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Jokes Apart: Critiquing the 'coloured' Jokes on Gender and Side Kicks in Malayalam Movies

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Abstract

Human beings' tendency to bring content in colours can create some contorted concepts in our 'colorful' life. Jokes of the characters connected to ones' gender and sidekicks in the movies convey a deeper political meaning. Caricaturing or calling people in names based on their colour constructs binaries in popular Malayalam movies; the character's colour of the skin plays a significant role. The relationship between genders, the hero and sidekicks are determined by the colour they possess. Present study aims at assessing the 'coloured' jokes centered on gender and sidekicks in select Malayalam movies.

Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Deconstruction, Gender studies, Film Theory

Introduction

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

Martin Luther king Jr

The colour of human skin plays a significant role in forming one's identity. Varieties of colours carry political, psychological and cultural meanings. The concept of race has a close connection with one's colour. Colour consciousness constitutes and divides people. Superiority of white over black generates the notion that black is a foil to the white culture. White's upper hand over other races on the basis of colour create barrier in understanding and tolerating the differences.

Discrimination based on skin color, also known as colourism or shadeism, is a form of prejudice or discrimination in which people are treated differently based on the social meanings attached to skin colour. Discriminating people on the basis of colour or deeming white as the 'norm' and judging other colours as ugly and unaccepted make a deeper impact in the society.

Fascination for fair skin widens the rift between those who have lighter skin and darker skin. Popular Movies which show the 'fair ladies' and dialogues regarding the colour of one's skin perpetuate a distorted concept on colour. Most of the South Indian movies are bombarded with the contorted colour 'visions'. It heightens the inferiority of darker complexions. Mimicking the colonial ways persuade movie makers to portray the 'fair heroes and heroines. 'Fair' heroes' throbbing for attaining the love of 'fair' heroines have come to be the content of almost all Indian movies.

Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks* observes:

"Negrophobes exist. It is not hatred of the Negro, however, that motivates them; they lack the courage for that, or they have lost it. Hate is not inborn; it has to be constantly cultivated, to be brought into being, in conflict with more or less recognized guilt complexes (53).

This paper attempts to examine the jokes in select Malayalam movies that subtly carry the Malayalee sensibility towards colour. White man's repulsion on black skin is carried to the world of celluloid. Popular Malayalam movie 'Kattappanayile Hrithik Roshan' projects the inferiority complex of the central character named 'Kichu. It conveys an ugly and a distorted

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picture of black colour. Kichu's intense longing for marrying a beautiful girl coupled with his film dreams marred by his darker complexion; bring a solemn perusal on the issues related to one's colour. The movie is centered on the problems of his skin colour.

His misconception on beauty standards makes him a butt of ridicule among the people. There were scenes from the movies which show Kichu's obsession on glowing skin. Kichu's desire to be a famous film star gets thwarted by poor self-image created by his surroundings. It fortifies a wrong notion that dark is dirty. His Father's abortive attempts to be a hero in movies channelized to his son finally find difficulties in Kichu's life. His father's disappointment and dislike towards Kichu's darker skin brings humiliation in his life. Society's unfair treatment and their mocking make him to belittle his own image.

Kichu who aspires to be a superstar strongly believes that his darker skin becomes a hindrance for him to make huge strides in film industry. From beginning to the end, the movie revolves around the issues of dark and fair binaries. Kichu's counterpart named 'Kani' and the crush of Kichu named Anne Marry who possesses the white complexion create sharp binary oppositions.

Here Kichu's desperate attempts for winning the heart of Anne Marry prompt him to value the white and disparage the darker skin. His obsession and attraction towards fair skin and excessive use of fairness creams signify the lack feelings of the black and dark people. Protagonist's preference for emulating the style and demeanors of Bollywood hero Hrithik Roshan depict an undermining effect on darker skin.

'Coloured Jokes' on Black Looks

The Strategies of whites to devalue the merits of black people and viewing black as a beast have been stealthily promoted and permeated to the popular south Indian movies. Frantz Fanon states in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

"At the risk of arousing the resentment of my colored brothers, I will say that the black is not a man (1). This maxim can be used for observing the complications of skin colour portrayed in the movies of Vinayakan. Vinayakan appears as a prey of severe racial attacks. The 'comic' scenes in the movie '*Aadu Oru Bheekara Jeeviyanu*' where Vinayakan is termed as a West Indian cricketer and a primitive god from African countries make Vinayakan's character an "Other". This racialized comment on his colour appears as a recurrent image in his various movies.

The actor Vinayakan's physique often poses the questions about the colour issues. The recent movie 'Role Models' which tells the story of four friends contains the issues related to colour. Vinayakan's character (jyothish Narayan) in 'Role Models' acted as one of the sidekicks of Fahad Fasil's character named Gautham, became a victim of colourism. The 'jokes' Vinayakan's friend 'Rexie' (sharafudheen) crack about Jyothish's physique bring a mocking effect on one's colour and identity. Vinayakan's role as Ganga' in 'Kammattipadam' also stands as a binary to the Dulquer Salman's character named Krishnan. In that movie the inferiority of Ganga (Vinayakan) gets an outlet when he compares the complexion of Krishnan (Dulquer Salman) with Salman Khan. Vinayakan's body becomes an instrument for illustrating the characteristics of an uncivilized 'Other'.

The 'Othering' of darker people tend white to associate

dark with terror, hatred and ugliness. Edward Said In his work *Culture and Imperialism* observes the supremacy of imperialism over oriental Culture. "Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental" (336).

Vinayakan who was often seen as a thug and gangster in many movies create the picture that dark people are potent to portray villainous characteristics and they are intrinsically bad and wicked; deeming them as depraved and callous develop a negative attitude towards darker complexions. The dark skinned villain who stands as the nemesis of white heroes is the focal point of major popular movies.

Movies of Kalabhavan Mani who enacted the roles of subaltern heroes vividly problematize the subject of colourism. Most of the movies of Mani narrated the struggle and survivals of a coloured character cast light upon the intricacies of colourism exist in south Indian movie industry. Mani's characters posit scathing criticism on colour issues. His resistance and rise as a hero of subaltern classes starkly delineate the 'colour blinded' and caste blighted Bollywood industry.

Kalabhavan Mani's popular Movie named 'Karumadikuttan' is an evident of colour issues. The title 'Karumadikuttan' suggests dark colour. His affiliations with the heroine vividly carry the binary oppositions. Fair skinned Nandinikutty (Nandita) who acts as the love of Karumadi' evokes a debate over the issues of colour. The persistent portrayals of dark and fair combinations construct and cement a contorted concept on colour. The aid and care Karumadi offers to Nandini and the people delineated in a master slave manner also perpetuate an ugly version of black identity. Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks* writes:

"I hope I have shown that here the master differs basically from the master described by Hegel. For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work". (220). Karumadi's subservience and service to her and his society give a different colour to the master – slave dialectics. Mani's movie '*Oru Black and White Kudumbam*' revolves around the backdrop of tensions that Antony (Kalabhavan Mani) creates in his house in the name of colour.

Oru Black & White Kudumbam movie is about an attractive person Adithya Varma (Jayasurya) who is the son of a dark-skinned father Antony (Kalabhavan Mani) and fair mother Lakshmi (Vinaya Prasad). Antony is a lorry driver, is a man who has a complex about his colour, more so since as his wife, who belongs to a Kovilakam family, is fair and beautiful. This dichotomy of black and white and black's lack feelings are the central concerns of this movie. Fanon continues in his *Black Skin White Masks*: the man of color there is a constant effort to run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence (43). Here the complex and frustration of Antony (Kalabhavan Mani) due to his skin colour facilitates white to debilitate the identity of black. Intense craving for white and considering white is better than black and lack of white colour generate a dehumanizing effect on black and dark people. Association of white with all positive qualities such as purity,

innocence, goodness and linking black with negativity also adds fuel to the fire in black's lives.

Roles of Salimkumar plays in the movies as sidekicks of popular heroes have several implications on racial issues. Salim Kumar's character in the movie named '*Cobra*' the story of the two brothers: Raja (Mammootty) and Kari (Lal). Gopalan (Salimkumar) and Balan (Manian Pilla Raju) play the roles of their security guards have the glimpses of colourism. Gopalan's (Salim Kumar) dialogues to friend Balan (Manian Pilla Raju) about his skin colour shows his hankering for whiteness and fairness. Combination of Mammootty and Lal stands as a hierarchy of black and white. The very name 'Kari' signifies the black colour and it also reveals the inferiority of blackness. Traumatic childhood of 'Kari' centered on his tanned skin makes him to stay reserved. It also indicates that black is sinful and erroneous. Salim Kumar's comic scenes and comments on him often carry the themes of blackness. Bell hooks in her work *Black Looks: Race and Representations* says:

To make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, and sexual practices affirm their power over in intimate relations with the Other (23). In the movie '*Manikya kallu*' the character named kunjraaman who belonged to a lower caste desires to change his name and wanted to be termed as Thampuraan and the way the people make of fun of his longings create a feeling that one's caste and colour are strongly intertwined. Movies such as '*Pandippada*', '*Kunjikoonan*' also contain the comments related to his colour. The sidekicks in movies are always sidelined for their bodily features. Movies of 'Harisree Ashokan, who acted as a sidekick of many popular stars have been victimized by the complexities of their colour. Movies such as *Ee Parkkumthalika*, the character named a Sundareshan M. K (Harisree Ashokan) gives stark evidence for distorted beauty standards based on colour. His other movies '*Arjunan Pillayum Anju Makkalum*,' '*Meesha Madhavan* carry a stereotypical racialized comments. Roles of Sreenivasan in various movies also describe the discrimination based on colour. In the movie '*friends*' and '*Katha parayumbol*' encapsulate the implications of colour issues.

'White –Washed' women in Malayalam movies

Bell hooks in her *Black Looks: Race and Representation* says: "The world of fashion has also come to understand that selling products is heightened by the exploitation of Otherness" (28)

Indian film industry's irresistible desire for portraying the images of 'fair' women characters in celluloid call for the debate over the topics of colour and subaltern themes. Fair fetish Indian cinema and culture spend their time and money for toning and bleaching their skins regularly. It is estimated that market for Fair & Lovely, Fair and Handsome and other skin whitening creams continue to grow exponentially each year. Movies and advertisement's negative portrayals of darker skin accelerates the growth of

cosmetic industry. Viewing fair as lovely and handsome and dark is ugly and unattractive have created sharp binary oppositions and racial problems. Men and women who have been burdened with colour complex get disturbed when they see a little spots and blemishes in their faces. In Indian movies fairness has been attached to wealth and happiness and darker faces are equated with undesirable things. The stigma around darker skin makes people to believe dark and black a liability whereas white is beautiful and legitimate.

Bell hooks rightly criticizes the consumer culture in *Black looks: Race and Representations*: Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization (31).

The movie *Celluloid*, which was made to essay the efforts a first subaltern heroine named Rosie, shed light upon the caste and colour ridden elite society. Narration of women in subaltern sections have had rigorous oppression from the upper class people on the basis of their caste and colour. This movie traces the attempts of elite class to degrade the subaltern identity and treating them as wretched of the earth. Rosie's dark colour and her caste question the authority of elite people; her enactment of Nair woman and the protest of elite class against her dreams for acting expose the umbilical relationship of caste and colour.

Gender discrimination based on colour is prevalent in Indian cinemas. The comments and jokes related to women's colour and shapes, defining their beauty in terms of their skin are general topics for movie makers in Molly wood and other Indian film world. Gayatri Spivak's theory of Subalternity speaks of the problems of marginalized subjects and their efforts for freedom from elite oppressions. Fair worshipping movie world is blind to the darker complexion. In the popular Nivin Pauly starred Movie *Action Hero Biju*, protagonists Biju Palouse's (Nivin Pauly) mocking dialogue against the character 'Shirley' (Manju vani) about her colour indicates the attitude of the patriarchal prejudice over women's beauty. There are several other instances from other Mollywood movies that deal with the biased and misleading beauty concepts centered on colour.

Conclusion

Differences and discrimination between black and white have become the contentious issues in the world. The fixation on whiteness and the repulsion regarding dark and black colours bring binary oppositions in relationships. Deliberate attempts from the celluloid to legitimate the whiteness and repudiating the dark have brought 'coloured' concepts on beauty. Viewing white as the paragon of beauty tends to produce dislike towards other colours. Recent Malayalam movies which portrayed the comic scenes based on the skin colour of central characters and their sidekicks problematize the concept of colour and beauty.

The concretized beauty standards set by movie world tries to allure the viewers by their constant depiction of the bodily features of actors and actresses. The movies such as '*Kattappanayile Hrithik Roshan*, '*Kammattipadam* ,movies of Vinayakan ,Kalabhavan Mani,Salimkumar,Harisree

Ashokan and the roles of female characters contain the varieties of 'jokes' regarding their skin colour. The jokes based on colour carry serious political meanings; cracking jokes and bringing humour at one's body and their skin colour bring a humiliating effect on their identity and their self. Recurring images of black and dark colours along with white complexions generate a wrong and negative notion towards darker skins. These kind of mocking jokes at one's colour cement an inferiority complex to the people those who are different from white and bright skin. The branding of white is bright and right ideology is subtly established through these seemingly 'naïve jokes', thus it will be essential for film goers and viewers to ensure that they pause wisely while heartless humours and jokes are played at one's skin.

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