

# VISUALISATION OF SLUM IN MALAYALAM MOVIES *BEST ACTOR* (2010) AND *THAKARACHENDA* (2007)

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**Abstract:** Films as a modern art have gained immense popularity. Its closeness with depicting life in a realistic way has helped it in garnering popularity. Films are eminently suitable media for an analysis of spatial concepts due to its need to represent space. How we understand the reality around us is very much influenced by the visuals films have. The films that this paper attempts to analyse how slums are represented in Malayalam films are *Best Actor*(2010) and *Thakara Chenda* (The Tin Drum, 2007). The slums of these films are more presentational. The reasons behind such presentation are analysed. The movies are trying to disguise poverty. Instead of showing the realistic harsh surroundings of slums the viewers are taken away from the reality of slum life.

**Key words:** Malayalam movies, slum,space representation, *Thakara Chenda*, *Best Actor*.

Films as a modern art have gained immense popularity. Its closeness with depicting life in a realistic way has helped it in garnering popularity. Beyond being a medium for entertainment films have today become also an ideological tool. Hence films have been both used as educational tool and propaganda material. Films have today also emerged as a commodity which is a part of a production- sale- profit chain and it has now become very imperative that films should be analysed in different levels. Films use dialogues and visuals to communicate. The visuals in a film can be used to create different layers of meaning in the subconscious of the viewer.

Film studies try to analyse films. It works on the premise that film is a language, and hence considers films with all the features of a language. Organisation, structure, evolution and levels of meaning. To comprehend the language of film means that one should have an awareness about the history and aesthetics of film, be aware of the similarities between film and other narrative media and deviations of visual representation and storytelling from traditional literary forms, and consequently the ability to recognize and analyse structures of filmic narration.

Compared to other forms of art, technology has helped films to tell stories in a compelling and engaging way which had helped in making films the most influential among modern art forms. Ways of narration has made film critics classify films as commercial, middle stream films and art or off beat films. And in the liberalized era commercial or popular cinema has made huge inroads into the market. As a medium of entertainment and as a commodity it aims profit. And as films cater to the choices and demands of the viewers, film studies also become a study in culture. Film studies becomes a part of cultural studies. An analysis of films helps us to understand how a culture defines and evolves itself. But one of the major critique of film studies is that, film studies tend to keep away the sociological aspects away and look at films only as artistic things. They are not concerned with any empirical data that is part of any sociological phenomenon. How to look at both sociological and aesthetic significance of cinema is an area to be studied in depth. We cannot isolate aesthetics from political and ethical concerns, and has to consider them as indissolubly entangled.

Films are eminently suitable media for an analysis of spatial concepts due to its need to represent space. Film becomes a wider marker of culture when it is traced as —a recorder of reality - and hence a valuable tool (Miller, 192). How we understand the reality around us is very much influenced by the visuals films have. Film and video are cultural artefacts (Bryson, 99). Representation can be made ‘real’ to an audience through the medium of film by suitably manipulating the visuals and camera angles.

The films that this paper attempts to analyse how slums are represented in Malayalam films are *Best Actor*(2010) and *Thakara Chenda* (The Tin Drum, 2007). Slum is described as overcrowded

neighbourhoods overflowing with impoverished migrants, where the poor and vulnerable live. Urban slums are spaces which shows the reality of the dispossessed and the social disparity that exists in many societies. Hollywood movies and European film makers had movies with the background of slums in the glamorous modern cities to even Mumbai. Indian films have also used slums as backdrops of their films in the sixties and seventies. But later after particularly liberalisation of Indian market, though poverty and slums increased they found their way out of films. These films now try to keep away from the disturbing pictures of poverty. And whenever they become the backdrop of any story that the film maker wants to narrate we can see that they try to keep away from actual depiction of slums. Whether the two films go according to the pre-set notions and what happens as a result is the scope of this paper.

Malayalam cinema since its beginning has been noted for the stories related to social issues. From caste system to un-touchability, land struggles to ideological issues the films have dwelt with a variety of subjects and themes. With the huge social transformation that happened in Kerala society in the nineties, Malayalam cinema also changed its perspectives. Super stardom and neo liberalized economy completely brought in a kind of cinema which can be seen to depict the urban life and material craziness of Malayalee. In this phase Malayalam cinemas most often tried to avoid the subalterns in society. Be it the story or references to marginalised, the slum dwellers, dalits and down trodden, the films kept away from any stories about them. An attempt to look into the subaltern space then in Malayalam cinema leads to the scope of this proposal. Literature review of the studies on space and especially slums in Malayalam cinema shows that there has not been much studies on the spatial representation in Malayalam films albeit slums. Otherwise slums shown in movies in Malayalam are sites of crime and places where criminals live. They always show colonies/slums in the city in the same way and it explains how the notion and image of the colonies are created by the dominant institutions of our society.

The films that this paper attempts to analyse are *Best Actor*(2010), and *Thakara Chenda* (The Tin Dum, 2007). *Best Actor* is a commercial film which went on to be a popular hit. *Thakara Chenda* is an off-beat film which went on to win critical acclaim and won many awards. The movie treats slum in a realistic way. But the slums of these films are more presentational. The reasons behind such presentation are to be analysed. When the film is being made some of the ideas that would come up in the mind of the director would be how the film would be critically received, what kind of an aesthetic representation should be made and how can it be positioned contextually. Popular cinema has its own formulas, notions about audience and their likes and choices it chooses to address. And there going to an audience who in India come to get entertained by the heroics of the superstar cannot be given a space marking defeat. It is a space that will be off the premises of that film. Slums in our common notions are spaces of defeat.

Space is constructed both in discourse and practice. Conception of space outside language is not possible. Jones and Natter (1997) suggest it is only through representation – words, images and data – that space exists. To conceptualise space as text helps us to understand the ‘discourses, symbols, metaphors and fantasies’ (Donald, 6) associated with it. Critical theory informs this approach as evident from the works of Roland Barthes, the cultural materialism of John Berger and Raymond Williams and Michel Foucault’s thoughts on discourse. Spaces of cinema – from the earliest spaces of film exhibition to the digital cinemas and multiplexes of the contemporary era – consequently tell us much about the changing spatial forms and practices of urban life (Hubbard, 62)

*Best Actor* (2010) was the directorial debut of Martin Prakkat .The movie is about Mohan, a schoolteacher who wants to be a film actor. Motivated by a group of young filmmakers Mohan decides to have experiences of his own to mould himself as an actor and decides to move to Mattanchery in Kochi. There in Mattancherry visuals of the slum abound in the film but devoid of any realism. The real dirty claustrophobic slum is absent and the visuals along with the overall mood of the film are tip and trim. From the scene when the central character Mohan reaches the place where he decides to earn his underworld experience it obviously moves into a slum as slums are places where one thinks one can find people with criminal background. But the shots there are framed in such a way that no clear perception about the locale can be made. Rather tight shots and close ups of characters in vibrant costumes fill in. And the whole sequences there are laced with humour.

The desire for a “panoramic interior” (Mazumdar,110), will be one reason why an aversion towards slums work in Malayalam movies. Accepting a slum sequence in a movie will be accepting the grim reality of presence of slums. In a hugely middle class Kerala society opulence and lavishness has to be celebrated

in visuals. Though we have shots and sequences that reflects the troubles and travails of life in slum, they are all coated with humour to make one feel that it's just for laugh, otherwise not to be taken seriously. "An exhilarated objectification of ... surroundings" (Jaikumar, 24) is what happens.

Director Avira Rebecca's maiden feature film *Thakarachenda*, is may be one of the rarest deviation of presenting a slum in a Malayalam film. It is a rare film that has attempted to show the slum in a realistic way. The film focuses on a group of slum dwellers who are ignored in the ambitious blue print of city developers. The slum dwellers are facing an eviction as part of the city beautification project. The colony and the people who live there are constructed in opposition to middle class life and values. Though it can be argued that resistance about the stereotyped presentation of characters from colonies rise, there seems to be no discussion happening about the scenic presentation of these places in movies. *Thakarachenda* unlike other movies has visuals of houses in a slum, the interiors of a house, the shacks there and so on. The pseudo mentality of Malayalis does not accept these indecent ugly spaces. *Thakarachenda* presents the slums in a more realistic way. An offbeat film it shows the shacks of the colony. The movie has several sequences where different spots inside a slum is shown. Though the visuals are very much superficial it was one film which could at least show the inside life of a slum. The shacks there, the work spaces of people living there, the common resources like water supply that they share are all shown with situations that really happens in a thickly populated area. But then with such realistic portrayal the movie could not garner much interest in the commercial market though it was a favourite in film festivals. The argument here is though with such a significant content why is it that the movie is only accepted in what is called the film festival circles.

The representation of colonies in Malayalam films, depends on the way Malayalis conceive slums. The globalised Keralite is one who detest the dirt, filth and lack of moral behaviour associated with slums in Indian psyche. A good percentage of Malayalee population works abroad, a sizeable population of them in the Middle East, USA, Europe and Australia. Almost all families in Kerala will have a member, a relative or a friend who works abroad and through them the narratives of developed world is familiar to them. For a viewer familiar to the gloss of a developed city and its space then it becomes difficult to digest and accept the fact of presence of slums around his own space. For them how one interpret the spaces is very important particularly in the context of the new cultural contexts they want to be part of. Filmic representations of people who live in these slums hence become stereotypes to satisfy such an audience. The idea that cities are signs of progress and the association of city with sin and immorality, is specifically associated to slums. They are spaces which move away from common notions of values and ethics.

The notion about slums would also have been created out of the caste hierarchy that exists in India. Most often or mostly the people who live in these slums are people from the lower strata of caste system and who are involved in jobs like scavenging, tanning and other menial jobs. Places where the marginalised live then does not become the part of normal development projects of governments and even basic infrastructure is usually denied in these places. Hence they become spaces where normal clean surroundings and hygienic situations cannot be maintained. For Malayalee who is obsessed with cleanliness these spaces hence become a space to be kept out of their discourse. Urban poverty for us and society at large is something to be detested, in such kind of representations slums do not fit. Slums appear rarely. So decorative representations and imaginations happen. Commercial films avoids these visual scenes. Though the character belongs to the slum, the slum to which he belongs is neat, clean and tidy. They rest on close up shots of characters and very peripheral shots to show the slums.

Analysis of the representation can be done using Lefebvres' theory on production of space. Lefebvre argues that space is socially produced. Lefebvre discusses how we experience space and time, by stating scheme to understand how space is socially produced. And based on the argument it becomes very evident that the movies discussed presents the slums only in ways they are thought about. Lefebvre theorized a three level production of space: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space. Spatial practice is used to describe together the places of usual social activity. The normal situations man is involved normally when he goes for shopping using public transport and the places he interacts in a normal basis like home. Representations of space are how space is understood by people engaged in designing space. They have designs, plans, maps where they use the specific knowledge systems in their domain to conceive spatial relationships. The third level representational spaces are the spaces are imagined and modified by artists and others who look for alternative spaces. Classification helps us understand the social patterns that produce the abstract space of contemporary capitalism. Lefebvre critiques these spaces and looks to challenge them. He puts forward differential space that would dissolve the social relations of

abstract space and generate new, heterogeneous relations that accentuate difference and “shatter the integrity of the individual body, the social body ... and the corpus of knowledge.”(Lefebvre, 52). The evolution and representation of slums then has to come to terms with differential space to be accepted.

The way in which the portrayal happens in these movies one argument to be noted is that they escape the trap of falling into the western notions of Indian slum. The postcolonial gaze of Indian slums has made it very exotic as evident in films like *Slumdog Millionaire* (Dir. Danny Boyle, 2008). It may be because, as Indians and Malayalis it is not in our thought process anything to accept the presence of slums. The movies are trying to disguise poverty. Instead of showing the realistic harsh surroundings of slums the viewers are taken away from the reality of slum life.

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