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## **In and Of Space in *Chappa Kurishu***

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**Abstract:** In Samir Thahir's *Chappa Kurishu*, a lost and found mobile phone results in the production of a new narrative space by exploring the space within the mobile. The paper tries to analyze how *Chappa Kurishu* presents a regionalised culture struggling to negotiate its space within a highly globalised environment.

**Keywords:** city, cheri, market economy, corporate culture.

In the centre of the past two decades' cinema, there was always a hero and the narrative functions in and around him. But today's cinema has many centers, not one center, and they do not contain a superhuman or a chivalrous, ideal, manly a hero whom the heroine worships or a tragic hero whom she sympathises with.

There exists a contradiction between the existing traditional values in our day to day life and culture and the transforming modern experience, aspirations and the change in environments. Here technology acts both as a catalyst to change and as a resistant to it by looking back at the old. Look at the constant presence of mobile phones within the filmic narratives. Analogue phone has limitations of place, but mobile phones, though sometimes out of range, are free from it. *Chappa Kurishu* carries the notions that women's chastity, virginity, nobility and sacredness are threatened by the new technologies (mobile phones act the role of villain). In a way, they try to question them. Any new technology when it first comes in the life of a middle class Malayali naturally creates fear and suspicions about it. But when they are used to it, it functions both as an accident and as a regular incident. While the upper classes see it as a world of new pleasures, the lower classes see it as an opportunity to improve their lives.

Sameer Thahir, the director of the movie says that while he was writing the script itself, giving shape to the main male leads, Arjun and Ansari, he knew that they were the two sides of the same coin. So he thought of 'Heads and Tales' as the title. But he wanted it in the colloquial lingo. It's called 'Changum Chappayum' in Kollam, 'Thalayum Valum' in Kottayam, 'Raja Kozhi' in Thrissur and 'Chaappa Kurish' in Cochin. He belonged to Cochin and chose 'Chaappa Kurish' as the title (Behind the Camera 2011).

*Chappa Kurish* puts the scanner on the strangeness of reality in a busy city in Kerala, teeming with life. This wrenching and powerful testament on the politics of power that governs human lives deals with issues that are real, contemporary and quite complex. The film started production in April 2011 at Ernakulam and released on 14th July 2011. Arjun (Fahadh Fasil) is a dashing young businessman on his way to become a corporate magnate. Living in a swank apartment in Cochin, he likes to see the city move beneath his feet. He is engaged to be married to Ann (Roma), and has an affair on the sly with his secretary Sonia (Remya Nambeeshan). One of their clandestine encounters is recorded on Arjun's mobile phone, and when Sonia threatens to wreck his marriage, he loses the phone in a scuffle. Where it does land is

before Ansari (Vineeth Sreenivasan), a cleaner boy at a local super market, who quickly grabs it and disappears into the crowd.

Arjun is the kind of man who believes that money has earned him everything possible in the world. His gait is self-assured, perhaps a bit too much at that, and he has selectively ousted lesser individuals from his purview. He is used to having people hop around his fingertips, and is a strategic planner who devises his booming career with as much craftiness and care as his life.

Ansari on the other hand is fast getting used to being jostled at, and has learned that it's a man-eat-man world out there. He engages in a silent battle every day, with him on one side and the affluent world at the other, where he merely puts up a feeble guard and tries to meekly get away. He never gets to sit on a vacant seat on the bus, is shoved around by the bulky supervisor at the workplace, and gets insulted by all and sundry.

Money is thus the last thing in Ansari's mind when he hears Arjun at the other end imploring him to hand him the phone back. For the first time, perhaps in his long and miserable life, he listens to someone talk to him with respect. He is neither aware of the possibilities of blackmail nor interested in striking up a profitable deal. He is merely fascinated by the voice of a human being, who for a change is eager to take his orders.

It's a long winding chase that Arjun embarks on, since Ansari soon gets intoxicated by the dope of contentment that he derives from being in charge. The climatic showdown between the two is all the more vicious and bloody, as they literally tear themselves apart, before finally settling down and resignedly going their separate ways.

Housing is one of the basic requirements for human survival. Every citizen needs to have a safe, secure and healthy place to live, work and lead a life of dignity. A house provides not only physical protection against the vagaries of nature but also space and privacy to an individual and his family for physical, emotional and intellectual growth.

In the narrative of *Chappa Kurish*, the first scene shows us the luxurious hotel room where Arjun lives. Then the camera moves on to one of the congested, unhygienic *cheri* where Ansari lives. The city as it appears on the screen is an entity in formation. The densely populated area where Ansari lives gives enough space for election posters on the doors of the public paid toilets. Because of the lack of electricity and iron box, Ansari provides a space for his clothes under his bed sheet to make it free of wrinkles. He takes one plastic bag while going out for job. From his talk with Nabeesa, a Muslim girl working in the same shopping mall and from his act of sending money order, the viewer gets an unclear image of his mother who longs for his son's presence beside her. The owner of the hotel from where Ansari takes his breakfast often treats him with harsh words for eating the cheapest *maida* every morning.

Kochi is an exciting city. In an article titled “Kochi: The Other City” T. V. Sajeev talks about Kochi:

Throughout the rest of the city shops are a streetside presence, and at many places streets are shops. The city drew its manual workforce from the slum. The hallmark of Cochin's streets as perceived at night by anyone is the hordes of mosquitoes over one's head. The island of Vypin, a part of Kochin, is the most thickly populated island in the world. With little access to potable water, and acute shortage of health and service facilities, the island was the test site for the possible limits of demographic thresholds. Until the opening of Goshree Bridge three years ago, access to the mainland was only through the backwaters. (Sajeev 94)

From such a place Ansari comes to the city and works as a cleaner in a shopping mall in the narrative of *Chappa Kurish*. Today shopping mall is an integral part of many modern cities. Mall makes it possible to meet not one but a number of needs at once. Shopping mall is an appropriate example of spatial transformations under the influence of global forces, which may also give clues about changes in urban lifestyle. As Lefebvre says, every social space is the outcome of a

process with many aspects and many contributing currents, signifying and non-signifying, perceived and directly experienced, practical and theoretical (110).

Kamala Das, the noted writer of Kerala, had remarked that in travelling from south to north in Kerala, the smile changes from black to shine (Sajeew 92). Explaining the lack of humane concern in the south and the very personal bond quickly established in the north, she mused that this reflects in all walks of life. Cochin is half way in this journey. It harnesses both of these – the brutal practicality of existence and complex interpersonal relationships.

In the narrative Arjun is travelling in a car, talking with his mother and his fiancée Ann in two mobile phones simultaneously through a busy road where vehicles flow like water from an open tap. Ansari while crossing jumps in front of the car of Arjun. Ansari walks through a rush area where one person cannot pass without touching the other person's body, but they do not know who is the person near to them.

Arjun's world is in front of his lap and mobiles while Ansari's world is in between the noun 'cleaning' and the verb 'clean'. When Arjun in his hotel room engages to take the video of ants moving through his bed, Ansari loads heavy sacks to the shop. Mobile functions as a time pass for Arjun by providing the videos and at the same time contains the master plan of his project site.

Recent years have seen the expansion of different formats of media. The development of the internet has allowed the proliferation of online stores, celebrity fan sites and news channels. Mobile phone technology has allowed for increased consumption opportunities via downloads. Many scholars have opted for using metaphors to explain the interconnectivity and multi-directional flows of media practices and images in everyday life. Paul Virilio uses the term "vectors" to capture how images travel. Couldry and McCarthy (2004) use the idea of the "grid" to explain these connections; Charles Acland (2003) speaks of the "traffic" in distributed images (54) ; Mitchell Schwarzer (2004) uses the term "Zoomscape" to help explain the in/tangibility of the moving image in urban perception (56); while globalisation theorist Arjun

Appadurai (1990) employs a metaphor of the “scape”. These “scapes” are particularly helpful in charting the perspectival nature of “new global cultural economy”, which revolves around flows of people, media images, technology, finance capital and ideas. This new cultural landscape “has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models” (Appadurai 296).

As the laws of the market take precedence over the laws of the state as guardian of the public good, the government increasingly offers little help in mediating the interface between the advance of capital and its rapacious commercial interests. Neither does it aid non-commodified interests and non-market spheres that create the political, economic and social conditions vital for critical citizenship and democratic public life. Within the discourse of neoliberalism that has taken hold of the public imagination there is no vocabulary in which to speak about political or social transformation. In the midst of this concerted attack by big-business on the public, market driven consumerism continues to mobilize desires in the interest of producing market identities and market relationships. These ultimately appear, as Theodor Adorno once put it, nothing less than “a prohibition on thinking itself” (qtd. in Giroux 8). It is this context of ongoing assault on the public by a free market economy and corporate culture that turns everything it touches into an object of consumption where Sameer Thahir’s film *Chappa Kurish* needs to be considered.

The fight scene in *Chappa Kurish* is very long, but violent and energetic by giving space for taking breath intermittently which is quite absent in the fight scene in Malayalam cinema with a superstar (Mohanlal or Mammooty or Suresh Gopi). In the movies of Malayalam superstars, the fight scene functions as a one man show which is used to project the starliness of those heroes.

Lately with the emergence of the AK 47 which has become a mere extension of the long hand of evil, one might have expected the fist fight to altogether disappear; on the contrary and not unexpectedly, the fist

fight remains, because when technology itself comes to the aid of violence, the fist must even more singularly mark an authentic masculinity and dignity of self. He who is armed with intelligence, virtue, and tenacity need not have any other arms. (Lal 1998, 230)

Another important thing we have to notice is how the narrow, shadowy, wet space of the urinals, which is a private space as far as a person is concerned, becomes a space for good fight between Ansari and Arjun. It is also interesting to see how it is captured by using a camera from the appropriate angles.

In an article titled “Malayala Cinimayum Jeevithavum – Chila Multiplex Kazhchakal”, film critic C. S. Venkiteswaran makes a reading of the new wave dancing in Malayalam cinema by taking examples such as Rajesh Pillai’s *Traffic*, Ashik Abu’s *Salt’n Pepper*, V. K. Prakash’s *Beautiful*, Sameer Thahir’s *Chappakurish* and Arun Kumar Aravind’s *Ee Adutha Kalath* (8-17). He analyses the looseness happened in the traditional narrative both in style and treatment and in the changing concepts of hero and reads it together with the cultural transformations happening in Kerala. He goes on that at one level their novelty lies in the technical treatment – graphics, lightings, etc. Their narrative world is city and its surroundings. They present both the luxurious life of the city and the suffocating life of the *cheri*. *Cheri* has become already portrayed in many films, but they carried with the traditional notion of under world politics.

Popular culture represents society; it tracks society’s consolidation of traditional norms and its subversions as well. Technological advancement and the mass media have proved that popular culture has greater penetration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, reaching remote locations, thereby leading to a perception of homogenizing of consumer desires and tastes, ranging from fizzy drinks, fast food to detergents and toothpaste. Popular culture, thus, is the sensitive litmus test that represents both tradition and transformation and that the movie focuses on.

Though we travel a great distance from the village in terms of space and time, we haven't yet reached the open free spaces of the individuals that characterize the city. The modern life experience of a Malayali is now in between them. This is what the contemporary popular Malayalam cinema consciously or unconsciously shows. However, the narrative space of Malayalam cinema comes out of the inner space of home and the institution of family to a much wider space of the complexities of the city space.

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