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HARNESSING THE POTENTIAL OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURAL INDUSTRIES IN ESANLAND, NIGERIA

Charles Onomudo Aluede

Abstract: The Esan is a unique ethnic group in the Edo Central Senatorial district of Edo State of Nigeria. This work gives a detailed account on the nature of the people's indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) which is eclectic and transdisciplinary. Within this transdisciplinary framework, is the (w)holistic conception of knowledge that pays no heed to the decompartmentalization of knowledge as conceived in the Western sense. Today, this age-old tradition is threatened not just by Western forces of acculturation, but by the same indigenous people who now feel that anything indigenous is fetish, heathenistic and retrogressive. In this study, review of relevant literature, interviews, observational techniques and group discussions were used in eliciting data. Although there are specific Esan practices worth propagating, commodifying the arts and crafts of the Esan race will require censorship lest we run the risks of commodifying our arts and crafts and dehumanizing humanities.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Industries, Esan culture & Ethnomedicine.

Introduction

In this paper, we would like to adopt a simple style of presentation so that we all will be carried along in a coherent form. This subject is reasoned to connect everyone to some degree. Basically, a salient set of questions will be raised to guide our focus lest we stray; consequent on this, we would within the remit of this presentation ask the following questions: Who are the Esan people and how old are they? Do they have distinct cultural practices; if yes, could you tell of some? Are these practices still palpable in their everyday life? If not, why is it so,

and what should be done to resuscitate them? How do we employ human resource application in preserving the people's cultural heritage? What if we apply the principle of progressive traditionalism in the development of Esan-derived cultural industries? These issues should be the concern of the Esan people because everything should not be left to foreigner investigators to help us out of this quagmire more so because after six decades of independence, we should be seen to be truly culturally independent. Relying on external help has its attendant consequences because where any of such help comes, it will rather repudiate what we treasure and demean our highly esteemed heritage. This position is not akin to the Esan alone. According to Dinielou (1970:1)

The problems which face the art of music in the countries of Asia and Africa today are of a general order problem that has grown out of the uncontrolled development of an industrial society in which no precautions were taken to protect the culture, the crafts, and the arts. The latter have tended to become mere consumer products, independent of the social context. The freedom of expression, which was the source of their constant renewal, no longer exists.

Earlier Danielou (1970) remarked that numerous foreign travelers who ever tried to make some documentation of our arts have brought back diaries and memoirs filled with negative impressions: the gestures of the dancers seemed like the antics of clowns, while the music was nothing more than a discordant and thundering din. The issue of noise, untuned musical instruments and illogical melodies dot their reports. If between the Orient and the Occident, such misrepresentation abounds, what impressions do you then expect of such people with reference to the Esan race?

Esan studies started quite as early as the visit of the missionaries to the land in 1900 and the subsequent introduction of Western education in the area. For example, the anthropologist, Thomas (1909) took photographs of carved doors at the palaces of Ubiaja, Irrua and Agbede monarchs. Sadly, this documentation came after the palace of HRH Abumhenre Ebhojie II was burnt in 1902. Many decades later, precisely in 1980, Ann Carol Lorenz started her study on house posts in Uromi and Ubiaja. As an Art historian, she studied Esan carving traditions. The contributions of Okojie (1963 and 1994) are noteworthy. Until about two decades ago, some of these palaces retained their old structures with many courtyards. The reason for their many courtyards is not far-fetched because according to Ahianba (2013:17), 'The traditional,

psychological and anthropological concept of the courtyard is that it characterizes the social status, wealth and integrity of family size....’

Elsewhere, he revealed that a monarch’s house is usually taller and bigger than those of his subjects and the building walls are uniquely decorated to enhance aesthetic sense. In the field of fine arts, history and architecture, some degree of work has been done. Beyond history, anthropology and art, there appears to be a paucity of information and documentation in other spheres of ‘Esanlogy’.

Methods and Materials

In this study, ethnographic method of data gathering was used and it included interviews, observational techniques and group discussions. The study area was stratified into five zones in line with the local government arrangement. Esan is made up of thirty- five kingdoms which are grouped into five Local Government Areas (LGAs) for administrative convenience. Three towns each were selected from the local government areas and each administrative headquarters were chosen along two other kingdoms for investigation. Informants were drawn from a widespread spectrum of some monarchs, chiefs, elderly (males and females), youths (males and females). Armed with audio recorder and already prepared questions to guide interactions on the field, a total of fifteen towns were investigated. Out of the fifteen towns, five were urban and ten were rural. These other towns were selected based on specific factors such as areas where indigenous cultural practices could still be gleaned and areas that were safe to visit considering the current security challenges in the locale of investigation. Addedly, a review of relevant literature was done to strengthen the study.

The Esan in Historical and Geographic Sense

Whenever and wherever used, the term Esan conjures two meanings. It is nomenclatural for a territory occupied by a people who occupy a landmass of about 2,814 square kilometres (Oseghale, 2019), that are found in the Edo Central Senatorial District, whose neighbours are the Benins, Owans, Etsakos and Igbos of Delta State and across the river Niger. Esan is also a language spoken in the locale already delineated above. From a historical perspective, the Esan is generally believed to be of Edoid extraction (Okojie 1994 and



In this paper, we will be using the terms, indigenous knowledge and African indigenous education interchangeably. This is so depending on the context and perspective of the presentation but put simply, we feel that a very thin demarcation exists between them if any.

To Mushi (2009), African indigenous education is a process of passing among the tribal members and from one generation to another the inherited knowledge, skills, cultural traditions norms and values of the tribe. Indigenous knowledge which is our major concern is today seen as somewhat ersatz and something that should not be spoken of in the light of superior and standard practices. It is this background that informed the observations of Ocholla and Onyancha (2006) and Bruce and Baloyi (2017) when they remarked that “For a very long time, indigenous knowledge systems have suffered a high measure of neglect”. While an uninformed person may tilt towards blaming the missionaries, imperial and other forces of acculturation for the wilt of IKS, the indigenes under whose watch the people’s collective art has vanished into oblivion have questions to answer for this grave ineptitude. Some Africans have found themselves in the messy mire of believing that indigenous knowledge is nothing but the conjuration of ancient mysticism and everything profane. For those in this category, the opinion of Emeagwali (2014:1), will be helpful in fine-tuning their thoughts. According to her, Indigenous Knowledge Systems are not confined to the material sphere but are often interconnected with spiritual and non-material realms of existence. We need to emphasize ab initio that African indigenous education is a unique knowledge transmission system that encapsulates all the spheres of human endeavour hence the duo, Emeagwali & Shizha (2016:6) observe that:

Scientific knowledge in whatever form, definition and cultural context it may exist, is found in all societies. Each society has its own way of categorizing and labelling types of knowledge. However, in African indigenous communities, knowledge is often treated as a holistic body of knowledge. African indigenous knowledge systems which are based on the natural environment and human practices for human sustainable development, are intrinsically interrelated.

To have a near-good idea of African indigenous knowledge, and indeed the indigenous knowledge as it is in Esan, we need to basically grow in the understanding that as the world is spherical so is the Esan construct of knowledge and this reasoning enables us not to dichotomize or demarcate boundaries in holistic knowledge acquisition. Hence an Esan man who is a farmer is also an herbalist, diviner, musician, drummer, rainmaker, good storyteller, orator, an adept of proverbs and aphorisms and the other a farmer, palm wine tapper and

harvester of palm nuts, hunter, traditional morbid anatomist, catcher and trainer of parrots, livestock rarer, etc. Among the women, we find them being farmers, native doctors, traditional birth attendants, surgeons, palm oil processors, traders, singers and dancers, priestesses and healthcare deliverers.

The Strands of Indigenous Knowledge in Esanland

The contribution of Abah, Mashebe and Denuga (2015) is quite insightful when they acknowledge that indigenous knowledge systems constitute the core of community–development processes in agriculture, the preservation of food, collection and storage of water, animal husbandry and ethnic veterinary medicine. It also forms the basis of indigenous interpretation of meteorological and climatic phenomena, orientation and navigation on land and sea as well as in the management of natural resources. The Indigenous knowledge system is also very helpful in local primary healthcare, preventive medicine and psychosocial care as well as the role of procreation. Having observed the absence of dichotomy in the body of knowledge in the Esan of old, it may be somewhat antithetical to swiftly return to or bow to the contemporarities evident in today’s subject structure. However, for your own sake and that of convenience, we will talk of five subsegments which are as a matter of fact, interconnected and whole. Below is a diagram of my own impression of the Indigenous knowledge web in Esan worldview which is not in anyway sacrosanct.

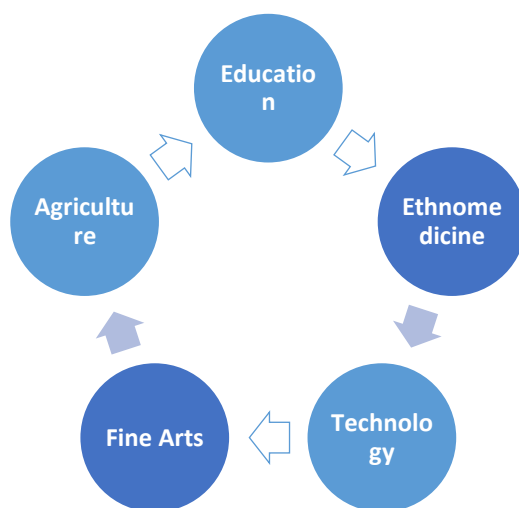


Figure 2: A diagram of indigenous knowledge web in Esan

Here I intend to cursorily discuss the diagram above using apt esoteric Esan proverbs so that we may know how old some of our practices are.

Education

Odiale no bhiye men, Odiale my brother,
a ha rekhan adia when one follows a straightforward person
adiale one will be straightforward

Apprenticeship was a major technique in education. This technique was borne out of caste system where the native doctor's child was not expected to be a novice to the father's craft at best should know a few herbs to treat stomach ache. Names of the land, neighbours, rivers and hills in the environment. Family history, lineages, taboos, dos and don'ts. How to exchange pleasantries, elementary hygiene, and how to conduct oneself in public. What kinds and parts of food, meat and vegetables to eat. For example, the antelope may be eaten but it is not advisable to process its intestines for food. Pumpkin leaves may be eaten but it is not expected that we have anything to do with its roots and this same principle applies to *Ihieghie* (myrea theus Arborus). On moon lit nights, children were told didactic stories, and other brain teasers like *Agbido- Ale*, similarities, dissimilarities and the dangers of confusing them. This whole gamut formed the educational basis and foundation of a well-groomed Esan child.

Ethnomedicine/ Ethnomedical Practice in Esan

Ai zu uhomon bo ni ihe kholor No one abandons self because divination is cataclysmic.

Where etiological investigation was necessary, divination through Osiru, Ukpabor, Oguega was done. Oguega has a plethora of amazing poetries pointing to good health habits.

Herbs have always been used in the treatment of different kinds of maladies. Under traditional healthcare delivery are traditional birth attendants and surgeons, priests and priestesses, healers and native health extension workers who preach about good health habits. Recently, the duo, Aluede and Okakah (2022) discussed Esan indigenous models like talking while eating, techniques of cutting pounded yam, eating late dinners, expelling catarrh with force from the nose, the habit of chewing clothes, and Ota in daily Esan living and their health implications.

Today it is almost anathematic for an Esan child to be given antidotes for snake bites and scorpion stings or convulsions but we find it fashionable to travel from faraway Oria to Irrua Specialist Teaching Hospital (ISTH) in search of anti-snake venom injection which is ever hardly available and anti-epileptic drugs which may not be too affordable to the poor to arrest convulsion. Early in time, the Esan race had a full grasp of the mind-body connection in illness causation, defined their scope of types of illness causation, knew multiple variables in illness causation, and understood social dysfunction as illness.

Technology in Esanland

‘Ogun Agbede,	Agbede blacksmith
Ukpo kpia ogbigbi	brief and thick man
oru uwedin gbe emon	who uses buttocks to match ashes
obha gbo mi ozolua.	if he has not killed Ozolua’s child
ole bha se yo okhon	has not gone to battle field

The poetry above talks of the blacksmith who is a maker of tools that are valuable during conflicts and community crises. They make innumerable household items too. Very early in Esan existence, Ojiogun and the manufacturing of implements like guns, cutlasses, knives/ Elo (a variant of knife), Oya (rubber tapper’s tool) and swords evolved. This evolution was in part to create tools which would make work easier and to make dangerous ones for battles of expansion and protection of one’s territories. With different kinds of tools, carvers of elephant tusks and wood to make Okor (wooden mortar), Uro (wooden tray), Ukpabor (smaller wooden tray) was realised. Traditional artists expanded their creativity from drawing, painting into ceramics, sculptures and textile technology. This background gave rise to the production of Esiso (a woven bag which farmers use in conveying farm produce home), Uталиwe (farm clothes) and Igbulu (Esan homemade fabric for ceremonial outings). Farmers also went beyond land cultivation to the making of Ohen-udin for climbing tall palm trees and strong bamboo with branches for climbing palm trees of moderate heights (Ohalin). They created Ugbi-udia (fly whisk or fly-swish) to chase away or kill tsetse flies. As communal endeavour, the While men were involved in the technology of setting Ulubu, Ugbagbe, Ufi, Akpobe and Ogholo,

1. Ukpe ha ru, If at the end of a year
Okpea bha da ze e jo a da mun ugbo, a man does not mark out where he will farm
ole re egbole lu elimin ese. It means he freely gave himself to his ancestors
2. Egbodia, Being in one place
omen no Ojie, is good for the king
Oimen no Oka it is not good for corn
Oi men ni enyan it is not good for yam
Aha re min ko obha jie, when a planted crop fails to germinate
ohanmen ki gbo oria. hunger will be upon the land

¹ A constellation of three stars in the East with one burning like a flame. It normally appears around late March to signal the planting season and this phenomenon eclipses in early May after which Alukihimojie which is at times the precursor of the moon then takes an eminent position in the sky.

1. The cotton plant from which cotton is extracted could be as raw material could be sold or financial gains.
2. Cotton is used to make clothes.
3. The tender leaves are washed into native orange to produce pinkish solution that is believed to be a good herbal treatment for the stomach.
4. Cotton seeds when grinded into a paste is used in making soup of Egusi status

Fine Arts in Esanland

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Ukpon no fua | The white cloth |
| O le le ejie bha akun | is a king around its wearer's waist |
| | |
| 2. Odafen di igbon | A rich man bought a slave |
| Igbon da de elo | the slave also bought elo |
| Igbon da we | the slave then said |
| ole mo emin obole | he has his own property |

Historically, the five main aspects of fine arts were painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance and literature. Put side by side other cultures around Esan, the creative ingenuity of the Esan is unsurpassed. From the carved doors, wall paintings, house designs to sculptural pieces in designated palaces and shrines, one sees creativity at work. As part of fine arts is oral literature in Esan where again the people have a corpus of poetries that are esoteric, mundane and erotic. You may wonder too that there are erotic poetries. This is not because the Esan race is licentious; but that as part of pastime, senior citizens enjoy them when they are together. Erotic poetry is not peculiar to the Esan nation alone. For Example, Alain Danielou (1992), documented the complete *Kama Sutra* which is the world's oldest and most widely read guide to sexual life in Vedic culture that includes subjects like marriage, adultery, prostitution etc. Esanland has a similar collection which is littered everywhere, wasting away and crying for documentation. With deference and your anticipated kind permission, I dare to share a few:

1. A bha ne abẹ edin ai ho ọ le. Without foreplay no meaningful sex can be achieved
2. Okhọ nọ so okhuo rẹ re egbe no okpea, The mind that permits a lady to mate a male

- ọki sọ rẹ fí akun rẹ khańlẹn. should enable her to twist her waist along
3. Okpẹa ha si so okhuo If a man visits a lady
 ọbha da sa anyudin without gifting her palm wine
 ọ bho, ọbha sẹ yo. He hasn't visited the lady
4. Ọnọ ri okhuo bhi udu ọ le ẹhi ọle. He that is on a lady's chest is her angel
5. Eba ọle okhuo re si okpea ke egbe. With food a lady draws a man close
 Ekue ole okpea re si okhuo ke egbe But with penis, a man draws a lady close
6. Ekei men okpea When a man is unhappy
 ai muọ ọmọn jọ bho oduwa a child is not taken to him in the bedroom
7. Egbe rebhe ole a re lui ilomon okhuo It is the entire body that is used in sex

Cultural industries Defined

Cultural industries (sometimes used synonymously with creative industries) are economic fields concerned with producing, reproducing, storing and distributing cultural goods and services on industrial and commercial terms. In other words, this industry is one that engages, on a large scale, with goods and services that are cultural in nature and usually protected by intellectual property rights-along economic considerations rather than for the purpose of cultural development. (<https://www.definitions.net/definition/cultural+industry>).

According to Spacey (2017), cultural industries are products or services that are based on the culture of a civilization, nation, society, group, or place. Expounding this subject further, he identified nine: Tourism, Events, Publishing, Fine Art, Entertainment, Sports, Crafts and food. Stacey's position is quite insightful here and we intend to discuss them in relation to the Esan scenario.

The Contemporary Esan Scenario

Relying on Spacey's model, we will discuss the current situation of Tourism, Event management, Publishing, Fine Art, Entertainment, Sports, Crafts and food in Esanland.

Tourism in Esan at the Moment

Are there tourist and potential tourist sites in Esanland? This question is vital in realization of the fact that through cultural tourism, tourists are led to sites of attractions such as urban environments, historical sites and museums. Is there any known museum currently in Esan? How have we preserved our historical sites? Would you now say that cultural events in the form of festivals (religious or social) are still in place? What has happened to Ibhialimingbe and other related carnival-like festivals? Esan towns are blessed with a plethora of scholars who are probably not yet thinking of giving back to their land of birth? Not much has been captured in the form of published works such as literature and magazines, documentaries and photo stories? There are waterfalls, shrines, rivers with ancestral boundary demarcations made of exotic plants in Esanland and there are hills and valleys linking kingdoms creating inter-visibility sites. As at today, these sites are under developed.

Wither Fine Arts in Esan?

In this paper, we would also like to mention that in search for modernity, the supposed custodians of these arts have on their own destroyed them. Between the Esan monarchs and the Catholic churches in Esan, we are unable to reconcile who has been the greatest agents of cultural erosion. For want of finesse, under their watch, the first church ever built in Esanland was destroyed and the various palaces of our forebears were also destroyed. But for the kings of Ewatto, Igubeen, Ugboha, Ebelle kingdoms and perhaps a few others one would have said that an attempt at studying Esan palaces will be in a state of irreversible paralysis.

The Esan idea of fine arts is unsurpassed. From the drawing, paintings, the architecture of temple walls, we can glean their creative construct. Today we are living witnesses of Esan

music and dance whose vestiges we still see. Whither Esan minstrelsy (Umalemon)? Chief Umobuarie Ugberase of Ewu and Obeto Atine (Amojo) are dead. Is the art of Umalemon still alive or asphyxiated? Where are the Esan war drums? And where can they be found right now? In the area of commercial art, right from time up to the last three decades there was a bustling art market at Ivue in Uromi. Okojie 1994:344 specifically reported the pot market in Asukpodudu in Uzea in his book. What is the fate of that market right now? What is the fate of Igbulu- Ododo? Who now weaves them? Sacred Heart Convent in Atani-Uromi and Shomorika in Akoko-Edo area are today its major producers.

How is Our Entertainment?

Is anybody sponsoring programmes on the radio, television or any other media to propagate Esan-derived arts? If yes to what degree? Currently, we have some Esan people who are experimenting with Esan radio, comedy, philosophy, proverbs, music, music drama and others on YouTube and other media. Esan entertainment needs enhancement and we will address this elsewhere shortly.

Do We Have Sponsors of Indigenous Sports?

Today we can buy fuel to power our power-generating plants to watch Arsenal and Man United soccer tournaments but in our tinted vehicles we watch toddlers do cartwheels, banana jumps, summersaults, hand and headstand stand, standing on one hand, forward and backward rolls- these are components of Esan Igbabonelimin without rolling our windows down to appreciate them or work out ways to promote it. What about wrestling and climbing?

Are Our Crafts Alive or Moribund?

Esan traditional and contemporary crafts making is on the downward slide. In the 1970s pupils in local authority primary schools were encouraged to make baskets, small and big pestles, ((Obhi-Okor and Ulumun-Obor), make ropes as part of handwork. The best sets of such products were often sold to the public. All these are today monetized and craftsmanship is on

the decline. No doubt, that's the present situation in our schools and in our communities, craftsmen have died without finding inheritors of such traditional arts. Lack of patronage, support and encouragement is the bane of this present situation.

Esan Food?

Food in culture is a global phenomenon and some are unique to a geographical environment. For some others, they need cultural approval. For example, the fish called salmon is served rancid in Germany just as the Ikpakpa is better served and appreciated rancid in Uromi and many other Esan towns. Esan people have some foods which have unique cultural characteristics such as Masa from Ewu, Osisinakpo, Eka -Igali, Amen-Oriri, Kpekele (Eka-Oka) Omon-ebe (black soup), Ikpi-Ukoko, Ikpogi, Irerele, etc. What has happened to breadfruit production in Esan? Kpokpo -Gari (Garri flakes) that was probably introduced by Urhobo and Kwale riverside dwellers in Esanland. How have we made any of such foods presentable or exportable? As we speak right here, is there any Esan restaurant where we can eat these delicacies?

The Journey So Far in Esan

If not considered superfluous, it is believed that we know the gains of strengthening our cultural industries. There is financial benefit should our cultural industries be revived. If well-packaged to exportable levels, foreign exchange will be earned. At the local level forgotten towns will be known once again and in the course of tourism, local foods, crafts, and all other outfits tangential to the hospitality business will have full patronage.

The Esan nation cannot operate outside the Federal, State and Local governments. According to Kwarson (2023), The Department of Cultural Industries is divided into three divisions: Cultural Industry, Heritage, Innovations & Entrepreneurship. The Cultural Industries and Heritage Department is mandated to initiate and support the process of job creation, wealth generation and empower the vulnerable groups. The department is also expected to develop heritage activities for economic growth and opportunities. Beautiful as this blueprint may be,

not much is seen at the grassroots. At the heritage level, the division is saddled with the responsibilities of promoting Nigerian foods and delicacies, Nigeria's Cultural Festivals and special publications on harmful and negative Cultural practices. If the structures are not nurtured, to talk of fostering innovations for entrepreneurship and wealth creation is flim-flam. As we think of the gains associated with this enterprise, we also need to know that it is not going to be possible for the arts to remain in their age-old original state. This is so in that culture is dynamic and so is musical culture. This therefore means that there may be some modifications. In this regard the opinion of Emielu (2018), on the theory of progressive traditionalism is insightful. In his article, he challenged the notion of rigidity and fixity by showing in his study of Edo people how specific dance bands are redefining traditional music through innovations. This therefore means that musical practices can never be static as what was a one-time traditional music has been upgraded into highlife and other musical genres. Aside the principle of progressive traditionalism is human resources application.

Quite a good number of those charting the course of today's cultural renaissance in Esan may have had their trainings outside the region. This then means that, such persons would need to be reintegrated to the arts of their people to be able to rely on and use local examples from their area. To do this, the persons need to apply themselves diligently. As we strive to make a good case for indigenous knowledge and cultural industries, much care is required in commodifying the arts and crafts of the Esan race. Whether we know this fact or not, we must consciously strive to put things right ab initio lest we run the risks of commodifying our arts and crafts and dehumanizing humanities. For example, the present experiments in Esan is beset with irregularities and misrepresentations. In the Esan home video, *Isighele*, an Esan daughter is seen cursing her parents and of particular note is that the young girl wished her mother to be a butterfly that will wallow endlessly from one new farm to the old one. In a similar vein, the Esan proverb maestro popularly known as Oyo-oyoyo has in his work remarked that 'excuse me, just a minute' is the haste that leads to a teacher's untimely death through motor accident. The desire to make people laugh or to introduce comical elements in the work of art and craft should be done within the confines of the people's cultural realities. Among the Esan, there is social control and traditional mechanisms for censorship. This is of course why male phallic symbols worn around the waist by females during a given festival is not worn after the festival. Even in Christendom, everyone knows that the Biblical Mary mother of Jesus had other children for Joseph but who has seen an image or painting of

the Mary kissing Joseph or they holding themselves so intimately? There is the need to learn from available models or set standards by Ndigbo who sent a delegate to Nollywood over the irregular use of red cap in filmmaking.

As an Esan man, one often gets accosted by friends outside Edo State who curiously want to know much about Igbabonelimin and what has happened to it. This to me is indicative of the fact that they love it and would like to see more of it. This inquisition applies to all the creative arts in Esan. Sadly, in the past century, not much has been achieved in the area of cultural industries in Esanland. Once upon a time some Esan persons thought of reviving some aspects of Esan culture and decided to give some support to a faith-based institution -CERDEL in Glorious University, Ogwa. This to me was a laudable feat but my utter chagrin was why it was a faith-based they chose to collaborate with when indeed there were some government-owned tertiary institutions in Esanland with adequate manpower that should have manned it. The five local government Secretariats in Esanland have cultural units that are moribund and the royal fathers of the kingdoms who are patrons and custodians of the arts are tardy in this rescue mission.

Conclusion

Ologho bha yole ole da di uwai, Erosion has not said that it will wash off a house *ono nyan uwa ole ha na len fia*. The onus is on the landlord to channel it off.

In this study, we gave a general background of the traditions of origin of Esan people and their geographical location. Given that foundation, we examined African indigenous knowledge systems and related them to Esan worldview. In this effort, we discovered that there is actually no dichotomy in subject fields in Esan as it is conceived in the West. This is so because knowledge is (w)holistically sought and acquired in this culture area. Thus, it is possible to find one person who is a dancer/singer, farmer, palm wine tapper, and bone setter or a trader, traditional birth attendant, surgeon, priestess and a diviner. These age-old features are gradually waning unless frantic attempts are made to safeguard them. At this critical time in Esan's socio-political history, it is important that we take seriously the threats to our existence which is more self-orchestrated than any of those induced by external forces. In one accord, let us channel off what appears to be cultural erosion that is poised to wash away our indigenous knowledge and its associated cultural heritage to move the Esan race forward.

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Evolution of Entertainment and Indian Literature: From Musical Plays To Hollywood

Isha Mittal

Abstract: Evolution is an unending, continuous process marked by gradual changes and improvements that manifest in diverse forms and stages. In today's high-speed world, as we perpetually race and immerse ourselves in the quest for livelihood, the imperative for stress relief and relaxation becomes even more crucial. The entertainment industry has played a pivotal role in helping us realize this potential. Indian literature encompasses classical texts, ancient scriptures, narratives, and poetry in myriad languages across various works. This industry has grown expansively, garnering the interest of both avid listeners and dedicated readers. Enthusiasts range from those captivated by ancient literature to those intrigued by science and fiction. As the industry evolved from its roots in musical plays to the heights of Hollywood, it's vital to recognize that each stage possesses unique features and allure although a shift has been seen and people have become more inclined to Hollywood. And let's not overlook the expressive enactments of musical plays, as they paved the way for the grandeur of Hollywood.

Keywords: Street plays, musical drama, music, evolution, silent movie, Bollywood, Hollywood, technology

Introduction

The growth of the entertainment industry is a captivating adventure that perfectly blends technology, culture and art. This intricate journey unfolds in time, bridging the gap between classic dramas of ancient civilizations and Hollywood's whimsical luxuries,

presenting the ever-changing landscape of human creativity and the ever-changing preferences of audiences. Nowhere is this transformation more evident than in India, a country with a rich literary heritage, where timeless stories undergo not only astonishing transformations into eye-catching performances but It has also received wide acclaim around the world. In this captivating world, the fusion of imagination and technology coexist harmoniously, illustrating the harmonious synergy between tradition and innovation. The stories that once resonated by campfires, shared in intimate gatherings, have now turned into epic cinematic works, bathed in the bright light of the big screen (Society, 2021). This transition is a testament to how entertainment has transcended historical boundaries, becoming a globally accessible medium that serves a wide range of audiences with different interests .

The theatrical release, box office, and online streaming services follow a advanced data analytics model and the convenience institutional logic in a way to increase subscriptions .

India, with its tapestry of legends and epics, has masterfully reinterpreted its classic stories, breathing new life into ancient tales. These culturally nuanced stories not only retain their essence but resonate with viewers around the world. The universality of human emotions, struggles, and triumphs depicted in these stories allows them to transcend geographical boundaries, establishing a global connection that is pervasive beyond borders. . This evolutionary entertaining journey is more than just its transformation; it reflects the timeless human tendency: an innate desire to be drawn to stories that arouse curiosity and arouse emotion. From the earliest civilizations to the modern digital age, the essence of this journey remains the same: hunger for stories that inspire us, challenge us, and touch us deeply. In the interplay between ancient stories and the excellence of contemporary cinema, the continuity of this deep human longing becomes apparent. The growth of the entertainment industry is not just a story of changes in the industry; it is a chronicle of humanity's enduring fascination with stories that illuminate human experience. As technology advances and cultures blend, one thing remains unchanged: the power of storytelling to transcend time and capture hearts.

The findings of the review show that Disney has extended its influence in the Indian entertainment industry by adhering to the capitalist logic of profit maximization at the expense of regional entertainment product development, distribution, and consumptions.(Rasul, 2023). The exotic, the mystical, or the spiritual have historically drawn Western to misconceptions about India. Paul Scott's *Jewel in the Crown* and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* are two

works of literature that illustrate this imaginative construct. By using stereotypes that were first shown in Indian-themed movies, I contend that this replication may also be applicable to the cinema.(Escobedo de Tapia, 2021) .Bollywood and the Indian film industry have experienced tremendous success. Nevertheless, the positive perception of Indian cinema, which makes over a thousand films annually and sells billions of tickets, the industry has come under fire for the practice of copying expression—at times nearly scene for scene—from US and other foreign films and adapting it to reflect Indian social and cinematic mores. This practice is known as "Indian cultural adaptation." Bollywood's long-standing habit of adapting Indian culture has only recently caught the attention of Hollywood studios, but under international, US, and Indian copyright law, the practice's legitimacy is still up for debate. current research on cultural adaptability in India(Goodyear, 2020) Videocassettes made movies more accessible and had a bigger impact in India than anywhere else, and this was something that was still changing the video culture when digital distribution came along. The internet and digital production have also changed the way people watch movies in India, but again, it's the Indian market that makes these changes unique. In other countries, people have been able to access more foreign movies and services, but in India, the main digital changes relate to people wanting to watch more domestic movies.(Tiwary, 2023). The traditional motion picture industry is being challenged by online streaming services, which is forcing Hollywood major studios to make strategic decisions about which films they will produce and how they will be distributed. The institutional logics perspective uses scenario analysis to look at how these two interactions are likely to evolve. (Hadida et al., 2021). the history of Hindi cinema can be traced back to song and dance. In other words, the story of Hindi cinema can best be understood through the song and dance. Ever since sound was introduced to India in the 1930s, popular Hindi cinema (now known as Bollywood) has made the use of song and dance one of the key—if not the key—features in its on-screen ecosystem. Beginning with ‘Alam Ara’ (1931), the first Indian sound film, the incorporation of music, song and dance became ‘the cornerstone’ of Hindi cinema, according to Ashish Raiadhyaksha & Paul Willemen (253). However, the manner in which these elements changed over the next decades, from the introduction of a single system camera to the simultaneous recording of both image and sound, reveals at times the accidental way in which these elements were incorporated into the film story as well as the evolution of the cinema as a storytelling device.(Gehlawat & Dudrah, 2017). Musical play plays a role in the development of musical skills in first-grade elementary school students. The study included

three phases: an initial testing of pupils' musical abilities, a series of ten hours of musical lessons where the focus was on conducting musical play; and a final testing of the pupils' musical abilities. The Mann-Whitney u-test showed that the difference between the initial and final test results was statistically significant for each of the three musical abilities: rhythmic phrase reproducing, individual tone reproducing, and melodic phrase reproducing. (Varley, 2013)

Main Content

The evolution of combining music with three-dimensional images has taken an extraordinary journey, crossing the boundaries of written literature to find the big stage in cinemas and theatres. During this transition, the timeless epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata were reimagined into vibrant musical compositions, where dialogue took the latter place and the outdoor stages became the canvas for performances, especially at revered Indian festivals such as Dussehra and Janmashtmi. However, in the contemporary context, the younger generation may initially be hesitant to adopt such traditional programmes. But, by understanding the differences of unrecorded life experiences that promote emotional resonance and relativity, their views can change dramatically. At the heart of this transition is the exploration of how a single musical motif, coherently woven into the fabric of the piece, encapsulates a story spanning hundreds of pages in a single book. This dynamic format gives audiences a vivid experience as they witness stories unfold in real time, against intricate backdrops, intricate choreography, and a setting that meticulously reflects the eras of the film. The appeal lies in creating a clear connection with historical reality, transporting the viewer to a world of non-fiction that once flourished. It is a journey that goes beyond mere escape; it is a visceral connection to heritage and history. When the melody harmonizes with the visual tapestry, the viewer finds himself not only a passive observer but also a participant in a shared emotional journey. The absence of scripted dialogue adds improvisation and realism, making each performance a unique interpretation that can never be repeated. This direct interaction resonates deeply, fostering intimate connections between performers and audiences, and more broadly between the contemporary world and bygone eras.

Dialogues play an important role in giving information about the personalities of the characters being portrayed. Through their communication, exchanges, and responses, the

audience gains insights into their motivations, opinions, conflicts, and emotions. This depth of characterization enables the audience to connect with the characters on a more profound level, making their journey and development throughout the story more engaging and relatable. In addition, dialogues help to tell the story. Rather than just telling the story through narration or visual aids, characters' conversations offer a dynamic, real-time representation of the plot's development. This active involvement keeps the audience engaged as they watch the story unfold through the eyes of their characters. Also they add to the entertainment value of a play. Good dialogue can make you laugh, feel empathy, or even cause you to ponder. Funny banter, emotional honesty, and dramatic confrontation all add to the overall entertainment value of the play. They serve as highlights that stick with you long after the curtain goes down.

What makes live theatre so captivating is that it doesn't have the luxury of editing errors or mistakes. The actors' spontaneous reactions in real-time interact with the audience, imbuing performances with an unscripted authenticity that verges on the unpredictable nature of real life. The imperfection creates a sense of relatable authenticity and a deep appreciation for the hard work, dedication, discipline and exceptional skill that goes into delivering a live show flawlessly. The raw emotion and the unfiltered expression that emerges becomes an essential part of the live theatre experience, creating a unique and profound connection between the performer and the audience that develops organically and can't be duplicated.

In addition to providing entertainment, live theaters also serve as a powerful tool for addressing relevant social issues and breaking stereotypes. Live theatre is an unmediated vehicle for provoking discussion, building empathy, and instilling critical thinking. Workshops on topics such as women's empowerment and mental health stigma as well as environmental awareness can create visceral reactions that drive meaningful conversations outside the theatre. Interestingly, the immersive nature of live theaters holds minimal impact on eyesight, predominantly engaging the visual and auditory senses without inherent detrimental effects. Audiences are encouraged to immerse themselves fully in the performances, knowing that their ocular health remains largely unimpacted. In essence, live theatre's blend of authenticity, social impact, and sensory engagement not only keeps its artistic significance alive but also contributes to its enduring appeal as a cherished and impactful cultural medium. One notable disadvantage of a play, particularly in comparison to other storytelling mediums, is its limited

accessibility and reach. Live theatre performances are typically confined to specific venues and scheduled dates, which can restrict the audience's ability to experience the production.

In the late 19th century, projectors were invented, facilitating the metamorphosis of props portraying trees and lakes into breath taking landscapes. This transformation marked a pivotal shift from street plays to the present era of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms. While one might depart from a play midway if it fails to engage, the dynamic landscapes projected by projectors have the power to captivate the audience and beckon them to resume their participation. As these novel landscapes enchanted the audience, fresh storylines, both fictional and based on actual events such as the struggle for independence or the lives of reformers, were introduced into the realm of movies. This evolution brought forth an array of narratives that catered to diverse tastes, ushering in a new dimension of storytelling.

The emergence of new narratives within the realm of storytelling has consistently developed curiosity among audiences, captivating their attention by creating a sense of premonition for what is going to happen next. On March 14th, 1931, India's first sound film "Alam Ara" was released. This historic day laid the foundation for India's thriving film industry. People who were passionate about this dynamic industry sought employment in the film industry. Today, it is one of the best and most sought-after jobs in the country. As the cinematic industry grew, so did the entertainment value. Not only did it provide entertainment, but it also served as a great way to relieve stress. The advent of VCR and DVD further changed the way we consume stories. Now, families and neighbours could come together after dinner and watch movies on cassette. This shared experience enhanced relationships, sparked conversations, and created lifelong memories. This transformative journey shows how storytelling through movies has become an integral part of society. It has become a powerful tool for cultural expression, emotional expression, and connection.

As new people joined, new ideas came up. Imagining the world with similar colours gradually would become monotonous and not catch much interest from the audience. In 1937, the first colourful movie, "Kisan Kanya," was released. Colourful movies helped us make connections to our daily life and introduced psychological effects. For example, the colour blue symbolizes coolness, and red symbolizes tension or warmth. A fictitious film would appear to

be real with a blend and mix of colours. Industrialization was simultaneous, and thus OTT platforms replaced cinemas. In 2000, rented cassettes were replaced by televisions. Televisions, along with the film industry, have given growth to business through advertisements in between. Technology gave way to Amazon Prime and Netflix, where a movie once released can be watched at any time of the day without any advertisements, saving time. But of course, cost remains a factor. When we have such advantages, Bollywood movies are actually unique in their own ways, with amazing soundtracks and music. They use different themes such as action, suspense, comedy, romance, and are rooted in various societal norms.

Nowadays, Hollywood movies have taken space in theatres. The craze for Hollywood movies is due to their lower production rate, making people more inclined not to miss a single movie. It is a complex combination of strategic exclusivity, captivating stories, cutting-edge technology, and a worldwide reach. This combination of elements fuels an insatiable appetite among filmgoers and aficionados, making Hollywood films an essential and beloved part of contemporary film culture. Nonetheless, the increasing inclination towards Hollywood productions often comes at the expense of neglecting the rich tapestry of Indian traditions, including the vibrant folk songs and dances that have defined the cultural landscape for generations.. A simple question that only a few percent of this generation can answer is to name any folk song played during auspicious occasions like marriage. These songs are still played but neglected.

Discussions and Conclusion

As the entertainment journey goes through different stages, audiences will have many different opinions, shaped by their personal preferences and cultural background. The allure of this field lies in its ability to adapt to changing circumstances, exploit strengths and overcome limitations when reaching unprecedented heights. What is most fascinating is the deliberate progression and gradual ascent leading to unexplored horizons. Throughout its development, the entertainment industry has gone through various eras, each characterized by its own attributes and challenges. These changes are influenced by the diverse tastes of listeners and audiences, which are closely linked to mainstream cultural dynamics. What remains constant, however, is

the industry's driving force for growth and excellence, an eloquent expression of the complex dance between innovation and tradition.

The tremendous growth of the entertainment industry is a testament to the harmonious coexistence of innovation and tradition. This mix caters to a wide variety of tastes, ensuring the field resonates with audiences across a wide range of backgrounds. As technological advances propel it forward, it continues to tap into its roots, preserving essences that have won the hearts of generations. This harmonious blend not only caters to a wide variety of interests, but also propels the industry into uncharted territory. In the midst of this development, it is necessary to acknowledge the central role of both the fascination of Hollywood cinema and the moving melodies and captivating dances of Indian heritage. These components are not simple isolated pieces but the heart of the community, rich cultural and emotional treasures. By recognizing and preserving these two aspects, we ensure that the legacy passed on to future generations is not only the glamor of Hollywood but also traditions that evoke deep resonance with nature. Nature of the Indian community.

Following the trajectory of the entertainment industry, we embrace a story that embraces the human creative pulse, the interplay of cultural diversity, and the enduring appeal of storytelling. As the journey continues, let's celebrate both the glorious heights of innovation and the timeless beats of tradition, enhancing it for future generations to come.

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Amplifying Voices of Resilience: A Review of *Women Rising*

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Abstract: This research article reviews the book *Women Rising: In and Beyond the Arab Spring*, edited by Rita Stephan and Mounira M. Charrad. The primary objective of this article is to critically examine the book, assessing its merits and demerits. Comprising forty chapters authored by diverse contributors, the book employs interviews, translated essays, visual representations, and excerpts from participatory journals to amplify the courageous voices of women across borders and throughout history. The central focus is on the agency of women in the context of the Arab Spring, emphasizing themes of resistance, revolution, and reform, while also highlighting the challenges they face, including sexual threats, body shaming, and attempts to discredit their work. Notable figures discussed include Afrah Nasser, Tawakkol Karman, and others. The book also examines significant movements and gender-based laws and policies in these regions. It employs captivating language and supports its arguments with data and citations, maintaining a page-turning pace through its diverse authorship. *Women Rising* explores patriarchal constructs, classism, and the role of women as active agents of change, making it a relevant and contemporary resource.

Key Words: women rising, Arab Spring, women's activism, gender equality, islamic feminism

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“You can crush the flowers but you cannot delay spring” (Stephan and Charret 2020 P. 190)

Women Rising is an ambitious and comprehensive collection that serves as a powerful platform to amplify the unwavering and resilient voices of women from various corners of the Arab world and across the annals of history. This extensive compilation spans a substantial volume comprising a remarkable forty chapters, each thoughtfully authored by a diverse group of individuals. The inclusion of interviews, translated essays, visually arresting representations, and compelling excerpts from participatory journals creates a multi-dimensional narrative that speaks loudly and authoritatively.

The book resonates with an assertive and persuasive tone, making it impossible for readers to remain untouched by the profound messages conveyed within its pages. It is not just a book but a manifesto for women's empowerment, an anthem for equality, and a testament to the indomitable spirit of women throughout the ages.

Moreover, *Women Rising* is more than just a collection of stories and voices; it's a meticulously crafted work that provides additional value through its insightful features. An inspiring foreword sets the stage for the reader, immersing them in the profound journey that lies ahead. Comprehensive notes and an extensive index ensure that readers can delve deeper into the material, uncovering nuances and connecting the dots between the various narratives.

In addition to this exceptional collection, it's important to recognize that there are also articles and studies on similar subjects, such as Saskia Glas and Neils Spierings' study (2019) in the *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, shedding light on how "supporters of Muslim feminism" are often disregarded by quantitative researchers (283-310). These studies add depth and nuance to the conversation, enriching the understanding of feminism within various cultural contexts.

Furthermore, Haneen Ghabra and Bernadette Marie Calafell's article, "From Failure and Allyship to Feminist Solidarities: Negotiating Our Privileges and Oppressions Across Borders" (2018) in *Text and Performance Quarterly* explores the (im)possibilities of feminist alliances

across difference and the importance of intersectional feminist ethics in creating alliances grounded in shared experiences of Otherness rather than specific identities.

Sara Salem's article, "On Transnational Feminist Solidarity: The Case of Angela Davis in Egypt" (2018), delves into Angela Davis's visit to Egypt in the early 1970s and how it catalyzed transnational connections of solidarity between Davis and Egyptian feminists, shedding light on the complexities of feminist organizing, hierarchies within "universal sisterhood," and the necessity for women's organizations focused on the third world. Further in his article "Arab Spring Era: Winds of Change in the Direction of Gender Equality for Tunisian Women" (2018), Gadi Hitman explores the transformative impact of the Arab Spring on the status of Tunisian women, highlighting the shift towards greater gender equality.

One significant aspect of *Women Rising* is its contextual richness. By offering a historical backdrop of the Arab Spring, it equips the reader with a deeper understanding of the chapters within the book. This historical context serves as a framework for comprehending the struggles, triumphs, and transformations of the women whose stories are featured in the book.

Almost every chapter within this comprehensive compilation delves extensively into the agency of women in the context of the Arab Spring, meticulously examining themes of resistance, revolution, and reform. Concurrently, it offers a critical examination of the myriad challenges and hardships encountered by these women activists. These challenges encompass threats of a sexual nature, instances of body shaming, and concerted efforts to undermine the legitimacy of their work, all of which underscore the resilience and determination of these activists.

Women Rising presents an array of inspirational women whose contributions span a wide spectrum, ranging from labor activism to intellectual pursuits that engage with a multiplicity of issues such as labor injustice, class discrimination, queerness, domestic violence, and other deeply rooted problems emanating from gender inequality. Notable figures featured in the book include Afrah Nasser, renowned for her articulate use of words as a catalyst for change, Tawakkol Karman, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate emblematic of unwavering commitment to justice, and Rasha Jarhum, a dedicated advocate for peace and human rights.

The book also highlights figures like Mafis, who have significantly contributed to the discourse on gender equality, Aliaa Elmahdy, whose art challenged societal conventions, Rose Ghurayyib, a prominent labor activist, and Summer Nasser, a tireless advocate for social justice.

Margot Badran's scholarly contributions have left an indelible mark on the discourse surrounding women's rights in the Arab world, further enriching the narrative.

Importantly, *Women Rising* transcends the mere celebration of successful women activists from the Arab Spring and provides a nuanced portrayal of those who have encountered setbacks, such as Shabaan. These narratives serve as a compelling reminder of the formidable obstacles that women frequently confront in their pursuit of equality and justice. The resilience and determination displayed by these women, even in the face of adversity, exemplify their unwavering commitment to catalyzing change in the Arab world and beyond, reinforcing their indomitable spirit.

The volume not only delves into the stories of these remarkable women but also provides insightful glimpses into significant movements that have left an indelible mark on the Arab world's landscape. These movements, such as 'Don't Touch My Child,' 'Stop the Killing,' 'Brides of Freedom,' 'Jasmin Movement,' 'Syrian Sisterhood,' and 'April 6 Egyptian Movement,' have each played a crucial role in challenging the status quo and advocating for gender equality and women's rights. Through these movements, the book uncovers the collective power of women who have come together to confront the prevailing social, cultural, and political norms, demanding justice and change.

Additionally, the text does not shy away from exploring the controversies and scandals that have shaped the discourse surrounding women's rights in the Arab world, such as the notorious 'Fadihat Aseel Alawadhi.' This inclusion highlights the complexities and challenges faced by women activists and the immense courage required to confront deeply ingrained patriarchal structures.

The volume also offers a nuanced understanding of the legal and policy aspects of gender equality in the region. It references pivotal laws and policies that have marked significant milestones in the journey towards women's rights, including the Tunisian Law of Personal Status from 1956, which laid the groundwork for women's legal rights, Saudi Arabia's historic 2017 law permitting women to drive, a momentous step toward women's mobility and independence. Jordan's repeal of Article 308, which previously allowed rape if the rapist married the victim, and Lebanon's abolition of Article 522, both critical in combating gender-based violence and discrimination, are highlighted as notable legal advancements. Furthermore,

the text acknowledges Tunisia's 2014 constitution, which promotes the language of equality, solidifying the nation's commitment to gender parity and women's empowerment.

In sum, *Women Rising* not only narrates the experiences of women activists but also provides a broader perspective on the social, cultural, and legal contexts in which these women have striven for equality and justice. This multifaceted approach underscores the profound impact of women's voices and actions in reshaping the Arab world's landscape and advancing the cause of gender equality.

The language employed within the text is a masterful blend of ornate and captivating prose, characterized by its deft use of rhetorical devices and vivid imagery. Phrases such as 'obituary of democracy' and 'domino effect' are strategically woven into the narrative, lending a poetic quality to the discourse while simultaneously conveying the gravity of the events and concepts they describe. This artful language elevates the text beyond mere documentation, imbuing it with a literary dimension that engages the reader on both intellectual and emotional levels.

Furthermore, the authors of this volume bolster their arguments with a rigorous foundation of statistics, data, and citations, reinforcing the validity and substantiation of their assertions. This scholarly approach ensures that the book is not merely a collection of anecdotes and narratives but a meticulously researched and intellectually sound examination of the issues at hand. It allows readers to navigate through the intricate web of women's struggles in the Arab world with confidence in the accuracy of the information presented.

One of the distinguishing features of *Women Rising* is the collaborative effort of over forty different authors, contributing to the book's vibrant and dynamic energy. This diverse authorship brings a multiplicity of perspectives and voices to the forefront, enriching the narrative with a kaleidoscope of experiences and insights. Such diversity not only provides readers with a varied and multifaceted exploration of women's activism but also maintains an engaging and page-turning pace throughout the book, ensuring that readers remain captivated from start to finish.

The text is also punctuated by the resonant echoes of slogans and revolutionary chants that have reverberated through the streets and hearts of women activists. Phrases like 'Women are complete not complements' and "Have Mercy! Have Mercy! The Egyptian woman has been screaming for years, and everyone turns a blind eye" (Mafis 2020, p. 99) not only serve as rallying cries but also illustrate the enduring power of language and rhetoric in the struggle for

women's rights. These slogans are a testament to the persistence and resilience of women activists, and they are seamlessly integrated into the narrative, providing a vibrant and authentic connection to the movements and voices featured in the book.

One of the particularly captivating and intellectually stimulating aspects of this book is its thoughtful exploration of complex ideas, profound observations, and compelling thoughts. It delves into the patriarchal logic that systematically constructs the normative worker as male, effectively excluding women from essential decision-making roles within labor activism (Naber 2020, p. 36). This critical analysis unravels the intricate web of gender biases that underlie labor movements and serves as a testament to the depth of scholarly inquiry undertaken in this work.

Additionally, the book's chapters shed light on the inherently gendered aspects of classism and authoritarianism, underscoring the intricate intersections between gender, social class, and political power. The insightful examination of these dynamics reveals the multifaceted nature of women's struggles in the Arab world, highlighting the importance of addressing these issues within a gendered framework. This nuanced perspective advances the scholarly discourse on gender in the context of broader socio-political structures.

Moreover, the book firmly establishes the viewpoint that women are not passive victims but active agents of change. It celebrates the agency and resilience of women who have taken it upon themselves to challenge the status quo, advocate for their rights, and initiate transformation. This perspective reframes the narrative, emphasizing the proactive and instrumental role women have played in shaping the course of history in the Arab world.

Another noteworthy aspect is the book's meticulous attention to detail and acknowledgment of the collaborative nature of this work. Each chapter is accompanied by acknowledgments, recognizing the contributions of the many individuals who have collectively contributed to the book's creation. This collaborative ethos not only underscores the significance of solidarity in the struggle for gender equality but also reflects the spirit of unity that has driven women's movements in the Arab world.

Additionally, the book includes a chapter that delves into the development of a university course titled "Genesis of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Fez, Morocco" by Fatima Sadiqi. This chapter provides a valuable case study of the academic growth and institutionalization of gender and women's studies in the Arab world, showcasing the scholarly and educational aspects of the book.

Women Rising maintains its scholarly relevance by engaging with contemporary discourse and offering a nuanced exploration of key concepts within the realm of gender studies and activism. Notably, it dissects the distinctions between secular feminism and Islamic feminism, delving into the complexities of these ideological frameworks in the Arab world. This examination sheds light on the multifaceted nature of women's movements and the diversity of perspectives that contribute to the broader discourse on gender and equality. The book thus serves as a valuable resource for scholars and activists seeking to understand the intricate intersections of feminism in the Arab context.

Within its pages, the text delves into the concept of a Feminist Ethos, as exemplified by figures like Asmaa Mahfouz, providing a comprehensive examination of the principles and ideologies that underpin feminist activism in the region. Additionally, the inclusion of references to Western feminists such as Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir further enriches the narrative, demonstrating the global dialogues and cross-cultural influences that have shaped women's movements in the Arab world.

Moreover, *Women Rising* explores the innovative ways in which women have harnessed digital spaces and audiovisual media to amplify their voices and dissent. This exploration reflects the contemporary relevance of the book as it delves into the challenges posed by the age of post-truth, where the internet serves as both a platform for truth-seeking and a menacing space for disinformation and online harassment. This analysis underscores the ongoing struggle for truth and justice in the digital age, positioning the book at the forefront of discussions surrounding technology, activism, and gender in the Arab world.

The book also provides readers with invaluable insights into the emergence of Arab women's activism in cyberspace as early as 1999, a testament to the pioneering spirit of women who harnessed the power of the internet to advocate for their rights and challenge societal norms. Furthermore, it elucidates the establishment of The Arab Women Solidarity Association United (AWSA United) as a crucial platform for Arab women in the diaspora to express solidarity and support for women in the Arab world, highlighting the transnational nature of women's movements and the importance of cross-border alliances.

A critical examination of *Women Rising* reveals important considerations related to the book's inherent limitations. While this work undeniably represents a significant and commendable collection of women activists' voices from Islamic countries, it is imperative to acknowledge

that it may not encompass the full spectrum of women's diverse experiences within these regions. The selection of authors and chapters is inevitably a subjective process, influenced by a variety of factors, and as such, it is plausible that alternative perspectives and narratives may not have found a place within the book. This subjectivity can potentially limit the overall scope and representation within the text.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the book primarily centers its focus on the Arab Spring and its aftermath. While these events undoubtedly had a profound impact on women's activism in the region, it is equally vital to recognize that there have been other pivotal moments and movements in the history of women's activism within Islamic countries that also warrant attention and exploration. The book's emphasis on the Arab Spring may inadvertently overshadow these other significant milestones and movements, thereby presenting a somewhat skewed historical narrative.

It is essential for readers to approach *Women Rising* with a nuanced perspective, appreciating it as an invaluable contribution to the field of gender studies and women's activism. The book undoubtedly offers profound insights into the experiences of women in Islamic countries and the transformative power of their activism. However, at the same time, it is crucial to remain cognizant of its inherent limitations, primarily stemming from the subjectivity of the selection process and the book's specific historical focus.

In scholarly discourse, recognizing and engaging with such limitations is a fundamental aspect of critical analysis. While *Women Rising* offers a rich and illuminating portrayal of women's activism, its readers should supplement their understanding with additional research and diverse perspectives to gain a more comprehensive view of the multifaceted landscape of women's experiences in Islamic countries. The book serves as an essential starting point for this exploration, prompting further inquiry and a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding women's roles and struggles within these regions.

In conclusion, *Women Rising*, despite the recognized limitations discussed, remains an exceptional and indispensable resource that enriches the scholarly landscape across a wide array of academic disciplines. Scholars, researchers, students, educators, and anyone with an interest in feminism, women's studies, political science, social science, political history, gender studies, and the humanities will find this book to be a valuable addition to their academic pursuits.

The book serves as a comprehensive and illuminating exploration of women's activism across various Islamic countries, offering profound insights into their struggles, achievements, and agency. Its multifaceted content, which encompasses interviews, essays, visual representations, and meticulously researched data, provides a rich tapestry of women's experiences in these contexts. *Women Rising* not only informs but also inspires critical thinking, facilitating profound discussions on critical topics such as gender equality and social justice.

While the book may not claim to provide a definitive or exhaustive account of women's experiences and activism in Islamic countries, its thought-provoking nature and comprehensive index make it an indispensable reference and textbook for those seeking a deep and nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding women's lives in these regions. Its ability to transcend the boundaries of the classroom is a testament to its impact, as it inspires readers with its powerful voices and radical ideas.

By delving into the intricacies of women's activism in Islamic countries, *Women Rising* empowers readers to explore further, question established norms, and engage in ongoing conversations surrounding gender equality and the dynamics of women's struggles. In this sense, it is not merely a book but a catalyst for continued exploration and reflection, making a significant contribution to the ongoing dialogue on women's rights, social justice, and political change in Islamic countries. Its relevance extends far beyond the pages of the book, leaving an enduring imprint on the minds and hearts of those who engage with its powerful narratives and intellectual insights.

Ma men reedo ma men reedo (We don't want it we don't want it)

Ma men reedo ma men reedo (We don't want it; we don't want it)

El nizam el abaweh badna nbeedo (The patriarchal system we will abolish)

El nizam el abaweh badna nbeedo (The patriarchal system we will abolish) (Stephan and Charret 2020 P. 179)

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“Hum Kaagaz Nahi Dikhayenge” (“We won’t show our papers”): The Narratives of Bodies and Belongings at the Anti-CAA Shaheen Bagh Protests 2019-20

Kenny Bhatia

Abstract: The Shaheen Bagh protests of 2019-20 were a nation-wide performance of dissent against the Indian citizenship laws CAA, NRC and NPR that would religiously discriminate against Muslims. Began and led by Muslim women from the neighbourhood of Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, the protests engendered critical conversations around the nation, the gendered body, space, history, and legal citizenship. The essay is a critical exploration of the counter-narratives the protestors performed against the State’s discriminatory, divisive and violent narratives, through the lens of performance studies. The bodies of the protestors became spaces of dissent and the bearers of the multiplicities of the nation, the corporeality of the individual, the domestic space, the Muslim neighbourhood, and the protest space expanded, encompassing, and even creating, the nation itself. The essay, thus, argues that as the protest site became a space of multiplicities, the protestors built the nation(s) of their secular imagination and their disidentifications presented the excess that the State could never fully regulate.

Keywords: Shaheen Bagh; India; protests; belonging; Muslim women’s movement; Hindu Nationalism

Introduction

In December 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), re-elected in the same year to form the

central government of India, passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), a discriminatory law that would allow only non-Muslim persecuted communities from neighbouring countries to seek refuge and citizenship in India. The Act was then combined with the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and National Population Register (NPR), which further endangered the citizenship of those already living in the country, demanding certain documents for the proof of their legitimacy as Indian citizens. (Vaid 2020) These laws violate the secularism and equality promised by the Indian Constitution as they discriminate on the basis of religion. The introduction of these Acts was, thus, met with large-scale protests and demonstrations across the country.

Since the election of BJP in 2014, there has been a significant rise in the Hindu-nationalist ideology and violence against Muslims, Dalit communities, trans communities and other marginalised peoples in the country. (Bansal 2020, 52)

In the Hindu nationalist project, there is no room for those who differ; indeed, Hindu nationalists would like to either assimilate or eliminate Indian minorities such as Muslims [...], as well as those Hindus who do not agree with the Hindu nationalist version of Hinduism. (Bacchetta 2000, 260)

Even prior to the introduction of these laws, there had been several nation-wide reports of individual occurrences of hate crimes rooted in religion and caste-based discrimination. (Naseem 2019; Sangam 2019) In addition to these individual cases across the country, the brutal violence that the police inflicted on the students of Jamia Millia Islamia, a University in the vicinity of Shaheen Bagh, protesting these Acts seemed to have ignited a spark of anger and desperation amongst the women of Shaheen Bagh, since many of their children attended this University and were injured in the violence. (Mustafa 2020, Introduction) This violence was both physical and ideological. Their bodies were not simply brutally violated in the attacks but were also being divided, regulated and mapped through the imposition of the intensely scrutinising laws. It was a hyper-visibilisation in order to systematically regulate and eventually invisibilise their bodies.

Gayer and Jaffrelot (2012, 2) bring attention to the years of distrust that the Muslims of India had been enduring since the tensions that intensified during Partition. '[T]heir loyalty has

been continuously questioned by sections of the state, of the media and of the political class.’ These laws were, and are, a decisive attempt to delegitimise these bodies, citing safety and protection of ‘legitimate Indians’, namely, upper-caste Hindus. (Basu 2021, 169) Thus, even without the introduction of NRC and NPR, the CAA was indicative of this distrust. These laws would authorise this distrust and violence against Muslims through a false narrative of a potential victimisation of the Hindu majority. The Shaheen Bagh protests, therefore, started in response to this State-sanctioned violence when some of these women, mothers of the students of Jamia Milia Islamia, came together and ‘occupied a road, staging a public protest for the first time in their lives.’ (Mustafa 2020, Introduction)

The Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly denied that CAA was discriminatory on religious grounds, ‘I want to clarify it to my 130 crore Indians. The CAA will not have any effect on any religious community, be it Hindu, Muslim, Sikhs or Christians.’ (Vaid 2020) Nonetheless, the people understood from the example of Assam that CAA alongside NPR and NRC would make their status precarious and would be a direct violation of their fundamental rights, as stated in the Constitution. In Assam, the laws had left out 1.9 million people out of the citizenship register and many of those without documentation were sent to detention camps set up by the government, or were deported. (Osterman 2020)

Furthermore, these laws did not only affect the Muslim citizens and refugees, but threatened all those who would find it difficult to produce legal documents of birth certificates and land-ownership to prove their citizenship. Dalit communities, women, poor people, trans and queer communities, all would be impacted by the implementation of these laws. Realising that these laws would exacerbate the hierarchies amongst them further dividing them on the basis of ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ bodies, several of these communities mobilised together to organise protests across India. Their complex intersections of identities and their mobilised protest performances engendered counter-responses to the ones imposed by the government’s laws. As the Muslim neighbourhood of Shaheen Bagh became one of the major epicentres of these protests, the narratives produced and performed through this resistance movement became increasingly complex, strategic, and powerful in their response to the violence of the State. Although the protests themselves came to an end without succeeding to force the government to meet their demands, the strength, and possibilities they imagined and

demonstrated through such alternative socialities, built a movement of hope encouraging more and more people to produce such counter-narratives.

This essay will seek to investigate these narratives produced as these communities performed their resistance through creative interactions between bodies and space. In order to do this, the essay will follow a thematic structure to explore the different forms that the body takes in its social construction and how each of these constructive aspects is exceeded by the body as it resists the State's regulation. It will examine these interactions as they reconfigure the power relations between the State, the minority communities and the individual, through depictions of alternative models of relationalities.

The Legal Body

After the Partition, the Muslim communities across several cities of India have been segregated based on religion and caste. These segregations remain unwritten but formulate the demarcations of the cities. Jaffrelot problematises the 'category of the "Muslim ghetto"' and 'distinguish[es] these "neighbourhoods of exile" from more benign forms of enclosing.' (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012, 13) These demarcations differ based on the local contexts and power dynamics of the Muslim communities in each different city. Such enclosures did not restrict movements for either of the communities but marked an area dominated by a certain population, building small zones with the majority of a certain people and their culture. However, due to the overall majority of the country being Hindu, such enclosures were meant for the marginalised peoples. These centres could be viewed as spaces of confinement but also of cultural preservation and safety in numbers for these marginalised communities. Shaheen Bagh, in Delhi, is one such demarcated Muslim neighbourhood, whose

inhabitants [are] educated to varying degrees, politically aware and sensitive to media narratives [and] the locality represents that section of Indian Muslims who are more progressive than most believe them to be, but who still struggle to rise up the social ladder. (Khan 2020, 1247)

Owing to many of the students of historically significant Jamia Milia Islamia, who had been attacked by the right-wing Hindutva assailants, the site became the epicentre for the protests.

These protests, however, completely remapped the spatial relations of this locality as it became a site for collective organising.

The Muslim communities across India are not singular and neither are their living conditions and experiences. By marking all Muslim communities as suspicious and dangerous through these laws, these communities are being reduced to a singular entity. With the laws of CAA, NRC and NPR, these individuals would be reduced to bodies, objectified and made legible through two-dimensional documents, containing markers of their religion, age, gender identities, economic status and caste status. The documents become the identity of the individual, their bodies and voices, testifying on their behalf, reducing their complexities to social and legal categories.

Required to provide proof of being legal citizens of India having entered the country on or after July 1, 1987 or proof of a parent being born in India before that year, the lives of these individuals are rendered precarious. (Acharyulu 2020) The process of being recognised as a 'legal citizen' of India becomes a process of being recognised as having a birth-right to the land, a birth-right determined not simply by the place one was born in but by the privilege they hold to be able to provide documents of one's birth, parentage and land-ownership. The acknowledgement of an individual and the value of their life is removed from the immediacy and corporeality of their being and shifted to the space around them which determines the circumstances of their existence. It allows the State to hold power over who is determined to become a legal citizen and who gets the status of 'illegal,' thus limiting the power of certain communities against others. These categories then determine the rights, access and position available to this person in the society. They mark out a space, figurative, but in many cases also physical, that the individual is permitted to inhabit.

Simultaneously, these documents 'preserve' and record these objectified bodies for the purpose of the State to exert control and surveillance over these individuals. Michel Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish* (1995, 184) of the functioning of the examination system is appropriately applicable in this situation. He writes: 'The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalising judgement. It is a normalising gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and

judges them.’ The demand of the documentation with certain requirements is the examination system here and the State holds the power of judgement. These documents ensure that the individual becomes indelible and inseparable from the State system, demonstrating Foucault’s conception of “embedding” (“encasement”) these bodies under the State’s ‘spatial “nesting” of hierarchised surveillance.’ (Foucault 1995, 171-172) However, unlike Foucault’s argument that the State’s power is built in a format so as to not be seen, in this case, the State wanted to showcase its power. (Foucault 1995, 171) The State may have disguised its narrative as one of ‘safety’ but simultaneously overlooked those who terrorised and inflicted violence upon its citizens. The violence at Jamia Milia Islamia and the pogrom of Muslims in Delhi’s Muslim neighbourhoods both were carried out in the presence of elected officials and the police. (Matthew 2020) The State wanted its power to be seen in order to instil fear among the protestors.

Hence, even if they are able to provide proof of their ‘legality’ as citizen, the State has asserted its power, displaying its authority over these communities. This authority, the gaze of the State which carries out the surveillance, would be enough to bring these individuals’ bodies under their regulation. Moreover, since these bodies hold several such identities together, the State is able to expand their range of regulation and make it more insidious through the process of monitoring and recording of bodies, and the categories they fit into.

When Shaheen Bagh protestors occupied and blocked the road connecting Noida and Kalindi, reasoning through the Preamble of the Indian Constitution was a central aspect of their resistance. (Puranam 2020) The Constitution, written by the revered anti-caste movement leader Dr B. R. Ambedkar, which established secularism and equality for all was being violated through the introduction of these laws. The resistance, therefore, invoked one form of documentation against another. This may, at the outset, be perceived as being subsumed by the same narrative of legal documents as the government. There remained, however, a key difference in the impact of these documents upon the bodies of the citizens of the country.

While the CAA, NRC and NPR demanded documents to register and regulate these bodies as subjects to the State, the Preamble centres the power of the formation of the nation in the hands of its people: ‘We, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic and to secure to all its citizens: Justice,

social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship [...]’ (“Preamble” 1950) The two documents present an entirely opposite power relation between the State and its peoples. The Constitution acknowledges that the body of the nation is constituted through the multiplicity of the individuals who reside in it. In the process, the two-dimensional document does not limit the body but addresses its complexities and fundamental rights for a dignified life. This notion of the individuals constituting the body of the nation then seems to form the cornerstone of the corporeal structure of the Shaheen Bagh protests.

By distinguishing between individuals based on their social categories and the markers of ‘legal’ and ‘illegal,’ determining the spaces they occupy, the State would hold power over ensuring a dissolution of possible solidarities and the State’s sustained power over the segregated communities. The Shaheen Bagh protests were organised to display this very solidarity that was forged in the face of State oppression. Zeyad Masroor Khan (2020) draws attention to the stark contrast in the slogans of solidarity by the protestors and the statements made by the Hindutva supporters of the discriminatory law. The slogan of ‘Awaaz do, hum ek hain’ (Say it out loud, we are one) echoed the support, care and solidarity performed at Shaheen Bagh when people of all religions, ages, genders and classes came together at the site. A local Hindu resident who fired a gun at the protest site, on the other hand, shouted ‘Is desh mein sirf Hinduon ki chalegi, aur kisi ki nahi’ (Only the will of Hindus shall prevail in this country). (Khan 2020, 1221) The Preamble of the Constitution, and the rights it assured, were key to the demands of the protestors – to restore and uphold the democracy of the country. As individuals from all sections of society came together to lay claim to their rights to the nation, the protest site of Shaheen Bagh itself was transformed into a microcosm of India: ‘[It had] Musalmans and Hindus, hipsters and *dharam walas*, secularists and post-secularists, photographers and film-makers.’ (Zaidi and Pani 2020, 974) Yet, this microcosm transcended an immediate representation of the nation as it continually rebuilt itself through the vision of the protestors who stood in solidarity, bringing into existence the nation(s) they envisioned.

The protest site was a ‘sit-in, [it was] a candlelight march, [it was] a women’s space, [it was] a library, [it was] a metro station [...], [it was] a hangout zone, [it was] a bus stop, [it was] a night market, [it was] an outpost.’ (Zaidi and Pani 2020, 970) Women remained the founders

and the carriers of the protest as it took several forms, embodying the multiplicity of demands and desires that the protestors joined in with. The site itself became a multiplicity, a challenge to the idea of a singular, homogenous nation of Hindus that the State was attempting to impose. Asserting their fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution, the citizens became the makers of this microcosm of India, organizing, managing, and expanding the protest, which held their complexities and contradictions together, as opposed to the State, which imposes control and demands submission. In the process, they demonstrated that the State and the nation are not synonymous and undermined the power of the government, destabilising their power, and asserting their own.

Through the formation of these microcosms and reinforcing the power of the Constitution, the people called into question the role of the government and the power of the state. They brought attention to the idea of the nation and who constitutes it. By publicly reading the Preamble of the Constitution and countering it against the laws that the government wanted to impose, they used the government's own jargon of rights, legality and documentation to challenge the discrimination and violence that was being carried out. Consequently, they built alternative visions of the nation at the protest site and expanded the boundaries of the 'enclosed Muslim neighbourhood' to encompass the entirety of the nation. As the protest spread across the country, several pockets of such women-led sit-in protests arose in many Muslim neighbourhoods of major cities. (Basu 2021, 170) These protests then became the 'Shaheen Baghs' of these cities. The borders and limits of the enclosed space dissolved as the protest expanded in its corporeality. This figurative expansion of the Muslim enclosure, fundamentally altered the spatial segregation of the country and seemed to have opened up the possibilities of redesigning the social and spatial relations among communities across the country. The body, therefore, both asserted its legitimacy through the law while concomitantly exceeding the law and rejecting its reduction to the labels of 'legal' and 'illegal.' As the corporeal living body was framed against the two-dimensional legal body, the individuals asserted their rights to it by actively expanding their corporeality through the space while resisting the contraction and restriction that the laws sought to inflict upon them.

Such multi-dimensionality of the body was not simply asserted through physical space by the protestors, but also found relief and strength in its expanse over history and time. The persecution and discrimination against Muslims have been justified through the Hindutva

narrative of Muslims as invaders of the country while ‘Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains are considered Indians as India was the birthplace of their religions.’ (Hameed 2020, 31) The CAA, NRC and NPR functioned through such rhetoric of historical birth-right to the land through religious and/or family heritage. As their citizenship was questioned on these temporal grounds, their resistance was also performed across histories and futures. The following section explores these spatial and temporal dimensions interweaving with the protestors’ narratives of dissent, responding to the State by overturning their own rhetoric.

The Historico-Spatial Body

The category of being the ‘minority’ has marked the Muslim identity in India for decades, resulting from both colonial and Hindu-nationalist discourses. This colonial and nationalist history of antipathy lead to the Partition that spatially divided Muslims and Hindus into Pakistan and India, leaving Muslims who remained in India a minority. This rhetoric of minority against majority is itself principally disempowering in a majoritarian politics of ‘democracy.’ It plays on the notion of visibility and invisibility of certain communities and the access to rights they have based on these identities. It reduces individuals to numbers, objectifying them to merely bodies occupying (limited) space.

There is an intricate interplay of visibility and invisibility here. By acknowledging that a community holds a minoritarian status and is largely invisible in comparison to the majority, the State brings selective visibility to the community *as the minority*. This embeds the community in a power hierarchy in relation to the majority. They are, thus, brought under the gaze of power and surveillance and framed as the ‘other’ in a majoritarian public space. This status is insidiously alienating, both for the community and the individuals belonging to this community.

In this case, therefore, this historically minoritarian status has been utilised by the Hindutva fascists, who ‘used the democratic route to assume power’, to question the Muslim peoples’ rights to claim India as their homeland. (Hameed 2020, 33) The CAA, in conjunction with NRC, imposes this notion of historical right to citizenship. Foucault explains the functioning of such power, stating that the laws ‘render visible those who are inside it [...] to act on those

it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them.’ (Foucault 1995, 172) This visibilisation is, therefore, not simply the minority being made visible, but put under surveillance. The very demand for rights, for a certain kind of acknowledgement, as a result, becomes the State’s opportunity to extend its power over these ‘invisible’ peoples, visibilising them. The minoritarian community then might gain access to some of their needs, but is eventually subsumed into the homogenising power of the State. This homogenisation has been a constant Hindu nationalist tactic using historical and spatial narratives to expand their powers.

Bacchetta’s article on the Hindu-nationalist agendas of asserting Hindu political supremacy through either assimilation or eradication of other groups in India offers a detailed insight into the historico-spatial strategies used to further this purpose. She explains that for Hindu nationalists, the notion of a Hindu nationalist territory is foundational to the idea of the Hindu nation, ‘under which other categories are subsumed’ and which is ‘conceptualised as a chaste Mother goddess.’ (Bacchetta 2000, 276) Through this identification of the land as the ‘Mother goddess’, the land itself is inculcated into the structured narrative of the family and the sacred, a significant aspect of making it a prerogative for Hindu nationalists to ‘protect’ this mother from being violated by ‘Others’. Since Brahmins, upper-caste Hindus, are claimed to ‘have been in India “since time immemorial” and were the “first-born” of the land’ according to the Hindutva ideology, no one else has a legitimate claim to this land. (Bacchetta 2000, 274) Muslims, the largest minority in India who the Hindu nationalists deemed ‘barbaric and aggressive’, thus naturally became their ‘enemies’. (Bacchetta 2000, 273) Alongside the legal narrative discussed in the previous sections, this is the historico-spatial narrative of the State used to propagate violence against marginalised communities.

The Shaheen Bagh protestors were constantly and consciously navigating these discourses of history and lineage. Several of the older women protestors aged between seventy-five and ninety repeatedly boasted of being able to name nine generations of their families. (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 94) They recalled the mundanity of their lives inscribed in the streets of the nation. Entire families joined the protests. Sarwari, a seventy-five-year-old protestor, alternated attendance through the day with her daughter and daughter-in-law. (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 87) They protested for their children to live free lives in their homes, and not the detention centres which haunted the imaginations of the protestors as their future. They had

set up a ‘miniature detention centre to remind the visitors what awaited them in case they failed to oppose the new trilogy [of laws].’ (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 20) Their protest spanned generations. Through such assertions of familial care and lived memories in the homeland, they fundamentally countered the Hindu-nationalist discourse of ownership and claim to land with the narratives of belonging and home. The protest embodied this sense of belonging.

Ziya Us Salam interviewed another woman, Noorun Nisa, at the protest site who contrasted the care and community experienced at Shaheen Bagh from the loneliness of the detention centres which await them under these draconian laws. She said ‘[...] either sit here with thousands of other sisters with tea flowing all the time, samosas coming for all, and biryani for dinner. Or else, prepare to sit in that jail [detention centre] where there will be no comfort, no family member.’ (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 90) These individuals had no choice but to join the protests. Their bodies, through the visibilisation of the minority and the introduction of these laws, are constantly under the gaze of the State. They do not have the privilege of being invisible to the State even in their own houses. The protest in the public streets, on the other hand, allows them the safety in community.

At the protest site, the multiplicity of bodies which united for dissent created a community where safety and survival became shared responsibilities. Shaheen Bagh was a site of display of such care for each other: ‘There was a camaraderie, a politeness, a hospitality that never lost its edge as men stood aside while women made their way through the crowds, and strangers smiled and wished each other in recognition of each other as India’s citizens.’ (Mustafa 2020, Introduction) Instead of limiting the responsibility of such care to family, defined by Hindu-nationalists in terms of one’s religious legitimacy and legacy, the protestors extended the notion of family and kinship to everyone at the protest site, even those they were protesting against. The elderly women who lead the protests were referred to as ‘nanis/dadis’ (grandmothers) by all other protestors. Noorun Nisa, one of these Muslim women, even asserted her wisdom by saying that she was Mr Modi’s mother’s age, so she ‘[knew] better.’ (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 90) These kinships are formed beyond the restrictive notions of religion and blood-lines. The notions of purity of lineage and religious legitimacy were deconstructed through these protests. Hence, the protestors who were sharing the familial bond and respect, disregarding religious differences, became responsible for each other’s safety.

These familial bonds were, moreover, performed in the hyper-visibility of Shaheen Bagh. Not only were these notions of family and individual restructured and expanded in the public space, but the domestic aspects of a familial home were also relocated to the public space. They prayed, ate, slept and nurtured their children in the same public space for a hundred days. Most of the women at the protest site were homemakers. Several of them brought knitting needles and knitted mufflers and sweaters for the people there, free of cost, to stay warm in the biting cold of Delhi winters. These traditionally domestic tasks were juxtaposed with these women shouting slogans of ‘Azaadi’ (freedom) and educating their children about the freedom fighters and activists who fought to free India of the British colonisers. (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 17) In these complex performances of their resistance, where the domestic and the public space were woven together, multiple subversive narratives were engendered.

Firstly, the surveillance of the State was challenged. Through the introduction of CAA, NRC and NPR, the State would be able to invade domestic space and the familial relations of the marginalised communities. Many would be displaced, deported, or even have families separated in detention centres. The State’s control would therefore not be limited to their visibility in the public space but could lead to their displacement from their homes. By relocating the domestic into the public space, especially in a small Muslim neighbourhood, the protestors asserted their right to call the nation their home. The memories they recounted of living in the streets of country as children asserted a birth-right to the country, against the birth-right that the government demands be proven through birth-certificates. Their narratives of belonging could not be limited to the two-dimensionality of the documents but were inscribed in the nooks and corners of the country.

Additionally, these kinships were based on solidarities and recognition of each other as equal citizens of India. As these alternative cross-community solidarities were formed at the protest site, the categories of majority and minority which ensnared the communities in hierarchised power relations were dismantled. Even as they fought for democratic rights, they critiqued the representational politics of democracy simultaneously. (Basu 2021, 171) As discussed in the previous chapter, the protest sites spread across the country and were attended by people of all backgrounds. As the hierarchies broke down, these solidarities at Shaheen Bagh rewrote the interdependence of community formation and spatial structures, and found new

possibilities of building both communities beyond space and spaces suitable for these new possibilities. The enclosed zone of Shaheen Bagh as a Muslim neighbourhood became an expanding space of belonging and comfort for all. The space which was threatened as its people were at risk of displacement, became a space of strength and belonging as the protestors made it their home, one larger than any individual structure of a house.

This physical vastness of the protest was also significant to its power. The laws implemented by the government would make the marginalised communities visible for surveillance. These laws would reduce these individuals to bodies, mapping them as numbers. The protestors challenged this by choosing their own form of visibility through the performance of their protest. They used the rhetoric of numbers, the power of having over tens of thousands of 'bodies' coming together in a single space, to visually illustrate that these bodies hold agency and power to form a collective large enough to overwhelm the State. Furthermore, by collectively singing the protest song 'Hum Dekhenge' (We shall see) in such large numbers, they both literally and metaphorically, inverted the gaze of the State as they claim their agency and right to witness and resist the injustices of the State. They, thus, demonstrated that as solidarities are built, the State's identification systems of legal and illegal, recognition and regulation fail.

Secondly, although Shaheen Bagh became a space for formation of communities and solidarities, the individual was not subsumed into the whole. Despite the hyper-visibility of the public space, resulting from being an active participant in resistance, the individual found safety by becoming unrecognisable and inseparable in a collective of bodies. The laws implemented by the State would, reduce each individual to a body, understood only through one aspect of their identity – their religion or the privilege they hold. The perception of those markers would also be reduced to stereotypes. Zaidi and Pani (2020, 1007) describe the anguish of being trapped in such a system as the 'singularity of a madman': 'With no forms of insurance left on our identities, we are caught in a fixed code, where we cannot be anything else, except the enumerated self of our names, our parents' birthplaces and our religious identity.' Regulated by the state and made knowable, the people are made two-dimensional. In this moment, the same identities they are fighting for become restrictive, pre-defined and delimited.

It may be inferred that a body would only become a citizen if they showed their documents to the State and met their normative standards. But, a body, a citizen, would surely become an individual at the protest site as they become a part of the community, an active participant of dissent. At Shaheen Bagh, the individual was not subsumed into the community, but became a part of the body of the protest. To achieve this individuality, the protestors actively performed disidentifications through the protest.

José Esteban Muñoz conceptualises disidentifications as ‘descriptive of the *survival strategies the minority subject practices* in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship [my emphasis].’ (Muñoz 1999, 4) This protest was such an act of survival. The multiplicities of identities at the protest site meant that the success of the protest hinged upon a collective unity which held together multiplicities. Resisting the notions of representational politics, the protestors needed to ensure that the solidarities engendered were all held together without coercing them into the same reductive singularity which the State intended to impose. They needed to cross the limitations of identities and bodies to explore survival. Living at intersections of multiple identities, religious and gendered, Muslim women from different backgrounds formed the grounds for such strategies of disidentification to resist the ideologies that could subsume them into the same narratives that they were aiming to resist.

A crucial reason for the success of these protests was that the protest was initiated and led by Muslim women. Every article or book discussing these protests writes of the shock felt by the audience who saw these women, stereotyped as ‘coy, speechless and powerless’ homemakers lead a protest for a hundred days which shook the country. (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 10) Women often clad in *burqas*, *hijabs* or *niqabs* took to the streets to defy these notions and portray their strength to assert their right to their homeland. They held the contradictions of becoming visible and remaining hidden together. This, consequently, became an act of conscious disidentification with other’s ideas of their womanhood and moved towards creating their own performances of a national citizen.

In another major instance during the protest, the prime minister and home minister had allegedly made statements ‘about recognising the protestors with their clothes,’ suggesting

that the protestors would be those wearing recognisable Muslim garbs of *burqas* and skull-caps. As a response, the protestors made a painting of a woman with a 'tricolour wrapped around like a hijab, and *bindi* on her forehead, challeng[ing], "Now recognise with the clothes."' (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 82) The *bindi* is a common part of the dress of a married Hindu woman, while the *hijab* is that of a Muslim woman. She is wearing the tricolour *hijab* to lay claim to it as her home, while the tricolour also becomes a symbol of the nation standing with her in solidarity. The religious, gendered and national identities overlapped each other in this created body, preventing the separation and reduction to any singularity or stereotype. This is an evocative performance of collective disidentification. Labelled as 'Others' being Muslims and women, they recognise that these identities are performative. They both confine and define them. They acknowledge that their individualities lie both within such bodily identities and beyond them. They, thus, playfully reshape the performative aspects of it to create such witty symbolic performances of defiance.

Through the creation of the domestic in the public space, the women are seen fulfilling their domestic 'duties' as they fight for their rights. Wearing their *burqas* while attending mediatised protests, managing domestic tasks while simultaneously writing poetry on protest posters, these women refused to identify with the binaries that they had been framed in historically. One may interpret this as an inescapability from their 'womanly tasks.' On the other hand, locating this in the context of the tactical organisation these women showcase, it would be more appropriate to understand that they are centralising home-making as a symbolic representation of the making and survival of a nation and its peoples. They are simultaneously disassociating with the traditional narrative of the home-maker as being hidden and passive, and fusing it with their active engagement in strategic political decisions in their acts of nation-building. These disidentifications, moreover, are continually shifting and practiced in responsive ways to always exceed the State's regulations. Clever responses to jibes by politicians and active refashioning of the protest's corporeality as setbacks were faced, are examples of such responsive and strategic practice. The *process* of constructing these acts of disidentifications exposes the agency and playfulness of the performers in self-fashioning of their identities and narratives. These acts are an assertion of active and continual subversion and slippage through the cracks of the State law. By constantly defying the fixed narratives of the State, the protestors are never completely subsumed into the law and their identities always remain in progress, unable to be restrained by the State.

Through such complex intergenerational occupations of space, relocation of the domestic in the public, dismantling of hierarchies through kinships, and through constructions of identities which cannot be fixed in space or time, the protestors employed powerful and witty strategies using their bodies and space to continually escape and slip through the discourses and laws propagated by the State.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the Shaheen Bagh protests in this paper, it may be inferred that the strength of a protest hinges on the relationships navigated between the body and the space. These protests acknowledged that the individual is already inscribed within multi-layered historical, spatial and legal discourses, which are normalised through the structures of the everyday such as the dominant notions of community, identities and fundamentally the body. In order to resist these confining normalised narratives, the protest must itself embody and perform these alternatives to bring them into visual realisation. Just as the State functions through the power of the gaze, of visibility and invisibility, the protestors must overturn those narratives through active building of alternative forms of kinships, individualities and spatial realities and make the State a witness of their defiance.

Through the arguments drawn here, it may be observed that even as the thematic distinctions of legal, historical and spatial attempted to fully define the body and its protest, the individual continually escaped these limited conceptions of the body. The individual, not limited by the social discourses also cannot be limited by the singular discourse of the body as a corporeal entity. The protestors' narratives were powerful in their dissent since they brought attention to the body as it exceeded its corporeal limits. It defied labels of identity, located itself in spaces and across time, and built communities which became a corporeal entity of its own. The individuals, therefore, converted the protest site into a living corporeal body and simultaneously made the body itself a site of resistance, as domestic processes of corporeal survival became symbolic of the process of nation-building itself.

A protest, thus, is the performance of an excess. It displays an excess of the body as it encompasses the space around it without losing its integrity, while also being within the

space. The dialectical relationship it explores becomes a display of the vastness and fluidity of one's being. The individual accepts one's inscription within historical, spatial and legal discourses but refuses to settle comfortably into them. The protestor continues to create history and spatial realities and defines them in their own terms. The protest, hence, is a process of overwhelming the State by displaying the failure of its attempt to regulate its people.

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Kochi in Making: Polyphonic Articulations of Space and Subjectivities in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

Pramod L S & Remyasree S

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to scrutinise the aesthetic construction of the urban space of Kochi, a south Indian port city, in contemporary Malayalam cinema. It argues that there is a noticeable shift in how urban environments are portrayed in recent narratives, with a prevalent use of short lenses to articulate the urban setting. Such portrayals convey the perception that the city is not a static entity but rather an ongoing process that entails a series of evolving ideas. Contemporary narratives set in the urban geography of Kochi illuminate the multifaceted nature of urban landscapes and their varied impact on individuals. Through the deployment of particular cinematic devices and stylistic tools, these narratives achieve a polyphonic articulation of space and subjectivities.

Keywords: cinematic urbanism, Malayalam cinema, urban representation, hybrid urban spaces, aesthetic conventions, formal devices

One cannot study the development of cinema without placing it in the context of urban advancements. Cinema, deeply influenced by the rhythm and spatial dynamics of the city, reciprocally served as a critical element in defining the pace and space of the cityscape. Right from the genesis of the art form to modern times, the unique environments of cities, the hybrid lifestyles they accommodate, and the impact of these settings on human life have always been one of the major thematic preoccupations of cinema. In terms of form, this art form has flaunted its remarkable potential to reflect and articulate the intricate spatial dynamics of urban spaces through its quintessential tools and strategies like cinematography,

filming in actual locations, and editing (Shiel 1). Spatiality sets apart cinema from other forms of art and helps us get deeper into the lived spaces within cities and urban societies (Shiel 6). Koeck and Roberts extend this argument further and contend that cinema provides radical templates to experience and comprehend urban spaces (3).

These investigations into the interconnection between cinema and city started emerging in academia in the 1990s, following what is often referred to as the ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities. These investigations span over diverse disciplines, including geography, history, cultural studies, and urban studies (Hallam 277). As a result, cinema is often approached as an ideal site to speculate on and scrutinise the conditions of the urban and the way they are interpreted by individuals. In its engagement with the urban space, cinema serves as a versatile medium to unveil aspects related to culture, architecture, history, and society (Barber 7). Paris, for instance, holds a pivotal role in the scholarly discourse on cinema and urban studies, particularly in texts on urban modernity authored by philosophers such as Baudelaire, Benjamin, Guy Debord, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Anne Friedberg (Philips and Vincendeau 1). Similarly, scholars have undertaken academic inquiries into Los Angeles and New York, scrutinising the methodologies through which these urban landscapes are appropriated and articulated by filmmakers across diverse temporal epochs (Pomerance, 2007; Deleyto, 2017). The cities of London and Liverpool are also put under scrutiny to understand the significations of filmic images and imaginations (Brundson, 2019; Hallam, 2010). Within the South Asian context, scholars have extensively examined the intricate interconnections among cinema, urban environments, and the dynamics of modernity through a corpus of literature (Kaarsholm 2007; Mazumdar, 2007).

The complex interplay between major global metropolises and movies has been examined exhaustively within the annals of such scholarly tomes. These studies often approach the urban as a concrete component and fail to address the processes that construct urbanity, film being one of them. Analysing David Harvey’s book *The Limits to Capital*, Eric Sheppard observes that “spatiality is a social construct... not an exogenously given absolute coordinate system (473). Little attention has been given to the ways in which cinema uses its tools and devices to construct cinematic urban spaces. While focusing their analyses on the cultural, socio-political, economic, and historical implications of urban representations, scholars often neglect an examination of the formal strategies and mechanisms employed by cinema in imagining the urban landscape. This paper is an attempt to scrutinise the aesthetic

construction of urban in contemporary Malayalam cinema, particularly focusing on the visualisation of the hybridity of the city of Kochi, a south Indian port city located in the district of Ernakulam in Kerala. By delving into this previously less explored subject, I contend that a seemingly distinct transformation happened in this arena, where the articulations of the city evolved from a monstrous and formidable presence to a multifaceted domain that provides possibilities for polyphonic expressions. My focus here is to delineate the intricate formal techniques, particularly the use of short lenses, in the representation of the urban milieu of Kochi, all while shedding a discerning light on the historical rationales underpinning these choices.

Kochi in Malayalam Cinema

Kochi, as depicted in cinema, has traditionally been portrayed as a setting where people migrate looking for better employment prospects. It is also depicted as a space where violence and various criminal activities hold sway. The emergence of this portrayal of the new Kochi city as a thematic concern gained prominence in the late 1970s. Films from this era substantiated this notion by crafting narratives in a specific fashion. Many of these narratives retained the social realism that characterised the 1960s and the early part of the 1970s. For these films, the urban identity of Kochi was primarily rooted in the presence of its port. The port, along with the multitude of factories that sprang up in its vicinity, offered opportunities for new forms of labour and industrial activity. This symbiotic relationship between the port and the city played a crucial role in shaping the urban narrative within the cinema of that period.

The majority of cinematic narratives set against the backdrop of Kochi were situated within the crime thriller genre. Instead of delving into the intricate nuances of urban life, these narratives are primarily fixated on the generic perception of the city as a focal point for criminal activities. This structural opposition between the rural and urban settings unfolds in a predetermined pattern within these films, with the countryside perpetually embodying notions of purity and innocence, in stark contrast to the perceived vices and threats associated with the city. Consequently, the frames of such films were often filled with close-up and mid-close shots of characters whose characteristics extended to define the city they inhabited, rather than offering a comprehensive portrayal of the actual exteriors of Kochi.

The 1979 film *Thuramugham*, directed by Jesey, is an interesting early example of the cinematic representation of Kochi. The film appears to utilise the urban identity of Kochi as a central element of its narrative setting. What sets it apart from other contemporary works is its extensive use of exterior shots, which help to establish a distinct visual identity for the film. The film begins with title cards featuring a series of watercolour paintings depicting the dialectic of urban and rural aspects of Kochi that represent the modern and traditional aspects of the place. The incorporation of a folkish tune in the background further reinforces this connection, creating a sense of nostalgia and longing for the cultural and historical heritage of the region. This approach is likely intentional, serving to establish the central theme of the film, which appears to be the coexistence and conflict of traditional and contemporary elements in the city of Kochi. As the storyline unfolds, it becomes evident that a prevailing sentiment of vanishing moral values and lost innocence permeates the lives of the characters, who associate the port with negative foreign influences.

As indicated by the title of the film, the urban is largely represented by and visualised through the port and the activities in and around the port. The narrative opens into the lives of all major characters, and we are introduced to the Anglo-Indian antagonists, Peter and his father, Rosario (who works in the port), and the seemingly naive rural populace. The urban-rural divide is articulated right from the beginning of the narrative and is emphasised both on the level of subjectivities and spatialities. The space, with the presence of huge ships, large machines, and the people controlling them, demands wide shots as a pertinent formal choice. The introduction of the chief antagonist, Peter, with his Anglo-Indian lineage, his costume (particularly his shorts), and the use of English as the very first dialogue in the film are deliberate cinematic choices that serve multiple purposes. It appears to be a way to emphasise the distinctive cultural and social elements associated with the Anglo-Indian community in Kochi, setting the region apart from the rest of Kerala.

The narrative of the film conspicuously employs an unrestrained utilisation of zoom lenses in the contextualization and delineation of characters within their respective lived environments. Long and looming zoom shots abound throughout, with the first appearing in the opening sequence as the character Peter's casual gaze while monitoring the activities in his trawler. An extreme close-up shot captures Peter's visage as he turns left, a sequence promptly followed by a gradual zooming out from a diminutive, traditional fishing vessel. As the camera completes its zooming manoeuvre, the expansive port and its industrial machinery

emerge on the horizon, thereby confirming the intrinsic insignificance of the fishermen aboard the modest country boat. This cinematographic technique, although occasionally manifesting as a cutaway or an insert, serves to not only encapsulate the dominant stylistic preference but also underscores a salient thematic preoccupation inherent in the film—namely, the progressive submergence of rural and traditional modes of life under the inexorable tide of urbanisation.

An important song sequence early in the narrative assumes significance as it endeavours to articulate the distinct identity of the city verbally. The song "Kochu Kochoru Kochi," authored by lyricist Poovachal Khader, who is not a native of Kochi, touches upon the city's general connection with water and port but refrains from delving into the specificities that distinguish the city from others in its category. The song features characters, some standing on their boats and some on the shore, singing the verses. What is noteworthy here is the immobility of the camera. The camera remains stationary, refraining from physically traversing the actual city and instead zooming in on the characters' faces. This approach relies heavily on extreme close-ups and confines the frames to a mid-wide shot's boundaries. The camera's fixed perspective, tethered to the land, limits spatial exploration, opting for optical zooming facilitated by a zoom lens. The urban presence and visual identity of the city are predominantly confined to the initial shots of the port and the subsequent song sequence. Throughout the rest of the narrative, the urban essence is conveyed primarily through thematic preoccupations rather than explicit visual representation.

The film *Adiyozhukkukal* (*Undercurrents*, dir. I.V. Sasi, 1984) came a few years later and notably endeavoured to construct a formidable and monstrous identity for the city. The film narrates a tragic story involving three individuals—Karunan, Gopi, and Devayani—who aspire to build new lives in the port city of Kochi. However, their dreams are mercilessly crushed by the pervasive corruption and unscrupulous individuals in the city, rendering their lives utterly miserable and leaving them in a state of helplessness. Scripted by the renowned Malayalam writer M.T. Vasudevan Nair, the film, like *Thuramugham*, significantly hinges on the port to render a monstrous urban identity to the locale.

The introductory establishment shots of the film focus on the colossal cranes and other machinery in the port's environs. These huge cranes and their operational activities are strategically captured using low-angle shots. These meticulously composed shots serve two fundamental narrative purposes. Firstly, they establish a visual parallel between the tangible

materiality of the industrial machines and the broader narrative milieu. The iron structures prominently featured within this port environment are employed as metaphors, symbolically representing the socio-material conditions that define this urban space. Secondly, the deliberate application of low-angle framing imparts an imposing and intimidating quality to the cranes. This technique underscores the monstrosity of the urban condition, which is poised to exert an overwhelming impact on the lives of its inhabitants. As the narrative reaches its conclusion, it becomes evident that the lives of the three central characters have been irrevocably disrupted by the corrupt and morally compromised circumstances prevailing in the city. One can argue that their existence has been metaphorically crushed and fragmented by the gigantic iron structures introduced at the narrative's beginning.



Figure 1: Low-angle shot of cranes from *Adiyozhukkukal*

In contrast to the perspective presented in *Thuramugham*, *Adiyozhukkukal* portrays a village that has already succumbed to the corrosive influence of the opportunities presented by the expanding port city. In *Thuramugham*, the dialectical tension between urban and rural is artfully introduced through water paintings that juxtapose images of rural life with activities at the port. However, in *Adiyozhukkukal*, this dialectical element is conspicuously absent in the initial sequences, with the city's identity being exclusively established through visual depictions of the port. With the exception of the three central characters and a handful of minor ones, the city is portrayed as a place characterised by greed and moral degradation.

Additionally, the narrative within *Adiyozhukkukal* touches upon the early waves of migration to the city from other parts of the state. A significant wide shot of passengers in a boat in the early part of the narrative positions the three central characters in one frame. The shot spans 50 seconds and introduces the three central characters. Devayani's questions about

the place meet with cold responses as her fellow passengers are also strangers to this space. Both Devayani (enacted by Seema) and Gopi (enacted by Mohanlal) are migrants to this city, while Chandran (played by Mammooty) is returning to his place after serving a jail sentence. Unlike in *Thuramugham*, where everyone knows everyone else in the village, *Adiyozhukkukal* portrays a space that gives refuge to umpteen strangers and is open to welcoming more. The film thus serves as a cinematic document of the urban transition, portraying not only the physical changes in the urban landscape but also the corresponding sociocultural shifts and demographic transformations associated with them.

New Films and the Deployment of Short Lenses

As the twenty-first century dawned, a diverse array of narratives began to emerge from Kochi's urban landscape, marking a significant departure from earlier cinematic representations. The development of improved film production facilities made the city a thriving hub for all film-related activities. These films emerged as a genre in themselves, and scholars like Ratheesh Radhakrishnan labelled these cinematic ventures as "Kochi films" (Radhakrishnan 174). Due to the distinctive formal strategy employed by these films, I find it imperative to categorise them as exemplars of "short-lens cinemas." The subsequent section will explicate the rationale underlying this classification.

Ignacio Farias, in the work *Urban Assemblages*, challenges conventional approaches to urban studies that perceive the urban as a discrete and confined entity. Instead, he introduces the concept of urban assemblages, which facilitates the conceptualisation of the urban as an entity continually being assembled at specific locations of urban practice. According to Farias, the city is a multitude of processes in a state of constant evolution, a decentred object that resists classification as a bounded entity, specific context, or delimited site (2). At the heart of these contemporary cinematic narratives, we are analysing here, lies a distinct inclination towards absorbing the processes and non-human details that construct the city. These narratives present Kochi not only as a city with a distinct identity but also harness its cityscape as a vital component in the storytelling process, emphasising the hybrid urban geography as essential to the unfolding narratives. A significant and remarkable shift in the stylistic choices of these new films is evident in the realm of cinematography. To provide this

immersive hybrid urban experience, these new films started incorporating more shots taken with short lenses.

Lenses with a focal length below 35 mm are commonly categorised as short lenses or wide-angle lenses. These lenses are generally employed to provide a wider field of view, encompassing more of the scene within the frame. Additionally, they help maintain multiple layers of the scene in focus simultaneously. In comparison to telephoto lenses, short lenses possess a greater depth of field. The use of this device in cinematography is instrumental in achieving what is often referred to as ‘deep focus.’ Deep focus is a technique that emphasises a substantial range of the image to be in sharp focus, from the foreground to the background. Consequently, a short lens proves to be a valuable tool in facilitating the interplay of various levels and layers of meaning within a given shot.

In contrast to narratives from previous eras that often treated the cityscape in a generic manner, framing it as a pervasive and formidable backdrop that presented challenges to characters seeking their place within it, these new short-lens narratives are characterised by a proliferation of short lens mediation that provides a deliberate and nuanced approach. These contemporary narratives place a strong emphasis on acknowledging and exploring the subtleties of urban spaces, encompassing a range of dimensions—linguistic, geographic, and historic. The city here serves as a multifaceted environment, simultaneously offering avenues for positive growth and transformation while also serving as potential arenas for moral corruption. Furthermore, it is also portrayed as providing sanctuary for individuals fleeing persecution or adversity, yet presenting opportunities for exploitation. With the advent of these fresh films, it became evident that a novel articulation of urbanity was unfolding across contemporary cinematic horizons.

Within the new films that emerged in the Malayalam industry, the proliferation of short lenses reflects a shift in the visual sensibilities of contemporary filmmakers and cinematographers. These short lenses enable the filmmakers to transcend the perceptual filters inherent to human vision and allow them to represent urban spaces as they would appear to a stranger or an uninitiated viewer. By employing wide-angle lenses, the cinematographers could remove the limitations of human cognitive filters, enabling the camera to assume an apparent objectivity in visual storytelling. This is achieved by deprioritising any specific layer of meaning or plane within the frame, ensuring that various elements within the cityscape receive equal attention. These short lenses encourage a more

comprehensive view of the urban environment, allowing the camera to encompass a wide range of visual elements and contextual details. This departure from conventional cinematographic approaches demonstrates a commitment to offer viewers a more immersive and unfiltered experience of the cityscape. By embracing short lenses, filmmakers can capture the complexity, diversity, and dynamism of urban environments, effectively enhancing the visual narrative and its capacity to resonate with contemporary audiences.

The prevalent use of wide shots and short lenses in contemporary cinema can be attributed to several factors, including significant technological advancements in the film industry. Vehicles, emblematic of modernity, constitute an indispensable facet of urban existence. The inclusion of vehicle shots in urban geographical narratives necessitated the adaptation of camera mounts designed for the secure attachment of film cameras to vehicles. New camera mounts became available in the market that facilitated easy mounting of cameras both within and outside vehicles (L S *Wide Angle* 85). Contemporary Malayalam cinema looks for customised solutions to meet specific cinematographic requirements, which resulted in the development of a new career in this industry called camera rig designer. The adoption of cutting-edge camera mounts designed for placement in moving vehicles and other challenging positions necessitates the use of lenses with shorter focal lengths. This choice helps mitigate vibrations and jerks in the visuals, ensuring smoother and more dynamic shots (L S *Wide Angle* 85). With an increasing number of sequences involving moving vehicles integrated into the narrative, these lenses and camera mounts have become an integral component of modern film productions.

Furthermore, the inclusion of panoramic shots that encompass actual exterior locations has become a prominent feature in contemporary filmmaking (L S *Wide Angle* 86). To capture the diverse layers and elements of such expansive spaces, lenses with a wider angle of view are indispensable. These new narratives often place character amid exterior urban environments characterised by streets, towering buildings, numerous signboards, and advertising hoardings. Such shots demand the use of short lenses to encapsulate their complexity and visual richness. A third significant shift in contemporary cinema that drives the use of short lenses is the incorporation of crowd scenes. Crowd sequences set in authentic exterior locations have become a fundamental element of these narratives (L S *Wide Angle* 86). Unlike earlier Malayalam films, where crowds typically appeared in action sequences in an organised way, modern films integrate crowd shots as inherent components of the

storytelling. The apparent familiarity of the people in Kochi with film shooting also helped filmmakers handle location management with ease. Films also started developing guerilla sequences where actual crowds are incorporated into the filmic texture without their awareness. Moreover, the narrative focus in contemporary cinema has shifted from single protagonists pursuing singular goals to a more expansive approach that narrates the lives of multiple characters within a specific locale. Unlike the popular films of the 1990s and early 2000s, where the camera focused mostly on the countenance and body of superstars, with the emergence of this new trend, films expanded their narrative horizons to accommodate the stories of more than one character.

Gangsters and Violent Exteriors

In the 1980s, Malayalam cinema was dominated by crime and action thrillers set in Kerala. Most of these narratives were developed in different urban centres in the state, particularly Kochi and the state capital, Thiruvananthapuram. Films like *Athirathram* (dir. I. V. Sasi, 1984), *Aavanazhi* (dir. I. V. Sasi, 1986), *Rajavinte Makan* (dir. Thampi Kannanthanam, 1986), *Shobhraj* (dir. J. Sasikumar, 1986), *Irupatham Noottandu* (dir. K. Madhu, 1987), and *Adikkurippu* (dir. K. Madhu, 1989) explored the world of crime and criminals and the complexities of their existence within the urban fabric of the state. Nonetheless, it is important to note that these narratives neither effectively conveyed the identity of the city in which they were set—verbally or visually—nor significantly contributed to the development of a unique urban identity for that city.

By the end of the decade, a remarkable shift happened in the thematic premise of the Malayalam film, in which the city of Bombay (now Mumbai) started figuring as the backdrop. These cinematic narratives mostly fall into the genre of gangster films and were heavily influenced by Bollywood films in the same genre. Contemplating the patterns of gangster films in Bollywood, Ranjani Mazumdar writes: “Despite differences and variations, the core configuration of the gangster genre is easy to see—an urban backdrop, the play of criminality within a community of men, a performative masculinity, the impossibility of romance, the crisis of the family, and the experience of everyday fear and terror” (152). Films like *Aryan* (dir. Priyadarshan, 1988), and *Abhimanyu* (dir. Priyadarshan, 1991) engage with the underworld mythology of Bombay City and visibly follow the patterns identified by

Mazumdar. Both *Aryan* and *Abhimanyu* narrate the story of the protagonists' encounter and entry into the underworld in Bombay. Contrastingly, in later films such as *Aaram Thampuran* (The Sixth Lord, dir. Shaji Kailas, 1997), *Ustaad* (dir. Sibi Malayil, 1999), and *Praja* (Citizen, dir. Joshiy, 2001), a notable thematic element emerges, wherein the central character seeks to conceal his gangster identity, a narrative trope driven by the aspiration to ground the storyline within the cultural context of Kerala, thereby imparting a distinctive regional essence to the crime drama genre. These films achieved significant financial success and contributed to the consolidation of the superstar image of actor Mohanlal. His portrayal of masculinity in these films played a pivotal role in reshaping prevailing notions of male identity and masculinity within the context of popular culture.

In the initial years of these short lens films, narratives were mostly rooted in themes like crime, gang rivalry, murder, and revenge and made use of the urban identity and geography of Kochi to visualise the themes. An exceptional work that captivated the collective imagination of the audience with its exploration of gang violence and revenge is the 2007 thriller *Big B* (dir. Amal Neerad), which starred actor Mammooty in the titular role. This film intricately constructs an underworld mythology within the urban landscape of Kochi, shedding light on both familiar and innovative tropes of gangster narratives. Stylistically, the film is noted for its deliberate use of slow-motion sequences, the employment of low-key lighting reminiscent of the film noir genre, low-angle framing, and the frequent use of wide-angle lenses. These visual techniques are instrumental in shaping the identities of three key elements: the protagonist, Bilal; the primary antagonist, Sayipp Tony; and the underworld of Kochi.

The gangster theme is explored from a humorous perspective in the 2010 film *Best Actor* (dir. Martin Prakkatt). Though humour is the dominant mode of the film, the use of short lenses to connect the theme of violence to the urban topography of the city is evident in *Best Actor* as well. The 2011 film *City of God* (dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery) delves into themes that revolve around violence, gang rivalry, and brutal homicides, among other pertinent subjects. Functioning as a multi-protagonist hyperlink film, the narrative unfolds through four distinct plotlines that initially develop independently but intersect through a consequential road accident. Within the narrative framework of *City of God*, the escalation of violence, a prevailing theme from the film's outset, culminates notably with the public killing of the character Punnoose. The cinematography in the murder sequence is notable for its use of

short lenses with varying focal lengths, emphasising the impact of violence on urban space. Rapid and unsteady camera movements intensify the brutality depicted. The perpetrators, including the central character Jyothilal, are wearing masks, but when Punnoose removes Jyothilal's mask, his face is exposed to public gaze. This metaphorically signifies the city's direct confrontation with violence, previously concealed from public notice. The cinematic sequence effectively communicates the profound societal implications of urban violence.



Figure 2: Murder in the middle of the city from *City of God*

Director Rajeev Ravi offers a distinctive perspective on the theme of gangs and gang violence in his films. Notably, in *Annayum Rasoolum* (Anna and Rasool, 2012) and *Kammattippadam* (2016), he examines these themes through the lens of the marginalised, portraying the urban environment as a space marked by exploitation. Ravi's cinematic works espouse the ideology that violence is not an intrinsic characteristic of the slums in Kochi; rather, it emerges as a consequential byproduct of the unjust conditions and societal practices prevalent within these communities.

Actor Mammooty and director Amal Neerad teamed up again in 2022 for another gangster film set in Kochi—*Bheeshma Parvam* (The Chapter of Bheeshma). The film, which tells the tale of a regional mafia don Michaelappan in the 1980s, is a loose adaptation of the familiar plotline of the Hollywood classic *The Godfather* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1972). But this time the city is not articulated in terms of spatial elements, primarily because of the difficulty in establishing the landscape of the period and due to the restrictions imposed during the pandemic period. Except for the few wide shots of the Old Harbour Bridge, space is mostly articulated verbally, and visuals are often limited to the interiors. Time, on the other hand, is designated by costumes, props, film posters, and the headlines of newspapers of the

period. The narrative combines tropes from Indian mythology, Hollywood Mafia films, and anecdote tales from the Bombay underworld to construct a unique mafia folklore for Kochi.

By the time *Bheeshma Parvam* was released, low-key lighting, low-angle photography, and slow-motion sequences had become a pattern that the audience identified Amal Neerad with. These stylistic devices are used strategically to develop the central character's image, while the dialect and cultural references the character makes extend that impression to the city. In an early sequence, Michael explains to his henchman Shivankutty the regional etymology of the local word *panjikkiduka* (cotton-scutching). The word, according to Michael's explanation, has a unique connection with the region and its geography. Michael explains:

Do you know what the slang *panjikkiduka* (cotton-scutching) means here in Kochi? It's an old method of fending boats to prevent damage while berthing at the jetty, way before the fenders made of tyre and rubber came in. Raw cotton rolls would be hammered on to the wood so that there is no line left between the cotton layer and the wood (00:13:16-00:13:40).

These articulations help locate the narrative within the regional geography of Kochi. But one can very well argue that rather than anchoring the narrative against the tangible physical backdrop of Kochi, it positions itself within the fabric of cinematic history from the preceding decade, characterised by the extensive use of short lenses. For viewers already acquainted with the urban geography and sensibilities of Kochi through cinematic narratives of the previous decade, the seamless integration of this new narrative into that familiar context becomes accessible, even in the absence of authentic exterior shots depicting the city.

One last addition to these gangster narratives is the 2023 film *RDX: Robert Dony Xavier* (dir. Nahas Hidayath), which once again locates the narrative in Kochi between 1997 and 2005. The narrative, though it deviates from the ideological commitment of films like *Annayum Rasoolum*, relies heavily on the visualisation of the slum in Mattancherry to augment the theme of violence. Short lenses are widely used in the depiction of the slum and articulate slums as a site of unchecked violence, a trope we observed in the 2007 film *Big B*.

Commute as an Urban Ritual

The city is often represented as a space teeming with opportunities for employment, and most of the jobs associated with the city involve some sort of commute. The 2012 film *Annayum Rasoolum* arguably portrays this daily commute as an urban ritual in which most of the characters are involved. In the first part of the narrative, we see Rasool, the central character, shadowing his beloved, Anna, during her daily commute to her workplace in the city. Anna's routine entails a boat journey from her village in Vypin to Mainland Ernakulam. Notably, the interior of the boat is rendered through the application of short lenses, allowing the audience to familiarise themselves with the fellow commuters of Anna. The continuity of this ritual is evident as the same group of individuals is observed during the evening return voyage to their respective villages. The persistent portrayal of this routine, facilitated by the short lens, establishes the daily commute as an urban ritual wherein all participants are collectively engaged. This communal engagement is further accentuated as these familiar fellow passengers reappear on subsequent occasions throughout the narrative.

In the final segment of the narrative, a poignant convergence occurs as a majority of these individuals urgently rush to Anna's residence upon learning of her tragic demise. The nuanced exploration of the identities of these commuters on various occasions is facilitated by the probing gaze of the short lens, enriching the narrative with a multifaceted portrayal of their lives. The argument finds reinforcement in the closing credits, where the actual names of these recurring passengers are included in the cast list.



Figure 3: A screengrab from *Annayum Rasoolum* featuring the boat ride

In *Chappa Kurishu* (dir. Sameer Thahir 2012), the character Ansari's daily journey to his workplace, a supermarket where he works as a sales staff, sheds light on the challenges of surviving in a bustling metropolis, particularly for individuals who may lack certain street-

smartness. This commute vividly illustrates the struggles faced by the character in the urban environment. Swarnavel in *City of God* (dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery, 2011) rides his bicycle through the city to reach his coworkers. His commute is recorded in around ten long- to mid-shots, all mediated by short lenses that powerfully visualise the space with numerous visual signs. A unifying feature in all these commutes is the use of short lenses, which enable the capture of numerous urban elements within each frame.

Buildings and Other Landmarks

Short-lens cinemas made against the backdrop of Kochi often leverage the presence of historic colonial-era buildings in the region to create a distinctive and evocative identity for the locale. These architectural landmarks not only serve as visually captivating elements but also imbue the narratives with a sense of historical and cultural richness. Prominent structures like Aspin Wall, Vaco House (locally known as “Big B House”), and the slum houses in Mattancherry are recurrently featured in short-lens cinemas, contributing to the unique atmosphere of the place. In addition to these, several other notable constructions are commonly utilised in short-lens cinemas to enhance the cinematic representation of the city. These include the Bolgatty Palace on Bolgatty Island, Bastion Bungalow in Fort Kochi, Pepper House in Mattancherry, and Netto Bungalow in Eda Kochi, among others. The enduring appeal of these buildings to the film industry is largely attributed to their Indo-European architectural designs, which not only evoke a sense of historical continuity but also blend seamlessly with the narratives, enriching the visual and cultural tapestry of the cinematic portrayal of Kochi.

Just like these old buildings, a plethora of authentic visual cues are skilfully employed to establish and underscore the unique identity of the city. But a significant change happened in the visualisation of those huge cranes we observed in narratives like *Thuramugham* and *Adiyozhukkukal*. In contrast to the older narratives, which heavily leaned on low-angle shots of these cranes from close proximity to articulate a monstrous urbanity, the new narratives strategically present them in distant, wide shots. This deliberate shift in perspective and framing allows the cranes to assume a different role within the narrative. Instead of accentuating the modernity of the region, these cranes, when framed from a distance, now function as a backdrop that harkens to a recent past. Cranes no longer carry the connotation

of monstrosity, but they serve as essential visual cues that help locate the narrative in the urban geography of Kochi.

Along with these old ionic structures, new icons are also introduced to the texture of these new narratives. A notable addition is the Kochi Metrorail, which commenced operations in 2017 and swiftly integrated itself into the visual tapestry of the new urban narratives of Kochi. Perhaps *Mayaanadhi* (Mystery River, dir. Aashiq Abu, 2017) was the first popular film to turn its discerning gaze towards this new urban phenomenon. Even though the film features no scenes inside the coaches of the metro, the wide shot of the arrival of a metro train in the beginning effectively supplants the more conventional urban landmarks that previously served as symbolic gateways into the city's cinematic landscape. The city's vastness finds its most pronounced expression through the presence of the colossal pillars of metro rail, which often form the background of the nocturnal wanderings of the central characters, Appu and Mathan. Soon, Kochi Metro Rail became a crucial element in these new films, as seen in films like *Vikruthi* (mischief, dir. M. C. Joseph, 2019), *Varane Avashyamundu* (groom wanted, dir. Anoop Sathyan, 2020), and *Ancham Pathira* (the fifth midnight, dir. Midhun Manuel Thomas, 2020).

Identity in Flux

Short-lens cinemas also serve as a canvas to vividly portray the multifaceted ways in which the urbanity of the city leaves its indelible mark on the characters within their narratives. This portrayal marks a notable shift from films of previous decades, which primarily depicted the struggles and hardships of survival in the urban milieu. The contemporary narratives, however, venture into the realm of character development, illustrating how the city can catalyse personal transformation and empowerment. These narratives feature characters who undergo a profound metamorphosis as a result of their urban experiences. A prime example is Ansari in *Chappa Kurishu*, who, initially portrayed as a naive and unassertive individual, undergoes a remarkable transformation, emerging as a more assertive figure by the narrative's conclusion. The final mid-wide follow shot captured using a short lens convincingly presents the transformation of this character. We see Ansari coming out of his usual restaurant after grabbing fifty rupees from the restaurant owner, who routinely belittles him. Outside the restaurant, he elbows another character in the

neighbourhood, who also passes comments at him as a routine. The wide lens maintains these characters and their surroundings in focus while registering the bruises on his face that were the result of his recent fight with another central character. It is imperative to note that Ansari does not strictly conform to the conventional archetypes of a protagonist or an antagonist within the narrative; rather, the socio-cultural milieu of the city exerts a transformative influence, thereby rendering him a character whose moral alignment fluctuates between heroism and villainy within the narrative's context.

Similarly, in *Best Actor*, the character of Mohan, an ordinary school teacher, adeptly assumes a new identity as a formidable goon from Mumbai as part of his plan to ensure a negative role in an upcoming film. This underscores how the urban context enables individuals to adopt new personas and adapt to diverse roles, showcasing the malleability of urban life in shaping character dynamics. As Jonathan Raban in *Soft City* observes:

It's easy to 'drop' people in the city, where size and anonymity and the absence of clear communal sanctions license the kind of behaviour that any village would stamp out at birth... In the city we can change our identities at will, as Dickens triumphantly proved over and over again in his fiction; its discontinuity favours both instant-villains and instant-heroes impartially.
(Raban ch. 1)

The consistent deployment of short lenses across the narrative of *Best Actor* ensures that the urban environment plays a pivotal role in orchestrating the character transformation of Mohan. This transformation is most conspicuously manifested within the confines of a salon, where an unconventional and innovative hairstylist undertakes the task of adapting Mohan's appearance to align with his impending role shift. In this visual sequence, a wide-angle lens is employed to vividly encapsulate the interior space of the salon, characterised by its distinctively vibrant green colour scheme and prominently displayed photographs of film actors. The hairdresser's performance from Mohan's point of view and from a wide shot covering the interior of the salon takes around fifty seconds to complete. The wide-angle lens facilitates the dual task of maintaining focus on the salon's interior while simultaneously amplifying the lens's capability for visual exaggeration that adds a touch of humour to the scene. Nevertheless, the film does make use of the binary values associated with village and city, with Mohan's past life and space symbolising the virtues of innocence and his current urban existence in Kochi compelling him to grapple with the complexities of evil. The

carefully crafted façade of Mohan's feigned persona is abruptly shattered when, by an unfortunate turn of events, his friends and family from the village inadvertently witness him engaged in a fight with another gang. The rural disallows such a fictional façade.

In *King Liar* (dir. Siddique-Lal, 2016), Sathyanarayanan, a habitual liar and manipulator, shifts his operation from his home village to Kochi city, where he can conduct his fraudulent activities with remarkable ease. His character highlights the city's unique environment and the opportunities that can facilitate such endeavours. As Madhava Prasad rightly observes, in “urban spaces, individuals encounter each other as strangers, reified entities whose position in a social network cannot be known immediately” (Prasad 84). Sathyanarayanan resides temporarily with a friend in a room situated atop the regional office of Cochin Corporation in Vyttila. By choosing a government-owned public building to provide the living space of Sathyanarayanan, the narrative thematically and visually validates Michel De Certeau's idea of "tactics." Explaining the concept, De Certeau writes: "It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises for them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse" (37). *King Liar*, in that way, metaphorically reflects the urban tendency to reinterpret the established structures imposed by authorities to facilitate a private function. In the absence of evident visual cues within the room to establish a connection to the character's subjectivity, the audience is invited to associate it with the urban environment. His fabrications, schemes, and tactics are associated in the narrative with the environment he resides in—the urban. The adoption of distinctive visual strategies also implies the boundless nature of the cityscape, where space exists in an abstract form, making it challenging to delineate the boundary between the interior and the exterior.



Figure 4: A screengrab from *King Liar* featuring protagonist's private space and the urban horizon in one frame.

This space, meticulously constructed by the film's art department on the actual Corporation Office building, was subsequently dismantled upon the completion of its cinematic use. The visual representation of this environment primarily employs short lenses to initiate a visual discourse juxtaposing two disparate notions of space—home and office. The room's expansive windows effectively encourage the external environment to become an integral part of the interior space's composition. The use of wide-angle lenses, in conjunction with the thoughtful use of yellow and white colour tones, applied correspondingly to distinguish between night and day visuals, effectively erases the perceived demarcation between the external and internal spaces.

Kochi serves as a sanctuary for individuals seeking to conceal themselves from their pasts. In *Mayaanadhi*, Mathan comes to Kochi in order to escape persecution. Mathan's ex-boss Shaji is also leading a peaceful domestic life in Kochi, eschewing his past life of villainy. But unlike *Big B* and *City of God*, Kochi is not portrayed as a setting where criminal activities unfold openly during daylight. The crime that Mathan committed in the beginning happens outside the state. Even when he encounters the investigating team in Kochi, the entire action is choreographed inside a lift in a mall. As the fight turns violent, Mathan uses the fire extinguisher to shatter the light within the lift. The rest of the sequence is skilfully edited using a colour inversion technique, imparting a visual resemblance to film negatives and mitigating the raw brutality of the fight. The outdoor city scenes are bathed in a warm, yellow glow, complemented by supporting colour filters. This deliberate use of colour aims to craft a romantic atmosphere, providing a backdrop for Mathan to rekindle his lost love with Appu.

Conclusion

While films like *RDX* demonstrate that the urban landscape continues to offer rich narrative possibilities, there has been a noticeable decline in the frequency of films exploring various facets of the city. Recent cinematic ventures emerging from Kochi, even when situated within its urban backdrop, appear to avoid incorporating visual elements that effectively convey the city's identity. Furthermore, narratives like *Kumbalangi Nights* (dir.

Madhu C. Narayanan, 2019), even when set in the rural suburbs of the city, tend to avoid the inclusion of urban elements and focus more on individuals and their interiors (L S “Visual Dialectics” 66). Nevertheless, the trend set by short-lens cinemas continues to exert influence on Malayalam cinema. It initiated a shift that transcends traditional binaries and embraces the inherent hybridity found in cityscapes.

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