OF VIOLENCE: BRUTALITY AND BLOODSHED
IN MALAYALAM CINEMA

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The depiction of violence in cinema has been increasingly explicit in recent times, paralleling the more unequivocal portrayal of imagery of sexuality. Violence involves physical manifestation of force on individuals, groups or nations. It includes psychological, physical acts of violence and is perpetrated within the personal or institutional ambit. Gender, racism, ethnicity, religion etc. may all become sources of violence. Its incorporation is manifested in several ways within the realm of a text. It can be a response to a specific circumstance or a means of asserting one's identity in opposition to others. The utilization of violence and fear may even serve as a method through which authority is exerted over the physical form; intentionally employed as a strategic approach to maintain its subjugation. These mechanisms of subjection constitute a 'political technology of the body' where punishment becomes a spectacle (of power and control). Genre specific, crime/gangster/action/war/apocalyptic, films predominantly feature acts of violence and portray an exaggerated and fictionalized depiction (a spectacle) of individuals involved in illegal activities and criminal organizations operating beyond the boundaries of legal framework. The portrayal of violence in cinema elicits an aesthetic reaction in viewers, evoking emotions like terror. In numerous films, this experience of fear and the unpleasant is transformed into an 'aesthetic interim' that is ultimately surmounted through the restoration of beauty.

The identification of patterns and tropes of violence within genres has been a subject of scholarly inquiry. Violence is a recurring element in Malayalam cinema. It is often employed as a component of cinematic narratives or as a means of resolving plotlines. As the story progresses the narrative, framing, camera angles, light, audio, and visual simulation become important elements keeping the audience hooked. The origins of violence depicted in films mostly stem from ideological and sociological factors. In visualization on screen the violence shifts from covert to overt action—mostly to a domain

of the "Other". There is a clear opposition between the perpetrator and the victim. This paper explores the representation of violence in Malayalam cinema taking for analysis selected movies of the last decade. Violence (or context) here is 'fictional' (re/created on screen, has a 'reel' life that is functional in the cinematic space) as against the 'non-fictional' which takes place in a particular temporal and spatial context, and is witnessed by either onlookers or individuals directly involved in or affected by the violent act. The site of violence is the human body. The means of representing can be mimetic, graphic, allusive metaphorical, cloaking the reality of violence or aestheticizing (aesthetically sanitized and morally justified) it. While the subject matter is offensive and reprehensible, the representation of violence paradoxically turns to be pleasurable to the audience. These visual moments when a character shows proclivity towards violence, raises question as to whether the film is itself an instrument of violence.

Violence in the cinematic space can manifest itself through several methods, including the deployment of intimidation, verbal eruptions, nonverbal cues, and acts of destruction. The inclusion of violence enables the audience to engage as 'active participants'. Edling and Rostami argue that violence can be organized, regulated, and incorporated within the social fabric. The presence of violence, including the inherent violence embedded in language, has the capacity to reinforce the power dynamics favouring men, both in their interactions with women and other men. It is a pervasive tool widely prevalent and commonly connected with the concept of masculinity. Institutionalized violence exists within the military and colonial contexts, sexualized violence within patriarchal power structures; structural violence on the other hand arises from long-standing systems of oppression and inequality. The concept of violence also serves to characterize the mechanisms that function in the ongoing perpetuation of the societal framework as a whole. Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Slavoj Zizek all have engaged in profound intellectual inquiries into the significance and positioning of violence. Walter Benjamin in his "Critique of Violence" reveals the connection between violence and the law; exposing the violence inherent in the law itself. In an authoritarian political regime, violence can serve as an underlying expectation, representing a widely accepted reality. Slavoj Žižek instead employs a multidisciplinary approach to scrutinize the intricate dynamics underlying our comprehension and misapprehension of violence. He delineates three distinct forms of violence--*Subjectivity* (the direct involvement of the subject in a given situation), *Symbolic* (language and its connection to racism, hate speech, and social dominance patterns that are ingrained within the fabric of everyday discourse), and the *Systemic* (arising from prevailing political and economic institutions). According to Pierre Bourdieu, the perpetuation of male dominance in society is upheld through a subtle and imperceptible form of violence that remains undetectable even to those subjected to it. This form of violence serves to reproduce and establish the gendered hierarchy within society,

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as evidenced by the normative perceptions of masculinity and femininity that prevail in various institutions like family and the state. He considers masculine domination as a prominent illustration of symbolic violence. This form of violence is characterized by its subtle, imperceptible, and all-encompassing nature, exerted through the routine activities of social existence. The concept of 'regimes of violence' is associated with the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, particularly in his collaboration with Félix Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari introduced (as part of their broader exploration of social and political structures) the idea of 'regimes of signs' and 'regimes of violence' as ways of understanding the organization of society and power structures. Rejecting traditional binary oppositions they sought to understand the world in terms of multiplicities and assemblages. They argued that everything is connected and interrelated, forming complex networks of relations. Regimes of Signs represent the semiotic or symbolic systems through which society operates. They encompass language, culture, and the various ways in which meaning is created and transmitted. Regimes of signs are essential for the functioning of any social order. Regimes of Violence, in contrast are the material, repressive aspects of social organization. They involve the exercise of power and control, often through institutions, laws, and other mechanisms of social coercion.

Johan Galtung's conceptualization of violence as the imposition of limitations on human potential enables an extensive understanding of violence across its diverse manifestations. This typology of violence elucidates the intricate interplay between violence and the political structure. Galtung discerns three overarching categories, which he refers to as super-types, to encapsulate the various kinds of violence. He categorized violence into direct, structural and cultural violence. Direct violence encompasses both physical and verbal forms of abuse, and is closely intertwined with structural and cultural violence. Galtung emphasizes that—"One way cultural violence works is by changing the moral colour of an act from red/wrong to green/right or at least yellow/ acceptable…Another way is by making reality opaque so that we do not see the violent act or fact, or at least not as violent" (1990, 292). According to Scheper-Hughes, the concept of structural violence pertains to the tendency of individuals to devalue socially marginalized individuals, considering them as expendable non-persons. Domination, exploitation, and humiliation can be understood as forms of structural violence, which ultimately manifest in physical violence as a means of compelling individuals to assume a subordinate place within the power hierarchy. The system assists the perpetrators of violence to venture upon inflicting damage to the socially construed powerless humans who are discriminated based on their caste. "Aspects of a people's culture such as religion, art, ideology, language, science, communal and symbolic elements are used to justify or legitimize structural or direct violence" (Lee 134). To Hannah Arendt, violence is constructed and serves a certain function within the realm of politics. Arendt argues that the use of violence is inherently illegitimate, yet she acknowledges that there may be circumstances in which it might be

morally justified. Anderson's concept of the shared genesis of nation-states, as expounded upon by Fukuyama, posits that this notion serves as a catalyst for numerous disputes and acts of violence. This is mostly due to the fact that national identities are constructed in contrast to others, hence perpetuating a cycle of conflict. The concept of the nation engenders a collective feeling of unity among its inhabitants and is often regarded as a profound form of horizontal camaraderie (Anderson 7). Consequently, individuals who are excluded from this construct may experience acts of violence, which serve to uphold the homogeneity and exclusive character of the nation-state.

Violence involves torture. It consists of a primary physical act which inflicts pain, and also a verbal act of interrogation. In the very processes it uses to produce pain within the body of the victim, it bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually private and incommunicable, contained within the boundaries of the sufferer's body. It goes on to become a spectacle of power (as in caste, gender or racial violence). Various forms of violence; gender, caste, sexual, racial as well as campus related are portrayed in Malayalam cinema. The portrayal of rape and violence against women has been a recurring theme in Indian cinema. These depictions (*Puthiya Niyamam* 2016, *The Great Father* 2017, *Teacher* 2022) often serve the purpose of either highlighting the extreme brutality inflicted upon women or contributing to the character development of the hero, while also reinforcing prevailing societal ideologies. This phenomenon gives rise to intricate power relations involving instances of sexual harassment and rape, as well as the exertion of masculine dominance and power. Caste hatred and violence that works in Kerala is explored in *Puzhu* (2022), and the violence unleashed by nature (as landslide) in *Malayankunju* (2022). The screen (especially of action/thriller movies) becomes a space of violence and bloodshed. Films like *Papilio Budha* (2013), *Ozhivu Divasathe Kali* (2013), *Kala* (2021), *Nayattu* (2021) foreground the social aspect of violence. Indian cinema itself has seen recent releases like *Jailer* (2023, Tamil), *Vikram* (2022, Tamil), *RRR* (2022, Telugu), *KGF 2* (2022, Kannada), *Maamannan* (2023, Tamil), and *Veera Simha Reddy* (2023, Telugu), with a substantial portrayal of bloodshed and violence on a grand scale. Dulquer Salmaan's *King of Kotha* (2023) in line with gangster films, portrays violence and gore locating it in a fictional crime-infested town. The film *Christopher* (2023) an action thriller, starring Mammootty, has sequences depicting rape filmed graphically disturbing manner. Spookiness and a sense of dread fill the revenge thriller *Ela Veezha Poonchira* (2022) as parts of the human body are discovered in different areas of a hill station. The violence and fear implicitly recreated on screen carry a moral value beneath it (that evil will be punished, the audience leaving the theatre happy or sad as the film ends in retribution and poetic justice). This 'entertainment violence' (as in *Thallumala* 2022) grabs the viewer's attention through depiction of brutal aggressiveness. Manliness/masculinity gets inextricably linked to the ability to re/act violently and evoking fear. The verbal conventions of bragging and threat, stories about gallant fights fought, all add to make

violence vicious and ugly on screen (as in the campus life recreated in *Oru Mexican Aparatha* or *Masterpiece*). *Gangster* (2014) revolves around revenge and violence. Extensive periods of silence, a slow background score playing through and slow motion sequences in such movies create an ambience of hovering violence and hidden threat. The hero slits throats, spills blood, and proves himself a 'gangster'. The use of shadow animation, the narrator's voice, the initial setting in Bombay all work to provide the necessary background to the creation of a discordant and violent note in *Gangster*. The city of Kochi gripped by violence, corruption, brutal killings and rape forms the background in most Malayalam movies. Ruffianism and violence of the hero gets conveyed also through his physicality; moustache, bloodshot eyes as well as his body language, gestures and dialogues. He commands the screen with his intense stare, snarl and coarse look.

Violence and villainous deeds are incorporated within an entertainment frame to convey evil and highlight good. It functions as a survival strategy, a mode of punishment, a way to induce fear and thus submission, as well as a sign of loyalty and identification. The use of violence as a method of disciplining, to uphold the cultural order imposed from above/the state machinery (like the use of tear gas or *lathi* to get control over violence, signifying the enormous power of state machinery) also involves the bringing in of the violent into the cinematic content. The strengthening of social relationships among gang members, in a hostile environment, leading to violence is utilized as a significant means of demonstrating loyalty. A background account is often provided by the cinematic narrative to indicate the factors outside the situation that lead up to and cause the violence. The insertion of the comic into fights covers up tension and fear, and the audience takes the 'entertainment' without the horrified attitude that occurs with 'real' violence. Transgressions, sexual assault, domestic violence, rape, organized violence are all employed according to the plot in Malayalam cinema. Violence is signified by physical manifestations like bruises, black eye, broken bones, contusions and concussions. To validate masculinity, heroes spew patriarchal vitriol and indulge in violence. The representation of murder/violence correspondingly involves the aestheticization of death, which places the murderer on par with an 'artist.' A mutilated body becomes an object of fascination and revulsion on screen. The aestheticization of suffering/violence is produced by a visual and linguistic complex that eliminates the pain of suffering while retaining the phantasmagoric effects. Malayalam films are replete with gangsters and brutal police force imposing violence and bloodshed on screen.

Verbal and brutal physical assaults abound in films like *Kasaba* (2016), lacing the narrative with sexist humour and lewd jokes. The film through the depiction of violence cursorily refers to the systemic issues that become a burden to the ordinary man. The characters find themselves surrounded and constrained by a corrupt system and are compelled to move outside it to deliver justice to the beleaguered common folk. Films like *Left Right Left* (2013), and *Oru Mexican Aparatha* (2017) revolve around brutal political

murders, deceit and violence. Student-police confrontation, encounters, lathi charges, stamping and bloodshed are a part of the visuals here. Unpleasant student politics, party politics and brutal martyrdoms, fist fights, cycle chain attacks, shouting and yelling fill the screen. In movies like *Angamaly Diaries* (2017) the villain has attained more of an iconic status. Instances of political violence, red tapism and bribery rule abound in Malayalam. Fights end in punishing the antaonist. Many early Malayalam films have also dealt with the nexus between politics and crime which provide ugly onscreen instances of violence—*Rajavinte Makan* (1986), *Irupatham Noottandu* (1987), *Samrajyam* (1990), *Abhimanyu* (1991), as well as *Aryan* (1998) provide instances of this.

In the contemporary cinematic space, the metropolitan world in which values are continuously overturned provides the background for violence; to demonstrate both what is horrible about the modern condition and also as a counterpoint of liberation and the opening of possibilities. It mostly focuses on city life as incarnating the loneliness and alienation of capitalist modernity. The visual culture explores the liveliness of the metros as well as the depths of moral corruption to which human beings can be reduced. The city is mostly portrayed as 'corrupting,' but material advancement in it is made so enticing that the attractions override any discourse about its evils. Corrupt law enforcers, dons in blazers, and dark glasses dolling out 'justice' indicate the mushrooming criminal elements in metros (like Kochi). Many of the contemporary films deal with the cultural landscape of Kochi (known as chotta Mumbai) and its underbelly. This offers much scope for the visualization of modern life, crime and violence. Places like Mattancheri and Fort Kochi have become prominent as 'locales' in the narrative. Images of urban modernity (often, contrarily, associated with progress as well as the ugly) are increasingly becoming a part of contemporary cinema. The bustling crowd makes it a claustrophobic space filled with violence and deceit. The city signifies urban cultural representation—'infested' by malls, fast food, traffic jams, underworld and quotation groups (seeping into even 'real' lives of actors and actresses), crime and after effects of globalization. While on the one hand cities like Kochi are visualized as representing the highest achievement of the human race; on the other it is imagined as representing the worst excesses of humanity where corruption, overcrowding, crime, poverty, injustice and social disintegration prevail. City becomes a metaphor for the dystopian excesses—corruption, sin, betrayal, segregation, alienation and entropy. The cinematic city comes first and then the material city for, in a contemporary media-saturated society representation substitutes for the real. In contemporary society (as Jean Baudrillard proposes) media simulate reality so convincingly that the audience becomes more familiar with the simulacrum than the real. Towns are dehumanized and images of brutality and destruction, vicious and repugnant ways of life, the violent and the harrowing woven onto the urban tapestry. The movies are marked by a dark world of criminality. Their organized crime focuses on the mafia, and the rise and fall of power. These films primarily revolve around violence and bloodshed. The audience, more than just witnesses to torture, becomes active participants in cruelty.

Films vary in the degree to which the concept of violence is concealed through language or depicted explicitly. The portrayal of a violent act, which is often regarded as negative and even unacceptable by the majority of those who witness it in real life, can be depicted in a manner that is perceived as morally defensible and even satisfying by many of those very same viewers. Its aestheticization pertains to a phenomenon in which the emotional responses of revulsion and other unpleasant sentiments, such as dread, wrath, and horror, that typically arise from real-life acts of violence are substituted or overshadowed by an admiration for and contentment with artistic or literary techniques. Violence as a whole is intrinsically intertwined with the political order of the system/state. Different forms of violence such as physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and verbal abuse are seen depicted. Physical fights, explosives, gunshots, rape (like the disturbingly detailed rape sequence in *22 Female Kottayam* 2012 or the blood stain in *Chola* 2019) are recurrent ingredients of violence. A film's preoccupation is more moralistic and virtue/vice oriented. The dogmatic grouping of virtues and vices always make characters stereotyped. The audience accepts these characters ('desirable' and 'ideal') as role models (and hated the villains) and wish for a repetition of such 'heroes.' The portrayal of sexual violence and assault in Malayalam cinema (when it comes to a woman) has been characterized by a lengthy and disconcerting trajectory, wherein the visual representation is dominated by a voyeuristic male perspective, while the narrative is influenced by a misogynistic patriarchal framework. Cinematic narratives of rape in Malayalam, facilitated by the portrayal of graphic violence, cater to sexual objectification. The depiction of violence on screen is frequently promoted as a faithful representation that closely resembles the experience of watching a real-life event. The utilization of special effects and computer graphics in the creation of captivating visuals has the ability to obscure the violent nature of a scene, instead emphasizing the visual impact of the spectacle. This contributes to the aestheticization of violence. The deployment of decorative elements to enhance the visual appeal of violence, along with the deliberate emphasis on symbolism, further contributes to the process of aestheticizing violence in Malayalam cinema. By including explicit depictions of bloodshed and brutality, a film has the potential to strip away the romanticized portrayal of violence (for example war), thereby allowing the viewer to witness the true horrors associated with it. The portrayal of violence through the medium of film can also be interpreted as an endeavor to aesthetically transform chaos into a form of artistic expression (even functioning as a 'corrective'). Violence in is systematically organized and understood as a reflection of socio-cultural frameworks. The 'reel' reimagines it creatively, retaining its resemblance with the 'real' to which a cinema goer relates. The process of aestheticizing violence can also be understood as a strategy employed to legitimize acts of violence. With urbanization growing exponentially, violence has become one of the unpleasant traits of modernity and contemporary cinema.

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