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## " Will One be Thief, if He is Black? " Re-addressing the Popular Imagination of the Cinematic Representation of Black Skinned as Thieves in selected Malayalam Films

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**Abstract:** Films influence people unlike any other media and the power it entertains in society has given way for both to appraise and degrade humans. The milky skinned is always welcomed by the viewers as it represents nobility, glamour and eligibility. Whereas the dark skinned are placed in the negative roles as it exhibits strangeness, fear and evil. The prejudice against people on the basis of their skin colour is modelled and widely used in cinema and Malayalam films are not. The current paper tries to analyse the role of colourism in shaping the mindset of the people and interrogating how the cultural construction of binaries white /black conditions black as a bad image? The paper aims to shed light on the treatment of Malayalam film as how they popularise the traditional understanding of black as a synonym for bad doings.

**Keywords:** Malayalam cinema, colourism, binaries, thieves.

### Introduction

The cultural history of India is built on several components: one side is religion, ritual, tradition on the other side is food, attire, family and the list seems ceaseless. However, India's agape for cricket and cinema is sempiternal and seminal. Both cricket, as well as cinema intoxicate the public unlike any other said components. The modern visual narrative has become a remarkable and outstanding platform as it has represented the general Indian life, culture, class consciousness, identity throughout its glorious, iconic and charming journey for more than 100 years. Indian cinema has brilliantly portrayed everything pertaining to the Indians - the colonial and post - colonial life, the changing consciousness of social groups, Indian bourgeoisie, good and evil, religion, faith, culturally conditioned Indian class values, spirituality, Western style modernity, history, modern educated with traditional elite Indian society and so on. The popularity of Indian cinema does not rest in delivering pure entertainment but its wings stretched fully when " more and more people are becoming conscious of the way the cinema has shaped their consciousness"



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(Deshpande1). The informative and colourful observation that films provide to its audience doesn't get over in the closed dark room itself rather it imparts in them to develop a new way of thinking through the imaginary characters that they meet with on the silver screen. Every cinema is a direct conflict of binaries such as hero- villain, good - bad, truth- falsehood, old - modern and more. These binate themes in visual narrative have limitless possibility to influence the audience and redirect their thoughts. For instance, film and television adaptations on myths such as Lord Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Christ, and on female deities guide the audience in a systematic and comprehensive way to a predefined conclusion. Therefore, the power that visual narratives possess is very influential, affects psychologically and not only controls the masses but also imprisons them in certain ideologies forever. Malayalam cinema has created a space for one such ideology called colorism, through the portrayal of characters with dark skin as bad or heinous. The binary opposition of white/ black and the respective connotation good/ bad manufactures views and opinion and confine the audience in their predefined conclusions.

Colorism is not a new concept to Indian cinema. As a condition for social stratification, it has a long history of practice along with other components such as class, gender, caste sex etc. This division always resulted in the creation of a toxic environment in the society and film as a mirror to the nature reflected in them. Discrimination and suppression on the color of skin completely marginalized an enormous section of people while the implementation of light skin as the ideal color steered the elite public to practice and enjoy colorism. The outcome is the launching of a power structure where the non - white group have undergone emotional, physical and psychological dilemmas and promoted the perception and stigmas on color widely. Darkening of faces is not a new trend in Malayalam cinema as many actors had done it for the better rendering of their character. Revathy in *Kakkothikavile Appooppan Thadikal* (1988) Bhavana in *Nammal* (2002) Sheela in *Collector Malathy* (1965) Mammotty in *Karuthapakshikal* (2006) and Amaram (1991). The directors of the films have explained convenient reasons for this darkening but the significant question remains unanswered: why are they following the stereotypes such as Dalit/Tamil/fishermen characters have to be dark skinned?



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Nna Than Case Kodu translated as Sue Me Then! is a 2022 Malayalam satirical film directed by Ratheesh Balakrishnan Poduval and Kunchacko Boban played the main role. The story centers around the life of a reformed thief named Kozhummal Rajeevan and his legal fight to prove his innocence to his live -in partner Devi and to the society around them. The movie was a commercial hit in the theatre with a curious storyline and a lofty message. Kozhummal Rajeevan was once a thief who escaped from the police during a theft and found refuge in Devi's house. Later they decide to start a new life as he agrees to give up his theft. But soon Rajeevan was accused of thievery in the house of the local MLA as he entered the compound at midnight. Rajeevan was caught by the police and filed a case against him. Rajeevan's legal fight for justice ultimately brings the state PWD minister as the main culprit in the pothole issue and reveals the corruption behind it.

The movie's reception among the public significantly rested upon the casting of the characters. The real-life lawyers Adv. Shukkur and Adv. Gangadharan in the same name and their give- and - take at the courtroom was really entertaining. The witty and timely comments from the judge goosebumps the audience. At the same time, the reception of Kunchako Boban as Kuzhammal Rajeevan was unbelievable. His body language and delivery of dialogues in the Kazargod slang was impeccable. A review comment on his transformation as a thief 'looked authentic' has made me think about this title. Here arises the question: what makes a thief authentic? Is it just his deeds if not what is then? The answer I have reached is his colour. What does he look like? The popular myth or imagination of the physical traits of a thief needs no introduction. The criteria that fulfills the eligibility of a thief is that he should be dark in colour. His skin colour should not be white. If that 'light' skin was the acceptable colour then Kunchacko Boban needed not to undergo such transformation. The film wanted Rajeevan to not be fair, glamorous or attractive. Rajeevan gets a dark shade in his skin, an emerging bald head, oily hair, unattractive and lightly gray beards along with his special way of keeping his lower jaw while he delivers dialogue gives him a perfect look of a thief. The success of a cinema is not just in the delivery of dialogues or the scenic beauty, music but in the physical appearance of the characters. Our culture has defined how a rich man should be in his appearance, if he's not in the predefined outfits he loses his social acceptance. Likewise a stealer, who should be an ordinary man in dark complexion if as dark as the night is well deserved. His economic status



should be below average, financially unsound, doubt should evolve from the appearance, he shouldn't be well dressed, if deformed is more suitable. He should not have any trace of leading a sophisticated lifestyle or the articulation of colonial language. He must be an epitome of an outcast.

Another notable Malayalam film which showcased colourism over the portrayal of thief was *Thuruppugulan*. The movie centers on the main character Kunjumon (Mammootty) a Calicut based thattukada owner who is nicknamed as 'gulan' for his mastery in gambling. The movie was released in the year 2006 and was directed by Johny Antony. The kind hearted Kunjumon helps his father Kochuthoma's (Innocent) friend Menon (Devan) as he was trapped in Singapore jail, a plan set by Sreedharan Unnithan's (Kalashala Babu) son Santhosh (Suresh Krishna). In order to release Menon, Kunjumon with the help of his friends Swamy (Jagathy Sreekumar) and Khadar (Salim Kumar) cheat Unnithan by abducting the money as advance given by Swamy for the bar licence. Here the crew behind the film has used the popular belief that revolves among the Malayalee psyche that Tamils have many drawbacks such as many instances and stories about Thiruttugramam in TamilNadu is chiefly noted for its thievery. Keralites call Tamilians 'Pandis' as a derogatory term but actually it denotes the people who hail from the ancient kingdom Pandiya. Though it is an outdated reference the popular belief relating to stealing still being circulated among Malayalees. We judge them in their appearance and colour when it comes to that level. In the early 60's many Tamilians had started to migrate and it reached its peak in the 90's. As they are in dark complexion these stories befitted them well. As wanderers they seemed very shabby and unclean and also gave more weightage to those parameters. In the movie Salim Kumar dressed as a Tamil beggar woman whom we often find on the traffic islands with a crying child on the waistline. Carrying a bundle bag which is made of saree, chewing betel leaves causing the juice to flow out gives an awkward and disgusting feeling. He requests for some money the Sreedharan Unnithan first neglect but soon opens the glass by the time Khadar stupefied him with chloroform and abducted his money. Here the noticeable matter is not the judgement over the villain's crime history but the choice of selection of the thief. The writer of the film has chosen Salim Kumar, an actor with dusky complexion, darkened him more for creating an image of a Tamil roaming woman with a crying child establishing dark skinned people are best suited for the roles of bad doings. Dark skin is the most appropriate colour for such illegal activity and



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people come under that colour tone need no extra explanation to disbelieve them. Through the given appearance a conclusion is established in the general public that even their presence can make them a criminal.

Similarly, *Urumbukal Urangarilla* translated as *Ants Don't Sleep* is a 2015 comedy - suspense drama directed by Jiju Ashokan based on thieves. The film revolves around the life of a man named Manoj (Vinay Fort) who approaches Kelu ashan (Sudheer Karamana) to learn the art of robbery. They both met in a bus while pickpocketing. Knowing Manoj's interest in robbery Kelu ashan introduces him to his favourite and well-trained student Benny (Chemban Vinod Jose). Later in a joint thievery attempt Benny was caught by the police and sentenced. Manoj too somehow creates a case and reaches the jail. While at jail he discloses his real intention that he is in search of a thief who killed his parents. With the help of Benny he finds the murder, a brutal and cold-blooded thief named Karlose (Kalabhavan Shajon) in the jail. As per his plan, with the help of friends Manoj kills the murder in a brutal way by scattering sugar and honey and leaving ants on him.

The qualifying feature of this movie in this article is that it sheds light to the lives of thieves and the science of theft. The casting is perfect as the actors have wonderfully played their part. But a question of colourism is prevalent here as the roles of the thieves have been acted by dark skinned actors. Why not a white skinned actor? There would arise a counter question with reference to Manoj in the above given movie - but the aspiring learner of thievery is light skinned. Whenever, a question over the skin colour of the characters (actors) in the film, the regular and cliché answer given by the directors that would be like this: those actors are chosen out of pure interest and as they excel in their acting have made the casting crew to select them and that has no connection with skin colour. But the fact on the other hand is colorism in film is the predominant factor behind it. The implementation of the popular myth on the characteristic features of the thieves are rightly portrayed in the film *Urumbukal Urangarilla*. Kelu ashan, a well trained and experienced thief, the master in diffusing his knowledge in theft is played by Karamana Sudheer, whose dark skin tone gives him a 'right look' of a thief. If we take his case as an exception for his mastery over acting, what about Chemban Vinod Jose as Benny, Kalabhavan Shajon as Karlose, Sreejith Ravi as Choodu Rajappan? All of them are good in their acting skills and received many acclamations on their



different roles on the silver screen but here they all are chosen for their dark complexion which is considered as the phenomenal trait of a thief and the audience accept them as robber only if they are represented by dark complexion. The reception of dark skinned in negative roles has a high impact on the audience. For instance, Karlose makeover along with the skin tone, his buzz haircut, wounded ear lobe and aggressive and masculine mannerism makes him perfect as a cruel thief. And this attributes if the filmmaker applies on a white skinned it won't create any impact. Therefore, such a popular convention regularised on dark skin has become the practice for many years. In the same movie when Benny and Manoj meet in the jail, and introducing Karlose to Manoj we can see many jail inmates are walking through the veranda and most of them are dark skinned thereby it is creating an impression and further a reimpression of the year-old practice of considering dark toned are malicious and detrimental.

Parseing at every moment for the clues to why lighter skin actors are completely exempted from acting as a thief or even if they act, why do they undergo a makeover? The acceptance of milky complexion as a thief is unimaginable, unpleasant and disagreeable to the general public as white stands atop of black, as it is the colour of elegance, supremacy, status and nobility whereas dark represents evil, strange, fear and mystery. Malayalam cinema always acknowledged and appreciated this convention from its beginning to till now.

Does White Matters ? Yes It Matters.

Thaskaraveeran or the brave thief is a 2005 action- romance Malayalam film directed by Pramod Pappan tells the story of KochuBaby (Mammootty) who flees from his home after witnessing the murder of his grandfather Peeli (Madhu) by Eapen (Innocent). After long years Baby, now an underworld don returns to his village to release his father Kuttappan (Rajan P Dev) from jail over an issue related to loan with Eapechan. Baby a master thief steals the gold biscuit from Eapen, which he had given him to resolve the issue with his father. With the help of Thankamani (Nayantara) an egg selling girl and Meenakshi (Sheela) his grandfather's ex-lover Kochu Baby plans and destroys the wealth of Eapechan.

The thief in Thaskaraveeran is entirely different from other ordinary thieves such as Karlose or Kuzhannel Rajeevan. The use of such a title glorifies the action of the thief and justifies his thievery. The foremost thing to be noticed here is that the thief is handsome, glamorous and fair. He is strong, dignified



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and represented as a don as well as a rich man from a rich family though all those were inherited through stealing. Secondly, Koch Baby's actions are normalized and supported by the viewers because he does all for a meaningful cause. His revenge on his grandfather's death becomes acceptable, necessary and unavoidable. A fair skinned thief gets emotional solidarity from the audience which is always denied to a dark skinned thief as well as black coloured people in general. As a result the fair skinned thief is elevated and receives a sainthood and enjoys the reward as his right. The same actions if committed by his binary opposite never gets such acknowledgement as the prevailing social structure and conditioning allows only the white/ fair skinned to enjoy those privileges. Therefore, KochuBaby's crimes as a thief turns into pure, morally good and sinless. Conversely Karlose, Keluashan, Benny are subjected to punishment who are subaltern, inferior and sinners who can never become an elite, superior thief like KochuBaby.

Robinhood: Prince of Thieves is another Malayalam action thriller film based on the story of thief directed by Joshiy in the year 2009. The movie revolves around Venki (Prithviraj) a Physics teacher who loots money from IBI bank ATMs every night. Venki takes revenge on the bank chairman because he destroyed his life for finding some frauds done by him but he had framed Venki as the culprit. Good looking actor was chosen as he hails from a prestigious family and son of a former IAS officer. Unlike other thieves who are either darkened or with dark skin tone who represent the uncivilized, cruel and unkind section of the society. Like Kochu Baby, Venki's crimes become not a crime and his theft gets justified. People like Kuzhannel Rajeevan, though he hasn't committed any crime, becomes the suspect and his dark skin tone becomes a significant reason for that. Thus dark/ black complexion turns into a color of pollutants and redemption becomes unattainable.

### Conclusion

Kali - a coolie in the short story *Sweets for Angels* by R K Narayan is an epitome of love towards children. An innocent and genuine ordinary man was beaten by the public for buying sweets for the school children. His physical appearance with beards strengthened peoples's belief that he's a scoundrel. His appearance was wrongly judged and thrashed by the people in the story. In February 2018, Madhu a 30 year old tribal man belong to the Kurumba caste from Chindakki village in Attapady, Palakkad was caught from a cave by a group of local villagers of Mukkali tied and thrashed him alleging theft of food articles





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from a grocery shop. Madhu, who was undergoing some psychological issues, moved by himself to the cave inside the forest as he was feeling uncomfortable interacting with other people. The so called civilized men from the elite section of the society made Madhu walk around 3 kilometers, stripped off his dhoti, tied up his hands, slapped and kicked him all over the body, furthermore circulated the videos in the social media to mortify the tribal young man. Many people witnessed these cruelties in silence. Madhu died on the way to the hospital by the police as some among the ‘gentlemen kicked on his chest while his head hit on a wall. Five years later in another February, Viswanathan, a 46 year old adivasi man hanged himself on a tree in the medical college premises at Calicut as the crowd accused him of theft. He came with his mother- in-law and his wife as a bystander for her delivery. Viswanathan was accused of stealing a mobile phone and money from there and was assaulted again and again by others. He along with his mother-in-law tried to explain his innocence but nobody listened to them. He left his mobile phone, tiffin box and chappal in a cover and the next morning found by committing suicide. It is significant to find that both men were accused of theft and had lost their life. What made the other people reach a conclusion as they are the thieves? No evidence they had except their colour and appearance. Thieves are represented with dark complexion and both the men were victims of that stereotypes. Moreover, they represents the vulnerable, underprivileged and the silenced category of the society. What more the dominant section needs to reach to such findings. Films that portray thieves in dark colour plays a significant part in popularizing this myth and undoubtedly that has deeply rooted in people's thoughts and attitudes. Surprisingly no initiation has taken place to annihilate this theory but self-correction by the silver screen can peter out this year old practice.

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