



# *Parava*: A Quest for Benevolence in a Misprized World

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**Abstract:** This study is an exploration of the hidden facets of Mattanchery in Soubin Shahir's debut movie *Parava*. It sets out to compare the images attributed to Mattanchery, a town in the city of Kochi, by a couple of Malayalam films over the last few decades. The main aim of the study is to understand how Malayalam films play a pivotal role in constructing distorting images that define the towns and slums of Kochi and to remove the attributes of degradation and violence that has shrouded Mattanchery. This study also tries to examine the way people perceive and relate to animals. The theories of Anthrozoology have been helpful to research upon the topics.

**Index Terms – Parava, Mattanchery, Pigeon Racing, Kite-Flying, Anthrozoology**

## INTRODUCTION

French actor Leslie Caron says “Cinema will always have an important role to play in society.” In this era where media dominates everything, it is obvious that society views itself through the eyes of camera. Film has the unique ability to influence the audience by challenging their morals and transforming their opinions. Film is a work of art. It is arguably the most powerful of any of the art forms to hold a mirror up to the society. It requires lots of effort and time to bring about a good movie. The script, screenplay, setting, characters, cinematography, editing, sound design and narrative structure contribute to the success of the film. By manipulating these tools, filmmakers are able to express a range of meanings. Film is not, of course, a language but it does generate its meaning through systems which work like languages. Film is a form of communication (Turner 52). It represents a diverse range of countries and cultures.

The *mise-en-scene*, a French term roughly translated as ‘what is put into the scene’ includes lighting, costumes, sets, performance and characters in the scene helps in imparting intended message to the audience (Corrigan 48). The context or background where a story is set of course creates a heavy impact on the audience in analyzing the situation or circumstances. In movies ‘settings’ and ‘sets’ refer to the location or the construction where a scene is filmed. In some movies, you will notice how important the settings and sets are. They sometimes provide images of the character's mind, the central theme, or become more complex and important than the characters or the story. Hence, film sets are not merely inert containers of or backdrops to action.

Kochi is one of the fastest growing cities in India and so are its towns. But what the cinematic world insinuates is the negative aspects of the metropolitan city. Often the backdrop becomes more than what it actually is and assumes the role of the character. The mushrooming underworld gangs relegate the towns like Mattanchery to the status of sites of criminal activities. Soubin Shahir has shown complete justice to the town of Mattanchery. *Parava* marks a fresh start to erase the anomalies in the present conviction and is a good product of the positive change which has affected the new age Malayalam cinema.

## BOMBAY (MUMBAI): AN ALTAR OF VIOLENCE?

Settings are charged with significance and inner meanings. The Hindi filmmakers have been fascinated with the lives of the gangsters, and drew upon them for material. Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Parinda* (1989), Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* (1998), *Company* (2002) are films that provide a glimpse into the hidden recesses of the city of Bombay (Mazumdar 150). The film *Parinda* opens in the city of Bombay accompanied by a staccato music that symbolizes an eerie sense of danger. *Satya* is a hard hitting story of gangsters involved in gang wars, extortion and encounter killings. The film takes us through the streets of Bombay to narrate a violent and tragic story of everyday survival in the city (Mazumdar 174). The film *Company* creates a unique journey into Bombay through a rich engagement with the gangster genre.

*K.G.F.* directed by Prashanth Neel is a Kannada language period drama that centers around the protagonist who goes to Bombay at a very young age on a quest for wealth and power as desired by his dying mother. The film shows the city in a bad light. Milan Luthria's *Once Upon a Time in Mumbai* (2010) and Feroz Khan's *Dayavan: Truth of Power* (1988) are some Bollywood films that contribute to building a horrid image of Bombay. In the above mentioned films, the paraphernalia that accompanies the *mise-en-scene* are guns, spectacular action and city spaces that capture the visual and material seduction of the underworld. Thus, Bombay has acquired the status of a danger zone.

## IS KOCHI A SYNONYM OF BOMBAY?

In films, cities represent the highest achievement of human race while the backward areas stand for poverty, crime, alienation and betrayal. The major city that is very much considered to be the hub of Malayalam film industry is Kochi. The city has become the stage of entertainment in the last few decades. Innumerable films have been shot in Kochi. Even though it is one of the fastest growing cities in the developing world, it is having a rough patch. Kochi attained the image of an area where all sorts of mischief prevails. For most of us, Mattanchery is a prominent town in Kochi that serves as the paradise of goons. Smugglers, drug addicts, prostitutes, criminals and gangsters reign the area. Most films portray the slums and towns of Kochi as centers of havoc. A few examples are discussed in this paper.

*Big b* (2009) directed by Amal Neerad is set in the backdrop of Kochi so is *Bheeshma Parvam* (2022). Kochi in these films is a city where underworld gangs reign beyond law and control system. Throughout the time, the names of film crew are exhibited, news clippings of numerous crimes occurred in the city flash before our eyes. The dark morbid spaces, peeling walls, dark staircases, theme of cruelty and death presents the darkness of Kochi. Often in the film we see that Mattanchery alone represents the whole city and its culture.

*Chotta Mumbai* (2007) directed by Anwar Rasheed deals with the Mafia wars in the city. Kochi in the film is a miniature form of Bombay underworld. The slums in this city are where uneducated, unemployed and “good for nothing” people live. The scene where women and children stand in long queues to fetch drinking water sheds light on the lack of basic amenities and the pathetic condition in which they live.

*Best Actor* (2010) directed by Martin Prakkat tells the story of a school teacher who dreams of becoming a film actor someday. He meets several filmmakers and directors with the hope of getting a chance to step into the film industry. On one occasion, he meets some filmmakers who tell him the story of Bollywood actor Vivek Oberoi who lived in Bombay underworld slums to learn the lifestyle of actual gangsters. Inspired from this, the school teacher Mohan, whose role was essayed by Mammootty goes to Fort Kochi to learn about the underworld and becomes the member of a gang in the disguise of a don from Bombay. It can be understood that what Bombay signify for Bollywood is what Kochi does for Mollywood.

*Mattanchery* (2018) directed by Jay Mynagappally tells the story of a group of people who are thugs. The film fails to expose the real Mattanchery and has nothing to offer but some fight sequences. The film adds an extra layer of false identity to Mattanchery. Many more films including *Black* (2004), *Anvar* (2010), *24 Hrs* (2010), *Kammattippaadam* (2016) and *Darwinte Parinaamam* (2016) paint a grotesque image of Kochi. All these films portray the slum areas and towns in Kochi as a world of despair, violence, degradation and danger. Stereotyping is a tool that films use for the effective transmission of ideas. But an image rendered through this stereotyping gets imprinted in the minds of viewers.

The Mollywood film industry saw the release of the film *Parava* in the year 2017. Quite interestingly, Soubin Shahir set his debut film in the so-called problematic and inappropriate place to unveil the traces of love, compassion, friendship and man-animal relationship residing in common people. The town has been canvassed without focusing much on the usual highlights depicted in Malayalam films. The alley that he takes to explore is myriad. The area is an abode of heaven where pigeon racing and kite flying hold much significance both for kids and adults alike. Thus, a misprized world dons the garment of love, passion and benevolence in *Parava*.

## A SNEAK PEEK INTO MATTANCHERY

Soubin sets out to explore an entirely different facet of Mattanchery in this film. Mattanchery is the small part of Kochi which was earlier famous for trading spices and tea. It is one of the oldest ports. From the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the British and China had trade relations with Mattanchery. Mattanchery houses people belonging to different cultures. A significant lot among these are the Gujaratis. As a result, Gujarati cuisine is easily available here. Mattanchery serves as the ideal place for shopping for antique hunters showing a mix of traditions and cultures. Some of the most pristine and historically significant artefacts are found in the Jew Street. There are more than 30 communities in Mattanchery which infuse it with a rich heritage. It is home to Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Jews. Therefore, co-existence comes naturally to the inhabitants. Modern India must imbibe lessons from here. Kochi's cultural heart lies within this town. The oldest European Church Saint Francis, Jew Street, Parsi Synagogue, Mattanchery Palace, Mattanchery Pazhayannur Royal Temple, Palliarakkavu Temple, Ram Mandir, The St. George Orthodox Koonan Jurist Old Syrian Church and several mosques are the major attractions in Mattanchery. It is a miniature form of Mother India.

## PARAVA: UNVEILING THE GOOD IN MATTANCHERY

*Parava* is Soubin Shahir's directorial debut film which he has co-written with Muneer Ali, produced by Anwar Rasheed and Shyju Unni under the banner Anwar Rasheed Entertainments and The Movie Club starring Amal Shah, Govind V. Pai, Shane Nigam, and many other prominent actors. In the film, we get to see Mattanchery in its totality and also the changing human attitudes towards animals through the narration of two equally mesmerizing tales. It belongs to the genre of comedy, action and drama.

*Parava* unveils the life and culture of the region, its interests and more. The film throws light on what pigeon racing means for the community of Mattanchery. Pigeon racing is an indispensable part of living there, where it is also conducted as a sport. In the tournament, a pair of pigeons belonging to each contestant has to fly without landing and the pair that flies the most is deemed the winner. The ‘sign’ or ‘symbol’ is the basic unit of communication and it can be a photograph, a word, a sound, an object or whatever the culture finds significant (Turner 55). In the film, it is apparent that the signature is *Parava* or pigeon. *Parava* is a Malayalam word that means ‘bird’, but in the film this term solely addresses pigeon.

In many tales and childhood stories we have heard of homing pigeons. They are known for their ability to find their way home after covering extremely long distances. In the ancient times, they were used as messengers due to this ability. Usually, a message is penned in a thin sheet of paper, rolled into a small tube and attached to the bird's leg. In the film, we do not see such illustrations in the actual sense, but a close examination indicates that *Parava* carries the message of love and friendship.

Mattanchery's landscapes, streets, lodges and its antiquity takes us back to the space occupied by gangsters in early Hindi cinema. It is probably the old buildings seeming to fall down and the dense population that triggered the filmmakers to plant a mafia in

Mattanchery. Soubin attempts to eradicate this image and in doing so, he has been able to bring forth a gem into the Bollywood industry.

He dedicates this film to the people of Mattanchery. At times, we notice that Mattanchery asserts to the status of a character. In fact, the setting speaks for the film. The titles and pertaining details concerning the film have been inscribed on the colorful but peeling walls, doors, rickshaws and even on the pavement. The accompanying music juxtaposed with certain scenes define their daily lives. The music also seeks to address their culture. The streets flooded with kids running to and fro, street vendors, the magical charm of the people, aged men in tea shops, narrow streets and overcrowded markets color the scenes. The camera squeezes into the alleys and sours over the terraces of crumpled flats. All this adds to the currency of the setting. Soubin here manages to familiarize the audience with the small dingy cells and tiny apartments of the colony through which they are about to travel till the end of the film. This asserts that the story is very much absorbed into the culture of Mattanchery. The camera never moves beyond a few streets in Mattanchery. The locale is very much part of the film. In this context, cinematographer Littel Swayamp deserves a special mention. He has very elegantly captured every nook and corner and some absolutely stunning visions and the realistic beauty of the place.

## MAN-ANIMAL INTERACTION AND KITE FLYING IN MATTANCHERY

Film as a form of communication employs images that are culturally charged. The camera angle employed, the position of images within the frame, the use of lighting to highlight certain aspects would all have the potential for meaning (Turner 54). There is a striking originality about everything in *Parava*. It offers a lot of interesting imageries for those who are unfamiliar with the pigeon racing game. *Parava* redraws the familiar canvas of man-animal interactions. Apart from images of caressing the animals, the film combines moments of sweetest intimacy possible. The delicate moments between the owner and the birds as well as between the birds alone and how the birds are sent on flight for competition all carry some meanings and significance. Even the pigeons get a love angle in the film. They fly better with their mates and symbolize love. The initial scene itself shows a pigeon in the pursuit of finding its mate that has been stolen.

The quest for goodness commences in the opening scene. The goodness is nothing but the interaction between humans and animals. Human-Animal Studies or Anthrozoology is a discipline that focuses on this kind of interaction. Irshad (nicknamed Ichappi) and his friend ride together to retrieve their fish that has been stolen by an elder boy. He gets back the fish, keeping it in a mouthful of water and brings it home. There is a guided tour of Mattanchery in this scene and is heavily loaded with their love for pets. The theme of man-animal love becomes powerful when the boys fill their mouths with water and then kisses the bird's beak to pour it back to its throat. This act of quenching thirst is very much reminiscent of parent birds feeding their young ones. The boys care for the pigeons and they are the most important possessions for them. But, there are obviously no signs of the birds' love for them. In this regard, the pigeons hold a dominion over the humans: they can be trained to obey commands, but can't be trained to love them.

In his book, *Animals in Film*, Jonathan Burt argues that animal imageries in film is distinctive in that the audience respond emotionally to the animal being represented or to the animal-related practices. It evokes certain feelings like empathy due to the particular techniques that are used in the film. *Parava* proves it right.

The theme of man-animal love is reiterated in the second part of the film where a middle aged woman bewails the death of her pet dog. Her son appears in the scene saying "People will think I'm dead hearing your mourning." Her lament reflects on how much she loved her pet. The closing scene of the film also ends with the same lady caressing her new dog. Throughout the film we see characters paying attention to the caring of animals. We see a chick crawling out of its egg, the death of a pet dog, and the love between pigeons.

Kite-flying is as important as pigeon racing to the people of Mattanchery. The whole song 'Pakalin Vathil' sung by Sreenath Bhasi is devoted to showing the fun of kite flying and the making of 'manja'. 'Manja' is a substance made from glass that coats a kite's string to make it strong. So far, Malayalam films have not met with the topic of interest and curiosity of the people of Mattanchery for pigeon taming and kite-flying. This renders a fresh whiff of life to the film.

## FRIENDSHIP AND LOVE IN PARAVA

The film goes on to explore friendship and love on many levels. The friendship between Haseeb and Ichappi is all the more apparent. Both of them love and care for each other. The heavy dose of realism in their acting lends reliance to the whole narrative. They both love and care for each other. Haseeb considers Ichappi's mother as his own and never hesitates to address her 'umma.' He spends most of the time in Ichappi's home and return to his own at the end of the day. He is really fond of what Ichappi's mother cooks and always enquires what she is planning to cook for the next meal. Ichappi's mother also takes care of Haseeb and scolds him for not washing hands before taking his meal. She doesn't forget to send some food to Haseeb's mother. The bonding between families and the tradition of hospitality becomes visible here. The people here are stereotyped as aggressive and intolerant in other movies. But the ground experience is the opposite.

While Haseeb manages to clear the final exams, Ichappi doesn't causing him to continue in the same class. Haseeb tries his best to soothe him saying that Ichappi should feel lucky that he has got a loving teacher is notable. Haseeb leaves the classroom dejected and disappointed at the prospect of leaving Ichappi, perhaps for the first time in his life. This brief scene is followed by Haseeb walking to the new class in heavy downpour. His painful tears get washed away in rain.

Pigeons form a channel for Ichappi's meeting with Surumi. He makes a loud clap making the pigeons soar high. Surumi turns back at this point and their gaze meets beneath the beating wings of the pigeons. One thing that is likely to escape our notice is that while Ichappi makes the clap, no one bothers to look at the scene but Surumi. This is because it is a common act in the locality. Surumi being a new settler becomes curious as she is not unfamiliar with this. The experience of Ichappi's first love and heartbreak at the sight of his lover as the bride to his elder brother's friend was a huge shock for the audience.

The second part of the film narrate another tale that reveals the past of many characters. Even though Dulquer Salman appears in the screen for just 25 minutes, he manages to create an indelible impression in the minds of audience. The character Imran who is called 'Captain Ikka' by his beloved ones is the embodiment of love, generosity, compassion, warmth, hospitality and care. Imran and his friends are obsessed with cricket and there used to be a local club named 'Six Four Mattanchery' where the players meet often. Even after Imran's death, the club members manage to keep the club alive. Love and togetherness envelope the club members. The character Imran seems to have a towering influence on the people. His decisions accord well with the people of the town.

Images, as well as words, carry connotations. He is completely aware of everything that happens in the colony. He gets to know when Shane falls in love with a girl and tries to fix his marriage. He is able to sense easily when his young friends make plans to have beer in his absence. The phrase that he uses often, "Don't think I'm unaware of anything" is an example.

A song sequence affirms that they too enjoyed pigeon racing and kite flying. The lyrics of 'Oormakal Karal Thalodum Pole' signify the care, friendship and goodness toward each other. The elder members of the town also share a similar camaraderie. When Abdul Khader (Indrans) dies, we see an empty chair beside the other three. The empty chair is a powerful symbol for the emptiness that has engulfed them following the death of their beloved companion. The scene evokes strong emotions in the audience especially when the voice over goes on to describe the father-son relationship.

### THE TASTE OF MATTANCHERY

The richness of Muslim delicacy is also looked at with much detail. The cuisine is mostly non-vegetarian especially rich in mutton and beef. Food which are unavoidable for a typical Muslim community like porotta and beef, fish biriyani, pathiri (thin rice roti) and mutton curry figure prominently in the visual menu of the film. The close shot of sizzling mutton curry that Ichappi's mother makes is enough to make our mouth's water. 'Irachi choru' (Kerala Meat Rice) which is a traditional Mattanchery style beef dish and kakka irachi (clam curry) appears in the film many a time.

### CONCLUSION

Cinema is such a powerful medium of communication, because it affects the viewer's life and the way they perceive the world in so many ways. So it becomes mandatory to reach an understanding of what actually the setting is, independently of its existence in any given film. Cinema inevitably has a social impact and its images and stories construct politically and socially charged views of the world. In the last decade, the dividing line between the cinematic world and the material world has been blurred thus, making it difficult for viewers to comprehend the reality.

*Parava* is not a hero-centered movie. It talks about life in Mattanchery and the virtues hidden in its dark alleys. All the character work to complete the beautiful tapestry of the town and to dig out the traces of benevolence towards one's fellow creatures. The film serves as a charitable gift to the people of Mattanchery. Many other minimal stuff that happens in the story has a statement to make. All the scenes stand close to reality. The film documents a certain way of life. It is about a common man seated near the fish cart who leaves when he hears the adhan (prayer call from the mosque). It is about making fish biriyani and serving it for poor kids. It is about making 'manja' for kite flying. It is about a son who mourns the death of his father. It is about teenage crushes. It is about people gathering to play caroms in the evening and cracking jokes. It is about a boy who has never been able to do a back flip, who does so for the first time and gets a double win as she does it right before his crush. The varied characters of Mattanchery with its painful pasts and presents, bittersweet realities and its portraits of friendship have been brought us in the course of 147 minutes.

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