WALKING WITH FILMS IN THE CITY

-by Anasooya AV

Abstract

Kochi, an urban center of diversity has been the subject of various movies. The Jew town and the socio-cultural milieu of Kochi is extensively used by cinema. The films represent attempts to describe some aspects of culture. Spectators are drawn to the celluloid illusion as a replacement for our unfulfilled expectations of life. This article tries to understand the portrayal of Kochi, more specifically Mattancherry. Most of the time, it is observed that the city is elevated to a character in the films.

Keywords: Subaltern, multiculturalism, public memory, stereotypes

Roaming around the city one could do nothing but romanticize the urban space. The paved streets, the crowd, the social gatherings are intertwined with history. I knew the city for its hustle and bustle from the movies, newspapers, and travelogues. One may associate the town of Mattancherry with 'Mattancherry Martin,' the product of stereotypical Malayalam cinema. Ranging from the movie Satyam to Action Hero Biju, Mattancherry Martin was the clichéd villain. The impact of films in forming the public memory is evident in the case of Mattancherry. Undoubtedly, Kochi has a rich cultural history which Malayalam cinema has only started to explore. The maze-like structure of its streets is often used by movies, not only action-packed movies but also simple comedy-drama films with running scenes. Whenever you visit a place, you can see gatherings of men in front of the tea shop conversing politics for hours, families trying to spend quality time, and groups of friends hanging around taking photos; their reason for traveling varies. Each group tends to stick with those around them, trying to present themselves in a particular manner influenced by the cinema and while the latter is influenced by the people. Young people usually take photos at the sites where famous movies have been shot. The house used for Big B presently acts as a kind of a tourist spot where people would stand and take photos. The house is not maintained, however, has nails on the handrails, possibly to avoid trespassers.

Another common visual in movies is the beachside showing Chinese nets. When asked about goons in the area during field study, the people smiled. They were reluctant to talk about drugs and crime in the city. Certainly, the natives are not happy with the dark portrayal of the city. Hence the crimes in the city are similar to other places. According to them, Kochi had a dark past but currently they are similar to others. The shopkeepers I talked with were vocal about the injustice and told me to see the communal harmony. They were more than willing to share the local history that they knew. One vendor explained to me the story of an abandoned ship in Fort Kochi. The remnants of the ship still remain there. The Gujarati Konkani peoples have integrated to the area so well that they cannot be distinguished from others. You may see people lecturing about karma, body and ahimsa in Jain temple while you feed the pigeons and devour the smell of frankincense. At the same time, you may also encounter an auto rickshaw with liquor in the very next road. Often, we only get a glimpse of the antiques and cafes in the films. The antiques, perfumes, ornaments, and dresses in these shops are not affordable to common people. They are products waiting for a foreign customer but still the people enter into these shops to see and admire the

elitist works of art. The approach of shop keepers in Jew town is different from others. The teashops, sweet shops, automobile workshops that you may encounter in streets may change your perception about city. The names that the shops use are influenced by movie names to lure young customers, for instance, Oh my cake. Thus, the following are some films that reinstated or changed the notions about Kochi.

Big B

Fig 1:The movie by Amal Neerad acted as a trend setter in Malayalam cinema

The film directed by Amal Neerad begins with the murder of Mary Teacher, an Anglo Indian. Her four foster children represent the multicultural background of Kochi. Bilal, Eddy, Murugan and Bijo stand for Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism respectively. The dresses worn by the younger Bijo indicates his ties with Gujarati culture. The Gangster movie acted as a trend setter in Malayalam cinema and used the rich cultural history of Kochi to its benefits. The betrayal of Pandi Asi [Vinayakan] can be seen in a postcolonial context as subaltern resistance. The character of Sayippu Toni also carries the weight of being a mixed-race child. The character Eddy runs a cafeteria showing the sites' tourist attraction. Bilal exhibits the underworld of Kochi with a series of dialogues like 'Kochi is not the old Kochi but Bilal is the same'. The film even starts by showing the newspaper clippings of crimes happened in the city along with the names of film crew, giving a ubiquitous picture of the movie. The Jewish history is explained briefly by the character SI George. The memories of *Bilal ikka* and his brothers persist in the spot. With the growing influence of social media, the place is being revisited by bloggers and influencers, especially to take reels.

Parava:

Parava is a 2017 film directed by Soubin Shahir. Unlike Big B, the movie is confined to the Muslim area of Mattancherry. The movie deals with the competition of pigeon flying and the local disputes. The patterns of houses, windows, common people, their close ups are used in the movie in order to illustrate the diversity of the place. The names of film crew are shown through the common walls and buildings. While strolling through the streets I could identify the places and people. The

people were extremely friendly. I felt like they are so used to tourists in such a way that each and everyone knows the direction of places, where we are heading to. They were walking mental maps or in other words, people are walking stories.

Valiya Perunnal:

The movie Valiya Perunnal is 2019 crime comedy drama film. The movie reveals the minute nuances of Mattancherry in a broader way. The movie could depict more communities existing in a wider way. The Gujarati, Cutchi communities are rarely depicted in Malayalam cinema. The character Hanumanth Shenoy played by Soubin Shahir talks to his mother in Konkani. The police officer makes remarks like "the people are complex like the streets of Mattancherry. Better be careful with them." Honestly, the streets are confusing but the inhabitants know exactly where to go. It is the outsiders who make such remarks out of confusion.

The lyrics of song 'Kochi Mattancherry' also exhibit the multi-cultural background, resembling a folk song. The character of the city is unfolded through the portrayal of a documentary film-maker describing the socio-political issues of the city. The city is well tied to cheap waterways through ports and harbours.

The movies like Parava and Valiya perunnal show a precise picture of the streets. They present the goats, hens, dogs, cows and pigeons, not often seen in other movies.

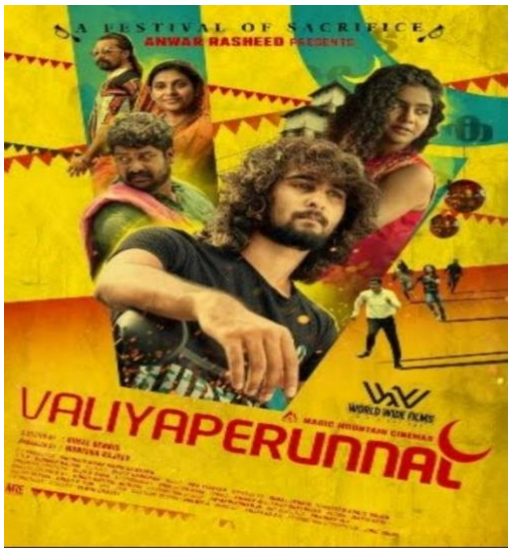

Fig 2 and fig 3: Movies like Parava and Valiya Perunnal shows the shift of Malayalam cinema to local narratives.

Conclusion

Film becomes an enlargement of our own physical ability to see and hear the world. People cluster to enjoy human environment of city and thus cities act as public good. The versatility of the site makes it popular site to make movies. The movies like Punjabi House and Cinema Company have shown the Gujarati community in subtle ways. The films like Amar Akbar Anthony portray the life of unemployed youth and exhibit the life in the city as full of crimes. Films like Chotta Mumbai

have blended the unique *papanhi* in their story. By looking at the movies we can see that Malayalam films have shifted their focus to local narratives. This marked shift can be traced in recent movies, for example, Parava and Valya Perunnal, which try to portray people's everyday lives and thus, making the streets more humane.