

Looking into the Progressive: *Yakshi's* Undoing

Sudha.K.F

Abstract

The archive for this paper is early Malayalam “progressive” cinema and the experiences of modernity it constitutes. This paper will attempt and locate “progressive” Malayalam cinema of the 50s and 70s as an archive; as a historical method, that helps us write histories of the disaggregate experience of modernity that gets constituted in the Kerala public sphere, through different socio-cultural formations. One key site of analysis is the melodramatic form of this cinema which is in tension with the ideological programme of rationality, which is privileged in the narratives. This paper as a preliminary attempt to tease out these points using one movie which best captures these two trajectories of enquiry, called ‘Yakshi’. Hence this paper attempts to extract the variable and contradictory meanings of the filmic text which emerges from the elements in the screen itself.

Keywords: Malayalam “Progressive” Cinema, *Yakshi*, Melodrama, Disaggregate Modernity.

Cinema as Historical Method: “Progressive” Malayalam Cinema

In writing about popular culture in Kerala, the superior/”progressive” nature of cinema of the region has always been a cornerstone for judging the merits of Malayalam cinema. This kind of

writing/scholarship discursively produced the category of “progressive cinema” as the ideal in the history of Malayalam cinema, with an investment in “realism” and a “progressive” modernity, even while the narrative is largely governed by melodramatic conventions. It is a category which was first used by critics, scholars and writers to talk about a certain kind of Malayalam cinema from the 50s to 70s, when a lot of “progressive literature” was made into films, and writers, directors, screenplay writers, lyricists, music directors either belonged to the Communist Party or had affiliations with its cultural movements like the Kerala People’s Arts Club (KPAC).¹ These films have been analysed by various critics to beckon towards the progressive nature of the films by talking about the narrativisation of class/caste inequalities, like in *Neelakuyil*² and other such films of that particular period.

The archive for this paper is early Malayalam “progressive” cinema and the experiences of modernity it constitutes. This paper will try and locate “progressive” Malayalam cinema of the 50s and 70s as an archive; as a historical method, that helps us write histories of the disaggregate experience of modernity that gets constituted in the Kerala public sphere, through different socio-cultural formations. One key site of analysis is the melodramatic form of this cinema which is in tension with the ideological programme of rationality, which is privileged in the narratives. This paper due to space constraints would refer to one film titled *Yakshi*, which best captures these two trajectories of enquiry. The film came out in 1968 and was directed by K S Sethumadhavan. The

¹ Kerala People’s Arts Club established in 1950 is the oldest theater organization in Kerala with the objectives of promoting social awareness to envisage a fair and just society in a burgeoning environment of cultural humanism. Also Ratheesh Radhakrishnan has argued that the history of Malayalam cinema has been written through this category of “progressive cinema”, “middlebrow cinema”, and has pointed towards the exclusions of excesses, both in writings of the cinematic narratives and processes of viewing cinema in Kerala.

² C S Venkiteswaran has written about the almost radical potential of *Neelakuyil*. *Neelakuyil* is seen to be a harbinger of “progressive cinema” that came later on, established as superior in terms of thematic content with its investment in social commitment, and superior in form too, infusing elements of realism with the standard social melodrama, in writings on Malayalam cinema.

script and dialogues are written by Thoppil Bhasi, an important Left activist/cultural figure in Kerala then.

Marcia Landy (1990), in her introduction to the book she edited on melodrama *Imitations of Life-A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, foregrounds melodrama as multilayered text and its study yielding several meanings. She writes that melodramatic content is marked by a constant struggle for gratification and equally consistent blockages. Its crises are articulated through familial ties, separation and loss, misrecognition of one's place, person and propriety. Jealousy, murder, suicide, incurable illnesses are all commonplace problems in the melodramatic mode and victims are usually females threatening the normative discourse of sexuality, property and identity. Illness and criminality are all constituted as the protagonist's transgressions against social expectations. On the other pole, are physicians, psychiatrists and representatives of Law.

Landy challenges the Marxist critical notion as all mass culture or the melodramatic mode itself as escapist. Instead she argues that it is important to see commercialized mass culture not as a monolithic unitary entity; rather it is rife with seamless contradictions. She draws from Gramsci's notions which do not see cultural products as monolithic. She writes that it is necessary to identify the nature of the mass culture, to understand the complex operations of ideology. She writes: "Cultural artefacts contain the marks of dominance and subordination, in their strategies of containment, but they also provide clues to opposition." (Landy, 1990: 18)

Thus melodrama is produced as a multilayered text and not unitary or coherent in nature. She writes that it "violates the language of empiricism and rationality", thus calling attention to the text's struggle with itself.

Hence this paper tries to extract the variable and contradictory meanings of the filmic text which emerges from the elements in the screen itself. When "progressive" cinema has always been

correlated with the project of rationalism, in this paper, through *Yakshi*, I hope to demonstrate the text as not an exponent of a monolithic modern project but as throwing up different calibrations of experiences of modernity itself.

Yakshi

Yakshi is the story of a college professor named Prof. Sreeni (played by Sathyan) who is a Chemistry professor, but is shown to be intensely intrigued by the figure of the *yakshi*, who in Malayalam folklore is the figure of the supernatural seductress who seduces men and kills them. Sreeni has a romantic relationship with his colleague. But he meets with a fatal accident in the laboratory while doing research on the *yakshi* and his face is burnt leaving him disfigured and ugly. His lover leaves him and he takes refuge in a house far away from the city and the college, with a helper for company. There he encounters a beautiful woman named Ragini, (played by Sharada) who comes to his house one night. The house is infamous for ghosts/*yakshis*. Ragini is shown to be passionately in love with Sreeni, who cannot believe that any human can even look at his face anymore. They get married, and during their honeymoon it is shown that Sreeni is impotent. He starts being suspicious of Ragini and doubts her to be a *yakshi*. In the end Ragini is found missing and Sreeni is shown to have gone mad. His friends take him to a psychiatrist who hypnotizes Sreeni and reveals to the friends and the spectator that Sreeni has murdered Ragini out of his doubts and anxieties and has fallen from reason, leading to his arrest.

The movie begins with a meeting in college where Prof Sreeni and his colleagues are present. One of his friends is questioning Sreeni about his interest in the supernatural or an irrational element like the *yakshi*. Sreeni, played by Sathyan, is seen to give a lecture on the importance of rationalism as a desired ideal, but justifies his interest in the figure of the *yakshi*, saying that he does not believe in it.

They are shown to continue the conversation in the next shot, outside the staff room, with the large college building in the background. Sathyan is shown attired in a three piece suit. He uses a fair amount of English words in between and fits into the urban modern space of the college. His female colleague, who is his lover, played by Ushakumari, is shown to be in admiration of his intellect. There is a certain confidence Sathyan portrays through gestures like hands in the pockets and a smirk at the corner of his mouth; it brings in a certainty to the frame, one that a modern man who believes that anything can be studied or measured with Reason. In a subsequent shot at the college corridor, he smirks at one of his students who is romantically interested in him and says that there is no time to waste for such trivial things. Thus, with the female subjects who are either romantically involved with him or is attracted to him, Sreeni played by Sathyan, is shown to be a man of restraint. There is no overt romantic gesture that Sathyan brings to screen.

After the accident at the laboratory, Sreeni/Sathyan is taken to the hospital and his lover who visits him, seeing his burnt face, leaves abruptly without informing him. This event is followed by a song sequence when Sreeni/Sathyan goes to the college. It is a romantic song, whose lines are part of a poem his lover had once recited to him in an earlier shot. The song starts and one is shown a medium close-up shot of Sathyan's shoe clad legs. This shot cuts to again a medium close-up shot of Sathyan's hands folded at the back, with a watch on it. This again cuts to a long shot, from the back, where Sathyan is shown walking. So throughout the sequence, when the romantic lines are playing, which is the male voice wishing that he was a dream of his beloved, there is no shot of the face. The face that carried the certainty of the modern man is disfigured and "fallen". It is only the shoe clad legs and the watch bearing hands that are left as markers of his modern self. Then Sathyan is shown sitting sideways, in a midshot, again the burnt part of his face is not visible. Then the camera follows his gaze, when he is looking at a couple, holding hands and merrily walking around. It cuts back to Sathyan's face as a mid shot-sideways. Then he moves again and camera follows him from behind,

again with shots of his feet with shoes and a fully formed shadow. He stops walking and the camera is positioned behind Sathyan and we look along with Sathyan at the statue of a woman in the park. Immediately in his imagination, near the statue appears his lover. Then the female voice starts singing, through the lover, and the lines are reciprocating his love. Now for the first time in the song, there is a close up shot of Sathyan and his lover romancing. They are shown to hold hands and rhythmically move in the park. Then the song ends with an extreme close up of Sathyan's face, where he is shown singing and is about to kiss the statue, thinking of it as his lover. So on-screen we can see a man of vulnerability, who now performs overt romantic gestures, otherwise absent from Sathyan's screen persona.

In the next part of the movie Sathyan shifts to the "ghost-house" in the village, along with a servant, who is played by the renowned comedian Bahadur, after being rejected by his lover and others' reactions to his disfigured face. Again the space of the new house is mapped through an acoustic landscape and lighting that is characteristic of any horror movie of the times. Sathyan enters the bare house and the background music invokes anxiety and fear. The house is mapped through the play of light and shadow, made by railings in the house, chiaroscuro being a key feature in the horror genre. Sathyan is shown walking through the house with slight uncertainty. The servant Bahadur is petrified by the eeriness of the space of the house. But in the sequences with Bahadur, Sathyan assumes a similar assured, rational self, dismissing fears as almost pre-modern and laughing it off.

Prof Sreeni/Sathyan is shown to be getting depressed during the stay in the house. The story progresses to him meeting Ragini, played by Sharada, one night, who is almost an impossible presence, in that space. She starts living with him and claims to be an orphan and homeless. The exposure to the disfiguration of Sreeni/Sathyan's face is made in sequences which come after he starts suspecting Ragini, who he has married, to be a *yakshi*. Here, he is shown to be under-confident

and hesitant. There is a song sequence in which Ragini tries to seduce Sreeni. Here unlike the previous romantic song discussed earlier, there are close up shots of his disfigured face, which does not stop Ragini from trying to seduce him with passion. Sathyan is shown to be not returning her embrace and appears very unsure of himself. He tries to walk away and subtly rejects her advances. The song is shown to be sung by Ragini with lyrics talking about female passion and the desire to be touched.

Conclusion

In this narrative of the “empty” homogenous time of modernity and progress, the fallen modern man that Sathyan acts out (following the accident) and the presence of Ragini function as elements of “shock” or in Benjaminian terms produces an effect of “traumatic value”³. These elements become configurations of the contingencies of modernity, rendering its very experience as disaggregate.

The seduction song sequence of Ragini and the overtly sexualized mise-en-scene involving Ragini in general destabilizes the overall narrative which is otherwise invested in a rational and scientific modernity. It is this desiring female that produces fear and anxieties in the otherwise rational and “progressive” Malayalee male figure of Sreeni. Pleasure in this text is intricately tied to the sexualized mise-en-scene involving Ragini. The presence of Ragini for the spectator is consistently produced as a figure of pleasure, but simultaneously also a figure of anxiety through the tropes of a horror genre. These tropes are abandoned after Ragini’s death, for a linear and pedagogic rational narrative,

³ Benjamin has written about the “traumatic value or the shock value that cinematic montage carries as opposed to the “auratic”.

culminating in the unraveling of the “Truth” by the pedantic modern figure of the psychiatrist in the climax. Ragini becomes that desiring woman whose passions are not within the purview of this desired ideal modern Malayalee woman, but is again constituted through a complex calibration of modernity itself.⁴

Melodrama is always mapped with its stylistic excesses and sentimentalities, often identified as a feminized aesthetic, whereas realism with its claims of being able to appropriately representing anything and everything is seen as a different epistemological project. The film in the first half deploys melodramatic excessive elements of the ghost/horror genre invoking a fear in the audience, springing primarily from the presence of a “modern” woman Ragini. Her passion/love for Sreeni coupled with her own playful and intelligent ways are things that make her existence impossible or either supernatural- in other words an aberration. A woman expressing her sexual desires to a “fallen” man and her singular presence without accompaniment of any elements of a traditional order in films- family, women friends- are the real source of anxiety. At the same time, the film also produces a liking for her straightforward and passionate manners. The anxieties are proven to be completely wrong, and this utter disbelief in this woman who acts out her passions and love turns out to be the real problem. That this woman had spotted Sreeni as a professor while she was a student at the college can exist only as a supernatural fantasy and that she arrives in the night ascertains these doubts for the spectator. Because can the good woman/heroine be mobile in the night? But the movie plays with these expectations generated by other melodrama socials and exposes Sreeni’s as well as the spectator’s paranoia and anxiety by the end of the film.

⁴ Feminist scholars like J Devika, Praveena Kodoth etc have theorized the formation of notions of the “Ideal Malayalee woman” in the Kerala public sphere in the 20th century, founded on upper caste notions of femininity, interacting with ideas drawn from the experience of colonial modernity. The new ideal “Malayalee woman” is produced with the primary role of being educated and to work, only to contribute to the constitution and sustenance of the nuclear patriarchal family. She gets constituted significantly differently from the earlier Nair woman who was part of matriarchy and was not involved in marriage at all.

The movie begins with a debate on reason and rationality, and ends validating it. But the film itself turns out to be one that mobilizes pleasures from various ‘unreal’ and ‘irrational’ sources like the possibility of the presence of a supernatural seductress, derived from popular and folk myths-the yakshi, which is validated by the chiaroscuro cinematography and settings of the house and the sexualized mise-en-scene of Ragini and her passions. Though the psychiatrist arrives at the end with an explanation that explains Sreeni’s illness in relation to his impotence and paranoia caused by the scars of the fatal accident, it is like an epilogue. This is because Ragini has already been murdered by Sreeni and there is nothing to be saved with this rational explanation at the end. What the spectator has already experienced and the rhythms of perception that have been mobilized in the films have been melodramatic excessive elements. Thus, through these contradictory channels of perception offered by the film to the spectator, a monolithic and unitary assumption of modernity itself is displaced. It offers many and disaggregate modernity, thus displacing the fixing of the rationalist project as the centre of the text.

Sudha K F has done her MA in Literary and Cultural Studies at EFLU, Hyderabad and is currently pursuing an MA in Film Practice at the University of Reading.

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