Chapter II

Imagining a Nation of Rational Subjects:
Neelakkuyil and the Left’s Interventions in Cinema

Academic attention on Malayalam cinema of the 1950s revolves almost entirely around the films that belong to the era of ‘social realism’, a loose term used in the scholarship on Indian cinema to refer to the aesthetic project that introduced “a thematic shift, focusing attention on the poor and the exploited but continued to feature a melodramatic narrative” (Prasad 1998: 160). In Malayalam cinema, this movement begins with interventions in popular cinema by artists and writers associated with the Progressive Writing Group and Kerala People’s Arts Club (KPAC) – two bodies that were closely affiliated to the Communist Party in Kerala. In fact, a major chunk of literature on Malayalam cinema would often begin by revisiting this aesthetic movement in order to problematise important aspects like the dominant history’s privileging of this era and its films, the representational claims of realism, as well as the new hierarchies and oppositions.

1 Progressive Writing Group was begun as Jeeval Sahithya Prasthanam (Movement for the Literature about Life) in 1937, with people like E M S Namboodiripad, K Damodaran, P Keshavadev etc. as its founder members. The movement was renamed in 1944 as Purogamana Sahithya Sangham (Progressive Writing Group). This forum consisted of most of the well-known writers of the period from Kerala, including P C Kuttikrishnan (known as Uroob) and Ponkunnam Varkey who had written for cinema during the 1950s. See Gopalakrishnan (1987) for a history of Purogamana Sahithya Sangham.

2 Kerala People’s Arts Club (KPAC) was formed in 1950 by a group of young Communists. KPAC was later affiliated to the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). See Mohandas 2002 for a history of KPAC. Thoppil Bhasi, the most prominent playwright of the KPAC, wrote the screenplays of a number of films in the second half of the 1950s.
that get established in the realm of aesthetics with the advent of social realism in cinema - between melodrama and realism, studio shooting and the use of real locations, etc. However, despite the importance given to the socio-realist films of the 1950s in Malayalam film studies, there has hardly been any attempt to examine in detail the defining features of this aesthetic movement and the specificities of the Left’s interventions in popular cinema. This cluster of films is mostly examined in retrospect, where the discussions are framed either by the claims that the dominant historians make on behalf of these films or by the contemporary debate on Malayalam cinema which tries to invoke a nostalgic past of ‘good cinema’, the genealogy of which begins from the socio-realist cinema of the 1950s. Even as such enquiries enable us to historicize the contestations over aesthetic forms in Malayalam cinema, it also had the inadvertent effect of selectively focusing on some claims that the dominant historians make on behalf of the socio-realist films of the 1950s, while discarding others.

The first section in this chapter discusses the cultural-political context of the Left’s interventions in popular cinema in Kerala and examines the precise terms within which dominant histories of Malayalam cinema have accommodated the socio-realist films of the 1950s. Analysing Neelakkuyil (P Bhaskaran & Ramu Kariat, 1954), the chapter later argues that the aesthetic domain of social realism provided the Left-associated artists with a ground to negotiate with an
industrial-cultural medium like cinema, marked by its popular, melodramatic excesses, and to mould a sphere of the ‘new popular’ that would address ‘the masses’ – the object of the Left’s political mobilization – and, at the same time, negotiate the (high caste) middle class’s position in the imminent modern nation of Malayalees. These artists’ early initiatives in cinema targeted the masses as the primary addressee, attempted to educate them in the reformed idioms of popular cinema, and sought to call into existence the new Malayali nation of rational subjects on behalf of them, even while catering to various desires as anxieties of the middle class literati and the elites. They appropriated the space of the cinema hall, marked by the presence of ‘the masses’, to give shape to an aesthetic of the ‘new popular’ on the one hand, and on the other, to negotiate the high castes’ position in the new nation of Malayalees before the mass audience of popular cinema. It argues that Neelakkuyil combines the elements of the star-cinema typical of the South Indian case, and the aesthetic traits – in its choice of the theme and the representational strategies – that one can identify in the progressive realist cinema in Hindi and Bengali during the late 1940s and the early 1950s.3 This complicates the existing understanding of the film as the beginning of a cinema in Malayalam that primarily addressed the middle class.

The chapter also argues that if the ‘nationalist’ address based on a common language characterized the commercial, star cinema of the 1950s in the other

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3 Hindi films like Dharti Ke Lal (K A Abbas, 1946) and Do Bhigha Zameen (Bimal Roy, 1953), Bengali films like Udayer Pathe (Bimal Roy, 1946), Babla (Agradoot, 1951) and Chhinnamul (Nimai Ghosh, 1951) are examples. The involvement, direct or indirect, of the artists associated with Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) in these films is striking. Also see Biswas 2010.
south Indian states, in the case of Kerala, the Left conceived and proposed a discourse of rationality, imagined as emanating from Communism, as the uniting element of Malayali nationalism, an aspect which was to have major implications in the region’s cultural realm towards the end of the decade. The anxieties surrounding the position of various communities/castes in this newly imagined rational-secular Malayali nation animated the narrative preoccupations in the socio-realist films of the 1950s.

**Socio-realist films of the 1950s in the dominant history**

It would be worthwhile to begin this exercise by revisiting some of the dominant historical accounts about Malayalam cinema in order to identify the precise terms within which the socio-realist films of the 1950s are accommodated in these histories. If one were to look through a couple of historical narratives about Malayalam cinema and analyse them together, it becomes clear that the dominant history's stake in the social realism of the 1950s is mainly as a precursor to the ‘art cinema’ of the 1970s and the 1980s in Malayalam, which brought national as well as international acclaim to Malayalam cinema through the films of directors like Adoor Gopalakrishnan. The primary interest of these historical narratives, all of them written during the 1980s or later, rests on this ‘art cinema’ which is considered a matter of pride for Malayalees, at a time

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4 The dominant historical accounts often put forth culturalist arguments by proposing a causal relation between sociological factors like the high literacy rate among Malayalees and the
when the institution of popular cinema in India was being looked down upon by critics as well as academicians for failing to adhere to the standards of Hollywood realism – considered the universal yardstick to judge cinema across the world. As the dominant historical accounts, written from a teleological perspective, attempt to construct a longer history for the moment of arrival of the ‘aesthetically matured’ art cinema of the 1970s and 1980s in Malayalam, the social realism of the 1950s was identified as a preliminary phase, mainly because of its thematic engagement with ‘social issues’ and the attempts to introduce ‘nativity’ in character portrayal, dialogues, music as well as the narrative backdrop.

For example, discussing Neelakkuyil (P Bhaskaran & Ramu Kariat, 1954) and other socio-realist films of the 1950s in Malayalam, Vijayakrishnan writes:

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emergence of art cinema in Malayalam. This has resulted in claims about ‘Malayali cultural superiority’ becoming a commonsense in discussions about cinema in Kerala. For example, the official website of the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA) tries to suggest a causal link between the ‘cultural sophistication’ of Malayalees and Malayalam cinema’s propensity towards ‘realism’ in the following manner: “The viewers in Kerala enjoy the films while comprehending the reality in it. They possess a high degree of insight and intuition and distinguish reality from fiction in the themes of experimentalism. [...] Kerala has a very rich art and cultural background. Its films are unique in several aspects. Unlike the other linguistic films, which have started off taking themes from the Puranas, Malayalam films have taken relevant social issues as its theme from the beginning” (http://malayalamcinema.com/Content-4/Cinema-History.html; retrieved on 18/03/08).

Apart from pointing towards the culturalist assumptions within which aesthetic practices are explained, this passage also hints at the reasons behind the assimilation of socio-realist films of the 1950s within dominant accounts about Malayalam cinema which most often tend to become accounts about the career of realism in Malayalam cinema. Here, the thematic focus on social issues (as opposed to myth) becomes the criteria for being accommodated in the history of ‘progressive’, ‘realist’ Malayalam cinema.
The exposure to international cinema [after the international film festival of 1952 in India] and its influence were not reflected in South Indian film industries except in Malayalam cinema. The [progressive] transformations that were taking place in Malayalam cinema were clearly noticeable. However, these changes had nothing to do with the International film festival or the arrival of [Satyajit] Ray [in Indian cinema]. Rather, cinema in Malayalam was gradually coming under the influence of literature. [...] Neelakkuyil had a Keraleeyatha [Kerala-ness] that was never seen in Malayalam films until then. Every frame of the film pulsated with the rustic images of a Kerala village. Characters were drawn from everyday life. The most important aspect about this film was that it replaced the artificial backdrops used in films until then, with its dynamic, vibrant and realistic settings. [...] The screenplay reflects the skills of Uroob in writing touching stories about the ordinary life of people. However, theatricality dominates in dialogues and the conception of scenes. As was the convention in other popular films of the time, dialogues continued to gain prominence [over visual elements] in this film too. [...] The photography signified a shift by introducing depth to images, compared to the conventional use of ‘flat’ images. [...] The film also inaugurated a tradition of using authentic tunes and lyrics in film music. (Vijayakrishnan 1987: 74-78)

As the passage quoted above suggests, what prompts the dominant historian to claim the socio-realist cinema of the 1950s and to begin the story of the

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As another account describes *Neelakkuyil* as a “melodramatic film full of songs and dance” (Ramankutty 1989/ 2006: 6). Ramankutty says: “The linear flow of the narrative was not given importance in the early Malayalam films. Films were often made by simply sticking together a number of disparate incidents. At times, they dealt with social issues, directly or indirectly. They also tried to entertain the audience. Scenes were not organised along a linear thread. One can see all these aspects in *Neelakkuyil*” (ibid: 11). Similar views can be seen in the reviews of these films that appeared in newspapers and periodicals.
‘aesthetically superior’ Malayalam cinema from this movement is mainly the deployment of nationalist realism that imagines the nation, its people and landscape, rather than the use of narrative realism (associated with classical Hollywood cinema), where all the elements in the film are subordinated to the linear progression of the narrative. Beyond that, these films are described as “not worthy of even being compared to films like Satyajit Ray’s Pather Panchali” (Vijayakrishnan 1987: 81; emphasis added). The impulses of nationalist realism seeking to portray the people in the region “represented in their objective there-ness” (Prasad 1998: 6) was one of the most appreciated aspect of the film when it came out, as the reviews that appeared in the print media during the time also suggest. For example, Cynic, a prominent film critic of the time, begins his review of the film by saying that “notwithstanding its limitations, Neelakkuyil is a good Malayalam film worth watching”. Listing some of the alluring elements in the film, he writes:

Uroob, who wrote the story, screenplay and dialogues, deserves credit for the film’s success. He succeeded in creating characters that connect well with the common people. Though some of these characters do not have any function in the linear progression of the narrative, they do not bore us because of their authentic portrayal. The vibrant, lively dialogues ooze life into the film.

Madhava Prasad uses ‘nationalist realism’ to describe Italian neo-realism and the realist experiments in Indian ‘new cinema’. This aesthetic movement, according to Prasad, functions as “one of the mechanisms of the modern state’s hegemonic project, giving substance to the state’s claim to represent the ‘nation’ that it encompasses” (Prasad 1998: 61; emphasis in the original). In contrast, the realist imperative in classical Hollywood cinema “consists in according primacy to the features of a rationally-ordered society – relations of causality, progression along a linear continuum marked by motivation, credibility, and action submitted, in the ultimate instance, to the narrative possibilities arising from the operation of the rule of law; the realist text in this sense is a sign of bourgeois hegemony” (ibid: 62).
The outdoor shots, used in plenty, succeed in conveying the sense that the story takes place in Kerala. The uchikuduma [typical tuft of hair] of the Nair karanavar, the Namboodiri’s paan-box, the traditional evening lamp customarily lit beside the thulasi [holy basil] plant at the Nair house, the village restaurant, the Marar and his drum, the Mappila’s fishing net… all these add to the Kerala-ness of the film. [...]

Though Moithu’s character does not fit into the narrative scheme, the role was essayed excellently by Balakrishna Menon. (Mathrubhoomi, 7 November, 1954: 31-3, emphasis added)

The point of quoting extensively from these accounts was to foreground the visual pleasures that the film evoked, both for the writing elites of the time as well as for the historians later. While the portrayal of nativity was one of the highlights of Neelakkuyil, the film clearly did not qualify as a text that follows conventions of classical realism. This should persuade us to revisit and historicize the Left’s interventions in art and cinema. Though class revolution is not the theme of Neelakkuyil, this project considers the film as a Left initiative considering the involvement of artists associated with the Progressive Writing Group.

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7 The terms Nair, Namboodiri and Marar refer to Hindu caste groups. Mappila is a term commonly used to refer to both Muslims and Christians in Kerala. In this case, it refers to the Muslim character Moithu in the film.

8 In a number of dominant historical narratives, the period of ‘neo-realism’ starts in Malayalam cinema with Newspaper Boy (P Ramdas, 1955). See Chapter III for a discussion on the film.
The Left’s cultural interventions and popular cinema

Theoretically, a commitment to social progress (over aesthetic, literary values) and an insistence on reaching out to the masses to educate them in ‘good’, ‘progressive’ art seem to be the two most important governing principles for the interventions of the artists and writers associated with the Left in the fields of literature, theatre and cinema. In addition, aspects like portraying ‘authentic’ images of the region’s landscape and people, and an ethnographic detailing of the mobilized working class were the other important aesthetic considerations for this movement. For example, the essays of E M S Namboodiripad, written during the 1950s on art and literature, reflect an endorsement of a lesser emphasis on literariness and a greater stress on the need to adopt from, as well as reflect, the day-to-day life of the common people. In these essays, E M S was positioning himself, as a Marxist, in favour of a meaningful practice of art that supports progressive social movements, as against the proponents of the art-for-art’s-sake theory, by endorsing a model of literature that combines aesthetic concerns with social commitment, where the emphasis is on the latter. This was to be supplemented by the authentic representation of the region, its culture and people, etc., as is evident in the choice of the title for the movement he was a

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10 E M S wrote in 1937: “What does the Jeeval Sahithya Prasthanam propose to the artists? It is that they should advocate and support the progressive forces in the society. […]. This does not mean that Jeeval Sahithyam should sacrifice artistic values in favour of progress. Jeeval Sahithyam does not disrespect aesthetic values. However, the movement would insist that one should not stand for conservatism in the name of aesthetics” (Namboodiripad 1937/1998: 19–20).
founder member of – Jeeval Sahithya Prasthānam (‘Movement for the Literature about Life’).\footnote{11} The espousal of nationalist realism (or aesthetic realism) combined well with the communists’ desire to see the mobilized working class represented in literature and plays.\footnote{12} This is evident in his essays discussing the popular plays written by the playwrights associated with the Kerala People’s Arts Club (KPAC). Endorsing the transformations that KPAC’s popular socialist plays like Pāṭṭabākki (Rent Arrears: K Damodaran, 1939) and Ningalenne Communistākki (You Made Me a Communist: Thoppil Bhasi, 1952) effected in the theatre traditions that existed in Kerala, E M S wrote:

In Pāṭṭabākki and Ningalenne Communistākki, Damodaran and Bhasi have tried to mould characters and their relationships out of the social reality they encountered while trying to support and lead the organised movements of the working class, farmers and agricultural labourers. [...] The success of these plays rests on the playwrights’ ability to grasp the pulse of people’s lives, their quest to understand the everyday struggles of the masses as well as the transformations that happen in the society, and their skill to mould characters and plot out of such experiences.

(Namboodiripad 1954/1998: 40-1)

\footnote{11} E M S found it difficult to explain the choice of the term ‘Jeeval Sahithyam’ as the title for the movement over something like ‘purogamana sahithyam’ (which stands for ‘progressive literature’), given the emphasis that he had given to the need for literature to facilitate progress in society. He wrote: “I have always felt that Jeeval Sahithyam is not the proper equivalent for the English term ‘Progressive Literature’. The former term does not instantly convey the sense that ‘progress’ is at the heart of this movement. However, progress undoubtedly is the life of the movement” (Namboodiripad 1937/1998: 21). The inconsistency between the title of the movement and its thematic agenda, which Namboodiripad acknowledges but fails to explain, indicates that the ethnographic detailing of the region, its people and their lives – thus producing a discourse about the region – was central to this aesthetic movement, despite the overt emphasis on ‘social progress’ as its primary objective.

\footnote{12} See also Menon 1994: 148-51.
Art was not just supposed to reflect the struggles and life of the ordinary people, it should connect easily with the masses. In this sense, its popular nature was considered a positive criterion. My intention is not to deny the pedagogical nature of the Leftist cultural interventions. In fact, ‘the masses’ were considered the objects of reform into a new ‘progressive’ aesthetic, in need of political awakening, as the site of the civilizing mission of the new nation-state, etc.; nevertheless, they remained the primary target audience for ‘progressive’ art as well as the legitimate source of creative energy. It is significant to note that in the introduction to Thoppil Bhasi’s second play Sarveykkallu carried brief notes recording the playwright’s “indebtedness to the lives and words of ordinary people made heroic by circumstances” (Menon 2001: 263).

Considering these aspects discussed above, one could summarize the ideology of the Left’s progressive art in the following manner: the everyday life and struggles of ‘ordinary people’ (the working class) were the substance and source of inspiration for the progressive art movement; out of this ‘raw material’, the cultural producers realize and articulate the class interests of the working class and project them back to the masses through literature, plays, etc. What is striking in this outlook is a certain valorization of working class life as the only

13 Commending the initiatives of the KPAC in theatre, E M S lists three reasons to assert the historical importance of this movement: “1. KPAC’s plays were the most frequently staged plays in Kerala, 2. these plays led to the emergence of several theatre artists and facilitated the formation of theatre groups all over Kerala, and 3. they were extremely popular” (Namboodiripad 1954/1998: 34; emphasis added).
legitimate source for the progressive art to draw from, and a simultaneous imagining of the toiling masses – the primary target audience – as susceptible to ‘false consciousness’ which prevents them from realizing their own class interest, and which thus necessitates their ‘awakening’ through progressive art.

Ajithkumar’s (2008) essay, problematising the genealogy of ‘Malayaliness’ in songs from the KPAC plays, points at this paradoxical nature of the Left-associated artists’ interventions, by citing the story behind the song titled “Moolippattumayi Thambran Varumbol” (“When the lord comes humming a tune”) from the famous KPAC play Ningalenne Communistakki (1952). Written by O N V Kurup, the famous poet in Malayalam, the song alludes to a real-life incident that took place in the early 1950s in Kerala, when a Dalit peasant woman refused sexual favours to a high caste feudal lord and insulted him by throwing a bundle of paddy in his face. The poet has said in interviews that the song was inspired by “the peasant woman’s courage” (Ajithkumar 2008: 16). Analyzing the song, he points out:

Though O N V says that the peasant woman “showed courage”, the song is written in a tone of advice [to peasant women in general]: “Moolippattumayi Thambran Varumbol, Choolaathangu Nilladi Penne” (“When the lord comes humming a tune/ O girl! Be strong and stand up to him”). Ultimately, it
becomes the task of the Communist to liberate the “peasant woman” by uprooting the feudal order. (ibid)\textsuperscript{14}

The anecdote is useful to illustrate the point about the Left-associated cultural producers' simultaneous imagining of the working class or ‘the masses’ as the source for creative and political energy, as well as the targets of political awakening through art. This conception of the ‘masses’ had decisive significance for the narratives that the socio-realist films of the 1950s staged, the representational strategies in them and the spectatorial address they constituted, given the fact that these ‘masses’ constituted (in the imagination of the cultural producers) the traditional audience of popular cinema and theatre. One of the attempts in this chapter would be to push this idea and argue that the ‘mass audience’ was attributed with a certain rationality and modern values that other sections of the population seemed to be lacking, and how the look of this ‘rational subaltern’ audience, that often received the status of being what I would call ‘the ethical population’ in the Left imagination, was a decisive factor in the dominant textual form of the new popular cinema that the Left-affiliated artists shaped during the 1950s.

\textsuperscript{14} Ajithkumar’s essay problematizes the general perception that there is an innate ‘Malayali-ness’ to the songs which were composed for KPAC plays and were later known independently as ‘KPAC songs’. He argues that KPAC songs were the results of the attempts to formulate a new popular musical practice – different from the songs used in Malayalam and Tamil company dramas of the time – that appeals to the masses and is ‘close to their lives’ in tune and lyrics. The essay argues that mixing the tunes and lyrics of ‘local’ folk songs (which would signify ‘nativity’ and ‘closeness to ordinary life’) with the classical musical traditions used in popular Tamil film music and company dramas was identified as a formula to invent a new popular ‘Malayali’ musical practice which would not be ‘too folk’ or ‘too classical’. KPAC songs were exemplars of this tradition.
Arguing that the Muslim character Moithu in the narrative schema of Neelakkuyil stood for the look of the ‘rational subaltern’ audience institutionalized within the text, I shall try to delineate some of the important elements related to the Left’s imagination of ‘the masses’ and their close relation to the nature of sub-nationalism in the region as well as the preoccupation of socialist realism with self-reforming protagonists. Moreover, the film has two protagonists: one is the middle class/caste character who undergoes self-reformation; the other is an ideal figure who, I would argue, represents the moral authority of the region. The available scholarship on Neelakkuyil has focused only on the former. This project considers it important to analyze the significance of the latter figure as well. It attempts to argue that infusing this ideal character with the charisma associated with the Communist figure was a crucial strategy that enabled the film to imagine a new moral authority for the region, who would also negotiate between the masses and the high caste middle class hero, only to institute the latter at the centre of the imminent cultural entity of Malayalee nation.

On Neelakkuyil, Moithu and the Left’s imagination of ‘the masses’

Produced by T K Pareekkutty and written by Uroob, Neelakkuyil puts forth the reformist message of caste egalitarianism. The film is about the self-reformation of Sreedharan Nair (Sathyan), an upper caste school teacher, who impregnates Neeli (Miss Kumari), a Dalit woman, but refuses to marry her saying he has to “respect the sentiments of his community”. Sreedharan Nair later marries Nalini
(Prema), who is from a decaying Nair family. Meanwhile Neeli, the pregnant Dalit woman, after being expelled from her community, gives birth to a boy, and dies near a rail track. Neeli’s baby is rescued and nurtured by Shankaran Nair (P Bhaskaran), a postman and a radical figure in the film, who is ignorant of the fact that Sreedharan Nair is the father of the child. Later, Sreedharan Nair feels guilty for what he did to Neeli, and decides to adopt the Dalit boy Mohan. In the end, Shankaran Nair, the foster father, hands over the Dalit boy to Sreedharan Nair and Nalini, asking them to “bring him up as a human being, not as a Nair, Pulaya or a Mappila”.

Most of the critical attention in the scholarship on Neelakkuyil has revolved around the self-reforming character of Sreedharan Nair, played by Sathyan, in the film. The centrality of this upper caste character in a narrative that advocates caste egalitarianism has been pointed out as indicative of how the Left-initiated project of social realism in cinema had the (upper caste) middle class as its primary addressee from its beginning. Meanwhile, the morally upright, ideal character of Shankaran Nair – played by P Bhaskaran, one of the directors of the film – receives far less academic attention, possibly because of the ‘unglamorous’ way in which he is cast. This strategy of casting is one of the aspects that I would like to foreground and examine, to argue that it provides us important clues about the commercial as well as aesthetic features of the Left’s interventions in popular cinema in Malayalam. It is plausible to argue that this splitting of the
audience ‘identification’ between two protagonists – one the self-reforming middle class hero and the other a morally resolute figure – signifies the film’s attempt to combine the elements of star-cinema of the South Indian variety addressing and mobilizing the masses (where the star protagonist symbolizes and represents the regional polity) and the elements of nationalist realism catering to the middle class audience. However, the strategies of casting suggests that the devices of the star cinema were being deployed and appropriated for reinstating the middle class hero at the centre of the cultural imaginary. An examination of the place of the Muslim character Moithu in the film’s narrative schema would be a good starting point to examine how the portrayal of Shankaran Nair closely resembles the modes in which ‘the star’ was often portrayed in South Indian language films of the period as the representative of the region and its people.

Moithu (Balakrishna Menon) is a marginal character in the film as far as the plot is concerned, and his function would appear to be somewhat that of a comedian. He does not have any significant role in the narrative progression as well. However, Moithu’s presence in the narrative schema has a crucial significance, as I shall try to establish, examining which would give us interesting insights about the audience whom the aesthetic reform project of social realism addressed, and how this audience was conceived. Evidences suggest that Moithu’s character and the ‘Mappila’ song that he sings in the film became major attractions of the film.
While the song ‘Kayalarikathu’, composed by the music director K Raghavan, became extremely popular, the critics were similarly impressed by the character portrayal and the actor who played the role, as well as with the song. Apart from the impressive lyrics and composition of the love song, the character’s appeal – both to the masses and to critics – could probably be the result of factors that arouse ethnographic interests, like his attire, the ‘Muslim dialect’ interspersed with puns that Moithu speaks, as well as the pranks he plays upon other characters in the film. Moreover, the prominence that Moithu’s character gets in the film seems to indicate the film’s attempt to appeal to the audience from Malabar, a region that was considered culturally distant from other parts of the Malayalam-speaking regions, and considered ‘backward’ in the development index than the other two princely states, but also a region where the Communist Party had a decisive influence. However, our interest here is to analyze the significance of this character for the narrative that the film unfolds, and for the cultural politics that the Leftist cultural interventions sought to effect.

A close look at some of the scenes in which Moithu appears in the film would suggest that his presence within the narrative coincides with or duplicates the presence of the viewers watching the film. Both Moithu as well as the viewers are

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15 Indicating the popularity that Moithu’s character gained in Malabar, an article said that “Moithu’s character played by Balakrishna Menon and the Mappila song ‘Kayalarikathu’ became very popular among Malayalees, especially those from Malabar.” (Achyut, ‘Chalachitra Vyavasayam Keralathil’, Mathrubhumi, October 28, 1956). Malabar, in the dominant as well as popular imagination in Kerala, is often marked as a ‘Muslim’ region.
‘witnesses’ to the ‘real’ story in the film, and they commonly share the same knowledge about the film’s diegetic world. I shall try to substantiate this claim by referring to three scenes.

1. Early into the film, the spectators see Nalini’s mother and the Karanavar in the family deciding to arrange Nalini’s marriage with her wayward cousin Kuttan Nair, in the hope that the latter would mend his ways once he gets married. In the next scene, Moithu stops Kuttan Nair on his way, and asks him whether it is true that he is getting married soon. The narrative does not offer any justification as to how Moithu came to know about the private discussion regarding Kuttan Nair’s marriage which happened in the Nair household where Moithu was not present.

2. Later, Nalini’s marriage is fixed with Sreedharan Nair, when the postman informs Nalini’s mother that Sreedharan Nair wishes to marry Nalini. In the following scene, Moithu again stops Kuttan Nair on his way and informs him that the marriage between Nalini and Sreedharan Nair has been fixed. Again, the narrative does not clarify how Moithu came to know about the marriage between Nalini and Sreedharan, even before Kuttan Nair gets to know about it.

3. In another instance, after Shankaran Nair, the postman, rescues the Dalit woman Neeli’s child, Moithu meets the postman at a tea shop. In this scene, Moithu offers the postman tea, saying that he admired the postman for deciding to rescue the child, braving the opposition of the upper castes
from the village. Once again, it is intriguing to note that Moithu was absent when the postman rescued the child.

The significance that I find in these scenes is the fact that Moithu is absent in the scenes when the real action takes place on all the three above-mentioned occasions (i.e., when the marriage of Nalini is fixed first with Kuttan Nair, and later with Sreedharan Nair, and when the postman rescues the Dalit boy). However, in the scenes that follow the above-mentioned developments on all the three occasions, Moithu appears to already know what happened in the previous scenes, just like the audience watching the film (naturally) gets to know what has happened in the previous scenes. Hence, it seems plausible to argue that Moithu’s presence in the film duplicates that of the audience watching the film. His presence within the narrative is the presence and the look of the audience institutionalized within the diegetic world of the film. There is an interesting relay of knowledge between the audience and Moithu that enables the latter to make ethical judgments about the diegetic characters and situations. We need to look into the logic behind this aspect. What is the significance when a non-Hindu character’s look duplicates that of the audience in a social film which talks about caste equality in Kerala, a multi-religious society?

It is obvious that a film with a reformist message presupposes a target audience - a social group to which the message should reach, which needs to be reformed.
However, what we have in Neelakkuyil is a case, where the delivering of a reformist message to a particular social group within the narrative is staged as a spectacle for an audience whose social profile is conceived as different from that of the ‘target group’ that receives the reformist message in the film’s narrative. Thus, the postman Shankaran Nair, the radical modern figure in the film, delivers the message of caste equality to the upper castes in the village (including our protagonist Sreedharan Nair) who practice untouchability. But the film’s ideological task is completed only when this act of delivering the message, as well as the self-reformation of the Nair protagonist, is staged in front of the look of people from other castes and communities. Hence, the audience’s gaze becomes an integral part of the film, and the way in which this audience is conceived by the filmmakers - in terms of its social profile and cultural attributes - plays an important part in the way the narrative elements are organized in a film.

Keeping this in mind, we shall try to explore the possibilities of making some useful assumptions about the social and cultural profile of the audience a film like Neelakkuyil presupposed. As we discussed earlier, the interventions of the Left in theatre and cinema during the 1940s and the 1950s were governed by the aspiration to reform the sites of popular entertainment culture, and ‘the masses’ were conceived as the primary target audience for this pedagogic, aesthetic
project.\textsuperscript{16} A quick overview of the print-media discourse on cinema during the time (see Chapter I: 46-54, for some of the examples) would tell us that the mass audience of popular cinema, in the dominant cultural imagination, was not a neutral/secular category. Popular cinema’s traditional audience was conceived as being mostly constituted by the lower class, plebian, subaltern, illiterate masses.\textsuperscript{17} Traces of this dominant cultural imagination about ‘the mass audience’ seem to have influenced the Left-affiliated cultural producers and their interventions as well (though their conception of the masses had its own specificities – an aspect we will have an occasion to discuss soon). In other words, the gaze of the plebian, subaltern spectators pre-existed the aesthetic reform initiatives in the field of cinema in Kerala during the 1950s, and it was this gaze – the gaze of the ‘subaltern’ audience – that the makers of socio realist films addressed and appropriated. While social realism introduced new aesthetic idioms (like nationalist realism, progressive modernist narratives instead of

\textsuperscript{16} P Bhaskaran, one of the directors of the movie, was a proponent of an aesthetic which connects with the masses, and believed in the use of cinema for facilitating social transformation. He wrote in 1974:

Some of the proponents of ‘new cinema’ believe that if cinema as a medium has a commitment towards anything, it is only to itself, and that it is in no way committed to the audience, the society or the nation. (…) The insistence that cinema should not be enjoyable for the common people appears to be the result of this outlook. Those who believe in this theory seem to be governed by a contempt for the audience, complete disdain for those who make popular films, the prejudice that whatever the masses enjoy – whether it is comedy, songs, story or performance – is third rate, etc. I believe that cinema should be used as a progressive medium containing messages of social transformation. (…) All the thinking directors and filmmakers should try to use the potentials of the medium and bring in radical changes in the life of the common people. (“Cinema cinemakku vendi?” Nana, 29 December, 1974: 46).

\textsuperscript{17} S V Srinivas (2000) has also argued that irrespective of the audience’s social background, the cinema assumed the status of a subaltern institution during the 1940s and the 1950s.
mythical themes, etc.) to the mass audience of popular cinema, the narrative strategies sought to evolve a popular consensus required for calling into existence the secular Malayali nation of rational subjects, and for instituting the reformed Hindu upper caste male figure at its centre. A process of nomination and authorization is involved here, through which a discourse of rational-secular thinking – imagined as emanating from the ideology of Communism – was instituted as the basis of the new ‘nation’ of Malayalees. The role that language played in mobilizing the linguistic nationalities in other South Indian regions is substituted by this overarching discourse of rationality in Kerala, mobilizing various communities and castes in the region into one nation of Malayalees. And it is the negotiations with this dominant discourse that institutes the Hindu high caste male figure at the centre of the new ‘nation’. The space of the cinema hall, where the gaze of the ‘subaltern’ spectators pre-exists, becomes the site for the articulation of these processes. We will have occasion to discuss some of these aspects in detail later in the chapter.

If we analyze the patterns followed in the representational scheme in Neelakkuyil, it becomes clear that Moithu is one of the very few characters in the film who is portrayed as possessing desirable progressive values like rationality and versatility, in sharp contrast to most of the other characters (including Sreedharan Nair, one of the protagonists) who are portrayed as either caught up in casteism or as incapable of moving out of the moralities of various
degenerated traditions (like Nalini’s cousin Kuttan Nair, a prodigal young man from a disintegrating Nair family, and her father – an irresponsible, casteist Namboodiri, etc). Moithu makes fun of every upper caste character in the film who comes into his vicinity (except Shankaran Nair, because “he has real guts”, and Sreedharan Nair, who is to be redeemed by the narrative through the staging of self-reformation); he invokes laughter mostly through pranks on the ‘irrational’ upper caste characters (the Namboodiri Brahmin, the Nair who runs the tea shop, Kuttan Nair, the wayward young descendent of the Nair family, the timid Marar, etc.), and the narrative suggests that they deserve to be mocked precisely for their incapability to think rationally, which is ‘the need of the time’. The humour that Moithu evokes is witty, not comical; it emerges from the capabilities that he is endowed with to make spontaneous ethical assessments of situations and characters. The rational values that the film upholds match perfectly with the values that Moithu possesses; or at least there seems to be no conflict between them. He is the only one who can accept and appreciate Shankaran Nair’s ‘radical’ persona. In short, Moithu and Shankaran Nair are the only rational subjects in the film.

Placing this proposition together with the earlier suggestion that Moithu stands in for the ‘subaltern’ mass audience of popular cinema, we can arrive at a formulation about the cultural attributes of ‘the masses’ in the Left’s imagination. One could say that the category of ‘the masses’, in the Left imagination,
constituted ‘the ethical population’, clearly endowed with certain capabilities of rational thinking and ethical judgment – values that are crucial for participation in a democratic polity, and that the other sections of population (including the Hindu high caste Nairs) seemed to be lacking in.\textsuperscript{18} This is not to suggest that the masses were conceived of as capable of articulating their ‘rationality’ in political terms. The film shows Moithu always talking in the ‘local’ dialect associated with the Muslim community, while Shankaran Nair is able to articulate in the language (devoid of dialectical influences) of rational politics with ease. What characterizes ‘the masses’ is, thus, their spontaneous rationality and their impulsive discretionary capabilities – in short, a ‘rustic modernity’, if one may call it so. Shankaran Nair is thus the ‘unmarked’, modern subject, whose legitimacy emanates from, and is reaffirmed by, the approval of Moithu, and the mass audience of popular cinema that he represents.

**The Communist as the representative of the region**

The casting of P Bhaskaran, one of the directors of the film, in the role of Shankaran Nair is an important strategy that enables the film to construct this character as the only modern, rational figure with considerable moral authority. Literally speaking, Shankaran Nair’s character is the only exception in the film,

\textsuperscript{18} It may be remembered that Krishna Pillai, the co-founder of the Socialist Party, wrote in 1934 that “Capitalism will be destroyed and the ruling of the country will pass into the hands of daridranarayan [the poor]”. Krishna Pillai, ‘Fascisavum kammyunisavum’ (‘Fascism and Communism’), Mathrubhumi, 18 April 1934; quoted in Menon 1994: 190)
while all other upper caste characters are portrayed as caught within pre-modern power structures. He is a resolutely ideal figure, elevated and placed above all other diegetic characters. It is striking that this role was reserved for Bhaskaran instead of Sathyan, a budding star of the time\textsuperscript{19} who played the self-reforming character of Sreedharan Nair. P Bhaskaran was a literary figure already known for his communist sympathies.\textsuperscript{20} It is by infusing the (extra-diegetic, extra-cinematic) charisma of the Communist figure, through strategies of casting P Bhaskaran in the role, that the film constructs Shankaran Nair as the supreme modern-rational figure drawing adulation and reverence. He, thus, represents the un faltering spirit of rationality, the basis of Malayalee nationalism, and mobilizes the region into one unity of modern nation-hood.\textsuperscript{21}

One of the scenes mentioned above becomes crucial in this context. In this scene, Moithu offers the postman Shankaran Nair a glass of tea, since the latter “has shown tremendous guts” in rescuing the Dalit boy, braving the opposition of the upper castes from the village. The film expects from the audience the same

\textsuperscript{19} By the time \textit{Neelakkuyil} was released, Sathyan had acted in three films – \textit{Athmasakhi} (G R Rao, 1952), \textit{Ashadeepam} (G R Rao, 1953) and \textit{Lokaneethi} (R Velappan Nair, 1953).

\textsuperscript{20} P Bhaskaran was a member of the Communist Party in Kerala, and had a brief career as the lyricist for Left theatre before coming to cinema. His poem ‘\textit{Vayalar Garjikkunn}\textregistered’, inspired by the peasant rebellion of Punnapra Vayalar (1946), was banned in Travancore.

\textsuperscript{21} See Radhakrishnan (2010) for a discussion on the exchanges between the popular Left and the middle cinema in Malayalam, including the socio-realist films of the 1950s. He has cited a number of instances from the history of Malayalam cinema when the star charisma of the Left leaders in Kerala was channelised into cinema to infuse the protagonists with extra-cinematic authority, though \textit{Neelakkuyil} does not figure in this list of films in his analysis.
adoration that Moithu has for Shankaran Nair. It is not a coincidence that the film chose Moithu, the Muslim character, to show admiration towards Shankaran Nair for his ‘bravery’. Moithu’s Muslim identity, I would argue, symbolically stands for the subaltern social groups that nominate the ideal rational figure Shankaran Nair to represent them, authorizing him to speak/act on behalf of them.²² This relation of adulation and nomination between Moithu and Shankaran Nair is similar, in certain ways, to the representational strategies in the star-films of South India, where the comedian would often figure as the fan/admirer of the star, nominating and elevating the latter to the position of being the representative of the linguistic nation.²³

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²² There are other supplementary mechanisms through which Shankaran Nair emerges as the representative of the subaltern sections of the population. We will have occasion to discuss those aspects in the final section of this chapter.

²³ See Prasad 1999. It should be highlighted here that the theorizations about the nature of star-adulation in South India have drawn from Slavoj Zizek’s contribution to the understanding of the psychic process of ‘identification’ – an important aspect for studies of ‘interpellative’ cultural forms like cinema. For Zizek, there is a difference between ‘symbolic identification’ and ‘imaginary identification’. He writes:

‘[I]n imaginary identification, we imitate the other at the level of resemblance – we identify ourselves with the image of the other inasmuch as we are ‘like him’, while in symbolic identification we identify ourselves with the other precisely at a point at which he is inimitable, at a point which eludes resemblance. (Zizek 1989/ 2008: 109) Using this distinction, Madhava Prasad has pointed out that in the ‘star films’ of South Indian cinema, as well as in the mobilizational films in Hindi during the 1970s starring Amitabh Bachchan, the link between the audience/fan and the star on screen is that of symbolic identification (whereas the audience’s imaginary identification happens with the comedian or sidekick in these films, who would often be a fan of the star in the film, authorizing the latter to represent him) (Prasad 1998: 76). See also Radhakrishnan 2010: 37.'
The Left and the specificities of ‘Malayali nationalism’

Neelakkuyil, thus, offers us venues for reflecting on some aspects about the specificities of ‘sub-nationalism’ in Kerala, in comparison to the linguistic nationalities in the South India. Studies on cinema and the film culture in the three south Indian states – namely, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu – provides valuable insights into the political transformations that take place with the emergence of linguistic sub-nationalities in South India, following the mass mobilizations on the basis of language during the 1940s and the linguistic reorganization of the states in 1956. These were sub-national entities since they did not claim sovereignty or undermine the overarching authority of the Indian nation-state, though the relations between all the South Indian states and the federal government at the centre were always fraught with tension; nevertheless, they assumed dimensions of nationalities, addressing themselves as linguistically homogenous territories, where mass mediums like cinema were used “to re-centre the popular consciousness” (Prasad 2009: 74) around these new cultural entities. (Hence, in this project, the terms ‘sub-nationalism’ and ‘nationalism’ are used interchangeably in the discussion on the linguistic nationalities in South India.)

The dimensions in which linguistic nationalism and cinema are closely connected in south Indian regions (except Kerala) are well-known. In Telugu, Tamil and
Kannada, with the arrival of the talkies, the film industry tried to appeal directly to the respective linguistic communities through films. As Prasad points out:

Cinema suddenly proved itself to be an effective means of integration of populations previously scattered across different presidencies and princely states, into one linguistic nationality. For the film producers, initially, this was no more than a marketing strategy, what they were aiming for was a national market for a cultural product that spoke in a particular language. But it soon became clear that cinema was a more productive institution that would quickly become the emblematic supplement to national identities that were restricted to cultural self-expression. The literary class soon recognised this potential and began to take an active part in the film industry. (Prasad 2009: 74)

Parallel to this direct address to the linguistic constituencies, a shift is identified in popular cinema that, by the 1950s, started moving away from the earlier conventions of the female star-oriented narratives towards a narrative structure in which the male star started gaining centrality. In the star-films of the 1950s in these three languages (i.e., Kannada, Tamil and Telugu), the male hero attained the status of being the representative of the linguistic community as well as the moral authority of the respective regions (Prasad 1999).

These textual strategies created avenues for the male stars in Telugu, Kannada and Tamil film industries to gain considerable popular appeal and authority that often spilled over to other domains including electoral politics. For various aspects of this, see Prasad 1999, 2009; Srinivas 2009. See Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2010) for an account on why this did not happen in Kerala. Radhakrishnan’s essay traces the history of stardom in Malayalam cinema, arguing that in contrast to the case of other South Indian states where film stars have often been elected as political leaders, “[t]he transformation of star charisma into the field of electoral politics was impossible in a region like Kerala, as the former was being channelised into already existing structures of the Left, infusing leaders […] with star power” (Radhakrishnan 2010: 36).
In contrast, there is a general acceptance in the scholarship on Kerala that, compared to other south Indian states where mobilizations based on a common language became the most crucial facilitating factor for linguistic nationalism to develop and consolidate, nationalist mobilization based on language did not take on similar dimensions in Kerala during the 1950s. Scholars like Devika have argued that ‘developmentalism’, rather than language, was the uniting factor and the dominant discourse in the region’s nationalist sentiments. Devika says:

The major instrument with which [Malayalee nationalism] was to be accomplished was to be Development. This may seem to be in contradiction with the insistence of the Communist movement on the linguistic basis of State formation. Language was certainly not dismissed; however, while the place of Malayalam in imagining the new Malayalee was beyond dispute, it could only figure as an initial condition – quite unlike, for instance, the status of the Tamil tongue in Tamil nationalism. (Devika 2007: 17)

Our analysis of Neelakkuyil, which was released close to the formation of the state of Kerala in 1956, also seems to provide a similar picture about what constituted the basis of Malayalee nationalism. The ‘nationalist’ exhortations in Neelakkuyil are quite evident from its narrative, though the strategies of addressing the audience as ‘Malayalees’ (thus invoking language as the uniting element of this nationalism) was not resorted to. Rather, a ‘discourse of rational thinking’,

25 ‘Developmentalism’, in Devika’s essay, stands for a discourse of rapid industrialization that the political leadership of the official Left envisaged during the time as essential for fashioning a ‘modern Malayali culture’, which included promoting “large-scale industries, scientifically reorganized and managed farms and forests and hydel projects, enlisting its labor force rationally in productive activities, zestfully promoting scientific research and technical education”, etc. (Devika 2007: 17)
propagating secular egalitarian values and imagined as emanating from Communism, was envisaged as the dominant interpellative structure of Malayalee nationalism, if suggestions in Neelakkuyil are anything to go by. This discourse of ‘rational thinking’ formed the basis on which the Left imagined the region. Shankaran Nair, played by P Bhaskaran, epitomized this discourse, like MGR represented the Tamil nation or Rajkumar became the icon of Kannada language in the popular imagination. The scene where Shankaran Nair – on behalf of the Dalits and by invoking ‘the new laws’ of the state – asks the conservative Namboodiri Brahmin to stop practicing untouchability, is noteworthy in this context (See Figures ii.1–ii.2).

Interestingly, as if in continuation with the unglamorous casting of Shankaran Nair’s character, this unaltering morally upright figure – which had the potentials of being redeployed as the moral authority of the region in similar ways the stars were cast in other South Indian language films of the period – was to disappear from the world of the socio-realist films in Malayalam. In contrast, 

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26 This is not to contest Devika’s claim about ‘developmentalism’ as the uniting nationalist sentiment of Malayali nationalism during the 1950s. Rather, this project is examining the Left’s articulations during the time, considering Neelakkuyil as an example, in which ‘the discourse of rational thinking’ seems to have been proposed as the basis of Malayali nationalism. Nevertheless, if Devika’s argument proposes that a developmental ideology emphasizing growth to be achieved through rapid industrialization as the dominant discourse of the time, our analysis of Neelakkuyil broadens this proposition by arguing that the emphasis was more on a modernism based on rational thinking and social egalitarianism. Also see Chapter III for the contradicting articulations coming from the Left quarters during the 1950s regarding development through industrialization.
the self-reforming high caste character played by Sathyan in the film was to be repeated in a number of later films as well.\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{Figure ii.1-ii.2}: Shankaran Nair (on the extreme left in both frames) invoking the principles of rational thinking and “the new laws” of the modern state, on behalf of Neeli, the Dalit woman (on the right extreme in Figure ii.1), to reprimand the conservative Namboodiri Brahmin. \textbf{Source}: Neelakkuyil (P Bhaskaran & Ramu Kariat, 1954).

\textbf{The ‘sexual contract’ and the nationalist consensus}

One of the easily noticeable features about the socio-realist films is the importance that ‘public spaces’ like tea shops, streets etc., attain in these films as narrative backdrops. It would be worthwhile exploring the significance of the shift in the narrative backdrop from the ‘familial’ spaces of the studio socials to ‘public spaces’ in social realism – a major transition effected by the socio-realist films by the mid-1950s. In the studio socials, the primary narrative backdrop was

\textsuperscript{27} For example, in films like Mudiyanaya Puthran (Ramu Kariat, 1961) and Mooladhanam (P Bhaskaran, 1969) Sathyan himself plays the high caste protagonist who undergoes certain self-transformation in the course of the narrative, after spending time with the lower castes/ class.
the space of family - mostly that of the joint family which would accommodate
the conjugal space constituted by the young protagonists. The narrative that
unfolds in the “domestic” space, where women’s roles were central, becomes a
commentary on the larger society. The “family” functioned as a micro-social unit,
and the moral of the story often served as a critique of the social hierarchy. The
crisis within the family alluded to a larger social problem, and the narrative
resolution of the crisis would often necessitate changes in the existing social
order. The narratives would often revolve around, for example, the hardships
that an estranged romantic couple from two diverse social backgrounds has to go
through, the relationship between two brothers, or between the heroine who is
from a lower social location and her scheming sister-in-law, etc. This then
becomes a commentary or critique on the social hierarchies that is at the root of
the crises in the family/the narrative. Jeevithanowka, as we saw from the
discussions in the last chapter, is an example.

In Neelakkuyil and the later socio-realist films, the narrative backdrop shifts to
‘public’ spaces like the tea shop, the streets in the town, the court, the school, etc.,
which are defined by the presence of and exchanges between men from different
communities. The narrative focus is mainly on the relations between
communities (which constitute the ‘social reality’ that these films choose to
portray, preferring it over a myth or the realms of affects and sentiments that
circulate in, and define, the ‘familial’ space) unfolding in these ‘public’ spaces.
The narrative resolution depends on the negotiations between men (often of different communities). The suggestion is not that there are no sequences showing the ‘familial’ space in these films, but the events that unfold in the ‘familial’ spaces (defined by the presence of women) become subordinate to the events that unfold in the ‘public spaces’ and are often mere effects of them.

This aspect is often overlooked mainly because these films are understood only within the framework of realism and its central impulse to use ‘real’ outdoor locations for shooting, instead of studio sets. Hence, the shift in the narrative backdrop of the socio-realist films of the 1950s from family backdrops to ‘public’ spaces like tea shops and the streets is understood entirely as the result of the aesthetic compulsions of realism. However, it is striking that most of the ‘outdoor’ shots in Neelakkuyil, as well as many other films in this genre that came later in the 1950s in Malayalam, use studio sets to reconstruct locations like the tea shop in Neelakkuyil, the town and the streets in Rarichan Enna Powran (‘Citizen Rarichan’: P Bhaskaran, 1955)\(^\text{28}\), etc. Shooting at real locations is not often a major concern in these films, whereas the prominence afforded to public spaces as narrative backdrops becomes a striking feature in them. This could lead us to examining the emphasis on the ‘public spaces’ in this aesthetic movement as a narrative prerequisite, instead of (or at least along with) understanding this as

\(^{28}\) See Chapter III for an argument that proposes that shooting in the controlled settings of studio floors was preferred over real location shooting in Raricha Enna Powran for various reasons.
the effect of the realist cinema’s preoccupation with real location shooting. The attempt here is to explore the possibilities of understanding the socio-realist films as tales of nationalist consensus based on caste egalitarianism and ‘controlled’ class revolution achieved through a contract between men of different castes and communities. This is not to argue that the ‘family spaces’ as the major narrative backdrop in the studio films of the early 1950s meant radical avenues for elaborating women’s desires, but to signal at the transformation that takes place with social realism when questions of women’s subjectivity (irrespective of the ideological forms in which they were elaborated and resolved) were kept aside almost completely, and the domain of exchanges between men (of different sections of population) took the center stage.

The rest of this chapter argues that it is these negotiations (between men) that sealed the social contract between various communities, ushering in the new Malayali nation. The questions and concerns about women’s subjectivity were to be sidelined or muted almost completely for the time being. Here, it is also significant to recall the argument about Moithu’s character taking on the dimensions of representing the subaltern, mass audience as the legitimate source of approval. That a male character stands in for the subaltern audience is not incidental. Moithu, and by extension (the male members of) the subaltern audience, are important links in the tale of the sexual contract between men of different communities, effecting a (sub)nationalist consensus. Importantly, this
sexual contract is also the site where the middle class, upper caste hero’s position in the imminent social order is negotiated with ‘the masses’ who is represented by the Communist figure.

In the following pages, I intend to illustrate these points by examining some of the moments in Neelakkuyil where women characters play prominent roles in the narrative progression. We shall begin by taking a close look at the exchanges between Sreedharan Nair and his wife Nalini in their domestic space. The film has long sequences showing the guilt-ridden Sreedharan Nair striving hard to lead a normal married life. The presence of Mohan, his own son by the Dalit woman Neeli, is a constant reminder of his pre-marital affair with Neeli and the violence that he committed on the latter by rejecting her. However, he is not able to open up to anyone, including his wife Nalini. This leads to tensions between the couple, as Nalini insists that she needs to know why her husband is grief-stricken all the time. She begins to think that Sreedharan Nair is unhappy in the marriage because of her impotency. At this point, Sreedharan Nair gathers courage and tells Nalini that Mohan is his son by Neeli. He asks for forgiveness. Nalini’s response is interesting to note. She says: “I can never forgive you. I am accursed. [...] Cruelty to a child is something I cannot forgive. You threw your own child away. [...] Neeli bore your child for ten months, and her life ended on the rail tracks. What wrong did that girl do to you? She loved you unconditionally. But then, she happened to be a ‘Pulachi’ [a Dalit]. You practiced
untouchability in your love too?” She then asks Sreedharan Nair to talk to Shankaran Nair, Mohan’s foster father, and adopt the child.

The long sequences, elaborating Sreedharan Nair’s moral dilemma and guilt, mainly serve the purpose of staging the drama of the upper caste protagonist’s self-reformation before the mass audience. These sequences are replete with shots of the anguished Sreedharan Nair looking out of the window, making abstract philosophical points about his dilemma (See Figs. ii.3 & ii.4). For a long time, Nalini cannot make sense of the situation or comprehend what her husband says.

![Image](image1.jpg)

**Figure ii.3 & Figure ii.4:** The agonized Sreedharan Nair and his uncomprehending wife Nalini. **Source:** Neelakkuyil (P Bhaskaran & Ramu Kariat, 1954).

The intention obviously is to present the repenting protagonist before the audience (who, unlike Nalini, possesses the knowledge about Sreedharan Nair’s
affair with Neeli and how he rejected her), and to offer him avenues in the narrative to redeem himself through self-reformation. As someone who is outside this loop of exchanges – between Sreedharan Nair and the audience (gendered as male) – Nalini cannot make sense of her husband’s prolonged existential angst. Seen in this context, it is interesting to note that Nalini’s response to her husband’s revelation about his pre-marital affair seems to be totally framed by the film’s central theme of caste egalitarianism, which subsumes and renders irrelevant all other aspects of the situation, including the ramifications of Sreedharan Nair’s pre-marital affair in the life of the couple. It, then, should not strike us as strange that the only factor what pains Nalini is how Sreedharan Nair rejected Neeli because she was a Dalit (thus practicing “untouchability in his love”); the fact that her husband had a pre-marital affair in which he has a child never comes up at all in this exchange. In a narrative preoccupied with the tale of caste egalitarianism that needs to be achieved through a social contract between men of different castes, there is no space for the recognition or elaboration of the issues in the domestic space, and by extension, women’s subjectivity itself. The attempt was not to suggest that the narrative privileges the issue of caste discrimination over the subjectivity of women characters, but to show that even the actions that unfold in the (private) space constituted by the heterosexual couple function mostly as important links in the larger narrative preoccupation – the intense drama of the high caste
protagonist’s self reformation before the masses – where the roles assigned to women are largely insignificant.

Seen in this context, it is important that we understand the Dalit woman Neeli – one of the central characters after whom the film is named – as an important narrative device that allows the film to effortlessly stage the tale of caste egalitarianism to be achieved through the contract between men of different communities/castes. Neeli is not the film’s attempt to represent the Dalit woman, her desires and distresses, etc., nor is she an important link in the emergent social contract despite her prominence in the narrative. The primary function of Neeli’s character is to feminize the Dalit community, a crucial strategy that enables the film, on the one hand, to elaborate the issue of caste discrimination in a controlled manner so as to contain the radical energies that such narratives could unleash, and on the other hand, to institute the ideal Communist figure to represent and speak for the Dalits. As a film that subscribes to the social imaginary where only adult men are conceived as endowed with the agency of political deliberation and action, the Dalit protagonist’s femininity was a crucial representational strategy for achieving the terms of the social contract that the narrative sought to effect. Feminizing the Dalit community was a way of silencing it, so that the Communist figure can represent the former. It then sets the stage for the final negotiations between the Communist radical (who comes endowed with Moithu’s approval) and the self-reforming high caste protagonist,
which also brings the narrative to a closure. It would be useful if we discuss these aspects by first taking a look at how Neeli’s character has been understood in film studies scholarship.

Jenny Rowena (2002, 2008) has argued that films like Neelakkuyil, which puts forth a pseudo-radical message on the question of caste, in fact reproduced the caste/ gender hegemonies. Pointing towards the structures of ‘casteist patriarchy’ built into the social realism of Neelakkuyil, Rowena argues that the narrative of the film “does not accept the Dalit woman into its fold” and that it “lets her die helpless by the roadside” (Rowena 2002: 35). She writes:

Here, the question of caste/ gender (as in most other social-realist films of the period) is not taken up from the perspective of the person for whom it [the power structures of caste and gender] is most problematic – the Dalit woman. A truly radical narrative about caste/ gender inequality would have represented Neeli’s story from her perspective [...]. The purpose here is neither a radical cinema nor a true representation of the caste/ gender problem. [...] The entire narrative is represented from the upper caste man’s perspective, for whom the discourse on caste/ gender equality becomes a means to establishing his superior identity. In fact, it is by assimilating the radical discourse on caste/ gender with pseudo-radical films such as this that [the upper caste man] is able to posit himself at the center of Malayalee progressiveness and culture. (ibid: 36)

For Rowena, Neelakkuyil becomes problematic since it is not told in the Dalit woman’s perspective and it abandons her. She also adds that “there is a near
absence of Dalit woman in the entire history of Malayalam cinema” before and after Neelakkuyil (ibid: 35). Similarly, discussing the distinct modes in which Neeli, the Dalit woman, and the upper caste woman Nalini are portrayed in the film, C S Venkiteswaran says:

While Neeli enters Sreedharan Nair’s world from the outside, seeking refuge, Nalini belongs to an honourable taravad, an alliance with it being considered an honour by Nair. While Neeli is always shown in the open, frolicking and working in the exteriors, Nalini is firmly placed within her home first, and then after marriage in the new home. While Sreedharan is a playful lover to Neeli, he is a proper husband to Nalini. While one is all sensual and inviting, the other is controlled and prohibitive. (Venkiteswaran 2006)

While these critical observations invite our attention to some of the dominant representational strategies of portraying Dalit women in Malayalam cinema, they do not try to explain the logic behind placing the Dalit woman as one of the central characters in Neelakkuyil (whereas there is a near absence of Dalit women characters in the representational horizon of Malayalam cinema before and after this film). That the film’s intention is not to tell the story of untouchability from the Dalit woman’s perspective, and that its representational registers fix the Dalit woman with certain characteristics, are rather obvious. To my mind, an

29 These observations appears in Rowena’s persuasive thesis on the Malayalam comedy films of the late 1980s and the 1990s, while discussing the socio realist film of the 1950s that played a crucial role in setting the dominant aesthetic standards of Malayalam cinema.
overwhelming focus on how Neelakkuyil's narrative marginalized Neeli obscures the crucial question: why is the Dalit woman a central character in the first place?

In order to understand this aspect, I suggest that we have to analyze the choice of the Dalit woman as a strategy that enables the film to elaborate the theme of caste egalitarianism as a contract between men of different castes/communities. The dominant structures of representation in which cultural forms – whether novels, dramas or films – portray only adult men as politically agential (capable of deliberating on social issues, enunciating political positions, etc.), determines this choice. Other categories like women, children, the youth, the aged, etc., are conceived as vulnerable, less agential and incapable of deliberating on social and political issues. The latter categories often need nurturing and patrons.

In Neelakkuyil, one can notice that the Dalit characters belong to the latter category of women, children and the aged. The two prominent Dalit characters in the film are Neeli, the Dalit woman, and Mohan, her son. Using these two characters, the film foregrounds, in a compelling manner, a number of issues specific to being a lower caste, especially by portraying the humiliation they have to face from the upper castes in the village. The school scene, where Mohan's classmates try to humiliate him by calling him 'a pulachi’s son', is a striking example. In this moving scene, the film, using close-up shots and a poignant background score, tries to generate sympathy from the audience towards the
Dalit child. One just has to imagine how the scenario would have changed radically, if the film replaced the Dalit child with an adult Dalit man, and how difficult it would have been for the film to contain the radical political energies that such a scenario would have released (given the agential position that the dominant social imaginary attributes to the adult man, as opposed to a child or a woman). This ‘reducing’ of Dalit characters to categories of women and children – two categories which, in the dominant cultural imagination, are conceived as non-agential – enables the narrative to render the Dalits as voiceless who needs to be represented by the communist figure. It is interesting to note that in the film, Neeli never articulates her rejection as an instance of the practice of untouchability; she does not have the enunciating capabilities to articulate her condition as part of a larger social issue. It is Shankaran Nair, the radical Communist figure, who is endowed with the authority to represent the issue of untouchability in the language of rational politics; he is the custodian of the Dalit child Mohan after Neeli’s death; he is the object of admiration for Moithu.

Thus, it is with this Communist figure that Sreedharan Nair has to negotiate in the end so that he can redeem himself from the guilt of practicing untouchability (not with Neeli or Mohan). Towards the end of the film, when Sreedharan Nair

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30 As we have learned from the scholarly works in the areas of caste, community, gender and class, it is problematic to suggest that all adult men would be afforded a more agential position in the representational scheme of a film or a novel than all women, irrespective of the caste/community/class locations of these categories. My attempt here is just to point towards the hierarchical structures within the dominant cultural imagination that imagines men as more agential than women, 'other things being equal'.
falls on his feet and admits that Mohan is his son, Shankaran Nair gives a long, moving account of how the whole village discriminated against Neeli and Mohan because they were untouchables. He even punishes the repenting Sreedharan Nair by refusing to hand over the custody of Mohan to the latter, thus bringing the narrative to a momentary crisis as the latter cannot think of anything else but to end his life. In the end, Shankaran Nair hands over the Dalit child Mohan to Sreedharan Nair, thus offering him a chance at redemption. Significantly, it is this negotiation between the Communist figure, legitimized and nominated by Moithu who represents the mass audience, and the self-reforming Nair protagonist, that brings the narrative to a closure.31

Women’s cinema

Significantly, one clearly recognizable genre that was emerging and getting consolidated by the late 1950s and during the 1960s was the ‘women’s cinema’, which included mainly romance melodramas and a few ‘tearjerkers’. These films

31 We may also recall Carole Pateman’s famous argument that the social contract, which is the basis of polities like nation-states, is dependent on a prior sexual contract – a contract not between the man and the women who form the couple, but between the men who all agree to subordinate themselves to an overarching authority (of the state, in case of nation-states); the family and the woman becomes the property of the man. The authority of the modern state derives from this dual contract (Pateman 1988: 2). The term ‘sexual contract’, in this project, is borrowed from Pateman. However, the project is not using Pateman’s formulation – which indicates the conditions of bourgeois hegemony and the emergence of modern state – to apply it directly to our context. In the case of Neelakkuyil, the sexual contract between men in the film’s narrative symbolically stands for the contract between various castes and communities, represented by men, in the region. This sexual contract between men in the narrative, leading to the social contract between various castes and communities in the region, is negotiated by the Communist figure who represents the region/ nation and its people (especially the subalternt sections), and whose paramount authority is acknowledged by all.
dealt with a number of themes and issues related to women’s desires in many ways. Here, the term ‘women’s cinema’ does not mean ‘cinema by/of women’. Rather, it refers to the cluster of films that tried to address women as a separate audience segment by foregrounding and elaborating certain narrative elements and affective realms which were considered as directly appealing to this audience segment, and were left largely unaddressed by social realism. While Prem Nazir epitomized the romance melodramas in this category, Padmini, Ragini, Sheela and Sarada – the leading actresses of the industry during the 1950s and the 1960s – came to be known for their roles in the tearjerkers during this period.

The romance melodramas mostly dealt with the theme of an estranged romantic couple or the love between protagonists from disparate socials backgrounds. A number of these films drew from pulp fiction, especially the painkili literature – a term used to refer to the genre of titillating and sentimental romance novels, considered as catering mostly to women readers. The genre acquired this name from the title of Muttathu Varkey’s famous novel Padatha Painkili published in 1955, and was made into a film in 1957. Muttathu Varkey’s novels, and painkili romances in general, are devaluated and stigmatized in literary circles mainly for their sentimentality and sensual content. Udaya, Merryland, Associated Pictures and other producers made a number of films based on the stories of Muttathu
Varkey, Ponkunnam Varkey and E J Kanam – writers generally known for their painkili novels and scripts – in which Prem Nazir played the roles of the young romantic, the dissenting younger son in a feudal joint family, etc. (See also Chapter IV). The theme of Padatha Painkili (P Subrahmaniam, 1957), one of the biggest Nazir-starrer during the time, would be useful to look at. Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema describes the film's plot:

Marriage melodrama around dowry problems. Thankachan (Nazir) wants to marry the poor Chinnnamma (Kumari) but his rich father wants a big dowry for the eligible young man. Thankachan's marriage is arranged with Lucy, daughter of a millionaire, on the same day on which Chinnamma is scheduled to marry a poor worker from a beedi factory. Lucy, however, resolves the matter by becoming a nun, leaving the lovers to marry. One of the first major films featuring the scripts of Muttathu Varkey, in the painkili brand of popular fiction in Malayalam that later also influenced Prem Nazir's screen persona. (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen 1999: 327)

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33 Ponkunnam Varkey began his career in films by scripting Navalokam (V Krishnan, 1951), an early socio-realist film in Malayalam. A number of his plays were staged by the KPAC. He wrote the screenplay and dialogues for films like A shadeepam (G R Rao, 1953), Snehasena (S S Rajan, 1954), Bharya (Kunchacko, 1962), Nithyakanyaka (K S Sethumadhavan, 1963), Sathyabhama (M S Mani, 1963), Susheela (K S Sethumadhavan, 1963), Kalanjukittiyaa Thankam (R S Puttanna, 1964).

34 E J Kanam was a novelist who entered the film industry by writing the story for Bharya (Kunchacko, 1962) and Kalayum Kaaminiyum (P Subrahmaniam, 1963). He wrote the dialogues for films like Bharthavu (M Krishnan Nair, 1964), Kudumbini (Sasikumar & P A Thomas, 1964) and Adhyapika (P Subrahmaniam, 1968).

35 Director J D Thottan is another figure who tried to address this segment during the period, often by associating with these writers. His films include Sthree Hridayam (1960), Kalyana Photo (1965), A nadha (1970), Vivaham Swargathil (1970), Gangasangamam (1970), Vivahasammanam (1971), O mana (1972).
Considered one of the most handsome men in the industry during his time, Nazir came to be known as Malayalam cinema’s first romantic hero. (See also Figures ii.5-ii.8) Even when he acted in the socio-realistic films with explicitly political themes, Nazir brought his romantic star persona to these films. Thus, in Mooladhanam (Capital: P Bhaskaran, 1969), Nazir plays the character of a revolutionary who falters before romance, whereas the character played by Sathyan is the unwavering radical figure who does not succumb to emotions, and, ‘like a true revolutionary’, refuses to meet his wife and children when he is in hiding. In Anubhavangal Palichakal (Experiences and Mistakes: K S Sethumadhavan, 1971), Nazir plays the role of the labour contractor who covets the wife of the union leader – a mobilizing martyr figure played by Sathyan.

Interestingly, Prem Nazir’s histrionics (typical of melodrama) was to become an object of laughter through mimicry programs, a major entertainment form in Kerala since the late 1980s, performed mostly by all-men troupes. Imitating the acting mannerisms associated with Nazir while courting his heroine became one of the inevitable items in these mimicry programs. Along with all the ingredients of romance, the painkili genre is also known for the liberal messages of social transformation packaged in the narrative.36

36 For example, in Gandhi Nagar Second Street (Sathyan Anthikkad, 1986), a young Christian boy asks the Hindu girl next door (who is also the daughter of a painkili novelist) with whom he is in love: “Why can’t you love me? I know you are a Hindu and I am a Christian. But in your father’s novels, lovers always break these barriers, don’t they?” (Cited in Rowena 2002)
One of the most striking examples of the ‘tearjerkers’ would be Adhyapika (P Subrahmaniam, 1968), a major box office hit. The screen adaptation of E J Kanam’s novel of the same title, the film’s plot closely resembled that of Ritwik Ghatak’s Bengali melodrama Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960). Padmini played the role of a schoolteacher – the lead character – who had to sacrifice her life and desires to support her family, and ultimately succumbs to tuberculosis.

An examination of various aspects of the ‘women’s cinema’ and its connections with Prem Nazir’s stardom is beyond the scope of this project. However, as a concluding note to this chapter on the Left’s interventions in cinema, we can put forth certain broad hypotheses in the light of the observations made above. The Left and its aesthetic project of social realism conceived the realms of rational politics and the relations between communities (mediated by the exchanges and contracts between men) as the only constitutive elements of ‘social reality’; consequently, it marginalized or delegitimized the affects and energies of romance and sentiments, perceived as circulating in the ‘familial’ spaces and as appealing mainly to women. The radically commercial film industry that emerged in Malayalam by the late 1950s, facilitated by the local studios like Udaya and Merryland, commodified and addressed the subjectivity of women in various forms, offering avenues of covert gratification of their desires and anxieties. Understood in this manner, we can approach the women’s cinema of
the period as oppositional articulations to the cultural agenda proposed by social realism of the Left.
Figure ii.5: Prem Nazir with L Vijayalakshmi in Jnanasundari (K S Sethumadhavan, 1961). Source: Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema (Kerala State Chalachitra Academy & Malayala Manorama; 2003).

Figure ii.6: Prem Nazir and Ragini in Kalayum Kaminiyum (P Subrahmaniam, 1963). Source: Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema (Kerala State Chalachitra Academy & Malayala Manorama; 2003).
Figure ii.7: Prem Nazir and Miss Kumari in Susheela (K S Sethumadhavan, 1963). 
Source: Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema (Kerala State Chalachitra Academy & Malayala Manorama; 2003).

Figure ii.8: Prem Nazir and Sheela in Ramanan (D M Pottakkadu, 1967). 
Source: Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema (Kerala State Chalachitra Academy & Malayala Manorama; 2003).