

The Decathected Dalit Body in Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract – In our country from time immemorial Dalits have been treated and termed as untouchables, impure to touch. In this sense the identity of the Dalit in the mainstream or dominant perspectives is highly associated with his/her body. The visual spectrum is filled with class and caste politics. In the conventional film culture the upper class and the lower class are depicted in the binaries of civilized/uncivilized, master/slave, human/savage etc. More than print or any other popular media, films have wider accessibility and they function as part of the ideological apparatus in forming the spectator's sensibility.

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One of the main attractions of the film industry, from its beginning, is to look at perfect bodies and thus create a desire in the audience. Through that, films not only provide its audience a space for voyeuristic and scopophilic pleasure, but also an invisible space through which caste hierarchies and power relations are promulgated. Films thus normalize various bodies portrayed in the power web and hence a new language comes into being based on the body. The body then becomes a construct that is fluid and flexible. Culture and social realities thus come to be written on the body. The prejudice against the Dalit body has been so deep rooted that there has been very little Dalit participation in the mainstream films.

In Indian cinema the body of the Dalit- male and female- presents a stereotype in contrast to the body of the upper caste Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Viewed as untouchables, the male Dalits are depicted physically untidy, emotionally weak, intellectually hollow and an object abhorable because of their apparently 'low birth'. (Singh).

Dark skin and unattractiveness become common features of the Dalit body. Through such repeated representations the personality and condition of the Dalits become imprinted in the social mind and one fails to overcome such stereotyped presentations. This hackneyed portrayals of the Dalits is common throughout the Indian cinema and Malayalam cinema is of no exception.

In recent years many new Malayalam films depicting the lives of Dalits have found place in both the audience's mind and the critic's table. Films like Rajeev Ravi's *Kammattippadam*, Shanavas K. Bavakutty's *Kismat*, Sanalkumar Sasidharan's *Ozhiv Divasathe Kali*, all are seen as firm and realistic portrayals of Dalit oppression and exploitation. But

here one fails to notice the continuation of the hackneyed Dalit body. Even when the films receive high applause, the Dalit individual continues to be trapped in his clichéd body.

The Dalit male body is depicted on screen as dark-skinned, untidy, emotionally weak, violent and untamed. His dark-skin becomes a symbol of his impure birth which is in sharp contrast with the wheatish complexion of the upper caste bodies. Films like *Kammattippadam*, *Karuthapakshikal*, etc celebrate this hackneyed subaltern bodies of Dalits. *Kammattippadam* is a pro-Dalit gangster movie directed by Rajeev Ravi. About his idea of casting black skinned actors, Ravi has observed:

Except for Dulquer who is fabulous as a middleclass guy, all other characters are from the lower strata of the society. I feel they suited my characters and the way the story unfolds..... In a way, I wanted to break the conventional commercial cinema concepts. (Sreedhar)

The director is well aware of the stereotypes, prejudices and fixations prevailing in the mainstream culture regarding the 'bad' body of the Dalit. Though he wanted to shatter the stereotypes, throughout the film a critical eye would reveal that he is blindly adhering to the existing myth of the Dalit body.

The stereotypical image of the Dalit man in the upper caste mind equates the Dalit to dark skin, ugliness, coarseness. The representation of every Dalit man in Malayalam film is the same. They are grotesque, clumsy, perspiration streamed and ugly to look at. As Prem Singh says "[their] bodies are depicted in such a manner that their bodies appear incapable of pleasure or contemplation in life. It is depicted apparently as mere brute flesh suitable

only for labour". More than that, the Dalit characters are presented as illiterate, helpless, manner less and having ties with gangsters and mafia. Such portrayals of brute blunt realities, carnal carnivals and animalistic gang wars and violence quench the upper caste spectator's curiosity to know about the 'inherent' evil in the 'savage' Dalit. Thus they become decathected. In Freudian terms cathexis refers to "the process of libidinal energy being attached to a specific object" (Buchanan). Libidinal does not refer only to sexual energies but it also includes emotional and affective energies. Desire exists only in such cathected bodies. So by portraying the Dalit body as decathected, the desire resting on the body is taken out. By depicting the Dalit body as grotesque and ugly, the audience feels a kind of repulsiveness towards the Dalit and hence the notion of the impure Dalit body still continues through the film industry.

The same fate applies to the Dalit female body too. The tinsel space of the Malayalam industry is dominated by upper class fair skinned Nair looking female bodies. Still now the Malayalam cinema has not been able to accommodate a female persona which is outside the savarna limits of the Nair woman. Such a public acceptance of the decathected Dalit female body is silently followed and continued by our industry. One cannot conceive a Dalit individual without a black and dissatisfied body. This is the reason why we have many black-painted bodies in almost all pro-Dalit, subaltern movies. So we have Revathy in *Kakkothikavile Appooppan Thadikal*, KavyaMadhavan in *Annorikal*, Padma Priya in *Karuthapakshikal*, Bhavana in *Nammal*, Chandni in *Celluloid*, painted black in adherence to the existing ideology. In all these films the fate of the Dalit female is fixed: she remains ever as the dark-skinned, deglamourized female capable only for the sympathies of the upper caste audience. Charmi quotes Bavakutty, director of *Kismat*, in her review of the film: "Our concept of a heroine is fixed: what her caste should be, what her age should be, what her colour should be. That shows the attitude of our cinema and our society."

When the Dalit women are made visible on screen, they are created as the 'other' of the dominant upper caste Nair women. Through that the

Dalit female is reduced to her labouring body and audience see her only in those confines after denying her any sort of status outside it, all of which will help the non-Dalit establish their own intellectual and social superiority (Singh).

In almost all the films where Dalit woman becomes a character, she is robbed of her own independent subjectivity and is reduced to a passive object on whom the spectators can spend their sympathies. This is very much visible in the case of *Kismat* as the Dalit heroine Anitha, is a researcher and an SC promoter in her block. But this is not enough to balance her 'low birth'. The film gives freedom and

education to the Dalit girl, but still the stereotype of the decathected body remains. The upper class need a constant reassertion that they are greater and supreme which is provided by the decathected body on screen. A feeling not cathected with energy or loaded with a quantity of affect does not become fixed in memory. So the Dalit female is forgotten deliberately in order to establish the supremacy of the non-Dalit female.

Representations of body emerge from culture's designation of certain bodies as the ideal ones of desire. This determines both economic and political relations as a power structure began to get created through bodies. By critiquing the hackneyed bodies of the Dalits, I mean not an imitation to the upper class fair-skinned bodies, but a neutrality in the depiction. That means both the Dalits and the rest should be presented in a more or less equal manner. Body cathexis is viewed as an attribute to one's status. So by maintaining a neutrality on screen the screen status also becomes neutral. Thus the portrayals that justify and perpetuate caste hierarchies and give legitimacy to the oppression and violence committed to the Dalits, gets eliminated.

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