

**HEGEMONIES OF CLASS, CASTE, GENDER AND ETHNICITY: THE
POLITICS OF (DE)STEREOTYPING IN THE NEW GENERATION
MALAYALAM CINEMA**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through a survey of Malayalam cinema since the 2010s the political unconscious of the New generation cinema in Malayalam is unearthed. What is revealed in the process is the continuing strands of the class-based, casteist, sexist and ethnic unconscious which functions as the lynchpin of Kerala polity and culture.

In Malayalam films, the lead characters are almost always either from a middle class Nair family, or Syrian Christian. The hero and heroine are fair and it is the trouble-makers who are dark. The thugs are dark-skinned, with some odd features – usually a Muslim or a Dalit. Though casteism may not be very obvious in the surface, it may appear like something else. It is not like the caste atrocities, seen usually. Even when there is a depiction of caste atrocities, it is shown as something done by some bad guys, and not as a problem with the system. On a close analysis, the Kerala social structure is ably supported by the movies or more theoretically, it is constructed by the popular art. The New generation cinema did not very much disrupt this except the inclusion of the emerging dominant Muslim upper class. So Caste and class are combined in the process.

Malayalam cinema with its illustrious film makers, radical themes and rational audience has maintained a unique status quo, much discussed and deliberated upon by the academia and the common man alike. However, globalization and the growing capitalist trends are luring major conglomerates from the entertainment industry into the world of Malayalam cinema. The shift from realistic idealism to imaginative spaces has diminished the degree of social responsibility of the film maker in Kerala. Foreign co-production and crossover cinematic markets are now transforming the Malayalam cinema experience. There is a heightened indifference to ideological positions and callous negligence with regards to the civil responsibility of the citizens of the state. This is reflected in the production and distribution of cinema. Globalization has reduced cinema to a mere commodity, totally discounting its role as a producer of culture and, endorsing market sentiments with consumerism as the most vital element. The theme of subalternity with its inherent ramifications is yet to find favour among film makers in India and in Kerala. Progressive film makers of the 1960s attempted to address the theme of subaltern and dared to give the subaltern a voice, but they remained singular attempts. A pernicious middle class contempt for the Dalit question distanced it further from the popular cinematic discourses. Metanarratives of the postmodern Keralite society refused to address the intricate complexities of Indian social hierarchy rooted in religious, economic, political and cultural discourses. Voices of the subaltern remained unheard and the expressions resembled the angst and alienation experienced by the diaspora.

New generation cinema has failed to bring a new code or aesthetics in which women could be represented without the patriarchal male gaze. They are often revolutionized in such a way to highlight their 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. When the female lead roles are shown as overcoming the stereotyped conventional outfit; on the other hand, for the purpose of balancing imagined "morality" compromises. This compromise leads an audience to initiate to think over the presence of deliberately muted moral values and rejecting the unidentifiable "other" culture. As a result it can be argued that silent in turn hails with a loud cry. The exoticising of women in movies

tends to stagnate particular gender and cultures to a time in the distant past without attributing any sort of agency to them in the present political structure. As the explosion of the media has resulted in the production of all women as pornographic. Pornography is to appease men; everything must appear to be the result of their being there as a consumer. Men are trained to watch everything with a pornographic eye. Men produce and consume pornography; therefore, it is their subjectivity that is most immediately affected by it. For although pornography is apparently about sex objectified in woman and woman objectified in sex, the principal protagonist in pornography is after all, the male – spectator – owner for whom the whole performance has been arranged. Despite the much talked about revolution about filming and consumption, the new cinema presents its own limitations in connection with the gender question.

Characters who belong to Dalit and ethnic minorities become part of the narratives of new generation movies and this echoes the deep-rooted angst of the Dalits and migrants. The attempt is to establish their identity as opposed to the ones thrust upon them by conservative casteist/Xenophobic elite. Subaltern narratives found little space within the Indian social hierarchy with Brahmanical Hindu culture occupying the centre, creating metanarratives of Indian culture and heritage. New generation films do not remain in the periphery and but fail to persuade the society to invest in the narratives of marginalized ones and to establish their presence as a powerful genre of cinematic expression. Subaltern characters were once ubiquitous on the silver screen, they were the rural and urban poor, often famished and horribly deprived. They evoked sympathy and challenged the economic policies formulated by the nascent political structures, carefully ignoring the fundamental divide prevalent in the society and carefully cultivated and ingrained in the cultural identity of the community. The new generation thus failed to significantly create a politics of inclusion against the dominant ideology of exclusion.