

The Cinematic Discourse of the City: A Case Study of Kochi in Contemporary Malayalam Movies

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Abstract

Studies on city and cinema have become a major field of research. This article tries to focus on the representation of the city Kochi in Kerala, and Malayalam films. Kochi being a port city has been the point where people around the globe arrived to develop trade relations with India. However, curiously enough, the city still appears to cradle the western influence in nostalgic manner and also seems to cherish it through many newly organized events and customs. Kochi has also been attributed a status as the center of many underworld activities by the tinsel town and films over the last decade have celebrated to a phenomenal level. This article critically analyzes the representation of Kochi in a few selected movies like *Big B*, *Chappa Kurishu*, and *Chotta Mumbai*. *Big B* focuses entirely on the corrupted city life, crimes and revenge while *Chappa Kurishu* tries to juxtapose the lives of an upper-class and a lower-class representative. On the other hand, *Chhotta Mumbai* is a story told in a lighter vein about the lives of small time goons in the street old *Chhotta Mumbai* in Fort Kochi. This image of the colonies is constructed by the dominant institutions of our society. The media thus reproduced the viewpoints of dominant institutions not as one among a number of alternative perspectives, but as the central and 'obvious' or 'natural' perspective.

Key Words: *Multiculturalism, Cinematic Representations, Dominant Institutions, Stereotyping.*

Introduction

Cinema is the dominant cultural institution of our age. Cinema's relationship to the modern world goes to such an extent that Strathausen (2003) comments "film screen becomes the mirror of

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modern life". This must be problematized since it offers only a superficial approach to film studies. Like other cultural artifacts such as literature, arts, videos etc. cinema is also said to represent reality. This is a quest to unveil the reality behind such assumptions.

The fascination to portray cities on the silver screen has a long history. The earliest motion pictures were itself an example for this fascination. Lumiere Brothers captured visions of 'Workers leaving the Lumiere factory' and 'Arrival of a train at a station' which were the byproducts of industrialization in a city. Since then city flicks have an evergreen hit in the film industry. This has led to a situation which made the distinction between 'the cinematic city' and 'the material city' impossible.

Clarke (1997) opines, "...the city has undeniably been shaped by the cinematic form, just as cinema owes much of its nature to the historical development of the city". City has always been presented as a dichotomy of city/village. While village represents the ultimate utopia, city represents everything opposite to it- sin, corruption, treachery etc. "...on the one hand see the city as representing the highest achievement of the human race and yet on the other hand, as representing the worst excesses of humanity where corruption, overcrowding, crime, poverty, injustice and social disintegration prevail". Fox (2006) furthers the argument by saying, "...city is often used as a metaphor for our dystopian excesses: corruption, sin, betrayal, segregation, alienation and entropy".

This stereotyping helps the effective transmission of ideas to the audience. It is better to reinforce the existing notions rather than

introducing a new concept. Following this idea films continue to misrepresent cities in the same light. "Stereotyping arises out of the need to generalize in order to make sense out of a very complicated environment. It allows people to easily categorize new things into comfortable spaces already defined by their experiences" (Lippmann, 1922).

It doesn't mean that the imagined city has remained the same for viewers forever. It underwent subtle changes over the time. For the Hindi cinema industry, Bombay was synonymous to the concept of 'the city', "a metaphor for the promise of the modern in Nehru's India" (Raghavendara, 2011). Hindi cinema naively represented cities as a place of hope. By the 1960s there was a change in the cinematic meaning of the city. It acquired the status of a land of opportunities where the migrant from the village can ascend the ladder of success though ultimately the city will corrupt him to the core. By the 1990s, city attained an altogether different representation- as an extension of village. The cinematic cities "... do not have fixed meanings, only temporary, positional ones" (McArthur, 1997).

Strangely enough, city portrayed in the regional films is a variant of Bombay/Mumbai. In Malayalam films the city of Kochi has acquired the status of 'Chhotta Mumbai', a miniature version of Mumbai. What Bombay represents for Bollywood is what Kochi does for Malayalam films. However, it must be kept in mind that there are contrasting representations of cities like that of Kozhikode in Malayalam film industry. The cinematic Kozhikode continues to

embrace the traditional values of love, compassion, empathy etc.

In this media dominated age, society views itself through the eyes of the camera. The cinematic city comes first and then the material city. "Jean Baudrillard proposes that in contemporary media-saturated society, representation substitutes for real, that is, in contemporary society media simulate reality so convincingly that the audience becomes more familiar with the simulacrum than the real" (Mennel, 2008).

The researcher has considered three movies *Big B* (directed by Amal Neerad), *Chappa Kurishu* (directed by Sameer Tahir), and *Chhota Mumbai* (directed by Anwar Rasheed) to analyze the representation of the cinematic city Kochi. Kochi attained the status of a metropolitan city not so long ago. This development soon made its mark on the silver screen too.

Big B

Big B directed by Amal Neerad and produced by Shahul Hameed Marakkar and Anto Joseph under the banner of Marikar Films is set in the backdrop of Kochi. Its story revolves around the murder of Mary John Kurishingal, a social activist and her foster sons' quest to avenge her death. *Big B* portrays Kochi as a city where underworld gangs reign beyond the law and control system. At certain points in the film, the city of Kochi ascends to the status of a character. The initial scene of the film shows the murder of Mary John Kurishingal on the streets identifying "street is coded as a site of danger" (Mennel, 2008). Throughout the time the names of the film crew are exhibited on the screen, news clippings of various crimes occurred in the city of Kochi is exhibited in its background. This helps setting

an appropriate milieu for the introduction of a story about underworld gangs in the city.

The character George, a policeman played by actor Vijayaraghavan can be seen giving a narration to the new ACP Balaji Shaktivel on the nature of Kochi. "There is a proverb in our area- He who visited Kochi is never in need of a wife. Maybe it is the very same fact which formulated this proverb that attracted people from Portugal, France, Holland and even Konginis to Kochi. If you need a specimen of the world, you simply have to place a camera on the top of the city of Kochi". This narration points fingers to the multicultural society of Kochi.

There is another instance where this multicultural aspect of the city is mentioned. Bilal John Kurishingal remarks "From big sharks to small trout revel in the playground called Kochi. If we search for someone in this place it will be like fishing with a fish rod in the sea". This is a comment upon the different classes of people in the city of Kochi. "Cochin is a melting pot of cultures. The city has a diverse, multicultural and secular community". The identities of the foster sons of the character Mary John Kurishingal are also chosen carefully so as to represent the multicultural Kochi. They are Bilal, Eddy, Murugan and Bijo who belong to Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Gujarati community respectively. The film crew has given every effort to make their multicultural background obvious through their costumes.

The entrance of the protagonist Bilal John Kurishingal is shown through the arrival of a black Ford Endeavor across the Goshree

Bridge which connects the suburbs to the city of Kochi. Bilal has a notorious past in the city of Bombay. From the cosmopolitan Bombay city, the protagonist is returning to the emerging cosmopolitan, the cinematic miniature of Bombay, Kochi. The murderers of Mary John also hail from Andheri, Bombay. Often Mattancheri alone stands for the whole city of Kochi and its culture.

When Bilal plans to take revenge upon the murderers of his mother, Eddy John Kurishingal, his brother warns him "It is not the old Kochi that you know". Similar dialogues can be heard throughout the film from different characters. Later when Bilal tries to locate the murderers of his mother, another character Felix belonging to a mafia says, "It is not the old Kochi you are familiar with. We will make sure you are paid back for what you do". Bilal replies, "I know it is not the old Kochi. But I am the same Bilal".

These conversations raise certain doubts regarding the changed circumstances in the city of Kochi. Kochi is one of the fastest growing cities in India. But what the cinematic world insinuates is not the positive aspects of the metropolitan city, but the mushrooming underworld gangs in the city. The city of Kochi is delimited to the status of a site of crimes. The film portrays bars as place where underworld criminals get together and where crimes occur in the clear vicinity of indifferent people (maybe because they are used to it).

One of the main sources of income for the natives of Kochi is tourism. The camera frequently pans over foreigners who have come to Kochi. The character Eddy John Kurishingal runs a cafeteria for foreigners in his own house. He also plans to build a heritage

hotel in the land which is bequeathed to him by Mary John Kurishingal.

The slums of Kochi are treated as sites of crime and as places where criminals live. This type of representation of Kochi and its slums is a recurring phenomenon in Malayalam Films. Most of the sidekicks of the antagonist Sayippu Toni belong to this background. The police witness of murder also hails from a slum, Andhakara colony.

Big B effectively makes use of the colonial architecture. Mary John Kurishingal was half Dutch. Her foster sons are brought up in the environment of Kochi. The European parentage of the characters is given ample justice by positing them in buildings on colonial style with arches, alcoves and half-circle windows. The main villain Sayippu Toni is also of mixed parentage. The climax scene of the film in which all the local goons turn against Sayippu Toni can be read in a post-colonial perspective. Pandi Azi, a character played by Vinayakan tells Sayippu Toni, "You forgot one thing, our fathers were already here when your father stepped his foot on this land". The cinematic city of Kochi teems with underworld activities, where mercy is meaningless word and 'an eye for an eye' is the slogan. A positive narrative on Kochi is a forgotten myth for the present-day film makers. Big B is not an exception to this genre.

Chappa Kurishu

Chappa Kurishu is a movie which portrays the two contrasting images of the same city Kochi. It is directed by Sameer Tahir and produced by Listin Stephen starring Fahad Fazil and Vineeth

Sreenivasan. Arjun played by Fahad Fazil represents the upper class in Kochi whereas Anzari played by Vineeth Sreenivasan stands for the downtrodden. The initial scenes of the film itself portray Arjun as a metrosexual, overly confident verging to arrogance, ambitious, insensitive rich young businessman. Anzari is portrayed with a contrasting image, an introvert slum dog. Anzari hails from the northern side of Kerala, Thalassery. Obviously, he migrated to the metropolis in search of an employment.

In the scene, which introduces Anzari, the audience can see him attending a phone call. It is an advertisement to make a filmy dialogue the caller tune of the customer. It is a dialogue from Big B, a Kochi based movie, "I know this is not the old Kochi". The audience is indirectly informed about the changed circumstances in Kochi. A side of Kochi is booming into a metropolis while the other side of the city is drowning into darkness. "...cities, especially the Indian, depict vast disparities between the resourceful and the downtrodden members of our society in the most revealing form. Cities accommodate towards consumerism gradually converting all luxuries into life's necessities and on the other hand, the less fortunate inhabitants who can hardly be matched with the former in respect of living style, mannerism or cultural traits" (Gill, 1994).

Anzari lives in a thickly populated colony's rented place. The atmosphere there is very gloomy with no privacy. At night, he lies on a cheap mattress on the floor. In the morning, he has to stand in a long queue in front of the pay and use toilets for his morning ablutions. He has a cheap old mobile phone in his hand which is kept intact with the help of a rubber band. The hotel he goes to for

breakfast is a third-rate hotel and the only food he can afford is a “porotta” that costs only Rs.5/-. The shopkeeper often ridicules him for this, but he never reacts. The whole sequence shows him as a person not cut out for this dog eat dog world. This is obvious in another scene where he fails miserably in his effort to get a seat in the boat. He proves he is incapable to cope in this highly competitive world.

On the other hand, Arjun is portrayed as leading a luxurious life style. To exhibit his wealth, the film director has endowed him with two mobile phones, an iPhone and a Samsung Galaxy in contrast to the old broken phone of Anzari. He symbolizes the ambitious inconsiderate urban who focused only on his success. For him, relationships are only a ladder to help him reach his goals.

The socio-cultural difference of the urban population is represented in the film by placing them in different urban situations and also by allocating separate costumes too. The city is organized by “ operation of power and the struggle for power” and it is reflected in every aspect of the city too. “...these power relations are organized by social differences in class, gender, age, race and ethnicity which produce urban patterns and processes. Films reflect urban patterns by coding neighborhoods as rich or poor or landscapes as modern or backward. They reflect class in costume and setting, and characters are positioned inside and outside with elaborate domestic spaces and urban public space” (Mennel, 2008). In Chappa Kurishu, while the character Arjun is endowed with a luxurious, comfortable, spacious flat for himself, Anzari has to

comfort himself with a single room with cheap mattress.

Through Anzari, we will get a glimpse of the pathetic working condition of sales employees in supermarkets and malls in the big cities. They are not even treated as human beings by the employers. Anzari is abused even for the slightest omission on his part. He is an educated person, but he is forced to do the work of a sweeper. Every night Anzari struggles to get back to his rented house before the last boat leaves the harbor.

At the same time, we can see the character Arjun visiting the night clubs in the city. Night clubs are portrayed as a place for casual sexual encounters. Arjun lacks empathy and he is inconsiderate to what happens to others while he waves through his path to success. He stands for the typical urban youth who is immersed in the consumer culture. During a discussion for his new project, he casually remarks they have to evacuate 50 families for the purpose. He undoubtedly assures the corporates he can prove that the place which is actually a part of the green belt was never a part of it.

Once he loses his iPhone and it ends up in the hands of Anzari the whole story turns upside down. Anzari, the representative of the working class in the city seems to be empowered by that device which is product of consumerism. He uses it to retaliate against those who trample over him.

We are given glimpses of the busy city life through the places where they arrange to meet in order to hand over the phone to the rightful owner. In the Nehru Park, we can see a cross section of the city of Kochi- middle class people who have come to idle their time

for a while, children playing, vendors selling ice creams, street performers etc.

The night in the city is shown in its full glory. The representation of the city will be incomplete if there is not a scene which shows the presence of a streetwalker in the city. The director effectively incorporates that too. "...the street is often coded as a site of danger and sexual encounter, which in Weimer cinema was routinely embodied by the figure of the streetwalker, the female prostitute. The streets and the screens of the metropolis promised erotic possibilities that linked the city and cinema in the collective imagination" (Mennel, 2008).

Chappa Kurishu subtitled based on Thousand True Stories represents the two extreme aspects of a society through the life of two young men which happens over a span of 7 days.

Chhota Mumbai

Chhotta Mumbai directed by Anwar Rasheed and produced by Maniyan Pillai Raju is a movie with the city of Kochi as its backdrop. The visuals of the film are inseparably connected to the storyline. The places are used in a way to represent the socio-cultural situation of that area. "The way spaces are used and places are portrayed in film reflects prevailing cultural norms, ethical mores, societal structures and ideologies" (Aitken & Zonn, 1994).

The main character Vasco Da Gama played by Mohan Lal is the son of a retired wrestler Michael (Sai Kumar). Vasco and his gang of five live in Fort Kochi doing some petty crimes for their livelihood. The film begins with an aerial shot of the colony in which the gang

Chhotta Mumbai, who are kids at the time, can be seen standing on the top of a building. Our attention is brought to the story by a narration by Vasco Da Gama, "This is our Kochi. We were born and brought up here. My father says the salty wind of the west will make us strong". The story moves through the sequence of events happening in the span of a year. The film spans over one year's Cochin carnival to the next year's carnival.

Cochin carnival is held in the last week of December. Origin of Cochin Carnival can be traced back to the Portuguese New Year revelry. The festivities will continue till the midnight of December 31. The concluding custom of the carnival is the burning of the effigy of Papanji, a Santa-Claus look alike. "Many see the New Year as a new born baby, born on January 1, who turns old in a year's time and goes away at the end of the year, carrying with him the burdens of the passing year. Another baby or year is born the next day, and so along with celebrations the truth of life is carried forward in this symbolic burning of 'papa', the chain of death and birth, of passage of time, of old and new, of time and tide".

The concept of the burning of Papanji/ SantaClaus in the Cochin Carnival is adapted effectively by Anwar Rasheed to play a crucial role in the film. The climax of the film also occurs with the burning of Santa Claus at its backdrop. Chhotta Mumbai also deals with the mafia wars in the city of Kochi. While unemployed, good for nothing, yet good at heart protagonist played by Mohan Lal and his sidekicks are framed as local goons, another mafia with a police officer at its helm terrorizes the city. The street from where the protagonist hails is named as Chhotta Mumbai insinuating Kochi is

the miniature form of Mumbai underworld. Chhotta Mumbai is a street in Fort Kochi where such names are common for streets like Saudi, Pakistani etc. The slum where Vasco lives also resembles those in Mumbai. The film celebrates the colonial legacy of the city through the portrayal of Cochin Carnival and also by naming the protagonist after the Portuguese sailor Vasco Da Gama.

The back drop of the film is the slums of Kochi. Slums are portrayed as places where uneducated, unemployed, good-for-nothing people live which in turn becomes the center of criminal activity. The film points fingers to the inefficiency of government to help the people living there. There is a scene where we can see women standing in long queues to fetch drinking water. When the villain spits in a pot of drinking water, heroine can be heard saying this, "I may forgive everything else, but I will never forgive you spitting in the drinking water". In order to show the pathetic condition in which people live in the slum areas, an aerial shot of the emerging metropolis of Kochi is also shown to the audience.

Big B, Chappa Kurishu and Chhotta Mumbai have the city of Kochi as its backdrop. Often the backdrop becomes much more than what it actually is and assumes the role of a character in the plot. Big B focuses entirely on the corrupted city life, crimes and revenge while Chappa Kurishu tries to juxtapose the lives of an upper-class and a lower class representative. On the other hand Chhotta Mumbai is a story told in a lighter vein about the lives of small time goons in the street old Chhotta Mumbai in Fort Kochi.

The colonies/slums in the city are always represented in the

same way. Either the men in the colonies will be criminals or they will be good-for-nothing drunkards who force the womenfolk to tend for the whole family. Big B and Chhotta Mumbai are examples for this type of representation in the media. This image of the colonies is constructed by the dominant institutions of our society. Media institutions are “locked into the power structure, and consequently as acting largely in tandem with the dominant institutions in the society. The media thus reproduced the viewpoints of dominant institutions not as one among a number of alternative perspectives, but as the central and ‘obvious’ or ‘natural’ perspective (Curran, Gurevitch & Woollacott, 1982).

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