

Article

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Depiction of Family in Malayalam Movies during the ‘OTT Boom’ And How it Engages with the Concept of a *Malayali* Home



The Gulf War was a sacred moment for India's media industry, which was on the verge of a crisis plaguing the economy. Satellite channels became customary in most of the nuclear families' Television sets, and they increased in times of deep identity crisis for the people of Kerala, who are not unique in case of their (patriarchal) family system at a point when they cut ties with the joint family tradition. Fast forward to the post-pandemic phase, the genre of perspectives has taken the social commentators for a ride as consuming habits are constantly taking significant leaps in the case of visual medium or art in general for that sake. This complication is absorbed into cinema in the narrative with a cluttered timeline that makes it feasible to find workable patterns.

In the early days of Malayalam cinema, interior spaces acquired prime significance, thereby

making Home a constant, along with other happening public hubs such as political rallies, tea shops, toddy shops, etc. Home is a private space, and the voyeuristic eye that reels opened has repercussions in our cultural spaces. By the 80s, the state had a content-rich regional industry, and Home was sustained prominently amongst all the gangsters, bachelors, and the urban army of the *Lumpen*. The post-mandal phase was much more enjoyable. The liberalisation of the economy and the withdrawal of Keralites from the joint family spaces combined with the formation of a prototype of the neoliberal urban middle class had their reflections in the movies, too. The equations become much more ideological with the welfare state, where a powerful leftist presence exists both in the intelligentsia and on the ground. With the dawn of the satellite era, mainstream films

also changed their pace and moulded themselves with the market trends by prioritising the satellite rights of manufactured movies. The next shift with exemplary characteristics was the 'OTT Boom', which collided effortlessly with the audience in the digital era. However, the depiction of relationships, both familial and romantic, had distinguishable features in these movies.

Critics generally see the aspect of filming home and characters related to the family space with a predetermined outlook into the diegetic rather than their causal *mise-en-scène* patterns and meta-context of the content, which reveals beyond the hermeneutics of interpretation. The depictions of family space in the contemporary films' predecessors paved the craft, and there have been a lot of actual parodies recently. But there is, of course, visible rebelliousness in play and much more of the spirit when it comes to the subconscious subversion of the viewer by using formalist film techniques to shoot with a critical lens. The complex nature of how family in films operates with emotional and economic interests and how it is reflected in the portrayal of family in movies released during the pandemic years can unveil more about the evolving private sphere (Home) in Kerala.

By this lead, this article will focus on detailing peculiarities in depicting family relationships in OTT movies that came out during the pandemic and how the OTT Boom becomes an empty signifier in the process. There was once an apprehension that OTT might be the ultimate threat to the industry. Still, cinemas immediately reprehended this with a wave of blockbusters in the post-pandemic phase for Mollywood. The depiction of family in these films followed a pragmatic succession of antecedents for which the OTT boom became a consequential point where vivid and polarised strata of the audience became much more critical of the conventional canons.

Conceiving the Private Sphere within constraints

According to Henry Lefebvre¹, conceived space is a mixture of understanding and ideology. The pandemic had restricted the film crew's outdoor probabilities as the state implemented grave safety

measures. The feasible option to make films was to get into interiors, and here, the reflection of the relation between the conceived space and the actual reality that propels the actualisation of this space gets unveiled. The home was the natural candidate for the OTT movies, but with an audience that has a severe attention span deficit, refurbished imitations of old moulds were crafted along with critical undercurrents. Urban audiences own the hierarchy as before, but in a post-truth era, after the disillusionment with the financial markets in the pandemic crisis, they appear to demand further elite and violent content.



Drishyam 2

But, most of these movies turned out to be sequels to the 'Slice of Life films', which pretended to be realistic in formalist attire. These realist films that came by the second decade of this millennium had gained significant achievements in constructing the aesthetics of the then times. But, they didn't face the logistical constraints the pandemic crew had to endure. Let's look at some of the significant films released during Covid on OTT platforms like *Sara's*, *Joji*, *Drishyam 2*, *Kala*, *Home*, *Thinkalazcha*, *Nishchayam*, *Churuli*, *Halal Love Story*, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Bhoothakaalam*, *Puzhu*, *Bro Daddy*, *The First Joyful Mystery* etc. We can feel how space was a limitation for these films in conception and visualisation. While in *Home*, directed by Rojin Thomas, the constraints are treated with the conflict of conventional intimacy with the concept of family, *Joji* has a more brutal idea of a family with a slice of subtle violence. Then there is Lijo Jose Pellisery's *Churuli*, where the radical content with an anarchist form deconstructs the institutional idea of a family with no plans to succeed with its befitting postmodernist lens. *Bhoothakaalam*, a horror movie

set in a haunted house with a dysfunctional family, builds panic by not employing jump scares but by exposing the inescapable alienation from home and the public in the narrative.

The modes in which these films are processed in the audience psyche is a broader problem. But, the perceived space that the masses form through their senses and the conceived space based on knowledge, along with the lived space, which is a manifestation of the physical space, extends our concept of space. These conceptions are further gripped by a virtual space in alliance with our sensual, epistemological, and material being. How the public conceives these virtual visuals and the overwhelming trickling down of contents of all sorts have changed the narrative and aesthetics of Malayalam movies to an extent. Indeed, the techniques have direct predecessors, but the gradual insubordination of the audience to come to terms with the moral highness of the Family system has produced defiance within the defensive.

Malayalam cinema, or Indian cinema in general, has never averted from the divinity attached to the family space. Still, it has always shown a reactionary tendency towards the institution at crucial times. Although this can be termed a textbook dialectical phenomenon, the styles in which the opposition is filmed by the filmmakers and processed in viewers' minds take varied connotations. Kerala, which elected a communist party-led coalition in the first election after its formation, more or less followed a nationalist aspect in conceiving the family space, and the need to influx modernity was emphasised from then but by not demeaning the traditional authority of the space. But, the emergency and the rise of Naxalites also had repercussions in the cultural sphere. Although it was visible primarily in parallel films, the noise in the narrative manoeuvred evenly to the mainstream.

In the movie *Thinkalazhcha Nischayam*, when Vijayan's daughter Suja is going to get engaged, the women are mostly confined to the lively compound of the home. Suja's plans to run away with her boyfriend unfurls a series of troubles in a rural village in Northern Kerala. Suja is educated and wants to break the shackles of orthodoxy, fleeing the village and starting a new life with her lover.

However, its impact on Vijayan's mental state and the whole family's dignity getting maligned is portrayed as a dark comedy. Here, the patriarch's command is futile, but there is enough space to sympathise with both Vijayan and Suja. While the breakdown of Vijayan gives enough space to empathise with him, the mode in which love strives to surpass the impediments of Public Property and the State is internalised in the narrative. This is a prominent conflict in the OTT movies during the pandemic. Malayalam films always had a reformist impulse, but it was masked within the conventional Hindu family, which is in visible antagonism with the late capitalist stage where surveillance capitalism exerts its rule in determining the audiences' preferences.

Diegetic's Template and Narrative's Technique

Andre Gardiès² in *L'espace au cinéma* (1993) explains four types of spaces related to films: Cinematographic, Diegetic, Narrative, and Viewer spaces. The Cinematographic space is where the exhibition of moving pictures is held. Viewer space is evolved from how the film connects with the consumer to make him analyse and interpret meanings. The Diegetic space is the world the film constructs independently of the narrative that defines the latter space. Here, the focus is on the Diegetic space and its parallels with the narrative space. While the Diegetic space is constructed with more technical emphasis than the creatively burdened Narrative space, both include patterns to analyse how the family is represented in the pandemic movies of Mollywood.

These movies are set primarily in interiors and too prominently in the family space, which has the spectre of a sustained mise-en scene pattern(s) where the world of the drama evolves inside fairy tale glass windows, and only the characters are herded to make us grapple with the dichotomy of moral conflicts. When this tendency dominates, we see very disciplined frames, and when combined with the narrative space where the Woke culture pervades, the family's portrayal also receives the censorious cue. For example, in the movie *Sara's*, even when the protagonist deals with an unplanned pregnancy, the diegetic space where she resides gives the pleasant atmosphere of a regular and tempting elite urban life

by not surpassing the relatability for the middle class, which is an inevitable part of the target audience. Until recently, the family cinema genre used to be the prime focus of the industry before it moved to an approach focusing on the millennial audience.



The Great Indian Kitchen

Indeed, the diegetic has the aspect of spatial constraints as visible in these films, but the narrative, which is weaved independently, is in contradiction of the former. The aesthetical dictates of the 'Reels Culture' that offers swift cuttings and minimal comprehension intrigues into the long feature format. This affects the narrative to the extent that the diegetic is not only liberated from the narrative but abstractly devours the unrepresentable in the presented narrative, thereby attempting the unrepresentable in the presentation itself in the narrative³. This postmodern proneness manifests eminently in the OTT films during the pandemic, instilling consequential undercurrents. When the audiences engage with the narrative, they become subservient to the diegetic, with discernible and relative sensory cues determining the visual experience.

Puzhu, a Mammootty-starrer movie directed by Ratheena, had this discrepancy sneaking into the narrative. The film places a subaltern character, Kuttappan, in the affluent residence area where he grapples to deal with Kuttan, a Brahmin IPS officer who detests the former. Kuttappan is a progressive theatre artist who had eloped with Kuttan's sister, Bharati, and now they share the same apartment complex. As the narrative builds up around the caste tension, accommodating Kuttappan within the diegetic seems to be bulged and ineffectual rather than catering to the opinion makers. The status quo already has the anti-caste layer in its agenda, but how to go beyond the skin becomes a barrier when diegetic restricts the character to the urban elite gaze. Kuttappan's dialogues and actions sound superficial

when the Brahmin protagonist gets the better character arc, and screen space has its root cause in the diegetic setting. Eventually, the conventional template of goodness triumphing over evil is recast, but the antagonism against Brahminism operates mostly emotionally by not transcending the audience's intellect.

The overwhelming social commentary, a staple component of social dramas in Indian Cinema, also catalyses this occurrence. In *Joji*, directed by Dileesh Pothan, the diegetic flows with the narrative by not stressing suggestive dialogues but with the constructive exposition of the world in which the fiction evolves. The home ruled by the senior figure gradually grips the traction by designing the world of fiction in tune with the nuances in the narrative. In the movie, Joji's father's authority is legitimised through the setting and dialogues, and it consistently gives indications of the incoming anarchy and violence in the family as Joji executes a coup d'état in the family. The approaches to the family have thus become renewed, but the templates seem to be without many variations at a time when they reflect the consumers' submission to the globalised market and polity. Also, these templates had similar predecessors in the Nehruvian era, the post-emergency period, and the post-Mandal dilemma, which makes it more feasible to derive more workable patterns from these films. Major OTT platforms' continuous streak of anthologies, such as *Lust Stories*, *Paava Kadhaigal*, *Putham Puthu Kaalai*, *Ajeeb Daastaans*, etc., further facilitated the market for dramas revolving around urban apartments or affluent families in picturesque townlets.

Problematising Modern Families in an Ideal Narrative

M.K Raghavendra⁴, in his major work 'Seduced by the Familiar: Narration and Meaning in Indian Popular Cinema,' analyses popular Hindi films from various periods to give a comprehensive account of the narrative patterns that appear in our commercial movies. He examines the influence of societal institutions on narrative traditions, where the state and the prominent ideology of the ruling class are given prominence during each period. He also sheds

light on the role of family in popular films and how the state, market, and social factors affect the depiction of family in these films.

He writes, "Whenever a discourse on the dominant historical preoccupations is needed, popular cinema goes back to the same constant motifs (about the 'traditional' family and the associated values) and employs them in several different ways to further a variety of discourses. It is perhaps because the traditional (or, rather, the 'traditional-ideal') 'Indian family' is a constant unit of narrative construction that popular cinema does not problematise the actual family's changing circumstances." By applying this observation, we can extend our analysis of the depiction of family relationships in the films that emerged during the pandemic.

In the pandemic phase, the family was a constant unit of narrative, as we discussed the reasons for that in the above sections. However, it can be stressed whether it problematises the family's changing circumstances to discern the pattern. In *The Great Indian Kitchen* (Director: Jeo Baby), the kitchen space is problematised according to progressive values, and a cathartic moment is achieved when the protagonist, a homemaker, gets out of the kitchen and walks by the seaside. In the movie, the unnamed protagonist of an upper-caste family is married into a conservative family. The wife, a classical dancer, leaves her career after the marriage and deals with a dirty kitchen sink and ultra-conservative men in an old house. Orthodox men and women are portrayed as misogynists, and the dialogues satirise the institutions of marriage and family.

The movie's third act is layered around the Supreme Court verdict on the entry of women into the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala. The issue had polarised the state when the right-wing forces used it as a 'Golden Opportunity' to promote their Hindutva propaganda. At the same time, the left parties in the state actively campaigned to uphold constitutional rights. The film aligns with the radical cohort, which outrightly defended the verdict by ignoring the practicality of such a radical act in the state, which reassured the Woke virtual sphere. It instantly opened

up grave discussions for its content crafted at a steady pace by minimising the facet of timeliness. Any narrative is born from societal conditions, requiring a certain level of compromise to connect with the mass audience for them to relate. An Iconoclastic plot watched from the comfort of home is prone to produce dichotomic interpretations as the audiences' unpreparedness for radical change is gripped by an omnipotent 'Spiral of Silence'. Also, how antagonists are portrayed as psychotic personalities who face the threat of an excessive set of perspectives, which signifies the non-issues instead of the intricacy of power structures within the family. The radical narrative thus offers less probability for the general public to be critical of the existing hegemony even if it is of interest to take forward the progressive narratives.



In *Bro Daddy*, directed by Prithviraj Sukumaran, the modern affluent Christian family residing within the spirit of holy conventions is romanticised. In the movie, a young couple, Eesho and Anna, living together in Bengaluru, lands in a moral discord when Anna becomes pregnant. The plot gets thicker when Eesho's mother also deals with an unanticipated pregnancy, and his father uses eccentric methods to cover it up. Extensively emphasising abortions and glorifying the comfort of the traditional family, the film eventually seeks its happy ending to let the status quo succeed with careful deliberation, not to upset the family audience. The film is set in desirable Porsche interiors to distract the viewer enough to be engaged in the world of drama, thereby giving them a momentary affiliation with the richness and sanctity of a wealthy family. Thus, the narrative makes visible its resistance to staying with the Woke but roots for mediocrity by catering to the idealisation of family space that vouches for nothing but a spectacle.

We can infer that the portrayal of family relationships in Malayalam cinema is going through a determining phase. However, whether it is demonstrative or reactionary is yet to be revealed, and the dialectics between these tendencies, in this case, must be further analysed. However, it is clear that when the push for change comes, there is a restrictive sense in the prevailing consensus, which consequently affects filmmaking techniques and technology.

OTT Boom becomes the Empty Signifier

An empty signifier is a signifier without a signified. Ernesto Laclau⁵ states, "An empty signifier would be a sequence of sounds, and if the latter are deprived of any signifying function, the term 'signifier' itself would become excessive. The only possibility for a stream of sounds being detached from any particular signified while remaining a signifier is if, through the subversion of the sign which the possibility of an empty signifier involves, something is achieved which is internal to significations as such". When *Sufiyum Sujathayum*, the first movie released in OTT in Malayalam during the first wave of Coronavirus, the bar was already set high for the OTT platforms as the audience in the state was getting more and more exposure to OTT content from the West. Initially, the films that were shot before the pandemic began streaming directly on OTT platforms, and then movies started to be made exclusively for these platforms during the pandemic. At this stage, the OTT boom acquires the status of an empty signifier as the phenomenon is a broader umbrella term where many perspectives can be accommodated.

When it comes to portraying families in Malayalam cinema, OTT is a phase that coincides with the gradual and, in some cases, swift transformations in the public sphere. That, too, at a time when the concepts of heterosexual family and the forced monogamy of the late capitalist bodies are facing a wave of ethical, cultural, and legislative challenges. The movie *Love*, directed by Khalid Rahman, was shot within 23 days during the pandemic, abiding by the strict guidelines imposed by the state. The screenplay places the schizophrenic protagonist Ajay in an apartment where he deals with

his irritated partner along with his multiple personalities. In the beginning, Ajay and his living partner can be seen having long, fierce conversations and physical fights inside their apartment. Ajay also exhibits traits of alcoholism and depression prominently. Thus, we can witness an amalgamation of the reified post-humans, further reflecting the schizophrenic tendencies within the movie's characters. In that way, the constraints of the medium when it comes to OTT movies can be placed as a causal progression for the conceiving of concepts that archive our times.

The OTT boom had many films made during lockdown when the families were stuck with themselves, and familial ties had a complex intimacy related to hope and desperation during lockdown. *Home*, helmed by Rojin Thomas, dealt with the conflicts between the analogue and digital generations and how they affect the structure of conventional values passed onto the nuclear families from the joint family system. The premise of this feel-good movie develops as Anthony, a director with a creative block, returns home from his shabby urban apartment to complete his script. The clashes arising between Anthony and his father, Oliver Twist, due to their generational gap are used as a ploy to depict the changing dynamics in families. The father consistently fails to live up to the son's expectations of being a validated and respected person because of his outdated technical knowledge and typical middle-class conduct. However, the narrative placed within the seductive interiors of the home eventually attains its closure when Anthony realises that the home is the safest space to reside, thus reiterating the goodness of familial values by downplaying the filmed contradictions in the same movie about the structural deficiencies of families.

Is the Anti-Family genre a near probability?

There is a severe crisis that the private property-oriented family system faces in Kerala, with the increasing tendency to break off the shackles of ethical and moral values of the modern family. This leads to further critical portrayals of the patriarchal family system in the popular movies of the industry. The OTT boom is a significant period in this aspect,

and the post-pandemic movies that are now flourishing in the state's theatres also have reverberations of this critical tendency. Considering the strengthening right-wing tendencies prevalent in the state and the country in general, the depiction of 'Home' in the movies can give varied interpretations that can propel more analysis. The polarised audience with a much-reduced attention span and broad exposure to contents in the virtual space makes finding a workable frame of reference for interpretations even more complicated. However, we can still make inferences compatible with the current market scenario, giving a much more filtered view of current patterns.

The actualisation of an anti-family genre seems a distant possibility at this point. As the family audience used to determine the referendum for the industry for so long before they got subjugated under the millennial audience, this trend has conspicuous indications for show business in the state. This temptation to be critical of the familial system involves the aptness of Kerala to constantly contemplate and reform the existing power structures in both their private and public spheres as a state that has excelled in Human Development indices such as Per Capita Income and Education in comparison with the National Average, the receptivity for refinement among the filmgoing public aligns with the critical narratives around the family. Even though the consciousness of an organised anti-family genre can be rejected, the undertone of the narratives will provide enough cues in the upcoming years for more critical portrayals of the family as a social institution. But, when Malayalam cinema is aiming for big productions that appeal to the Pan-Indian audience, it remains to be seen to what extent the filmmakers will be able to push grounded content that can prompt further expository renderings on family ties.

K.M. Kapadia⁶, in his work 'Marriage and Family in India', exposes the regressive atmosphere in traditional Indian families. He asserts that "The subordination and superordination designed to

regulate the lives of the different members in the hierarchy of the joint household, recognition of the family as a unit for all social relationships, the place assigned to the family as a juridical unit in family quarrels all tended to give the family such enormous influence that the individual lost his identity in it. The social environment never allowed the individual to feel that he had interests apart from those of the family". This observation also stands true in elementary families as the family considerably acts as the nucleus of individual life, even in the present scenario. Therefore, the leaning towards the disapproval of rigidity associated with conservative familial values will further drive the inclusion of refining perspectives obliquely and occasionally in a visible sense. However, the severe curbs in the templates of narratives that evolved within popular cinema are less prone to such a radical step as establishing an anti-family genre. Thus, the deconstruction of popular cinema with an emphasis on the form and narrative, rather than rhetorical hermeneutics focusing on content, becomes the way forward to substantially devise more analysis about the portrayal of families in Malayalam cinema.

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