

Chapter 18

A Queer Reading of “New Generation” Malayalam Cinema

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at the queer possibilities of reading the idea of travel and modern libidinal imaginations at the site of ‘new generation’ Malayalam cinema, a recent origin of a genre of films that introduced a new style of filmmaking, format, themes, and young stars in the industry. The spatial mobility associated with the notion of travel and the performative space of love and desire may form the conjuncture for expounding the fluidity of the queer moments within which intersections of power relations. Power relations are played out, and heteronormative conjugal and romantic ties are resisted, subverted, or reproduced. The trope of travel becomes the site that embodies, at varying historical and social contexts, the statist colonising/civilising mission, individuated liberal emancipatory utopias, and non-conforming and subverting queer desires. It is argued that the queer moments explored through a queer approach offer the theoretical possibility of reading romantic relationship and friendship beyond the homo-social and popular heteronormative frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

Travel as a cultural text and the queering of love evolve in myriad ways at the cinematic conjuncture of road movies. The queer possibilities embodying the idea of travel and modern libidinal imaginations at the site of ‘new generation’ Malayalam cinema, a recently evolved genre of films that introduced a new style of filmmaking, format, themes and young stars in the industry area less explored area of inquiry. The notion of queer has been used as a non-conforming, non-heteronormative and anti-patriarchal position that everyone can occupy and not merely as an umbrella term to denote LGBTIQ community (Sullivan, 2006; Narrain & Bhan, 2005; Doty, 2000).

Two new generations Malayalam films *Neelakasham*, *Pachakkadal*, *Chuvannabhoomi* (Blue Sky, Green Sea and Red Earth) (here onwards NPC) released in 2013 and *Rani Padmini* (here onwards RP) (2015) are taken for the study in which the idea of travel forms the main narrative plot and mode to ex-

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explore newer possibilities in redefining libidinal relationships and queer reading of love and desire. It is argued that the genre of road movie transpires into a fulcrum of liberal libidinal space at the cinematic conjecture of family, conjugal distress, desire and love through the trope of travel.

Road movie as a film genre employs the narrative technique of exploring differing geographical locations through the plot of a journey set forth by a protagonist and other main characters envisaging a spatial and temporal cultural reinvention or a consensus at the spectatorial conjecture of production (Cohan & Hark, 1997, p. 2). In this sense, the road movie assumes the political role of a nationalist developmental project of civilizing the hitherto non-citizen subjects. It is suggested that the process of culturally integrating the 'primitive' and 'unruly' social spaces into the cultural-scape of the nation is integral to the ideology of the road movie. At the same, it may reproduce cinematic moments that inhabit the hidden desires to resist such frontier political missions. The suggested queerness as a fluidity embodying human relationships elicits such a possibility.

Alexander Doty argues that any text is always already potentially queer. Doty sees queer discourse and practices as being less about co-opting and "making" things queer and more about discussing how things are, or might be understood as, queer (Doty, 2000; p. 2). As Nikki Sullivan notes, 'queer moments' that Doty refers to could be described as moments of narrative disruption which destabilize heteronormativity, and the meanings and identities it engenders, by bringing to light all that is disavowed by, and yet integral to, heteronormative logic (Sullivan, 2005, p. 191). It is in this sense of a theoretical possibility to 'destabilise heteronormative texts' that I use the term 'queer moments' in this chapter.

The spatial mobility associated with the notion of travel and the performative space of love and desire may form the conjuncture for expounding the fluidity of the queer moments¹ within which intersections of power relations are played out and heteronormative conjugal and romantic relations resisted, subverted or reproduced. The trope of travel becomes the site that emulates, at varying historical and social contexts, the statist colonising/civilising mission, individuated liberal emancipator utopias and non-conforming, and subverting queer desires.

There is a performative queer vantage point that notionally connects the act of travel to the libidinal in a road movie through the interplay of love and desire. Both the acts of travel and love offer the possibility of spatial mobility that might help transgress the rigid boundaries of tradition and form more fluid formations of the self and desires. Instead of playing the different moments of life within a fixed frame of the societal self, the visual splendours of a road movie offer to comply with the complex terrain of desires and the self. The conflict between a structured societal and individuated self-find new expressions, which implicitly help on critically look into oneself, both as an individual and a community.

History stands testimony to the fact that travel explorations have been associated not only with discovering unknown locations, but also part of the civilizing missions of colonization. It was also an integral mode to subjugate regions and communities through internal-colonization in which hegemonic caste communities explored social, cultural and political domination over other native communities. This colonizing urge though remains integral to the idea of travel, acquires new capitalistic and consumerist dimensions propagated by the strategic missions of the emergent tourism industry and related neo-liberal markets. Road movie functions as a popular culture extension of this capitalist political economy and culture.

However, there are other possibilities that a road movie can offer. Laderman has argued that the driving force propelling most road movies is an embrace of the journey as a means of cultural critique. Road movies generally aim beyond the borders of cultural familiarity, seeking the unfamiliar for revelation, or at least for the thrill of the unknown. Such travelling, coded as defamiliarisation, likewise suggests

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