ON THE FACE OF IT: COMMUNITY AND STATE IN A MOHANLAL POLICE THRILLER

The accompanying picture to this essay (fig. 1) is from a 1990 movie Mukham [face] (dir. Mohan), starring Mohanlal and Ranjini. Mohanlal plays the character of Hariprasad, Assistant Commissioner of Police, now in charge of investigating a series of murders which can be inferred to be the doing of a serial killer. The victims are all upper class women, and there are insinuations that the victims were of loose sexual mores. Ranjini plays Hariprasad’s wife Usha, a housewife with an interest in curios, who also has an active outdoor life. The house is also inhabited by their domestic help Kesavan Nair, played by Sankaradi, and their dog Jackie. Though Usha’s parents call on the couple very early in the movie, there are no signs of Hari’s parentage. (1)

The year 1990 saw an interesting mix of Mohanlal movies who was by now already a superstar. (2) Among the movies were three thrillers, feudal romance, a communist movie, and a folk-historical. Mohanlal has already had huge successes behind him – Kireedam in 1989, Aryan in 1988, and the third instalment of Priyadarshan’s CID trilogy was already out. If one is to trace the career of Mohanlal, he had just crossed the stage of being nobody (Sanjeev and Venkiteswaran 2002; cited in Radhakrishnan 2002, 33) and more than half a decade short of his next phase as the spectacular star (discussed by Radhakrishnan 2002) (3).

Mukham was not a successful Mohanlal movie, but is still interesting because it is one of the very few movies in which he has played a policeman, and thus out of his usual repertoire. (4) That Mohanlal has already been established as a superstar makes the movie further important, because even though the movie in itself is not a hit, the stardom would be one of the factors which decide on the parameters of acceptability of a film at the level of its production (Thomas 2014) as well as its reception (Srinivas 2009).

The diegetic context to the accompanying image is this: Hariprasad has just returned from his office for lunch. He hears from his help that his wife had gone out in the morning and is yet to come back, rounded off by “don’t know what she’s up to”. We see Hari deep in thought in the bedroom when we are alerted to the sound of the approaching car. The scene shifts to car. Usha comes in. The fidgetiness about her suggests that something is amiss. In the sequence that follows we see Usha, accompanied by Hari, walking across the hall, captured in a tracking shot. Usha is telling Hari where she has been, and sounds unconvincing. Hari can sense that Usha is not her usual self, and in the tracking shot it is clear that he is observing her movements. Usha then walks to the refrigerator, opens it, takes out the bottle of water and drinks from it, while Hari is now in an objective distance from her. Usha comes closer to Hari, and in the dialogue corresponding to the accompanying image (fig 1), she claims to have a headache, which conjures the image of a woman who wants away from her husband and has something to hide, deployed in numerous other Malayalam movies. Though this indication of licentiousness is bare for all to see, Hariprasad doesn’t see it. Hariprasad doesn’t see what is clear enough because the film has so far operated through a rupture between the spectator and the protagonist, which, given the situation, is no more tenable. What is available as ‘knowledge’ to the spectator is lost to the protagonist who nevertheless shares the space. For a moment the spectator has an edge over the star who is blind to the tell-tale signs of his victimization.

Soon the protagonist receives an anonymous letter which says as much as the spectator has known – that his wife has an extra marital affair and therefore she is to be the fourth victim of the serial killer. The accusation
turns out to be false, as Usha tells him the truth that has been disturbing her (to which I won’t go into), as a
flashback. As is wont, the truth does not comply with her version only in its essentials but even in its minute
specificities, like playing the same actor in both her narrative and outside it. All of these happen in the first
half of the film, to which this paper is restricted to, for this is the site of certain crucial filmic negotiations
which may be of interest in thinking of the idea of public in cinema.

So far the thriller operates on two parallel axes of seeing. The spectator sees what is not available to the
protagonist – the spectator is the privileged viewer of the set ups to the murders. The movie begins with the
long shot of a boat approaching a landing bridge and we see a man, identifiable in general outline, pulling out
something from the bed of the river. We are then to see the scoping of the gun, thus giving us a notion of who
the murderer is. This information is however not available to the protagonist, who has to come to the same
person through other means, making it a plot of ‘how to catch’ rather than ‘whom to catch’. On the other
hand, the protagonist is the privileged viewer of certain other information, like the piece of paper passed by
one of the characters indicating a possible suspect. We see the protagonist perusing it, but are denied access
to it nevertheless. The spectator has to come to know of him through other means, again provided by the
film itself. Thus each of these separate domains of viewership soon emerge as knowledge on the other side.
What the spectator objectively knows the protagonist will see, and what the protagonist objectively knows,
the spectator will soon see. Thus in each of these cases, seeing is also a corollary of a spatial placement. The
spectator is accorded certain knowledge which the protagonist isn’t because the protagonist wasn’t there;
the spectator cannot see the piece of paper, because the spectator occupies a third position. Thus the
spectator is involved in the film neither as the relay point of the protagonist’s eyes, nor as an omniscient
recording point; thus allowing for a third position as an active public incorporated in the diegetic as a
particularity with its own entries and exits. I shall further qualify this public as the extra filmic counterpart of
the public that is available in the film – a public which is not public at all because it is constituted as the
sphere of gossip – in which knowledge is transmitted through word of mouth and devoid of authority and
unamenable to an objective enquiry. The public in the cinema are in privy of ‘knowledge’ regarding the
victims, but this knowledge can only be passed on as rumours, and cannot be testified in a court of law. The
public is similarly unwilling to step up, except as conveyors of information in scare quotes.

The twin axes of gaze operates as the filmic counterpart to the operation of gossip. Knowledge is available
but cannot be confirmed or referred back to, is relayed across ellipsis and has to satisfy itself with incomplete
evidences. The knowledge afforded by a community of gossip is a binding force, but retains its force only
insofar as the sense of secrecy that comes with it has to be maintained as well as relayed. The long shots
employed in the depiction of the arrangements behind each murder operates within the coordinates of such
a structure – it is clear enough who it is, but will not give you a closer look for scrutiny. It will insinuate, but
never confirm. In that brief moment described here, the public is constituted as the holders of a knowledge
which cannot be objectively proved, but can yet sustain this communal public. The star appears unable to see
as long as he is in the register of the law. For a moment the social relation is fractured and space becomes a
holder of three different thoughts, held in a tableau of emotional separation. The wife has something to hide.
The husband is preoccupied. And the spectator becomes the point of suture whose mediation cannot be
upheld unless there is a change of register. The wife is now a target as well, but there is no way that this fact
can be objectively conveyed to the protagonist.

The specific thrill that the moment lends us is made possible only because the female is denied to us in its
interiority, as has been the case with Malayalam cinema (Pillai 2013, 102-114). We do not know what is going
on in her mind, which then renders her body to investigation, for the truth of her has to be assembled
from her corporeal traces. Usha recedes to her bedroom and is disturbed by her thoughts. Hari joins
her and asks her if she was not well, to which she responds that she is fine. We are soon given her as if
under a scope, from an objective position and untainted by her own thoughts (fig 2). Soon after, the protagonist receives a letter from the murderer which accuses his
wife as being a loose woman and therefore now deserving death which we see as it is also read by the
protagonist, thus ending the order of the parallel visions.

The moment that I describe through the picture is then the one through which the world of crime has now to be
subjugated to the communal order. Until now, what we have is a police story where the Police, as the
representative of the state, is after the perpetrator who is a law and order issue. But precisely at this
moment the law and order problem becomes a moral problem for the spectator in which the Police Officer’s
private space will now colour his public function also. Or, one could say that the public function now has a
private reason which lends it the moral force. One is now beset with two enemies, one internal, and the
other external. The external force, the murderer, can be gotten rid of by force, which is what will happen.
But the internal enemy strikes at the root of the conjugal modernity at the centre of the Malayalee moral
universe which came into being by controlling female mobility (Pillai 2013, 102-114). (5) That the protagonist
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The twin axes of seeing sustains two different orders

The Police Officer, who is also a star, is now a representative of the communal order. His moral force, as opposed to the legal force, is sustained by the perpetrator being a perpetrator in this parallel order, based as it is on notions of spatial approachability – on a regime of communal order of meaning production which privileges the face-to-face and therefore also those who can face-to-face. (7)

The suturing of the protagonist with the public each of who had so far occupied different axes of vision and knowledge is carried out by turning the threat to the order of the state also a threat to community which possesses distinct mores from the state. But more importantly, it is also the moment in which this order of the community appropriates the order of the state, such that the two parallel axes of vision is now conflated to one. The immediacy of the wife's narrative is what lends this order its communal nature. A parallel vision, which the film could so far afford, is now made an impossibility. But this community cannot be confused for the nation, whether linguistic or religious or however else it is thought of, for the simple reason that this community sustains itself by being the un-named. This is a community which operates through proxy and in the shade of the hear-say. Which is why it needs the Police garb.

Notes:


2. In an article published in 1988, Shreedar Pillai mourns the category of superstar and that the youth could go to such extent that fifteen fans were injured in a stampede in Thrissur on the opening day of Mohanlal's Moonnam Mura (1988, dir. K. Madhu), Pillai, cited in George (2017, 55).

3. One could also see that these laughter films were central to Mohanlal's rise through the eighties in a role distinct from the other superstar of Malayalam cinema of the period, Mammootty, who played the liberal humanist middle class single hero ethos. Mohanlal's laughter-films from the eighties boast of such resounding successes such as Boeing Boeing (1985, dir. Priyadarshan), Gandhi Nagar Second Street (1986, dir. Sathyan Anthikad), Mazha Peyyunnu Maddalam Kottunnu (1986, dir. Priyadarshan), Nadooddikkattu (1987, dir. Satyan Anthikad), Chithiram (1988, dir. Priyadarshan), Pattanapravesham (1988, dir. Sathyam Anthikad), Vandanan (1989, dir. Priyadarshan), etc.

4. Kariyilakattu Pole (1986, dir. Padmarajan) and Moonnam Mura (1988, dir. K. Madhu) are two successful thrillers from the time in which Mohanlal played Police roles, the former of which is muti-starrer featuring Mammootty, Mohanal, and Rahman. Vandanan (1989, dir. Priyadarshan), another movie from the same period, a hugely successful movie and still a formidable presence in the Malayalee cinematic memory, has a dominant strain of romantic comedy even though Mohanlal dons the role of an undercover cop, and thus...
inclines toward a set of romantic comedies (the definition comes to some strain if we go by actual plots – but I am avoiding spoilers) of that period by Priyadarshan such as Kilukkam (1991) and Minnaram (1994).

5. As Rowena (2010) notes, the eighties is also marked by the consolidation of the laughter-films which overhauled the liberal humanist patriarch-al masculinity of Malayalam cinema in the favour of groups of men from different social backgrounds engaged in a competition of dislodging each other (in unscrupulous ways) from the position of desirability in the eyes of the central woman character who continued to be the upper caste woman of the earlier cinema. Insecurity is a characteristic feature of this marketplace masculinity which corresponded to the increased mobility of the non-hegemonic ‘other’ castes and communities of Kerala. These films imagined these masculinities as aspiring for a role earlier occupied by the upper caste single hero.

6. To quote Michael Warner, “Intensely personal measurements of group membership, relative standing, and trust are the constant and unavoidable pragmatic work of gossip... An apparent exception is gossip about public figures who do not belong to the social network made by gossiping, especially when official or unofficial censorship makes scandal unreportable by more legitimate means.” (Warner 2005, 79)

7. It is interesting that the real perpetrator who is vanquished at the end is actually someone who is in a face-to-face mode with the protagonist. What is different here is that his presence there just as his dealings with the protagonist are strictly within the domain of the state even when it happens within the intimacy of the house.

Contrast Mukham with Kariyilakattu Pole (1986, dir. Padmarajan) where the objectivity of law is strong enough to consume the near and dear, even as the communal order strives to be the structure of feeling.

Works Cited:


ABOUT THE WRITER

Shafeeq is a Post-Doctoral fellow at the Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities. He was drawn into the world of movies with the Malayalam slapstick comedies of the eighties. He has kept a small place for his childhood mirth in the respectable guise of teaching Film Studies.