

The New Generation Films *Thattathin Marayathu* and *Ustad Hotel*: Going Modern or Traditional?

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Abstract

A new movement of films popularly called ‘new generation’ films have now become an increasing trend in the Malayalam film industry. These films are known for their fresh perspectives and innovative ways of storytelling. These even though are called ‘new generation’ implying, of and by the modern youth of Kerala; are heavily romanticizing the past and is very much concerned with the traditions and culture of Kerala. The research will analyse and understand this ironical phenomenon of the highly western influenced youth becoming more traditionally rooted. The research will use Social cycle theory by Alexandre Deulofeu and Yi Wang’s theory that Globalization Enhances Cultural Identity, to analyze the films *Thattathin Marayathu* and *Ustad Hotel*. Even though the films are about the modern globalized and westernized youth of Kerala, the films are very much traditional and culturally rooted in terms of their story and message. The increase in globalization has in turn led to an increase in the realization of one’s own culture and traditional roots among the youth of Kerala. Even though the Malayali youth is westernized in many aspects of life, they are still preserving and holding onto their cultural roots.

Key Words: New Generation film, Globalization, Traditional, Modern, Cultural Identity

Malayalam cinema is going through a new wave of change and these films are popularly called ‘new generation’ films, not because they belong to any particular genre but it is mostly produced by youngsters with very innovative techniques and ideas, and hence called the ‘new

generation'. Across India it is a popular belief that the young generation is moving away from traditional practices and cultural values and is becoming more westernized as a result of globalization; and that it is the older generation that has some values still lingering in them. Even though every generation has this same complaint of the younger generation not behaving the same way they once did and not adhering to the rules of the past, it was only in recent times, with the effect of rapid globalization and with spread of the internet that a severe change and generation gap has occurred between two generations. The difference between the young and the middle aged groups have become very wide. It is this young generation which has both a few memories of their childhood before the digital boom and adolescence bombarded with innovative technology every day that has created these new generation films. These new generation films have a fresh perspective in terms of story, narration, cinematography etc; but even though these young film makers use many modern digital techniques in their films, the stories are becoming more concerned with the daily nuance of the people in Kerala such as the dialects, food, cultural values etc. Even though these films are acclaimed for its innovative techniques and modern styles, the films are increasingly becoming traditional. Since modern is very much equated with westernization, we expect these films to portray a very de- cultured youth, but instead they young protagonists of these films seems to occupy an in between position, where they are a westernized group having the traditional Malayali values, customs and morality.

This paper tries to understand and analyze this ironical phenomenon by looking into how and why are these films even though called modern are becoming more traditional. This research tries to understand and analyze this juxtaposition of the modern and traditional in the films *Thattathin Marayath* (Behind the veil) and *Usthad Hotel*. This research will be using Yi Wang's theory that Globalization Enhances Cultural Identity and the Social cycle theory by, Alexandre Deulofeu arguing "that civilizations and empires go through cycles in his book *Mathematics of History* (in Catalan, published in 1951)" (Wikipedia). The paper will also try to define the term new generation and look into the characteristics of a new generation film, and what are the modern traditional aspects these films encompass. The paper will also try to answer what is meant by traditional and modern with respect to the culture of Kerala and why there has been a mixing of the two lately in these films, and how are the films makers blending both aspects into their films.

The modern youth of Kerala and of the world is popularly believed to be deviating from anything traditional, cultural and religious. They are seen as the people of the technology and therefore can no longer preserve ones culture. But these new generation films, which revolve around the life of the modern youth, are portraying a generation upholding the traditions of their region. Even though the characters are very westernized in their dressings and manners due to the impact of colonization and globalization, they are still very much close to the culture and tradition of their society. Even though modern digital technology and graphic effects are used in the narration; the storyline and script are becoming more and more traditional. They are using modern technology and sophisticated techniques to give emphasis to the traditional values and customs of the place, delving deeper into every nuance in the lives of people and therefore preserving these customs and traditions. This is an impact of globalization. The increase in globalization has in turn led to an increase in the realization of one's own culture and traditional

roots among the youth of Kerala. Even though the Malayali youth is westernized in many aspects of life, they are still preserving and holding onto their cultural roots.

Swapna Gopinath and Sony Jalarajan Raj looks into the portrayal of female protagonist in the new generation Malayalam cinema while Jenson Johnson tries to define what is a new generation film and its trajectory. Swetha Antony talks about the use of food in these films as a metaphor. Even though so much research has been done on the topic, there seems to be a gap in understanding how these films claiming to be new is moving towards more traditional and conservative aspects of the society. Therefore this paper intends to look at how these films are showing the aspects of more traditional ideology that the commonly perceived notions of modern being western.

Thattathin Marayathu is a film about the love between a Hindu Nair boy named Vinod and a Muslim girl, Aisha and their struggle for their love to be accepted in the face an opposing society, while *Ustad Hotel* is a coming of age film which deals with the tensions and identity crisis of an aspiring NRI Malayali Muslim chef who wants to make a career abroad and his dilemma to remain with his grandfather in Kerala. Even though both the films deal with different theme, they are still looking into the lives of Muslims in Kozhikode and have a blend of the traditional with the modern very clearly. To give a brief storyline of the two films, *Thattathin Marayathu* revolves around a college student Vinod and his intense love for a girl Aisha. The film opens with their childhood, where young Vinod meets Aisha for the first time during a school trip and wishes to marry her. Years later he meets her at a friend's wedding, and even without knowing that this is the girl he once wanted to marry he falls for her head over heels. Then the films goes in detail in portraying Vinod's attempts to win his lady loves heart and later to gain acceptance from a society that fiercely oppose an inter caste marriage. Even though it is a very simple storyline, what makes this film interesting is the amount of details given about Vinod's culture and the culture of that region as a whole. Details like the dialect of the region, food, ideologies are all shown in great detail. While *Thattayhin Marayathu* delas with a boy's love for a girl, *Ustad Hotel* is a film about a rich NRI boy, named Feyzee and his passion for food and cooking. He is a chef who aspires to establish himself in a Western land and settle down with his English girlfriend. He later visits India and ends up stuck with his grandfather and his small hotel. The films tracks the transition of Feyzee who aspired to be an acclaimed chef abroad to someone who cared about the quality of food prepared and run his grandfather's restaurant 'Ustad Hotel'. The film explores in detail the relationship between three generations.

Language is a very important feature of both the films. They both very well incorporate the local Muslim dialect of both Thalassery and Kozhikode. Malayalam cinema has long overlooked the dialectical differences in Malayalam and it can be seen that almost all the films until recent times had a very standardized neutral accent or a valluvanadan accent. Since these films did not have an accent, they could have been set anywhere in the state. The characters were not developed according to the particular region they were set in. This is one feature that has been explored well in the films of the new generation era. The dialect is very important to the storyline as it concretes the cultural identity of the characters. Incorporating the dialect, phrases and puns common to a particular region is a distinctive feature of most of the new generation

films. In *Ustad Hotel* the story is set in the coasts of Kozhikode and the characters speak with a very Muslim dialect of Malayalam. The film begins with the voiceover of a narrator narrating Feyezee's story in a typical Muslim dialect. The language Malayalam has distinct dialects based on the region, religion, caste and class. Therefore it is very easy to identify a person's social standing from their accent. Using a dialectical accent gives more authenticity to the story. Muslims of Kerala, especially in places like Kozhikode and Thalassery where there is a high Muslim population, have a distinct Malayalam accent supplemented with many borrowed Arabic words. This is very different from the standard print Malayalam. Someone who has never been exposed to this dialect may find this very different from what they perceive to be Malayalam. The dialect is what is giving the film a social and cultural relevance, and without it the film will cease to make much sense. "Dr. Usha Namboothirippadu (Samoohya Bhasha Shastram (mal) 1994:69) noted the following differences of Mappila Malayalam, when compared with other dialect and standard form of Malayalam First, The absence of the following consonants in Malayalam റ്റ, ശ and ഴ Unicode as SSA, SHA and ZHA respectively and transliterated as sś or sh, ś or s and l or zh respectively. Second the absence of voiced aspirated sounds. Third two peculiar phonemes i.e., /f/ and /L/ as in kafir and allah. Fourth, റ്റ /va/ is often pronounced as /ba/ and fifth, ഴ /l/ is transformed to റ്റ /ya/ or ശ /ga/." (Saidalavi 4). Many words in Mappila Muslim dialect is spoken differently from the standard Malayalam. For example the words like 'Avan' (He) becomes 'On', Aval (she) becomes 'Ol', Ezhulnettu (get up) becomes 'neechu' and Avar (them) becomes 'Oru' in Mappila Muslim dialect. Also there is a tendency to substitute different consonant sounds for some words, with 'va' frequently substituted with 'ba' sound. The film *Ustad Hotel* therefore has shown this aspect of the language in detail. *Thattathin Marayathu* has a distinct Thalassery dialect, which is again a Mappila Muslim dialect spoken in the district of Kannur. If in *Ustad Hotel* it was the Muslim character who spoke the mappila dialect in *Thattathin Marayathu* the protagonist is a Hindu Nair boy, with a Mappila Muslim dialect. This shows that the dialect is not restricted to the Muslim community of the area but is spoken by most of the population of the Malabar districts. The use of dialect sets the film in a particular place, and therefore cannot happen elsewhere. The films also uses many phrases which is typical of the place it is set in. In *Ustad Hotel* when Feyzee is taken to Shahana's (female lead) house for the bride viewing ceremony one of the relatives of the girl asks the guests to 'sit down' in a manner which is not spoken in standard Malayalam. He says "kuthiyirikku" instead of the standard way of saying "irikku". Therefore accent plays a major role in establishing the setting of the two films. The character of Feyzee speaks a much anglicized Malayalam as he was brought up in Dubai and later on studied in Switzerland. He frequently code switch between English and Malayalam in the beginning showing the characters westernized ideologies. Towards the end of the films we see a reduction in the use of English words and phrases in his Malayalam, which can be an indication of his attitude change towards his culture. Even though Feyzee is a very liberal character, with his own set of views on life, career choice and marriage, he still sticks to his cultural roots at the end and stays in Kerala. Even though he was brought up and educated abroad and has had exposure to the world outside, he identifies himself with his own community back in Kerala. The exposure is what precisely led to his identification with the culture of Kozhikode. In *Thattathin Marayathu* also the use of English is considered to be very elite. There is a scene where Vinod and his friend Abdu encounters a student who talks to them in English

and both are flustered by it. only the educated upper class tend to use English in their daily speech, while the middle class continue to talk in Malayalam. But Abdu is a character who is much westernized in his dressing and is born into a wealthy family. He therefore has accommodated certain characteristics of the West but is true to his Thalassery culture. The youth in both the films speak very a culture specific dialect but at the same time is not oblivious to the changes around them and have adapted and adjusted accordingly. Such specific detailing of the language and the dialect is an attempt by the film maker to be closer to the reality and in a way preserve these indigenous dialects in a world taken over by English, by making it known to the rest of the Malayali community through their films. These films are, therefore emphasizing the uniqueness of the Malayalam language and its numerous dialects which plays an important role in the culture of the society. The phrases used in both the films are language of the common people. This is an attempt by the youth to hold on to their language in the face of increase in the use of English as a mode of communication. A dialect is more than just a language, in Kerala the dialect you speak can determine who you are, what caste you are from, what region and what class you belong to. Therefore language and dialect is a very distinct part of the society and they are captured in the film in detail. Even the titles of both the films speak a lot about the Muslimness of stories with the words 'Thattam' and 'Ustad'. Just like the language food also becomes another important cultural marker.

Both the films especially *Ustad Hotel* to a very large extent uses food as a strong tool of cultural uniqueness. In *Ustad Hotel* there are so many references to food. Food is a very important aspect of a culture. The film deals with a lot of nuances related to the food culture of Muslims in Kozhikode. *Ustad Hotel* opens with the scene of women cooking in the kitchen and Fareeda (Feyzee's mother) giving his father the Kozhikode's famous halwa (a sweet) while announcing her pregnancy. The making of food is shown in great detail in the film. The film constantly refers to Kareemikka's (Feyeze's grandfather) Malabari Biriyani which is his famous special dish. The preparation of these indigenous foods pertains to ones gastronomic sensibilities. This is juxtaposed with all the packed and mass produced snacks, the current generation is munching on. The film lays high emphasis on these indigenous foods. "Sulaimani" (*Ustad Hotel*) a flavored black tea, which is close to the Malabar Muslim culture of Kerala. In the film *Sulaimani* becomes more than just a drink, Kareemikka tells his grandson that every sulaimnai should have a little "Mohabbath" (love) added to it, so that when one drinks it the world comes to a stop in front of you and you see that face of the person you love. The drink sulaimani therefore becomes a metaphor for romance in the film. Food therefore is not just something to survive but becomes the survival itself. Feyzee is a professionally qualified chef and yet fails to make a "parota" (very common snack made from maida) which is not even considered to be something very important and worthy of being studied in any university. He takes a whole night to master the technique of making parotas. He being born and brought up abroad and studied in Switzerland would not have bother with such snacks as it is not an international food item, but he later combine this knowledge to what he had studied to contribute to the fusion food festival of an Indian local cuisine and European cuisine. The film emphasizes the taste of the local food, compared to the foreign dishes. This way the local food is given some importance in the globalised markets of karala. In *Thattathin Marayathubdu* there is a scene where Vinod and Abdu are waiting for Aisha in front of a local tea stall opposite her college. When normally a

shop opposite a college should be filled with packed chips and biscuits, this particular shop sells locally made snacks. Abdu even refers to a snack called “sukhiyan” in the scene. This again emphasizes the local food culture of the place and in a way is resisting the intrusion of the global products. All these points towards the increasing cultural consciousness in the modern youth of Kerala. “In the new era of globalization, people become much more concerned about the uniqueness and particularity of their own culture. Cultural identity provides the global significance of local knowledge and the sense of self, community and nation” (Wang 83). Each of these foods has indigenous names which in itself explain the culture of the society. These foods have various meanings associated with them, unlike with the foods mass produced by foreign companies. Such close emphasis on food of the local is also a feature of the new generation films, with other films too experimenting of the food culture of Kerala. After food comes the attire of a region, which plays an important role in determining the cultural aspects of a society.

In *Thattathin Marayathu* (behind the veil), the title itself refers to the Veil in a very positive undertone. In the film the ‘veil’ has been romanticized to such an extent that the veil becomes a fetish for the protagonist, who is a Nair boy. For him veil is an important factor of attractiveness of a woman. From his childhood, he had a likeing for Muslim girls, especially the ones who wore a veil. The film romanticizes the beauty and virtue of a Muslim woman in Kozhikode (a highly Muslim populated district in Kerala). In the opening scene of the film the young Vinod asks his friend Abdu whether he has seen any unattractive Muslim woman wearing a veil to which he replies no. There have been many instances in the film when Vinod romanticizes the veil through speech and action. When he meets Aisha, he asks her to wear the veil, which had slipped off her hair, this she later reveal was one of the moments when she realized that his feeling for her were sincere. And at another instance he tells a police officer that, how when Aisha wears a veil, it distracts him from everything else in the world and that at that moment he can then see only her face inside the veil. Here is a Hindu Nair boy who is madly in love with a Muslim woman and everything Muslim about her. He enrolls in a typical Muslim dance called “duffmuttu” for college youth festival and even opens his own Purdha shop. It can be seen that even though the modern young generation has many western ideologies, it in some way is making them to hold more tightly to their culture and their notions of virtue of a woman and many others. Even though this can be seen as the epitome of religious harmony, it should be still noted that the film lays high emphasis on the virtue of a Muslim woman, which is another attractive factor for Vinod. He and all his friends, who falls in the category of the more westernized and technologically advanced generation, is seen to strongly hold on to the traditional cultural morality of the place. When everyone is trying to modernize the state and do away with the practice of veiling Muslim women and uphold their rights, here is a Hindu boy who is very much interested in the traditional Muslim culture, and likes it love interest mainly due to her beauty and her so called traditional virtues. There is a dialogue in the film where Vinod’s friend Abdu teases him saying that she is an “Ummachi Kutti”(Muslim girl) (*Thattathin Marayathu*) and that people like him should be born twice to get a glance from her. This line strongly advocates the high virtues of a Muslim girl and that a good girl will not even look at a boy. Even though this line was said facetiously it still has many moral implications. The guy who said the dialogue was indeed very western in his attire and had multiple relationships, but still

expects the girls of his community to be virtuous. Aisha is even praised for not owing a cell phone. And the film romanticizes the act of writing love letters between lovers. This is an example of the idea that progress is not a linear one. When the earlier generations were fascinated by the modern gadgets and communication this modern generation is romanticizing the earlier methods of communication practices saying that it is more personal than the communication through the modern gadgets. The progress is cyclical and the society will deteriorate and will go back to its former forms. This what the social cycle theory says. Culture is not just depicted through the attire but also through the language and dialects. The film *Ustad Hotel*, opens with showing a framed photograph of a man and a fully veiled woman. This is a mockery of the whole idea of taking photograph of a veiled woman but at the same time establish the normality of it in a conservative society. Shahana, the female lead in *Ustad Hotel* looks at veiling as a restriction of her freedom by her family, but still she complies with it. She wears a veil or a burkha around her family and when she is with Feyze and his friends, she does not bother to veil herself all the time. Shahana is able to respect her individual identity and her cultural identity at the same time. Another important cultural aspect is the importance given to family and relationships in the films.

In *Ustad Hotel* Feyze despite having a girlfriend back in London, is forcefully taken to Shahana's house for the bride viewing ceremony by his family. There, Shahana conveys her disinterest in marriage, let alone an arranged marriage. She reveals that her family was very orthodox and she agreed to this marriage because she did not have any other choice. Shahana is a girl with definite ideas about her life and she demands for an equal partner in marriage. She is not ready to just sit at home taking care of the kids. But because he was a chef and not an MBA graduate Shahana and her family disapproves of the marriage. She later gets engaged to another guy, but unexpectedly meets Feyze again and this time the couple clicks and she leaves her fiancée for Feyze. This is in one way a mockery of the argument that officially arranged marriages cannot hold true love. The film shows that your true love can come to you even through an arranged marriage. The film also explores in detail the cordial relationship that exists between a grandfather and grandson and the bitter relationships between fathers and sons. In *Thattathin Marayathu* even though Aisha wants to escape her caged life she is not ready to elope with Vinod, leaving behind her divorced sister and her father. She chooses to sacrifice her life for her sister. Even in Vinod's life, he runs away from home because his family found out about him and Aisha but repents and goes back to his family. Family in the film becomes a very strong point of love and affection.

The Films *Thattathin Marayathu* and *Ustad Hotel* therefore gives a lot of importance to the cultural and traditional nuances of Kerala and Muslim Mappila culture of the Malabar region. Both the films have blended the concept of being modern, a globalized citizen and a part of a traditional society in such a way that, its increased focus on the nuances of the culture of Kerala and tradition is exactly what is making it 'modern' and 'new'. The increased globalization has led to the development of an increasing cultural identity among the youth, which is reflected in these films. Therefore the theory proposed by Yi Wang that, "globalization enhances cultural identity" holds true in the case of the selected two new generation films. According to social cycle theory, society does not actually progress but it repeats itself as a cycle. Therefore one age

will be followed by another and will go on as a cycle. Therefore these films are a medium, through which the modern youth of Kerala are trying to exert their cultural identity in an ever changing global village. The society saw a boom during the industrialization period and now wants to go back to the times before industrial pollution and therefore is trying to achieve it. The new generation films therefore emphasize the importance of the traditional customs, and values and wants to preserve what their culture in this fast diluting society of globalization.

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