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**MAHESHINTE PRATHIKARAM AND ACTION HERO BIJU: REFLECTION OF AN  
IDEOLOGICAL WAR IN MALAYALAM CINEMA**

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**ABSTRACT**

The second decade of twenty first century witnessed a paradigm shift in the Malayalam Cinema in terms of subject matter and style. The Star centered elitist Romantic comedies gave way to a more realistic popular cinema that welcomed experimentations. Common people, common man's life, realistic settings, marginalized cultures, popular music, regional slang, gender and cultural minorities etc. qualified to be appeared on the big screen. This new trend is popularly termed as New Generation Cinema. This paradigm shift in the Cinema is the impact and reflection of an ideological conflict that exists in the Kerala society. The rise of a new middle class, as a result of the spread of education and gulf money, invited a new set of values substituting, at the same time, struggling with the earlier elitist classical traditional values. The fierce ideological conflict between these two ideologies reflected in the cinema also. The two films at stake in this article represent these two ideological streams that run strongly in the socio-political sphere of Kerala. As *Action Hero Biju* declares its solidarity with the elitist values the film *Maheshinte Prathikaram* expresses a dissent. As two films released in the successive days, fourth and fifth of February 2016, they represent and reflect the same socio-cultural background. This article examines how both the films become the mouth pieces of their corresponding ideological background.

**Key words**

Ideological State Apparatus, Repressive State Apparatus, Ideology, Power, Patriarchy, Center, Periphery, Masculinity, Elitist, Governmentality,

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In a socio-political scenario, which suppresses the dissenting and expression of difference as an act of treason, the role of art is to join hand with the periphery. The representation of a parallel and diverse socio-political system in film and art thus becomes an act of activism. The repressive, authoritarian, male-centric Brahminical film texts call for a recentring of the hegemonic ideological atmosphere in Kerala cultural scenario. As popular mode of representative culture, cinema always took a different turn in its history for more than a

century. Dileesh Pothan's *Maheshinte Prathikaram* being an example for dissent, celebrates the beauty of a village of multi-cultural, pluralistic society keeping away from the influence of the governmental or ideological source of repression. A close analysis of the two recently released Malayalam movies, *Action Hero Biju* and *Maheshinte Prathikaram* will give us a clear cut picture of these two conflicting flows of socio cultural streams running active in the ideological sphere of Kerala.

The hero of *Action Hero Biju* is a police officer, a representative of the governmental 'repressive apparatus', who stands for the masculine, patriarchal power agent and 'centre'. He is 'in charge' of the protection of the whole of the marginalized, including women, children, poor, old, and the commoner, who have no access to the constitutional institutions of justice and equality. At the peripheral level it would cheat the spectator disguising as a film of the poor and the oppressed. According to Althusser, the cinema as other "Ideological state Apparatuses", "do not correspond to reality, i.e that they constitute an illusion, we admit that they do make allusion to reality, and that they need only be 'interepted' to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world" (154). A close reading of the film exposes the inner, implied, internalized and normalized back grounding politics of the film, which would rise as a "textual unconscious" wearing its real ugly face. The surfacing of the inner politics of the film is easily possible by unlocking the loop-holes that we confront in the film.

#### **Construction of a Hero**

Projected chest, thick moustache, piercing look, commanding voice and police uniform give the hero the typical physiognomy of an upper class elitist warrior. His role as a protector and saviour of the oppressed gives him the image of a medieval chivalric knight. He is the one and only complete man in the centre of a group of fragile set of constables, women, old, poor and the weak. By creating such a super hero the film indirectly pronounces the existence of a Hitlarian pure blood in the centre of a weaker set of 'people' who are only deserved to be ruled and protected. "There is therefore a cause for the imaginary transposition of the real conditions of existence of a small number of cynical men who base their domination and exploitation of the 'people' on a falsified representation of the world which they have imagined in order to enslave other minds by dominating their imagination" (Althusser 154). By exemplifying the common men as weak and fragile, the film maker affirms the existence of two classes and a hierarchy in Kerala society.

The film *Maheshinte Prathikaram*, on the other hand, creates a protagonist who is like any other person in the society. He is a man or human among many other men or humans. He is defeated in fight with his opponent, cheated in his love, and disappointed in his profession and is loved and treated like any other one at the same time. He is neither the pupil of anybody's eye nor the epitome of the traditional virtuous hero. The people around him are also neither better nor worse than him. There is not even an antagonist to be contrasted in the background to see the virtue of the protagonist. In short, the protagonist is not even a hero. His opponents in fight, love or profession are not even his enemies. The fight scene that takes the film to its climax is just an event of sport. The protagonist is winning only his own fragile nature and not any villain. The victory of the hero is never portrayed as an ultimate victory over the vice. It never makes his opponent anyway inferior to him also. The last dialogue of Jimson "just a hand slip at the last/ Else I would have knocked you" (*Mahesh*) proves it. The protagonist is no way more handsome, fairer or stronger than his fellow villagers. The makeup and costumes or body structure of the main characters are not superior to the other villagers, and sometimes, it looks even worse than others. The protagonist maintained the normal style throughout the film. Only in two genuine situations- one, at the time of the photo shoot; two, in the flash mob scene- only we see even the lover of the protagonist made up.

#### **Gender and Sex**

S I. Biju Poulouse is a patriarchal hero. His fair, beautiful and well shaped wife is just a shadow of his manly power and an object of his pleasure. She has no access to his worlds of power and 'responsibility' (the white man's burden). Her only role, as showed in the film, is to give him sexual fulfillment and to grow his human seed. Though at the peripheral level the movie pictures the protagonist as the saviour or protector of women, the politics of the movie seems to be just the opposite. As Althusser pointed out the "familial

ideological configuration is, in its uniqueness, highly structured, and that it is in this implacable and more or less 'pathological' structure that the former subject-to-be will have to 'find' 'its' place, i.e. 'become' the sexual subject..." (165).

The women characters are literally abused and harassed by the hero. In the first instance, the hero settles a conflict between an auto driver and his mistress. The hero's rebuking and advice, in person to the auto driver, after the settlement of the issue, pointing at his fat dark mistress is, "this punishment is not only for beating her but also for loving such a mean creature" (*Biju*). This is a racial comment embedded with misogyny. In the second instance, the hero makes a sexually explicit comment over an issue of custodial violence raised by a lady- human right activist. It goes like this, "Madam, suppose a boy squeezes your ass and your husband sees this, if he is a man with moustache, he will beat the boy. I am also doing the same here" (*Biju*). What is wrong with this comment? First of all, the speaker wants to harass the female self of the lady and belittle her sexual identity to show her inferior to him as a man on the one hand, and as a representative of the state power on the other hand, secondly, by suggesting her husband, and not she, the person who is supposed to react to the crime against her, the film tries to establish the conventional roles of gender, and thirdly the movie supports the male chauvinistic view that the world is not as accessible to women as it is to men, since there exists a vicious group of criminals from whom she always needed the protection. The first mentioned event was racial and anti women. The second event, on the other hand, is not only anti women but also against the basic democratic values, because the client here is a human right activist and the hero was trying to justify the custodial violence.

Two women come to complain about a neighbor's habit of showing them his nudity and harassing them. The hero asks them about the physical features of the neighbor. On hearing that the man who is complained against is a dark, short and ugly man, the hero makes a dark bitter joke that, if he were a good looking man they wouldn't complain against him. What the hero tactically hid with the veil of a joke was hundreds of cases of complaints against policemen who sexually harass the women who come with genuine complaints to police stations. A major female character who appears in the film is a lady who eloped with her husband's friend leaving behind her husband. Another woman who appears in the film is a burglar. The film doesn't even show a single female character in a positive light.

The female characters of *Maheshinte Prathikaram* are as strong as the male characters. Many of the male characters including the protagonist and his friends are dominated by women in many instances. The first lover of Mahesh leaves him making a 'better' choice, his second lover openly comments over his lack of professional skill by remarking "Chettan, you don't have slight understanding of fashion photography" (*Mahesh*). She even advises him to avoid fight, wear chappals and marry her, and later, to pat Jimson in a friendly way to claim his record of beating him, with an explicit sense of understanding that her lover can never win her brother in fight. Here, the film maker breaks the conventional model of a hero in Malayalam cinema with powerful masculine body, sharp intelligence and talented professionalism.

We get hints about dominancy that women have in the movie *Mahesh* through the characters of serial watching woman and the NRI family living in America. The serial watching woman, a house wife, gives least attention to her husband's dominant way of addressing her, which leads to a quarrel between them and in the quarrel she gains an upper hand over her husband. The NRI wife, a nurse, bullies her husband to do things in her own way, even sacrificing his own self respect, to manage things without causing any harm to her self esteem. There are numerous instances of Chrispin being laughed at by his young friend Sonia. The film never tried to show the women in a bad light in any of these events.

#### **Governmental Oppression and Civil Rights**

'Police is the symbol of governmental oppression as it is a "Repressive State Apparatus" used by the state to subjectify its already subjects' (Aithusser 165). Police stations, jails, and lock ups played an active role in the human rights violations in the history of Kerala politics and civil right movements. The film *Action Hero Biju* legitimizes and white washes all kinds of police brutality and police raj that suppressed the civil right movements in the history of Kerala. The hero's harassment on a human right activist is a very good example

for this. There are several scenes of lock up brutality and custodial violence also in the film. By justifying the police atrocities, the film is trying to justify the numerous cases of lock up murders and the police brutality against numerous innocent people in the history of Kerala.

The issue of LGBTQ is a matter of dark humour to the film maker of *Biju*. A transgender or a guy, who happens be caught at the helmet checking, is made a laughing stock in the film. The hero hesitates to write the FIR against him because that person's name happened to be Biju. He doesn't even tolerate a 'wretched creature' like that motorcyclist to possess his (hero's) name. His very touch and talk is portrayed with aversion. The LGBTQ identity is dealt with bitter sarcasm in the film. Almost all the negative characters are dark skinned and all the positive characters are fair skinned. Thus, by all means, the film supports the dominant ideology that represses all other marginalized ideologies.

The symbols of state power is absent in *Maheshinte Prathikaram*. The only representative of the state power found in the film is Member Thahir, who is neither better nor worse than his fellow villagers in terms of his socio cultural status. Panchayath is the lowest body of the government, and the most democratic of all the other governmental bodies with at least a limited scope of decentred self governing status that stands in contrast with the centralized power structures that Biju represents.

When *Biju* advocates for the centralized state power, *Mahesh* stands for the decentralization of power. A film not only act as a mirror of the society, very often, it also suggests a model for the dream future society. *Mahesh* can be taken for a world without man-made boundaries. The totalitarian governments and their ideological supporting systems would often keep the boundaries and division alive, so that they can create an imaginary enemy, from whom it can 'protect' its people, and thus play the role of a protector and saviour and thus justify its existence and exploitation. When the rules disappear the ruler becomes obsolete, so, the people in power would not let its ideology weaken in the society. Film as an 'ISA would always try to boost an imaginary relation of the individual to its real condition of existence through an ideology'(Althusser 693). The film *Biju*, thus, becomes a pure example for the oppressive state machinery. A world without ruler and rules is the most democratic of all the democratic systems.

The centre of power always wants every individual portion (of society) to connect to it following the 'proper channel' of hierarchy. Any centralized and totalitarian system would resist a parallel network of relations that doesn't directly connect to it and feeds it. The intolerance of governments, established religious groups and political parties towards tribals and LGBTQ etc. are the best example for that. The whole plot of *Mahesh* is the result of a network of events that is related from (not "started from" because the network chain must even precede it) the dispute over the management of the NRI relation's land property between Sabu and Tommy. This dispute becomes the cause of Member Thahir's rage, and this rage results in the gooseberry cycle accident and that leads to the conflict between Jose and his wife Elsy, Baby Chettan's sister, and that leads to Baby Chettan's hurry, confusion and quarrel with Jimson's friend in the town and that to the fight between Mahesh and Jimson, which becomes a turning point in the film and it leads to the further development of the story. Each single cause triggers various effects, as ripples, around the spot of event, though the film concentrates only a linear chain of events more often than the other. Thus the film advocates for a parallel network of human relations or a number of such relations and it discards an authoritarian and totalitarian centering of power in the society.

#### **Moral Policing and Penetration to the Individual Freedom**

The term 'freak' is used in the at most derogatory sense in the film *Biju*. A 'freaken' is one who acts against the accepted morality of the 'traditional' society. In the film, the youngsters who embrace newer fashion and life style are treated as a group of wayward and stranded vicious people. The demonization of a differed identity and making them the 'other' is another instance of intolerance towards change, plurality and dissent in the film. A socio-cultural and moral code that verifies and scrutinizes to judge all kinds of social behavior using its own code is an oppressive system. *Biju* stands for such a system of moral code. 'Freaken', according to the film maker, is the only person who is not wearing the helmet. His greatest disqualification

seems to be having born to a panthal worker parent for wearing a unique appearance. His style and parentage are highlighted as a matter of bitter sarcasm in the film.

Mahesh's friend Chrispin, his lover Jimsy, and Jimson and his friends would have become the so called freaks if they had appeared in *Biju* because, Chrispin and Jimson's friends embody all the traits that the freaks of *Biju* are sneered for. Jimsy dares to perform a flashmob at the bus stand and Sonia dares to bunk class to watch a film in theatre. They all break the conventional codes of morality without any stain of pervasive stereotyping by the film maker. The normality and neutrality towards the inevitable phenomena of change is maintained in the film. Policing becomes justifiable only by establishing the existence of immorality and anti social elements. The film *Biju* plays that role of demonizing a group to advocate for the necessity of a controlling force and a ruling power in the centre. Thus the mask of a 'stright' officer that *Biju's* hero wears is thus unmasked here.

The village stands for the periphery and the city represent the centre. The complete story of *Mahesh* takes place in an idukki high range village. The beauty of the village and the rural life is projected in the film with due importance. The maintenance of peace, harmony and equilibrium through mutual 'give and take' (sharing) without any authoritarian interference is the back-grounding social structure of the cinema. Though the main plot of the movie is the development of the protagonist to the maturity of love, profession and pride, it is also the story of the development of many other characters including his friends like Chrispin and Jimsy.

The film *Biju* is not the story of an individual or a society, but it is the story of the empowerment of a repressive structure and also a tool for the 'interpellation of subjects', 'to tighten their imaginary relationship to the real condition of their existence' (Althusser 693), from the angle of a state power and as its 'ideological apparatuses', so that the authoritarian bureaucratic power structure can be legitimized.

The camera technology employed in both the films also plays a vital role in implementing the politics involved in the film. As *Mahesh* involves mainly long shots and medium shots, *Biju* uses close up shots and mid shots to high light the importance of the hero and make him the centre of attraction. Lighting also varies in both the films. *Mahesh* uses only normal lights, but the light is over bearing in *Biju*. Costumes are natural in *Mahesh*, but it is the most stereotyping in *Biju*. In short, the film *Maheshinte Prathikaram* leaves a mark of dissent on the one hand and the film *Action hero Biju* declares its solidarity with the elitist bureaucratic, authoritarian force of power on the other hand.

### Conclusion

Cinema, like any other cultural practice, act as a mirror of the society. As John Alberti puts it, Movie narratives do not exist outside and apart from these social codes and narratives; they are themselves constituent parts and cultural expression of them. One particular set of social codes and discourses that we have created to organize, understand, discuss, debate and manage cultural narratives themselves comprises the codes of genre, meta codes we most often apply to artistic narratives but that can extend into...larger social imagination. (Masculinity 8).

When there are two or more diverse flows of socio political streams in a single industry at a given period, the existence of a conflict and friction between these ideological streams in the society also can be observed. Thus, as two films released in successive days, fourth and fifth of February 2016, they represent the same period, same industry and same socio-political background. So, these two films reflect two opposing ideological forces existing in the contemporary Kerala Society. By the birth of New Generation Cinema in the second decade of the twenty first century, the Malayalam film industry witnessed a paradigm shift in all aspect of the cinema including the form and narrative techniques, language, content matter and thematic concerns, music and dance performances, use of camera, concept regarding hero and heroine, gender roles, location and setting of the movie, the preference of body and costume etc. The films which represented the New Generation trend were never the same in their degree of adherence to the experimentation and accommodation to the changing trend. A conflict between the conservative and revolutionary modes always existed. Most of the superstar films released during this period are examples for the continuation of the elitist cinema and its conservative values. Both modes attracted viewers attention, at the same time, both were brought under

sheer criticisms also. As long as the Kerala cultural sphere contains these diverse thought currents, this conflict would prevail in the cinema also.

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