Beyond 'Othering': Reconstituting the Cultural Stereotypes in Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract

This study examines Malayalam Cinema as perpetuators of cultural and intersectional othering through the portrayal of people living in the high ranges of Kerala, comprising of Idukki and Malabar regions, as unrefined and uncivilized. In the light of characterizations in the movies *Varathan(2018)* directed by Amal Neerad, *Jallikattu(2019)* directed by Lijo Jose Pellisserry, *Kettiyolaanu Ente Malakha(2019)* by Nissam Basheer and *Loudspeaker(2009)* by Jayaraj the paper seeks the politics inherent in the repeated portrayal of the high ranges as uncouth and inferior. It also argues that the concept of othering is well suited for understanding the power-relations as well as the binary positions created by movies intentionally or unintentionally. Homogenization of masses is what that happens in such a situation where particular is generalized. The study also delves into the hidden layers of cultural stereotyping and addresses the need to reconstitute the idea of the high range as the 'other'.

Keywords: othering, ontology, stereotype, polyphony, subaltern

Visual representations create a real imagined space apart from the ontological essence intrinsic in it. The represented images create a prism which might even blur the boundary between the real and the represented space. Mapping regions in visual culture has its own politics and poetics. Spaces associated with subaltern are often misrepresented. The wide circulation of these visual signs, mainly through films, creates stereotypes not only about the region but also about the people and their culture which occupy that space. Heterogeneities, contradictions and polyphonic voices unique to that region are often erased to create a monolithic space. This would create a cultural binary within the spectators which caters 'cultural stereotyping' or creation of the 'Other'.

As a systematic theoretical concept 'Othering' was coined by Gayatri Chakravorthy Spivak in 1985 in the context of man-woman relationship, men as the norm and female as the other. The notion draws on several philosophical and theoretical traditions. Significantly, it draws on an understanding of self which is a generalization of Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic as developed in *Phanomaologie des Gaistes*. This understanding of self and the other, put forward by Hegel was universalized by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* not only in relation to gender but also in relation to other hierarchical social differences. Early postcolonial writing is another reference point (Said 1995/1978). Said writes of an imagined geography which constructs the Orient as 'other' in a reductionist, distancing and pathologizing way while the Europeans are the superior Occidents. Orient is exoticized. It is a postcolonial phenomena found even in Kerala. Within the state, we could find the binaries created between low-lying areas and the high ranges considering the culture and people of the latter, the stereotyped other. This general notion is fueled by the depiction through cinema.

A detailed analysis of select Malayalam movies using the theoretical framework of 'Othering' theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, literary reorist and feminist critic and brought to Indian context by Edward Said, a founder of the academic field of post-colonial studies is aimed through the study. In this era of heated discussions on political correctness in media, and attempts to knock down binaries inherent in gender, race, class etc., this paper tries to point the importance to initiate an effort to resurrect a region from the clutches of age-old stereotypes associated with it. . The politics of classifying the entire people of a

region into these two groups, ignoring the gray area between the two, is problematic. The question is why a particular region is being repeatedly labelled as the 'other' and inferior.

The concept of othering builds on a Hegelian heritage; it is inspired by both feminist and postcolonial theory, and it is from the very beginning an intersectional concept. It marks a structuralist thinking which privileges a gaze that fails to see the in-between, or the "thirdspace" between self and other, occident and orient. This thought even denies the gray space in between, boosting the notion of binaries of superior and inferior. Said writes about an imaginary, geographic space which constructs orient or the other in a pathologizing and distancing way and occident as superior self. This notion becomes more or less psychological as it is a mental construct of considering oneself superior to everything outside the norm that they create. As othering has surpassed all the traditions and branches of thought, we could consider it as a phenomenon found even in post colonial countries within a single society and culture. Orient or the other is exoticized. It is a postcolonial phenomena found even in Kerala. Within the state, we could find the binaries created between low-lying areas and the high ranges considering the culture and people of the latter, the stereotyped other.

This general notion is fueled by virtual depictions and agencies like cinema as they fashion a real imagined space creating much impact on the general perspective of people. To consider it the movie *Varathan(2018)* in particular represents the binaries in its multiple levels of that the vulnerable female and the superior male who in turn becomes her protector. To see it in more post colonial terms or in the eyes of Edward Said, a superior self and inferior other is created by the movie which places the couple from Dubai as superior and the native village folk of the high ranges as uncouth with the only intention to peep into other people's life even denying their privacy or even as threat to their existence. When it comes to *Jallikattu(2019)*, the motif of the movie is worth discussing. It emphasizes on the savage nature of humans in spite of their claim to be civilized. It is something that underlines the animal element in every human mind as denoted by Freud. The setting chosen is the high ranges to portray the hidden animal element of human psyche. The movie consciously or unconsciously points to the idea that to show the narrow line between the animal, instinctive nature and human civilized nature the setting apt is Idukki where unrefined people live as per the general conception. The portrayal of people of Idukki as innocent often could be read as a mask for the lesser depiction given by the meaning makers, in a away the empirical self.

Kettiyolaanu Ente Malakha(2019) shows lesser knowledgeable hero who in turn commits marital rape due to his lack of basic sexual knowledge. This shows a growing tendency to justify the inferior portrayal as something that marks their innocence and closeness to nature. But this adversely affects the perception of people, as the viewers get acquainted with the less refined characteristics and the tendency to associate such distinctive features solely to the people of the high ranges. This becomes a pertinent issue to be discussed, as othering which was termed to be a post colonial phenomenon, is seen within a culture itself when people of a single society take two extreme points creating a cultural binary among them. This would cater such public notions just as Spivak was afraid of. The people of low lying areas are attributed the status of empirical self giving power to define the other according to the self.

The geographical dimensions are lesser significant as the psychological distinctions are taken into manifestations as there is no visible difference of 'more humane quality' in the people who claim the position of the colonial Occident. This claim is unintentional in most of the cases, but the images could manipulate the thought process of the viewers making a wider audience adhere to this binary ignoring the grey place between them. There is also the creation of binaries within the people of the high ranges either portraying them as the hard core estate owners or as poor, unrefined folks in other end. The negation of the third space is one among the serious concerns of the theory of othering as majority of the people of the high ranges do not belong to either of the oppositions but to the in-between space. So, the homogenization of masses which was a serious Marxist concern is also dealt as othering also involves the denial of anything other than the superior and inferior binaries. Through such depictions in Malayalam films, they unconsciously become harbingers of othering.

"Othering" has become a pertinent theme in continental philosophy and various fields of critical theory. The purpose of othering in interpretation in turn helps to insight about the other and ourselves. All cultural forms of representation hinge on the issue of identity creation. The represented images even create a prism that would blur the distinction between the real and the represented. Movies are the main agency of representation which has got significant influence in human minds. Mapping regions in visual culture has got its own politics and poetics. As representing the high ranges as the other, movies have created a deep impact in the minds of Keralites, since decades. Even the very recent movies, where the locale is set in the villages of Idukki, continue to exhibit the same traits of cultural othering marking the low-lying areas as

culturally superior as thought by the occident on the upper hand of colonizers. Though cultural othering is recognized as a post-colonial phenomenon, these depictions in Malayalam Cinema force us to point it further into the level of an intra-societal concern.

While having a read on Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Jallikkattu* which was much acclaimed for its expressionist portrayal of human condition which shares only a narrow line of distinction from the animal behaviour, we could find that the locale is a remote village of Idukki. The politics behind choosing Idukki or the high ranges to set a plot which marks the uncouth nature of human beings, is similar to that which Spivak claims to create an empirical self, making everything incomprehensible to them as the other. The tendency to mark people who live in harmony with nature as unrefined is a Hegelian tendency of assuming oneself the master, gaining cultural supremacy over the other, by their own.

There is a discursive dominant structure which challenges the cultural equality among the people of Kerala, creating transgressive images of the people so much so that, when there is a depiction of uncivilized folk, people tend to associate it with regions, such that of Idukki. The cultural othering has also created such impact in viewers' minds about the regions of Idukki as well as rural areas of Wayanad and Kannur. There is a profitable tendency of commodification of narrowed depictions of culture, by the people who claim to be the key bearers of refinement, where people from the victimized areas are presented as something exotic even as a backdrop to highlight the glimmer of mainstream culture, by exploitation of "otherness". *Varathan* being a typical example of the nasty representation of the other, creates a binary opposition of superior and inferior culture of the village, the latter being a threat to the former, the civilized class of people. Let us consider it as a discourse structured around polarized oppositions creating stereotypes which perpetuates social order and a stark distinction between self and the other. By the creation of such stereotypes people are reduced to a fewer traits that exaggerates or simplifies the person to fit into a mass. This is what happened for the people in *Jallikkattu* as well as *Varathan*.

The grouping of people of the high ranges into extreme ends, negating the third space, is a tendency seen in Malayalam Cinema for a decade or two. Either the characters are hard core estate owners or poor folk with lesser knowledge about essentialities, basically unrefined. This denies the existence of the in-between-space which contains the majority of the population of the area. Also, there is a tendency to attribute the characteristic of innocence to the character, that is incapable to blend with the dominant culture, who in turn becomes an object of ridicule. This innocent image attributed could be seen as mask to cover up the intentional or unintentional marketing of coarse representation of people. We could fine Sleevachan, the protagonist of *Kettyolaanu Ente Malakha,* attributed the quality of innocence and purity of heart for the marital rape he committed, like a single wrong of an otherwise perfect man. The choice of setting is the high ranges where these stereotyped heroes are placed.

. In *Varathan*, the couple who lived in Dubai in golden standards comes to a village, where both the ambience as well as the people disturbs their unassuming lives. The village is shown creepy and secluded from the rest of the world which is accompanied by bizarre shots and suitably arresting background score which would suffix the depiction of obtrusive village people. The maker's decision to seclude the place and to introduce native characters with uniform but superficial characters like lecherous, culturally-appropriating, intimidating and the unmannered likes, caters the notion of orient, which is considered exotic and also to channelize the product of othering, that is, homogenization of masses.

Grouping people into one or two masses create stereotypical representations about the region and its people. Just as in *Jallikkattu*, the enter village is running behind a buffalo in frenzy, awakening the primordial instinct in every man of the village. Pellissery's idea to rip off the so called civilizations that we claim to exist and to prove that man is basically an animal, was intentionally set in high ranges as it would be easier to depict the already marked other as uncouth than choosing a village out of the usual setting. The deliberate character portrayal includes butchers, outlaws and callous land owners to show up the type of people in the land. There are certain obscene comments made by the people themselves about each family's migration to the high ranges just as the teashop owner makes a comment, "All who came to the land was on exile as they were either thieves or had some blemishes in their personal history" ("Jallikkattu" 00:32:33-38). The movie-makers have inverted the history of the other, and have created a parallel history written by the self-claimed elite class. Spivak suggests a clear political agenda behind such depictions of the history of the subaltern as unworthy to mention or which does not suit with the mainstream, dominant representation of culture (Spivak 247). The movie seldom speaks about the individual stories, rather the movie denies individualization and presents the characters as expressionist images for the purpose of communicating the metaphor buffalo, a tale between machismo and wild.

Most of the movie-makers opine that, the setting of the high ranges is chosen for the lush green space and to support innocent characterization. But in recent movies innocence and ignorance are often used

interchangeably so as to create an image of the mapped region as a dark place of ignorance. This (mis)knowledge about the rural areas of Idukki is not created by people who lives the history of the region but by the superior self who claim themselves to be privileged to formulate history and identity for the other.

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