

Article

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The Indigenous Superheroes: Comics, Culture, And Contemporary Malayalam Cinema



ABSTRACT

The Malayalam film industry, renowned for its distinct approaches to filmmaking, constantly experiments with new ideas on narrative techniques, visual aesthetics, cultural representation, and so on. The recently released experimental movies Basil Joseph's *Minnal Murali* (2021) and Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Malaiikkottai Vaaliban* (2024) deal with superheroes, have a close resemblance to a comic style of storytelling and have found their way into the world of comic books. *Minnal Murali* and *Vaaliban* are deeply rooted in their indigenous identity, marking a deviation from the mainstream American superheroes. The cultural heritage of Kerala and India is reflected in the films. By analysing both these films, the paper intends to explore the elements used to depict cultural heritage and highlight the Indigenous identity of the superheroes. Furthermore, the paper investigates how the adaptation of comic book aesthetics and narrative techniques in these films contribute to the visual storytelling language and blurs the boundaries between different mediums and genres. The paper attempts to decentralise the dominant American concepts of the Superhero genre. It contributes to the larger discourse on identity and representation and adds new domains to the Malayalam film industry and Intermedial Studies.

Keywords: Superheroes, Indigenous, Comics, Cinema, Culture, Americanism, Sartorial representation, Tribal aesthetics.

INTRODUCTION

Comics have emerged as a pervasive element of daily life concomitant with the proliferation of print media. Utilised as instruments for stark sociopolitical commentary within newspapers and magazines, comic books have garnered extensive popularity across demographics, engendering many literary forms such as graphic novels, Amar Chitra Katha, Japanese manga, and so on. Even in this technologically advanced era, comics have established their position on social media platforms such as webcomics and memes. While DC and Marvel Comics ruled the bookshelves of children around the world, Kerala had its comic book universe through *Balarama* (1972), *Balamangalam* (1980), *Balabhumi* (1996), and so on. Kerala's 80s and 90s generation grew up with Boban, Molly, Mayavi, Luttappi, Soothran, Sheru, and so on. There would not be a single child in Kerala who has not tried to call on Mayavi, the classic Malayalam comic Superhero in *Balarama*, by uttering “Om.. Hreem.. Kuttichatha..”. Though *Balamangalam* published its final issue in 2012, a Superhero from the comic, Dinkan, has recently been given a godly status by the atheists in Kerala as a satire of organised religions. It has a cult following called “Dinkoism”, and its Holy Book is *Balamangalam*. Such is the profound influence of comic books in Kerala. The social consciousness of society has made comics an indelible part of Kerala’s cultural vocabulary. Cinema is another form of art that is closely associated with our culture. Unlike the esteemed intellectual regard bestowed upon other art forms, cinema and comics were relegated to mere entertainment. However, visual storytelling media possess an immense capacity to sway the populace through their distinctive modes of expression. The ascendancy of Film Studies in the twentieth century and the emergence of Comic Studies in the twenty-first century are a testament to their mass appeal. The Superhero genre, in particular, transcends both comics and cinema, achieving global recognition within popular culture and cultivating a dedicated fandom. Indian Cinema has seen many superhero films like Rakesh Roshan’s *Krrish* (2006) and Anubhav Sinha’s *Ra. One* (2011), and so on, were

made with a highly colossal budget and ended up imitating the dominant American Superhero concepts. However, Bollywood has been the face of Indian Cinema among the global audience until recently. It was the year 2021 that changed the game for Kerala's Malayalam film industry, commonly called Mollywood. Mollywood is well known for its innovative and realistic ways of filmmaking, with minimal budget and high quality. With the release of Basil Joseph’s *Minnal Murali* in 2021, the possibilities of the whole industry and the Superhero genre got redefined. The movie was made with a budget of just 18 Crore Indian Rupees, an anomaly within the genre’s typically lavish productions. *Minnal Murali* underscores the importance of narrative substance over budgetary and visual extravaganza. Basil Joseph has established his ability to find humour, even in serious situations, through his previous works. Through *Minnal Murali*, he expands the ways of approaching the Superhero genre by giving it a humorous side. Lijo Jose Pellissery’s *Malaikottai Vaaliban* (2024) ventures into uncharted cinematic territory, challenging traditional filmmaking and viewer perceptions, thereby broadening the scope for Mollywood and the cinematic medium at large. The film amalgamates the grandeur of spaghetti westerns with a folkloric narrative style. Its predominant use of wide-angle and long shots renders each frame reminiscent of an Amar Chitra Katha panel. *Minnal Murali* and *Malaikottai Vaaliban* experiment with their narrative techniques and visual aesthetics, aligning them with comic storytelling.

As Superheroes, both *Minnal Murali* and *Vaaliban* have certain parallels as well as deviations from the mainstream American Superheroes. What makes them special is the way their Superhero identities are deeply rooted in their indigenous culture. There are certain aspects that define a place other than its geographical location and territorial boundaries. The stories, memories, rituals, costumes, dialects, songs, etc. that are specific to a particular place or define a place constitute a part of its indigenous culture. The idea of the indigenous in *Minnal Murali* is primarily linked to the socio-cultural heritage of Kerala. In *Malaikottai Vaaliban*,

Pellissery creates a parallel world in which 'Indianness' is dominant, marking the idea of the indigenous. The paper intends to explore those elements used to depict the cultural heritage and highlight the Indigenous identity of the Superheroes. Furthermore, the paper investigates how the adaptation of comic book aesthetics and narrative techniques in these films contribute to the visual storytelling language and blurs the boundaries between different mediums and genres.

LITERATURE REVIEW

American superheroes, such as Batman, Spiderman, and Superman, mainly rule the superhero genre. Marc Singer, in his essay "Superheroes" in the work *Comics Studies: A Guidebook* (2020), says: "As champions of the oppressed who break the law to defend society, superheroes promote a contradictory mythology that mingles heroic individualism, civic responsibility, and redemptive violence" (213). He gives a clear idea about the genre by delving into the major characteristics and tropes of Superheroes. By discussing the ideas of significant scholars like Peter Coogan, Richard Reynolds, John Shelton Lawrence, Robert Jewett, etc., Singer puts forth a critical overview of the origins of Superheroes, Superhero revisionism, metatextual Superheroes, and how to interpret Superheroes. The work focuses on the mainstream American Superheroes. In Peter Coogan's *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (2006), he discusses different dimensions of the genre, its evolution, myths, etc. Coogan tries to define a Superhero by analysing major tropes in the genre. Though there are many works on superheroes, gender politics in the genre, and so on, the area lacks works on indigenous superheroes.

With the rise of Intermedial Studies, the similarities and differences that occur when a work is adapted into another medium have been widely studied. Though there are studies based on the adaptation of comic aesthetics to films, like Matthias Kreuter's thesis, "Adapting Visual and Structural Features of Comic Books to Film: Possibilities and Limitations", such works are also limited to the mainstream Hollywood cinema and comics. The decentralisation of the American perspective on the

genre is a need of the time. How these regional films inculcate their cultural heritage through comic aesthetics and Indigenous superhero identity is still a relevant question. This is where the significance of Kerala's Malayalam film industry lies.

Suraj Kushe Shekhar, in his article "A Superhero in Indian Style and Culture: *Minnal Murali* Goes Global", says: "While most superhero movies often lose their identities to mimic the West's character, *Minnal Murali* stays deep-rooted in Indian culture and its original story" (143). The Superhero's costume, which Coogan discusses as an integral part of superhero identity is utilised by both Joseph and Pellissery to establish the Superheroes' indigenous identity. Eisha Nair, in her article, "'Minnal Murali' Subverts the Superhero Genre Through the Supersuit", discusses how his super-suit establishes the identity and agency of small villages. The dominant American concept of a super-suit is subverted in *Malaikottai Vaaliban*. If *Minnal Murali* redefines the genre with its humour, *Malaikottai Vaaliban* does it through folkloric storytelling. Rajesh Mohan, in his article "'Malaikottai Vaaliban': LJP's folklore is Madhu Neelakandan's cinematography masterclass", discusses how Pellissery tries to bring life to those folktales that were part of Amar Chitra Katha. Both films portray tribal songs that can be read as part of the indigenous culture. The essay, "Cultural Minorities and the Panoptic Gaze: A Study of the (Mis)Representation of Ethnic Minorities in Malayalam Films" by R. V. M. Divakaran shows the politically incorrect views of the public towards what is alien to them and discusses how such misrepresentations caters in keeping the tribal population as the other. Malayalam film industry's shift in portraying the tribal culture can be seen through recent films like Sathy's *Ayyappanum Koshiyum* (2020), Ullas Chemban's *Anchakkallakokkan* (2024), etc. along with *Minnal Murali* and *Malaikottai Vaaliban*. The use of folk songs in contemporary Malayalam cinema is also an unexplored territory.

Though *Minnal Murali* and *Malaikottai Vaaliban* break many stereotypes in terms of depicting a Superhero, both films have been criticised for certain matters. *Minnal Murali* has been criticised

for glorifying the supervillain, Shibu's toxic love story. *Malaikottai Vaaliban* has been marked as 'not everyone's cup of tea' by several critics and has received a variety of negative criticism from the audience for its unconventional making style. However, these criticisms do not negate that films are milestones for the Mollywood industry and cinema.

COMIC AESTHETICS AND THE IDEA OF INDIGENOUS

Minnal Murali revolves around the life of Jaison, a tailor in the rural village of Kurukkanmoola, who gets superpowers after getting struck by lightning. The first introduction that the audience gets about Jaison is from Sajan, the Sub-inspector of Kurukkanmoola. Sajan describes him as a "spoiled brat" (00: 06: 25). Right from the beginning, *Minnal Murali* breaks the stereotypical image of a superhero. What happens when a commoner from a rural village gets superpowers? That is what the film highlights. Unlike the celebrated, mainstream American Superheroes, Jaison is a kid stuck in an adult body. He embodies the perspective of Kerala's middle class, convinced that relocating to America is the sole remedy for all their hardships. Jaison is just another victim of Americanism. In his essay, "What is Americanism?", Thomas Bender says: "In its progressive version, Americanism seeks to mobilize a people to do better by demanding that they live up to their ideals or enable a larger portion of the population to participate more fully in the American way of life" (2). This aspect of Americanism is reflected through his costumes, the knockoffs like 'Abibas', 'Poma', 'Lowcoste', his belt with a spinning buckle, and his earring. This clearly creates a distance between him and the villagers, who usually wear shirts and Kerala *mundu* (a cloth knotted around the waist). Those were his deliberate and desperate attempts to imitate Western culture, which stemmed from his extreme contempt towards the natives of his village. This can be seen in the lyrics of the song "Kugramame", which says: "When I will walk the red carpet/ With my stylish and simple looks/ I will turn to this godforsaken country/ And shower all my pity" (00: 10: 07- 00: 10: 20).

It is quite interesting to see this "spoiled brat" Jaison, who was so self-centred with much contempt towards his natives and culture, transform into Minnal Murali, who puts the needs of his people before his own, embodying his own culture. Basil Joseph uses a slice-of-life comic style of narrative in the movie, subtly presenting the cultural heritage of Kerala. The film is rich with its usage of sounds, objects, visuals, digressions, and so on in a way that reflects the indigenous aesthetics of Kerala. Be it the familiar catchphrase in the ad for selling lottery tickets: "*Naaleyaanu, naaleyaanu, naaleyaanu*" (It is tomorrow, it is tomorrow, it is tomorrow) (00: 10: 37- 00: 10: 38), which is played in the background right after Sub-inspector Sajan slaps Jaison, or the theft of path umma's goat- which is a pun about the illustrious Malayalam novel, *Pathummayude Aadu* (*Pathumma's Goat*), penned by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, *Minnal Murali* has portrayed the cultural heritage of Kerala in numerous humorous ways. His heroic image is mainly explored through kids' reactions, and his chemistry with kids is well established through the uncle-nephew bond Jaison shares with his nephew. The deliberate inclusion of numerous children and elderly characters in the Kurukkanmoola village design not only imparts innocence to the film but also infuses it with a whimsical, comic-like aesthetics, as the presence of elderly people and kids is one of the significant elements of cult-classic Malayalam comics like *Boban and Molly* (1962), "Mayavi", and so on. The slow-motion effects used in the action sequences reflect the dramatic fight scene effects like "pow" and "bam" used in comic books. The comic book references in the song "Thee Minnal" are noteworthy. The lyrics include the iconic comic book sound effects, "Dishoom Dishoom" and "Tto Tto", along concerning Mayavi, the famous, classic Malayalam comic book superhero (01: 11: 45- 01: 11: 52). The lyrics not only portray Kerala's culture but also evoke a nostalgic feeling in the audience. Even the battles Minnal Murali fought using his superpowers are unique to Kerala's culture- he uses his superpowers at a wedding reception to grab a seat and eat chicken biriyani. It requires a superpower to get a seat among the huge crowd at wedding ceremonies in Kerala. He

also uses his superpowers to win games at a local carnival to show off his skills.

In *Malaikottai Vaaliban*, even the typography used in its title is similar to that often used in the Superhero Comic book titles. The film takes up the narrative style of Amar Chitra Katha, which is an Indian comic series about iconic Indian mythological stories, legends, epics, historical figures, folktales and so on. It narrates the story in episodic events. *Malaikottai Vaaliban* does the same- it captures the journey of a *Mallan* (giant warrior) in episodic events, from one place to another- from one story to another, like folklore. Each episode begins with a title that indicates the name of the place where the action is about to happen. This episodic manner of storytelling establishes Vaaliban's extraordinary strength and skills, elevating him to a superhero status. Each episode highlights Vaaliban's characteristics. In the first story, Vaaliban beats Kulu Mallan and establishes his supremacy in the village- Adivarathoor. This story is about winning over arrogance. It underscores Vaaliban's calm nature and the power of his senses. The famous Mangottu Mallan is defeated in the next story, highlighting Vaaliban's honesty and loyalty. The colonial history of India is depicted in the next story. The victory of Vaaliban in this episode symbolises the downfall of greed and power, making him a "champion(s) of the oppressed" (Singer 213).

Vaaliban's character alludes to the Biblical character Samson, who is known for his incredible physical strength. The villain, Chamathakan, reminds us of both Joker's and Two-Face's characters in Batman's comics. Chamathakan has Joker's evil laugh, and his head, moustache and beard are half-shaven. Later, half of his face gets burned. Such abstract character designs are blended with the realistic world in the film. Even with all these allusions to the mainstream American works, Vaaliban establishes his indigenous identity as a superhero, through the Indianness that is dominant in the film. The casting of the movie makes it difficult to place the story in a particular region- as it includes faces from different regions within India. Though the language the characters speak is a combination of the South Indian languages Malayalam and Tamil, the

landscapes point to the Northern parts of India. Through these aspects, the film's world blends together the diversity in India.

SARTORIAL REPRESENTATION

The reflection of Indigenous identity through sartorial representation can be seen in both *Minnal Murali* and *Malaikottai Vaaliban*. Peter Coogan, in his work *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* says:

A pulp hero's costume does not emblemize the character's identity. [...] Superman's costume does, particularly through his "S" chevron. Similarly, Batman's costume proclaims him a Batman, just as Spider-Man's webbed costume proclaims him a Spider-Man. These costumes are iconic representations of the superhero identity. (33)

In *Minnal Murali*, as the film progresses, Jaison's costumes also change- from trying to imitate the Western culture through the knockoff T-shirts, he comes closer and closer to his indigenous identity. He stops wearing those T-shirts and starts to wear shirts, just like the natives of Kurukkanmoola. It marks his deviation from Americanism. He uses a *mundu* as his mask most of the time. His first super-suit was a bird-like costume he had stolen from a kid. The birdman with a *mundu* perfectly combines the familiar and the strange, blurring the boundary between a superhero and a commoner. It reflects his dual identities- one, that of an ordinary man, and another, that of a superhero. In his final super-suit, instead of using the alphabet "M" to indicate Minnal Murali, he uses the Malayalam alphabet "മാ" ("ma"). It marks him as a superhero exclusive to the Malayali population and deviates from giving him a globalised superhero image. The mask he uses is the one that everyone used to wear during the outbreak of Covid-19. Thus, again his costume highlights his identity as a commoner. It is the same with the case of the supervillain- Shibu's costumes. He uses a scarecrow mask- alluding to the supervillain in Batman's comic books. In Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005), the supervillain is seen wearing the scarecrow mask along with a suit. In *Minnal Murali*, Shibu wears the scarecrow mask along with a normal shirt and *mundu*. The scenes reflect how both the

superhero and supervillain highlight their cultural identity through their costumes.

In *Malaikottai Vaaliban*, most costumes are a single-long piece of cloth used to cover the upper and lower parts of the body. Vaaliban's costumes follow the style of traditional Indian attire and are completely different from the Western style of costumes. The dominant American idea of a super-suit is also challenged in the film. Bright-coloured clothes with capes and masks often used to represent mainstream Hollywood superheroes are avoided in *Malaikottai Vaaliban*. Vaaliban uses dull and pale shaded clothes, without a cape and mask, holding tightly to his Indigenous identity. His clothes consist of patterns made through woodblock printing, reminding us of the traditional cloth-making processes. Vaaliban is someone who makes use of his clothes while fighting his opponents. His skill in fighting using clothes is well established in the first fight itself- with Kelu Mallan. Kelu Mallan is tossed into the air by using just a shawl. Vaaliban's identity as a strong and unique skilled mallan is highlighted through his costumes. His armour has the texture and patterns of the skin of crocodiles, which could be an indication of one of his past fights with a crocodile. It reflects his superpower, that is strength. Stories told through objects are a speciality of the film. The story of Vaaliban's earrings subtly resembles the epic stories of Karna and Dushyanta, as well as Shakuntala, which adds to the indigenous culture. The abstract style in which the clothes are worn makes it similar to comic aesthetics, where more detailings are avoided, and only the important aspects are focused. Scott McCloud's theory of "amplification through simplification" (30), which he explains in his work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993), is reflected here.

Peter Coogan quotes McCloud and says:

In *Understanding Comics* (1993), McCloud argues that pictures vary in their levels of abstraction, from completely realistic photographs to nearly abstract cartoons. Moving from realism to abstraction in pictures is a process of simplification, "focusing on specific details" and "stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning'" (30). This stripping-down

amplifies meaning by focusing attention on the idea represented by the picture. (33)

The film follows this idea of abstract representations to bring in comic book aesthetics.

THE USE OF TRIBAL SONGS

Another significant aspect marking the indigenous nature of these films is the presence of tribal songs. The 20th and early 21st century Malayalam films like J. Sasikumar's *Picnic* (1975), Priyadarshan's *Chithram* (1988), Ali Akbar's *Bamboo Boys* (2002), and so on have depicted tribals in a stereotypical way, by portraying them as illiterate, uncivilized people with a strange way of life. In such films, tribals are reduced to mere objects that are to be laughed at by the audience. Tribal women were often depicted in a sexualised manner through the male gaze. In her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey calls it: "to-be-looked-at-ness" (309). Such depictions focussed on the powerlessness of the tribal community and resulted in creating a sense of superiority in the audience. The power dynamics between the gazer and the object of the gaze are crucial here. The tribal medicines were also part of a major trope. In another set of films, tribals rescue the hero in a crucial moment by giving him tribal medicine and magically healing him from a pernicious situation (Divakaran 242). Society's fascination with the unknown or the strange was used to misrepresent the tribal population and their culture. Such misrepresentations take away their agency and maintain them as the other.

Minnal Murali and *Malaikottai Vaaliban* deviate from such stereotypical representations of tribal people and culture. Trevor W. Purcell, in his essay, "Indigenous Knowledge and Applied Anthropology: Questions of Definition and Direction", points out: "As colonialism uprooted Indigenous people, it also uprooted their knowledge systems" (266). These knowledge systems include music, art, rituals, folklore, etc. Tribal songs are crucial in transmitting the folklore, adding to the community's collective memory. The "Tribal song" in *Minnal Murali* and "Raakk" in *Malaikottai Vaaliban* are part of the diegetic music in the films. That is, not only can the audience hear it, but the

characters can also hear it. Thus, these songs are placed not as a passing reference but with the same weight as the other songs in the films. In *Minnal Murali*, the “Tribal song”, along with the tribal dance, is a rework of one of the songs in the oral tradition of the tribes in Kerala. It is placed when Jaison sets out to find who the impostor Minnal Murali is. The use of tribal music and dance highlights his determination. In *Malaikottai Vaaliban*, the folk elements present in the song “Raakk”, like the use of body tapping as part of the music, the traditional drink of arrack or fermented toddy, and so on evoke the style of tribal songs. It is primarily a celebration of freedom. The ritualistic atmosphere that the song creates acts as a mood lifter to the characters as well as the audience. By honouring Indigenous culture without resorting to objectification or the male gaze, these songs subvert the stereotypical representations of tribal communities that the earlier mainstream cinema propagated. Bringing such songs and folk elements that represent the identity of the tribal community to the mainstream cinema is in a way, an act of resistance and an attempt to reclaim their identity and agency.

CONCLUSION

The rise of the Malayalam New Wave cinema in 2011 was the beginning of a cinematic evolution of the industry. The release of films like Rajesh Pillai’s

Traffic (2011), Lijo Jose Pellissery’s *City of God* (2011), Sameer Thahir’s *Chaappa Kurish* (2011), and so on gave a new dimension to the Bollywood industry. These films’ sharp realism and unconventional making style were significant characteristics. This movement paved the way for recent experimental works like Mahesh Narayanan’s *C U Soon* (2020), Lijo Jose Pellissery’s *Churuli* (2021), Khalid Rahman’s *Thallumaala* (2022), etc. The emergence of the two Superheroes- Minnal Murali and Vaaliban brought another layer into this experimental realm of Bollywood. *Minnal Murali* became the first Malayalam film to get adapted into a comic book. Then, the makers of *Malaikottai Vaaliban* released their comic book. The comic book-like world that both these films portray on-screen shows the potential of contemporary Malayalam cinema in expanding the limits of different genres and media, giving new definitions to Intermedial Studies. With its inculcation of the idea of indigenous in the global cinematic landscape, the industry also opens discussions on the broader discourse on identity and representation. What forms would the next Indigenous Superheroes take? What other globally acclaimed genres could be utilised to amalgamate the local and the global, and how will such narratives redefine the socio-cultural heritage of Kerala? The answers await in the stories that are yet to be told.

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