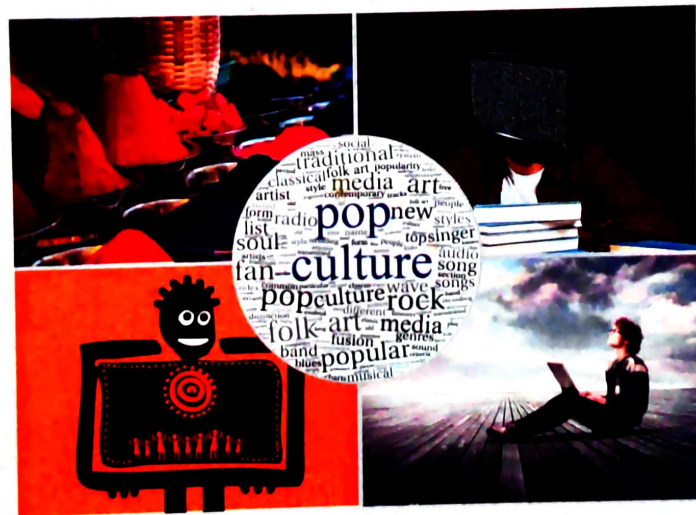


# The Politics of Popular Culture: Current Trends in Mass Media & Popular Fiction



Proceedings of the UGC-Sponsored National Seminar on  
Cultural Studies held at Mar Thoma College,  
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*Edited by*  
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CONTENTS

Foreword	
Introduction	
Editorial Note	
1 Rethinking Language, Politics and the Linguistic Reorganization of States - <i>Dr. B. Hariharan</i>	9
2 Picturing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of the New Generation Malayalam Cinema - <i>Lakshmi Salim</i>	19
3 A Fight to Recapture the Lost Kingdom: The Cultural Relevance of the Novel 'Kocharethi: the araya woman' - <i>Ratheesh.P</i>	23
4 Touring Bauls: The Wandering Mystic Minstrels of Music - <i>Babita B</i>	30
5 Gender Crossings in Contemporary Indian Cinema - <i>Sonya J. Nair</i>	35
6 Decoding the Ideology and [Mis]representation of Feminity in Selected Advertisements - <i>Parvathi.S</i>	41
7 Gnawing Conflict: A Perspective of the Pulayande Makan in the film Melvilasam - <i>Mary Paul Chakkachamparambil, C M Meera</i>	46
8 Representation of the Unpleasant: Sex, Drug and Woman in Jeet Thayil's Narcopolis - <i>Binu George</i>	51
9 The Implied and Real Reader-Viewer: A Study of the Construct and Constructed in Amar Chitra Kathas - <i>Renu Elizabeth Abraham</i>	57
10 The Sign of the Body: The Body as Expression of Self - <i>Appu Jacob John</i>	76
11 On the Trail of a Biennale Painting: Visual Choreography in K. P. Reji's Thumbinkal Chathan - <i>Cberi Jacob K</i>	83
12 Pooh-Poohing the 'Other'. The Politics Behind Tastes - <i>Rajeesh K.P</i>	93
13 Visual Representation of Bengali Diasporic Culture: A Study of Mira Nair's Film Adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake - <i>Subrata Kumar Das</i>	98

14	Semiotics of Murals : Thoughts on Kottayam as the 'Chuvarchitra Nagari' - <i>Vidya Merlin Varghese, Namith Kurian Mani</i>	108
15	The Knopfler-Clapton Legacy - <i>Anitha S</i>	113
16	Transcending the boundaries of Time and Culture: Evaluating the competency of Chakyar Kuthu as a satire, comparing and contrasting it with Modern Media - <i>Famina A.</i>	120
17	Transnational Music for the Global Market: A Culture Studies Perspective - <i>Dr. Swapna Gopinath</i>	126
18	Fair is Beautiful and Beautiful is Fair: Fairness Creams Redefining Ideal Femininity through Advertisements - <i>Sheeba K. Jacob</i>	131
19	The Twilight Enigma - <i>Thankam K. Abraham</i>	136
20	Tom and Jerry and the Dynamics of Modern Media Culture in the Literary Terrains - <i>Kaikasi V.S.</i>	141
21	Is there Politics in these Texts?: the Ambiguities of Representation in Arun Kumar Aravind's E Adutha Kalathu and Left Right Left - <i>Rajesh James, Augustine George</i>	146
22	An Examination of the Category of 'Cult' in Cult Film - <i>Labanya S. Unni</i>	152
23	"A Greek God on Our Feet?": A Study of the influence of Greek mythology on Popular Culture - <i>Sarannya V Pillai</i>	158
24	Indian Traditional Folk Media: Not a Thing of the Past. <i>Athulya Thankachy V R</i>	161
25	Maqbool: Adaptation with an Attitude - <i>Monikinkini Basu</i>	167
26	On Secularizing Mappila Art and Performance Traditions - <i>Jabfar Sadique</i>	173
27	Transforming 'Virtual' into 'Real': A Study of the Role of Social Networking - <i>Amrutha Rinnu Abraham</i>	181
28	Native Bapa and the Politics of Hip-hop: Modes of Resistance in the Cyberspace - <i>Sindhu Jose</i>	189

## Is there Politics in these Texts?: The Ambiguities of Representation in Arun Kumar Aravind's *E Adutha Kalathu* and *Left Right Left*

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When and how will the worlds of form that have arisen in mechanics, in film, machine construction and the new physics, and that overpowered us without our being aware of it, make what is natural in them clear to us? When will the conditions of society be reached in which these forms or those that have arisen from them open themselves up to us as natural forms? (Walter Benjamin)

The idea of art as a neutral reflection of reality is no more sustained or revered. In an era dominated by presentations and representations, at a time when the boundaries of fact and fiction disintegrate, the authenticity and integrity of art has been reviewed. All forms of representations including those of the media expertly conceal their hidden politics behind a seemingly innocent images and inconsequential utterances. As Walter Benjamin says 'the construction of individual/collective identity and the way in which the perception of individuals and groups in a society are influenced by modern technologies and certain ideological power plays' (Brosius 1). Artistic reproductions especially images have become part of the dense webs of a virtual reality, something that pretends to be firm, natural and true yet in fact the result of ideological and political ideas. Thus the political intentions and power struggles behind every media generated discourse reveals itself on rigorous scrutiny. According to Stuart Hall 'the representation does not re-present a meaning that is already there and static. Instead, he proposes that representation is a signifying practice with in a particular discourse that constitutes reality and thus identity in *statu procedenti*'(15).

With contemporary modern modes of mass communication we have to emphasize on ideas of hegemonic control in social critiques. When 'power' becomes key in the quest for control; systems which have the right kind of mechanism to manufacture it turn into instruments of oppression in the hands of those who utilize them to fulfill their intentions. The 'mainstream' that run such instruments of control, including films,

television programmes, and news broadcasts expertly utilize them to target the minorities. The mainstream would always attempt to dominate the minority suppress their voice and would also try their best to reclaim the minority within the mainstream fold. The film, being a popular media, easily aids such mainstream hegemony.

Today cinema is turning into an all powerful means of propaganda with many hidden agendas. In such a scenario the implicit 'unsaid' too attain importance. The seemingly innocent remarks or images may hide deeper motives and intentions. Film being not just representations but also presentations meant to generate specific responses from the audience. They target a wider audience, it has thus to cater to a 'majority' in order to be commercially successful. Cinema being an entertainment 'industry' thus holds the right mechanism which can 'educate' or 'influence' the 'masses'. Films which cater to the masses usually tend to include political, religious, and cultural content which can be molded to generate specific responses. These tend to degrade the minorities into type: repeatedly. The question is not of odd instances where ideas (seemingly harmless) are passingly uttered or presented, but those which recur incessantly in a concealed form, as tips of the iceberg, which sets off the warning bells. Minorities include the class, caste, gender marginalised groups. Preferably, for the media, those who are least represented and those whose voices can easily be suppressed. They become victims of an industry which still relies on old clichés to appeal to the majority.

Mass-movies tend to employ certain politically coloured agenda or specific ideology to seek consent from the majority whom they target. They tend to impart revolutionary ideologies with a definite plan of action where the minority voices are expertly cut off, and the interests of the majority are highlighted with use of dynamic characters who represent them. These films employ a radical agenda where the faults of the system are blaringly highlighted, with minorities playing roles of 'leeches' or social evils and main perpetrators of all cultural evils, and the noble hero is pitted against the issues of a society which s/he alone is able to solve. The basic political ideology being followed by such movies is that of a revolutionary one and such films tend to 'educate' the masses on how the system is inefficient. Radical ideas are presented as the sole escape route from a society plagued by age old ideas and 'minority evils'. Films of such order try to mobilize the 'believers' (the majority) in radical ideas of concerted action to 'reform' and to 'overthrow' the existing order.

Movies being produced in Kerala have just recently achieved a state of innovation and experimentation unlike never before. The so called 'superstar' movies are not the lone crowd-pullers now. Such movies are generating widespread audience, are becoming financially successful and

critically accepted. The director/scripter duo of Arun Kumar Aravind and Murali Gopi have come in the limelight with two such movies; *Ee Adutha Kalathu* and *Left Right Left*, the former released in 2012 while the latter in 2013. Both these movies met with overwhelming critical acclaim and were hits at the box office. These generated debates regarding a wide number of issues, mostly related to mainstream politics. Of the two, *Left Right Left* had to face a severe onslaught by communist party supporters in Kerala for its presentation of some of its party leaders in a bad light. These being the explicit issues, the movies expertly conceal a different sort of political agenda. They are to be deeply analyzed with the minorities being treated in them, and the radical 'Hindutva' agenda which they try to propagate. The paper explores how these movies target the religious minorities of Kerala especially Christians and Muslims and prioritize certain ambiguous yet hegemonic Hindutva power politics.

Both the movies try to stereotype the minority and to present them in a bad light. A thorough analysis of *Ee Adutha Kalathu* reveals some striking anti-minority ideas and this when read with *Left Right Left* clarifies the recurring sentiments. Ajay Kurien (Murali Gopi) who comes from a Christian background is an abusive, sadistic husband; he treats his wife (Tanusree Ghosh) as if she is a slave, insults and belittles her on all possible occasions. The revelations arrive later that he is sexually impotent, an incident which happened in his early years of uncontrolled womanizing lead to such a state. He is disturbed and tries to act 'manly' before his wife and son whenever he gets an opportunity. Lacking any kind of self respect, he forces his subordinate worker, who is a female receptionist, to send love messages addressed to him by SMS in order to provoke his wife. Reading this along with the portrayal of Matthew (Saiju Kuruppu), a character in the movie *Left Right Left*, husband to Jennifer (Remya Nambesan), reveals similarities. Matthew too is an abusive husband; he is a drug addict, a sadist, he assaults his wife and son at all possible occasions and is constantly driven by doubt on the legitimate nature of his son.

The character of Rustam (Nishan) in the movie *Ee Adutha Kalathu* is presented as a perverted Muslim porn video maker and supplier, a pimp who supplies *Bhais*, fellow 'porn lapping Muslims' in Dubai, with fresh videos. He is currently on a contract to capture Ajay Kurien's wife, an ex-actress in B-grade bollywood movies, Madhuri. Constantly browsing through porn videos in a high tech mysterious setting, within a room full of posters of women, shady dealings with contractors, Rustam is a typical stereotyped Muslim youth who has nothing else to do all day long. He has numerous similarities with Jason Fernandez, a spoiled Christian youth (an *Achbayan*) who runs a travel agency. He too has nothing but sex in mind, with an array of books dealing with the topic at his disposal in his office; he is seen presenting one such erotic book to Jennifer who seeks his help at one point. Emphasis is

made on his Achhayan status at a crucial stage by Jayan, another titular character who isn't surprised when Jason tries to act the 'shrewd businessman' these Achhayanans are supposed to be.

The gangster cum cut throat money lender Watson in *Ee Adutha Kalathu*, money lender Mammooty also in the same movie; sexual predator inspector Mohammed Bilal in the movie *Left Right Left*, the list goes on regarding minorities being treated as social evils. The character of Mohammed Bilal can be compared and contrasted with the character of Tom Cherian, the commissioner of police, presented as the useless, beauty conscious, play acting show-man, a typical buffoon in *Ee Adutha Kalathu*. Thus the presentations recur, they seem to express a statement; such minorities, serving vital roles in the society are evils which are to be removed in order for social progress. This is a highly biased and radical statement, which these movies implicitly make.

Observe the major protagonist of the movie *Ee Adutha Kalathu*, Vishnu, a symbol of lord Vishnu the transformer. He is presented as the hope of the city. A rag picker who 'recycles' waste materials into toys, he gradually achieves a well to do status at the end of the movie. At several stages of the movie he is portrayed as meting out justice and protecting the innocent, his steps are revolutionary and radical. He becomes the Lord Krishna figure to Madhuri, who once rescued Draupathi, when he saves her life by 'divine intervention' from the 'Rakshasa' represented by Rustam. His statement made at the end of disposing Rustam's dead body underlines this, he openly states that such people deserve the fate of the *Rakshasas*, which they are, and are to be obliterated with pleasure like *Maha Kali* relishing the killing of *Rakshasas*. He aids Madhuri's mother and saves her life, he catches the serial killer red handed, yet the credit is stolen by the inefficient commissioner Tom. The end scene shows his peaceful slumber, after a victorious spree of 'cleaning up' the city. He achieves a state of tranquility, unlike other minority characters; Watson's life ends at the hands of rival gangs, Rustam gets killed, Ajay Kurien's self respect gets shattered, and Tom takes credit for what he hasn't done. Vishnu's slumber is no ordinary one; it is the *Anandasayanam* of Maha Vishnu himself.

While the protagonist of the movie *Left Right Left*, Jayan doesn't enjoy the fate of Vishnu, he none the less metes out justice. He saves the life of Jennifer, takes revenge on Sahadevan, a powerful political leader who has wronged Roy Joseph, another protagonist. He thus assumes the role of Shiva himself, the destroyer. The methods followed by Jayan are violent and radical, yet he ends up as the one who metes out justice. The message is very clear here, in order to clean up the society; a representative from the majority has to rise up with radical ideologies and has to overthrow the present order plagued by evil minority. A 'holy war' is to be fought.

The radical political agenda of these movies doesn't end there. There is an implicit agenda to establish Thiruvananthapuram, the state capital, as a Hindu capital. The opening scenes in the movie *Ee Adutha Kalathu* present the image of a major temple in the district, with the narratorial voice expounding on the city's 1500 years of 'cultural' heritage. Of the collage of images which are presented as the title, cast and credits unroll, includes that of book stalls stacked with Hindu religious texts along with text books for computer studies; special emphasis is given to the *Ganesh Chaturdhi* festival, which is a recent phenomenon in the city and a popular north Indian festival. The statue of Christ gets a few frames while the Muslim population is completely avoided. Emphasis is also given to the dilapidated state of the city with its accumulating waste (Rustam's body is buried in the waste dump), inefficient political leaders, rising gangster problems and other abuses.

Here too a hidden Hindutva agenda raises its head. Observe two similar scenes in the movie where always alert and active RSS leaders aid the oppressed, in this case Vishnu. They save him from Mammooty who pursues him for the money which Vishnu owes him and from gangsters who have been sent by Watson, again on money owed. Mammooty is scared out of his wits when faced with the RSS cadets, he symbolically 'showers milk' at their feet; an act of reverence from the part of a Muslim minority. The dreaded gangsters who chase Vishnu are chased away by the RSS cadets, diligently exercising late at night. These are implicitly pointing towards the possibility of the new and efficient 'protectors' of the city; RSS cadets.

This Hindutva agenda is carried on in *Left Right Left*, with college students proclaiming the land (Thiruvanthapuram) to consist of Hindu soil, where communist ideals won't take root. Communist party officials are degraded into goons and cut throats. The leaders are corrupt at both the 'left' and the 'right' factions. Some of whom are just blabbering caricatures. There is no scope for trust in such inefficient leaders; the only way out being a radical Hindu RSS ideology. The movies actively, yet implicitly endorse such revolutionary 'eye for an eye' attitude.

According to Ella Shohat: "Each filmic utterance must be analyzed not only in terms of who represents but also in terms of who is being represented for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, using which strategies, and in what tone of address" (171). The practice of representation constitutes certain fields of discourses that later unfold courses of rhetorics with respect to the politics behind it. Every form of representation is ideologically and hierarchically tuned and secretly propagates certain images over others. Representations are thus authoritative practices by which social instances are negotiated, constructed and stereotyped. Cinema as a popular medium of (re)presentation too exhibits this personal/political desire in its innocently (un)real images. Arun Kumar Aravind's *Ee Adutha Kalathu* and *Left Right Left*

are politically coloured. These films have identifiable secret spots that prioritize several ideologies like Hindutva agenda and the hatred of minorities. This paper explored how these movies target the minorities of Kerala and prioritize certain ambiguous yet hegemonic Hindutva power politics.

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