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Violence as resolution in Cinema Narrative A study of Malayalam Cinema Since The Inception of Film Awards by The Government of Kerala

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Shanthi Mathai

Abstract

Cinema as a motion picture medium with proper sound effects has the potential to provide maximum entertainment value to the audience. Story narratives are one of the key elements in the success of any movie and violence in different forms play important roles in completing the story and its impact. Socio-economic, political and cultural changes as well as developments in the field of science and technology have changed the world and the lifestyle of people in numerous ways, in the last 50 years. If cinema reproduces human society and its virtues through the stories, how much of these changes get reflected in the cinema? Has the cinema changed substantially during this period? The assumption of this study is that the changes should be mirrored in the story including the depiction of violence in the movies. It explores the differences in sketching the resolution of violence and vulnerability in the 3rd act of movies by analyzing selected movies of the last 50 years. The selection of sample is formed from the Malayalam movies those received the Kerala State award. The study analyses the presence of violence in the three different 'Acts' of the movie narratives and use of violence as resolutions.

Key words: violence, three Act structure, forced violence, causes of violence, onscreen physical violence, nonphysical violence, resolution of movie narratives.

Introduction

Cinema is a medium that provides worthy entertainment and experience to people through its various elements such as story narratives, and visual and audio simulations. The narratives of movies are mostly fictional stories based on human lives and their life situations and/or their relationship with others in society or with their environment and nature. As violence and conflicts are part of human lives and societies, they obtain an important place in the story of a cinema or the cinema narrative. In fact, violence has a significant role in the story framing and progression of the narrative. The difference is only in the amount of violence that is part of each story narrative.

This study examines the violence in the Malayalam cinema narratives and the use of violence in resolving the conflict in the narrative. The dominant trend in the narratives of Malayalam cinema

is resolving violence due to ideological and social issues with violence at individual or personal level.

Violence in Cinema Narratives

Cinema was the first mass medium allowing close-to-reality presentation of stories through its moving visuals and accompanying audio. Violence is part of the stories in varied forms like killings, torture, rape, terrorism, revenge and so on.

Many film critics note that violence, an activity that causes pain and distress to human lives, gets converted into artistic forms that can provide pleasure to the audience through the “spectacular presentations” (quoted in Bruder) in the motion pictures. Margaret Bruder in her study observes that aestheticization of violence like an art has become the style in commercial filmmaking. (Bruder). The movie recording techniques including framing, camera angles, and light and sound effects also play an important role in this experience providing.

Violence can generally be seen as of two major divisions: ‘physical’ which causes any physical pain or injury or harm and ‘non-physical’ which involves verbal, emotional and psychological abuse. However, violence can be of many kinds and there can also be many different causes of violence. The perspectives with which violence is viewed also differ. Explaining these, Arthur Berger (1994) throws light into the various angles of violence depicted in media and provides a list of 35 “bipolar oppositions”, for e.g., “violence we see directly x mediated violence, comic violence x serious violence, verbal violence x physical violence, violence to individuals x violence to groups, defensive violence x offensive violence, causes of violence x effects of violence” etc. The effect of inclusion of brutalities and their creative presentations on the mindset of the audience has been critically analysed by many scholars. They are not discussed here as they do not come under the purview of this paper.

This paper is confined to the study of violence that is part of the narratives of Malayalam cinema expressed through dialogues and on-screen actions.

Malayalam Cinema

Malayalam film industry has found its place in the world of cinema with its well acknowledged presence of ample talents producing notable films. From the institution of National Film Awards in 1954, eleven times the ‘Best Film Award’ came to Malayalam and the ‘best actor’ award was bagged fourteen times by Malayalam actors. The Oscar nominations from India for the *Best Foreign Language Film* include the Malayalam films, *Guru* (2009) and *Adaminte Makan Abu* (2011). Other notable achievements by Malayalam film industry constitute eight premiered films

in a period between 1982 and 2014 and one film winning (*Piravi*, 1989) the Best Foreign Language Film award at Cannes Film Festival, winning the National Award for Best Direction ten times, (Directorate of Film Festivals) etc.

The history of Malayalam cinema started with a silent film *Vigathakumaran* in 1928, the second *Marthandavarma* in 1931 and then the first talkie *Balan* in 1938. There were only ten films produced in the entire period of 1940s and a steep growth in the number of Malayalam films were seen in the coming decades. The number 33 in 1965 jumped to 123 in 1975 and rose to 135 in 1985 which again came down to a number less than eighty films per year in the coming years. The Kerala State Government installed the yearly Kerala State Film Awards in 1969. (Saran, 2014, p. 121)

The inclusion of social themes, while remaining within the commercial format, has been a unique element of Malayalam cinemas from the beginning. (Saran, p. 122). Meanwhile, Asha Kasbekar (2006, p. 234) points out “plenty of violence” as one of the predominant factors of Malayalam movies of the 1970s and 80s.

Study of Movie Narratives: Conceptual framework

James Chapman, after inspecting the diversified film cultures across the world from “Argentina to Zimbabwe” which also includes a detailed study on the Bollywood and other Asiatic cinemas, asserts that “all films are informed by and respond to the societies in which they are produced” (2003, p. 10). Hence, the study of the story narratives of films over a period of time can throw light to the various ideological, socio-political, cultural, economic and other factors that were present in the society influencing the lives of the people and molding the pattern of the society. Consequently, a study of the conflicts and related violence in the narratives and their resolutions can reflect upon the nature of the perceiving of violence in a society in relationship with the above said factors prevalent there.

Syd Field’s ‘three-act’ structure theory of screenplays provides an important tool for studying the cinema narratives. According to him, screenplays follow a ‘three-act’ structure: setup (exposition), confrontation and resolution. (Field, 1994, p. 60). In the first Act, the ‘setup’ phase, the exposition of the film plot and introduction of characters take place and usually takes a quarter of the time (half-an-hour in case of a two-hour movie) of the movie. The story unfolds in the second Act with the main characters confronting obstacles and dealing with conflicts, and pursuing their goals. Act II normally contains the first culmination of the narration and most often takes two quarters of time. Act III, normally the last quarter of the movie, presents the second culmination and peak of emotions or climax of the story. Thus the story and the conflicts get resolved in this third Act. Generally there would be two turning points or reversals which are called as ‘plot points’ that mark the separation of the three ‘Acts’.

Present study: Research Questions

In order to make a study of the use of violence as resolution in the third Act of the movie, it is essential to understand how violence is used in the entire narrative of it. The following research questions explain/determine the objectives of this study: (1) Is violence a consistent phenomenon across the movies in all the three 'acts' of the movie? (2) Is the conflict because of violence? (3) What is the nature of violence? Is the violence on-screen physical violence or is it nonphysical through verbal dialogues or emotional/psychological? (4) What are the reasons for the violence? (5) What is the resolution in the third Act?

It is to be noted that the thrust of arguments of this study is based on the story narrative and dialogues of the movies and the overall effect of the technical aspects. Details of the differences in the styles of narration or the related techniques of camera, sound or light are not included in the study descriptions, though they could support the findings further, due to space and time limitations.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is a combination of quantitative as well a qualitative research. It is a qualitative study seeking to find out the use and presentation of violence in movies ranging over a period of five decades and an effort to discover the variations or changes, if any, in the narrations and their resolutions in this period. It includes quantitative study also as it allows for comparisons between the movies with respect to the quantity/incidents of violence in each selected movie and violence as resolutions of the narratives.

The method of study is content analysis of selected movies chosen using convenient sampling. The basic criterion for the selection was winning the 'best film' award of the Kerala State Film Awards. One movie per decade was chosen, taking the latest one (2013) as the starting point, though by the completion of this study the next year's award was announced, and moving backward keeping a gap of 10 yrs. As the 2002 movie was unavailable, a 2001 movie was taken for the study. During the year 1982, two movies were given the 'best film' award. Thus, a total of six movies spread across a period of five decades were studied.

The titles and year of the movies studied were: *Panitheeratha Veedu* ("The Incomplete House", 1972, directed by K. S. Sethumadhavan), *Marmaram* (1982, directed by Bharathan), *Yavanika* ("The Curtain Falls", 1982, by K. G. George), *Daivathinte Vikruthikal* ("God's Mischief", 1992, by Lenin Rajendran), *Shesham* ("Afterwards", 2001, by T. K. Rajeev Kumar), and *Celluloid* (2012, by director Kamal).

Analysis of the violence in the narratives of selected movies and Discussion

Summary of narratives

The narratives of the six selected movies can be summarized as follows:

The story of ***Panitheeratha Veedu***, is located at the poverty-stricken situation of the fifties, sixties and seventies of Kerala and in the time educated young men started migrating to different states of India in search of jobs and better living. Jose, the hero who gets a job as accountant in high ranges of Nilgris, has to become the witness of the physical and mental torture on a fifteen year old girl Leela, by her foster mother and others to become a prostitute. Though he makes his efforts within his limits, she was finally taken away by the landlord's people to a brothel.

Marmaram, one of the two movies that shared the 'best film' award in 1982, tells the story of the headmaster Narayana Ayyar and a teacher Nirmala in a primary school, in a hilly region of Kerala their love, marriage and issues arising out of the fact that Nirmala was a divorcee with a son of about three years. Nirmala and Narayanan have to witness her first husband who was a political activist with Maoist/naxallite ideology getting killed by the police, when he came to see his son for the first and last time.

Yavanika was the other film that got the best film award in 1982. This is a crime thriller telling the story of the disappearance of a 'tablist' of a drama company/theatre group and the interrogations of troupe members and tabalists's family members by the investigating officer. Ayyappan the tabalist is a drunkard and has a history of marrying more than once and having a woman to stay with him wherever he lives. When he was missing, it was Rohini, a young woman and the main actress of the drama troupe living with him and she had to yield to him because she had to financially support her ailing mother and two young sisters who were in utter poverty back home. Finally it was revealed that he was killed by Rohini who could not bear the torture by Ayyappan any further.

Daivathinte Vikritikal, the award winning movie of 1992 is made on the backdrop of *Mayyazhi* (at present *Mahi*), a place in Kerala which was a French colony for 233 years and got independence in 1954 and became part of Indian Republic thereafter. Most of the French people decided to leave Mayyazhi and go to France. But Alphonse, a magician by profession loved Mayyazhi as his own and did not want to leave its people and its nature, irrespective of his wife's strong desire and compulsion to go to France with others. The narration of the many consequences of this decision is the story of the movie. The story ends with Alphonse's realization that nobody wanted him at Mayyazhi and ended his life in the river he loved so much.

Sesham, the movie of 2001 narrates the life of Lonappan, who happened to be a permanent member in a mental asylum spending more than twenty years there, as no one from his family had ever come to take him back home. He has become a very good help to the doctor also by understanding the pulse of each and every member there and helping them in recovering from

their physical and mental instabilities. According to the doctor, when other inmates do not have consciousness of space and time, Lonappan lives within a time frame set by him using a timepiece that gives alarms. The story of the film *Sesham* is about a filmmaker studied in Canada, Meera, making a movie based on Lonappan without a fixed script. At one stage of the shooting, she decides to take Lonappan out of the asylum and bring him to society to give him a life. But all her efforts fail as society does not accept him and bannered him as a mental patient. He decided to return to the asylum as people inside 'understand' him.

Celluloid, the best film of 2012-13 is a biopic on J. C. Daniel, the father of Malayalam cinema. It depicts his struggles to make the first motion picture in Malayalam, how his film gets boycotted by the caste people as it casted a dalit woman as the heroine, and a journalist's efforts to get his work acknowledged by the State government and the people of Kerala. Daniel dies in poverty and sickness without getting any appreciation in his lifetime. It is revealed in the climax that the film reel was burnt completely by the youngest son of Daniel when he was just six years without knowing the importance of it.

Violence in Act I, Act II and Act III

Table 1 gives an overall detail on the presence of violence in Act I, II and III, nature of violence (physical/nonphysical/both), whether the violence leads to conflict and whether the resolution of the narrative is through some kind of violent action, in the selected movies. It can be seen that

Table 1 Violence in Acts I, II and III

Name of the film	Violence Act I (Y?N) (Physical/Non physical)	Violence Act II (Y?N) (Physical/Non physical)	Violence Act III (Y?N) (Physical/Non physical)	Violence as reason for main conflict (Y?N) (Physical/Non physical)	Violence as resolution (Y?N) (Physical/Non physical)
Panitheerath a Veedu	Yes Both	Yes Non-physical	Yes Both	Yes Both	Yes Physical & non-physical
Marmaram	No	Yes Nonphysical	Yes Both	Yes	Yes Physical & non-physical

Yavanika	Yes Non-physical	Yes Both	Yes Both	Yes Both	Yes Physical & non-physical
Daivathinte Vikruthikal	Yes Non physical	Yes Physical	Yes Nonphysical	Yes Nonphysical	Yes Physical & non-physical
Shesham	Yes Non-physical	Yes Non-physical	Yes Non-physical	Yes Non-physical	Yes Non-physical
Celluloid	Yes Non-physical	Yes Non-physical	Yes Non-physical	Yes Nonphysical	Yes Nonphysical

violence - physical, verbal and emotional- are part and parcel of the selected movies of this study. Only in the movie *Marmaram* (1982), Act I, the set up part, does not contain specifically something that can be called as violence of any sort. On the other hand, Act II and III of all the movies encompass violence as part of the narratives.

More non-physical violence than on-screen physical violence

Another thing noticed is that more than on-screen physical violence, non-physical violence dominates the movies. The non-physical violence include mainly abusive dialogues that humiliate or lower the person's worth and status, discriminate them because of their status/identity, create stress and emotional pressure and/or trauma on the other person etc. It is also seen that the nonphysical violence is affecting the characters emotionally, physically leading to killing and death, causing health deterioration etc. In *Panitheeratha Veedu*, only twice – one each in Act I and Act II – there is physical violence shown on-screen other than the climax scenes of dragging the girl for trafficking. There also only the sound of the cry of the girl and the efforts and agony of the hero reveal the severity of the violent action, not the on-screen actions. On other occasions, the narration of the girl that she was sexually abused by the landlord and marks of beatings on the girl's face and her struggles to escape from her foster mother and the landlord bring out the intensifying pressure on her to yield. She begs to Jose to take her to his home when he goes home next time revealing her fear again and again. In *Marmaram*, the onscreen violence is almost non-existent except two very light scenes of the headmaster punishing the students. The most violent scene of the killing of the ex-husband of the heroine is told to the audience with

the sound of a shooting. *Yavanika*, the crime thriller also contains only very limited number of on-screen physical violence. These include the tablist Ayyappan catching hold of a lady artist with sexual intentions, and the final fight between Ayyappan and Rohini where Rohini stabbed him to death with a broken glass bottle. But it is seen that the intensity of these scenes are reduced as the story is retold to the investigating officer by different people during the interrogations. At the same time an ambience of violence is maintained throughout using the dialogues, nonverbal communications and background music.

Presence of 'forced violence'

In addition, the narratives include characters facing 'forced violence'. By forced violence, it is meant here that a person is asked or compelled to do something that he/she doesn't want to do. As this is against the wish or choice of that person, it can be considered as violence against the individual's personal freedom. In the first movie, the young girl Leela is continuously forced by her foster mother, the landlord and others to sleep with the landlord. The foster mother first uses verbal tactics like lovingly persuading her narrating her own life story, their current economic problems, life of prosperity in future etc, then shouting at her, and finally threatening and ordering her to obey. She also beats the girl up at times. All these make the girl's life miserable, fearful and traumatic. In *Yavanika*, the young girl and the leading actress of the drama troupe, Rohini is put into a choice-less situations to live as the wife of a man who was old like her father and already married more than twice and with children in those relationships, and was a drunkard as well as very abusive verbally and physically. In *Daivathinte Vikrithikal*, Maggi, the wife of Alphonse has to stay back in Mayyazhi, irrespective of her strong wish to go to France along with her relatives and community people and then ultimately becomes a sufferer of the actions of others. She is cheated and betrayed by her husband, her son and then by her daughter as all of them act against her wishes and thus not any of her wishes coming true. She even has to sell her body for food at home though she tried her best not to reach that level. The story goes on with the daughter being forced to go to the money lender to avoid her house from getting auctioned for the debt they had. In *Sesham*, no family members came to take Lonappan back to home even after he was cured of his problem and he had to spend more than twenty years in the asylum. When he was finally out of the asylum, he was humiliated and discriminated against everywhere as a mental patient, and not accepted by the housing colony members or parents of school children where he got employment. He had to take the decision to return to the mental asylum. *Celluloid* consists of forced discrimination on the basis of caste on the heroine Rosy of the film *Vigathakumaran* which results in the boycotting of the film itself by the leaders and people in the society. The first screening of the film in three places in Kerala got forcefully stopped because of the same reason and ultimately the director-producer of the film was forced into debt and poverty and had to die without getting any financial help or acknowledgement.

Violence as resolution of the story narrative

Act III of the movies take the story narratives to a close with the inclusion of climax and resolutions. Table 2 gives the details such as the main reason/s for conflict and violence in the narrative, whether violence is used as resolution in Act III, and the resolution of the narrative of each movie.

Table 2 Reasons for violence and resolutions of the narratives

Name of the film	Reasons for violence	Violence as resolution (Y?N)	Violence as resolution (Physical/ Non physical)	Resolution
<i>Panitheeratha Veedu</i>	Class/economic issues, Gender issues, trafficking	Yes	Physical	Young girl was forcefully taken to brothel and hero leaves the job and place frustrated on his inability to help
<i>Marmaram</i>	Social discriminations, States' dealing of naxal/Maoist workers, divorce, widow remarriage	Yes	Physical	Ex-husband who was a naxalite gets killed
<i>Yavanika</i>	Patriarchy, domestic violence, alcoholism	Yes	Physical	Killing the husband due to unbearable physical, verbal and mental torture
<i>Daivathinte Vikruthikal</i>	Ethnical, Cultural	Yes	Physical	The Frenchman, who loved Mahi and stayed back, finally understands that he was betrayed by his own choice. He commits suicide in the sea he loved very much.

<i>Shesham</i>	Society's stigma towards people with Mental disabilities	Yes	Non-physical	Heroine tries to bring the 'once' mentally ill hero to the society. As the society not accepting, he himself goes back to the asylum
<i>Celluloid</i>	Casteism	Yes	Nonphysical	J C Daniel, the father of Malayalam cinema, after the release of the film failed because the heroine in the film was from a 'low caste' community

Causes of conflict and violence in the narratives

The causes of violence in all the movies can be seen mainly as ideological issues and social issues. The first movie *Panitheeratha Veedu* deals with issues such as sexual harassment, rapes and trafficking of women and girls. In detail it narrates the sexual vulnerability of women and girls belonging to lower economic strata, especially that during the feudal era. Those who wanted to help and save the young girl also become helpless and had to watch the physical and mental torture and then trafficking of her, due to their poverty and economic problems at their own respective homes. The second movie *Marmaram* deals with social themes like divorce, stigma associated with widow remarriage, and issues related to the work of political activists with maoist/naxal ideologies. *Yavanika's* narrative is based around the issues of patriarchy, domestic violence and alcoholism whereas *Daivathinte Vikruthikal* is located on ethnic and cultural issues. *Shesham* highlights the social stigma towards mentally ill patients and the unwillingness of their families to accept them and the social mentality to incorporate them to the mainstream society even after they get cured of the illness. The main conflict and related violence in the narrative of *Celluloid* arises due to discrimination on the basis of caste and the intolerance of the so-called 'high caste' people to accept a 'low caste' woman as heroine even on the screen. Many years of hard work and huge investment to make the motion picture go into vain because of this and the entire life of the filmmaker became a failure.

Resolving Social and Ideological Issues at Individual/Personal Level

Finally, it was found that though the issues treated in the narratives have social dimensions, some kind of personal or individual violence is used as resolution in the Third act of the movies. The hero of the first movie decided to leave his job in the high-ranges and join the Indian Army to fight from the borders as he could not help change the miserable situations of anyone close to him in the movie – the young girl in the main plot or an old man who requested for his financial help. In *Marmaram* the narrative is resolved with the killing of the ex-husband of the heroine who divorced her as he was a full time political activist. *Yavanika*, after dealing with the issues of patriarchy, alcoholism, domestic violence etc., presents the protagonist who broke down on the theatre stage admitting that she killed her husband. The story built around the physical and mental violence due to ethnic and cultural discrimination, *Daivathinte Vikrithikal*, gets resolved with the friend of the Frenchman revealing to him that he was not wanted by the people or land that he kept close to his heart leading to his suicide in the sea he loved. *Shesham's* resolution presents the man who was not accepted by the society for his history of mental illness, deciding to go back to the mental asylum to live the rest of his life there. In *Celluloid* where casteism works as the cause of conflict leaves J. C. Daniel in utter poverty and life's failure, his son reveals that he destroyed the film completely by burning it as a small boy. But here in a way the 'personality and passion for cinema' of J. C. Daniel were destroyed with the burning of the record of his efforts and hard work as the first Malayalam filmmaker.

Except in *Marmaram*, the victim's effort to fight the violence fails and they succumb to the external pressures that put them in continuous struggles and difficulties. The young girl who tried until the last minute to save herself from ending up as a prostitute could not get a positive result. The main actress in the drama troupe, though decided to yield to the man old like her father and live with him for helping her family, became his murderer. The Frenchman had to see his wife selling her body for food at home and all her dreams getting shattered, daughter getting pregnant from her childhood friend, son cheating them in many ways and finally committed suicide knowing the failure of his decision to stay back in Mahi. The once-mentally-ill Lonappan tried his best to live in the world of the 'normal' people, but nobody accepted him as a normal being. The first man who made a movie in Malayalam put all his efforts, but could not succeed, died in utter poverty, without even getting any support from even his children. The story is resolved with the youngest son explaining how as a small boy he burnt the film of the first movie, thus destroying his father's life and work.

Hence out of the six narratives, the resolutions include two killings, one suicide, two self-withdrawals from the contexts and one destruction of the 'work' making it a personal loss.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study covers a span of fifty years from the seventies of last century to the present decade. Closeness of the narrations to the social realities and real lives of people can be seen as a

peculiarity of all the sample movies evaluated. Examining the use of violence in the story narratives of them revealed the consistent presence of violence in them spread across the three Acts of exposition, confrontation and resolution. It is seen that violence is intertwined in the narratives aesthetically as determining factors giving culmination and continuity to the scenes and plots.

Although physical and non-physical violence are present in the movies, the nature of violence is more non-physical using verbal and attitudinal approaches giving emotional and psychological impacts. Violence forced on characters dominates the stories finally leading to killing, suicide, health deterioration etc. Ideological and social issues act as reasons for the arising conflicts and violence. But it is found that when it comes to the resolution of the story, some kind of violence at the individual level – something that directly affecting and damaging individual/s – is used. It becomes individual struggles against the social problems.

The many similarities in the narrations bring in the scope for further studies and can be suggested in two broad categories: (1) **The narrative style and resolutions** (2) **Narrative themes.**

The narrative style and resolutions: Socio-economic, political and cultural changes as well as developments in the field of science and technology have changed the world and the lifestyle of people in numerous ways, in the last 50 years. But the study leads more into similarities of depiction of violence and its resolution in Malayalam movies. These similarities in the narrative styles with respect to the inclusion of violence and violence as resolution calls for further studies of violence in Malayalam movies and their resolutions selecting larger samples of movies. Notably, ideological and social issues are brought to the limelight through the narratives, but then resolved at the individual level in all the selected movies. An important question arises, is it that the resolution not predictable at a larger level or in a different way?

Narrative themes: History of Kerala had been full of social discrimination up to the first quarter of 20th century due to severe caste and class seclusions. However, overcoming all these over the years, Kerala has attained the position of the most developed state of India with the development indices of literacy, higher education, low maternal mortality rates, low child mortality, highest sex-ratio, good economic conditions etc. (Kerala Model Development (Parayil, 2000)). If cinema reproduces human society and its virtues through the stories, how much of these changes get reflected in the cinema? Are these not influencing the story narratives of the movies? Or is it that the award-winning movies follow a particular type of narrative themes?

Both the above recommendations require further studies with larger samples of movies – award winning and non-award winning.

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