Words: Stereotypes, Islamophobia, Malayalam Cinema and Ideology.

Introduction

It is time to reevaluate the way how Malayalam cinema has represented and spurred certain ideologies by which certain individual and collective identities such as Muslims and Dalits are stereotyped and (mis)represented in the light of terrorist attacks, cultural changes and social reorganizations especially in the Malabar regions of Kerala. Malayalam Cinema (hereafter MC), particularly mainstream commercial cinema, constructs and circulate certain stereotypical image of Muslim identity as people of repressed sexual desires, as people of terrorist lineages, as money minded and food crazy people. Commercially successful films such as *Usthad Hotel* (2012) and *Thattathin Marayathu* (2012) are not an exception to this ongoing ideological victimisation. The former, scripted by Anjali Menon, creates an imaginary and spectacular space of Karrimikka, the protagonist of the film, where he cooks and serves delicious dishes. The film idealizes his profession to the extent of celebrating his spectacular cult as the only desirable ways of life meant for an ideal Muslim in Kerala ignoring the diverse desires and plural identities of Muslims in Kerala. The latter movie, scripted by Vineeth Sreenivasan, gazes at a Muslim girl as a fetishistic and exotic object. The film ideologically

* Correspondence: rajeshelukunnel@gmail.com

foregrounds a decodable message that an ‘ummachi’ girl’s (a regional slang for a Muslim lady) dream can be materialized only beyond her religion and with the intervention of an upper caste man. Using theoretical inputs from Ella Shohat and Sherene Razack the paper explores such dominant ideologies that determine the visual grammar of Malayalam Cinema that victimizes the marginalised and the ‘precarious identities’ in Kerala.

In any instances of film making, there is no such thing as a ‘real’ presence, but only a re-presence or a representation. ‘The value, efficacy, strength and apparent veracity of cinematic images rely very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the object reflected; they function as a presence to the spectator by virtue of its having excluded, displaced and having made supererogatory any such real thing as the reflected object’ (Said, 1978). Representations then can never really be ‘natural’ or authentic depictions of the object reflected. Instead, they are constructed images, images that need to be interrogated for their ideological content. According to Ella Shohat: “Each filmic utterance must be analyzed not only in terms of who represents but also in terms of who is being represented for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, using which strategies, and in what tone of address”. Examining the cultural production of knowledge in MC necessitates a close reading of certain images which are widely celebrated as touchstones of reality. As Ella Shohat (1995) rightly points out, each of this filmic representation demands an analysis of the socio-political mediations that overshadow them (ibid)..

As apparatuses of continuation, these popular images perform the central problematic of burying certain gestural acts by freezing its potentialities in images (Agamben, 1999). Although known for its creative/critical innovations and certain radical political points of view, MC is also not an exception to this. From its beginning in the late 1920s, it has thrived on freezing certain possibilities of the image and carrying certain stereotypical imaginaries particularly that of Dalits and Muslims. Although such is its trajectory, in background of global terrorism, cultural shifts and religious polarisations, there is a resurgence of such tendencies in MC in the context of the rising communalism and divisive thoughts in Kerala. Mainstream Malayalam cinema in general and the so called ‘new generation cinema’ in particular, construct a cinematic imaginary of Muslims such as people of repressed sexual desires and as people sympathetic to the global terrorism among many others. This is particularly salient in the climate of islamophobia and the contemporary resurgence of elitist and communalist tropes that label Islam and Muslims as the barbaric and uncivilized Other. Muslim women are particularly targeted since media images of burqah-clad women have become the

collective benchmark of Islam's regressive mindset and dogmatic repression. These images serve to legitimise all forms of feudal, communal and elitist hegemonies under the trope of modernity and liberalism. As Ella Shohat argues, the representation of an underrepresented group such as the Muslims in MC is framed within the hermeneutics of domination overcharged with allegorical significance (Shohat, 1995). Such embedded hermeneutics of domination is encoded and slyly circuited in the filmic images of recently released *Usthad Hotel* and *Thattathin Marayathu*.

The Deviant Muslim Man

The former, scripted by Anjali Menon, is located in the city of Calicut under the presumption that it is the cultural epicentre of Malabar Muslims. It captures certain cultural specificities of Calicut by framing samples of its rich haute cuisine such as *halwa* and *biriyani*. Though biriyani has become a common dish of Kerala across religions and communities (for instance Thalassery biriyani), the movie constructs it as a typical Muslim dish and attempts to define Muslim identity in terms of its tastes. It is obvious that this association is much more than an allegorical signification. It is an ideological tool that can serve to reinforce systems of inequality and subordination by equating a particular community with a food item and thereby suggesting its otherness by objectifying it.

The movie constructs an imaginary land of Karrim Ikka where he cooks and serves delicious dishes. He not only wants to feed the customers but also desires to make them happy. The movie idealizes and idolizes his profession to the extent of derogating Abdul Razaq, his son, who pursues a different profession. The narrative circuits a crippled image of Razaq as an unethical business man who resorts to all foul means to make profit. Such representation re-presents Razaq, a prototype for contemporary emerging Muslims, as a threat to the well-entrenched dominant Brahminical order. Consequently, the fall of Abdul Razaq becomes an ulterior motive of the text and he is thoroughly broken and destabilized in the end. By backgrounding emerging Razaq to the margins and foregrounding the self effacing and service minded Karimikka at the centre, the text narrativizes an ideology that an ideal Muslim must do service rather than be served. It becomes obvious that representations are not limited to the content of the story alone. It is an ideological tool that can serve to reinforce systems of inequality and subordination and to help to sustain upper caste elitist orders and desires.

The continuity of colonial scholarship in contemporary cinematic representations construct Muslim women as a universal, ahistorical, and

undifferentiated category who become essentialised through the uniqueness of their difference. Malayalam cinema in general continues this discourse of abject victimhood by representing Muslim woman as a foil to modernity, civilization, and freedom. The essentialism invoked in this process projects Muslim woman as an *a priori* social category with embedded qualities that become objectified through a discourse of Otherness which requires a process of hegemonic unveiling for comprehension. *Usthad Hotel* too follows this discursive logic through crippled Muslim heroine named Shahana. Though the movie apparently represents her as an independent and modern woman, she is shown as a victimised and subjugated other. The film parades certain images of her allegorical imprisonment. She has to fulfil her desires in secret which implies the meaning that lives of Muslim women in Kerala are worse than Muslim women of Arab countries. She says ‘this is my last free day tomorrow I am going to get married’. Marriage as an institution is usually celebrated and solemnised in the elite caste circles of Kerala in spite of all its drawbacks. But the text purposefully targets Muslim marriage (nikhah) as exploitative and abusive. That’s why the film asserts the arrogance and domineering nature of Shahana’s proposed husband. Even if she could get out of the initial marriage proposal, she ends up a typical house wife who helps her husband in preparing biriyani, sacrificing her desire to be an interior designer. The film ends where apparent exposition of Shahana’s rebellious nature cathartically exhausts in the safe hands of Faizi.

The movie also carries certain derogatory stereotypes that make Muslims as the ‘crippled Other’. While seeing a few children, Faizi asks a man whether it’s a joint family. Without batting an eyelid immediately, the man says “these are all my children” at which the audience explodes in slit laughter. Such a dialogue although generate a comic point to laugh at, it carries the problematic impression that all Muslims are medically reckless. The xenophobic canard of population growth among Muslims also finds a subtle reflection here. Through the mannerisms of Abdul Razaq the movie insinuates that Muslims prefer a boy to girl child and to be a girl child is something inferior in a Muslim family. When the movie end Faizi decides quit his new job in France and becomes a biriyani maker. Apparently, such conclusions glorify Faizi as young man who respects Muslim traditions and culture. But the last shot consciously places Faizi near a *biriyani chembu* and his identity circumrotates around it. Biriyani functions as a metaphor that allegorically constructs an imagined Muslim identity which is serene, ideal and spectacular. It becomes a signifier of an ideal Muslim identity and that assumption seems quite naive, if not patronising.

The Imperilled Muslim Woman

In her book *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*, Sherene Razack exposes three prominent figures who have come to symbolize world after 9/11: the “dangerous” Muslim man; the “imperilled” Muslim woman; and the “civilized” European (Razak, 2008). *Thattathin Marayathu* (2012), a film by Vineeth Srenivasan, imports these stereotypes as new avatars of veiled Islamophobia as foregrounded by Razack. The movie casts a ‘dangerous Muslim man’ in the representation of Abdul Khader. Ayisha and Vinod materialise imperilled Muslim women and civilised European respectively. The case is worse with the representation of Ayisha. She is a paradigm of the “oppressed Muslim woman” and “rescued Muslim maiden,” or perhaps ‘Muslim maiden in need of rescue’. The narrative consciously places her in a subjugated ambience. Consequently, the narrative brings Vinod and establishes his role as a redeemer.

Though the movie was celebrated as a ‘true love story’, the narrated love is dubious. Vinod defines Ayisha’s femininity in terms of beauty and identifies her with hot Chicken *biryani*. He falls in love with her when she wears *thattam*. The film presents Ayisha as a fetishistic and exotic object. The film never really zooms on her personality but glorifies her physical beauty to the extent of making Ayisha an exotic queen. Vinod’s mannerisms unveil his sadomasochist drives and the narrative unconscious inherently states that Vinod loves not Ayisha, but fetishized and objectified Ayisha. It’s evidently clear in the phrase “*thattam* has become a weakness for Malayalees” that appeared in the promotional posters of the movie.

According to Stuart Hall “racism operates by constructing impassable symbolic boundaries between racially constituted categories, and its typically binary system of representation constantly marks and attempts to fix and naturalize the difference between belongingness and otherness” (Hall, 1996). Hiding behind the aura of its secularist and humanistic propaganda, the movie insinuates a silent racism by asserting Vinod’s and Ayisha’s religious differences. Promotional write-up has stressed that “it’s a story of a *Nair* young man who loved a Muslim (*Ummaachi*) woman”. Whenever narrative gets the chance to assert characters religious ambits, it never misses the chance. Such religious significations are essential to prioritize Vinod’s upper caste lineage. Thus, the movie silently professes an ideology that an ‘*Ummaachi*’ girl’s dream can be materialized only outside of her religion and with the intervention of an upper caste man.

It is obvious that representations are much more than the re-enactment and criticism of socio-political stereotypes, conflicts and dilemmas. They are in a sense ideological tools that reinforce systems of inequality and subordination. Such reflections and recreations have a silent discourse that glorifies and fetishizes certain objects to (re)establish its priorities. Films such as *Ustad Hotel* and *Thattathin Marayathu* too are engrossed in such ideological ambits. Representation of Karim, Abdul Razaq and Ayisha and the fetishization of biriyani and *thattam* do affect the ways in which Muslims are perceived and positioned in the political economy of Kerala. In spite of its apparent humanisms and valorisations of regional cuisines, it accomplishes certain ideological functions. As Sara Ahmed (1998) argues this close analysis, thus, cannot blink at who is defining desirable effects for whom when someone or something is represented.

Coda

The paper explored the value, efficacy, strength and the apparent veracity of certain contemporary cinematic images that propagated an ideology of exclusion and displacement. In spite of its popular clamour, these representations are hardly the authentic depictions of Muslims in general and Malabar Muslims in particular. Instead, they are constructed images, images that need to be interrogated in the context of the ongoing Islamophobia in the country. With that perspective in mind, the attempt was to engage in a close reading of the filmic images and utterance in a selected Malayalam films in terms of who is defining desirable effects for whom when someone or something is represented.

References

- Agamben, G. (1999). *The Man Without Content*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (1998). *Differences that Matter*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, S. (1996). New Ethnicities. *Critical dialogues in cultural studies*. London: Routledge. 440-448.
- Razack, S. (2008). *Casting out: The eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Shohat, E. (1995). The Struggle over Representation: Casting, Coalitions, and the Politics of Identification. *Late Imperial Culture*. London: Verso. 166-178.
- Sreenivasan, V. (Director). (2012). *Thattathin Marayathu* [Motion Picture]
- Rasheed, A. (Director). (2012). *Ustad Hotel* [Motion Picture]