

An Interplay of Narrative and Culture in the Biopic: Celluloid

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Abstract

Biopics have a distinguished history in Indian film. It's interesting to note that Dadasaheb Phalke, who also directed and produced the silent film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), was responsible for India's first full-length motion picture. The Bollywood and regional cinema industries both celebrate biopics. However, the Malayalam film industry has not fully explored the potential of biopics. There are just nine movies created in Malayalam that may be classified as biopics. The movies classified as biopics in Malayalam include *Swathithirunal* (1987), *Pazhassiraja* (2009), *Yugapurushan* (2010), *Makaramanju* (2010), *Celluloid* (2011), *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (2015), *Clint* (2018), *Captain* (2018), and *Aami* (2018). The audience's impact is one of the factors contributing to the low production numbers of biopics. This paper aims to compare the biopic, *Celluloid*, by the Malayalam film director Kamal and distinguish the different paths taken by the director from the general conventions and themes of modern biopics to turn the biopic into the massive success it is.

Keywords: Dalit movement, Malayalam biopic, Celluloid, Shifting narratives, Director Kamal, Indian film

INTRODUCTION

Biopic: Themes & Conventions

The 'biopic' or biographical film generally sheds light on real people who portray broader values, aspirations, and ideals within a community. The primary ambition of the biopic is to foreground the 'truth'. It claims to offer a 'truthful' representation or 'true story' of individuals and the world in which they lived. In addition to these "truth claims" in the book, the biography also exhibits underlying cultural presumptions and attitudes. The biopic has not been accepted as a genre with its conventions and stages of growth in film studies. Furthermore, biographies were a staple of many major studios during the Hollywood studio era, especially Warner Bros., Twentieth Century Fox, and MGM (Bingham, 2010).

The biopic has been variously defined by scholars. George F. Custen in his monograph *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992) defined biopic as "the life, or the portion of a life, of a real person whose real name is used" (Custen 1992: 6).

Biopic often aims to represent social/cultural history. It looks at a person's life in relation to history, creates a public history through the stories of famous people, and uses truth claims to justify the depiction. Through depicting important historical figures, their efforts, and their accomplishments, it provides a "lesson". The biopic has frequently been ignored or exploited in different critical, general, and discursive contexts despite its apparent cultural role. The hybrid nature of the biopic, like those of other genres, makes it simple to classify these movies under various generic headings. The documentary film style focuses on telling the story as accurately as possible. It is based on actual statistics, figures, and data to provide us with a story that informs us of the events as well as the filmmaker's investigation that led to that information. It is regarded as a fairly accurate depiction of historical figures and events (Hoskins, 2004).

Today, it serves its greatest function by subtly bridging the gap between ancient India's heroes and scriptures and modern India's ideas and changes through a single tale that every Indian can relate to.

The spectator, like the film's "hero," is on a similar search for independence, success, and love, set in similar circumstances. Through these mutual individual emotions, he/she often seeks a sense of belonging. Studies that look at the general characteristics of biopics point out their crossbreed nature and the ensuing difficulties in shaping the biopic.

According to George Custen, the biography does adhere to identifiable norms and themes that set it apart from other genres. These tropes and motifs are not exclusive to the biography, as is the case with certain other genres, but their inclusion in some or all biopics sets them apart from those genres. Although the following study separates these several conventions, it is important to understand that they work in concert to legitimize the film's portrayal of the biographical topic. (Custen 1992: 12).

Biopic: Conventions

Titles and Captions:

One of the "formal aspects" (together with endorsements and voice-overs) that are utilised in demonstrating a biopic's veracity is referred to as title cards. The crucial element of the genre, that biopics purport to depict the experiences of actual people, is how they legitimise the rhetoric of "reality." As "the beginning proclamation of truth," opening title cards (Custen 1992: 51), securing the film's message and rhetorical design. Disclaimers, expectation managers, and meaning managers are other roles that captions play. Pierrepont's autobiography appears: "The fruit of my experience has this bitter aftertaste... In my opinion, the death penalty only served to exact retribution" (Pierrepont 1974:8).

Voiceovers:

Voice-over introductions are a common element of the traditional Hollywood biopic. Some voice-overs are given by characters in the film and, when mixed with flashbacks, they indicate how the individual represented is being remembered by a particular character rather than claiming that the film is real. Others purposefully stir up controversy and are ironic, casting doubt on the narrator's authority. British biopics once more commonly employ voice-overs. To convey a feeling of authority and authenticity, some people employ voice-over to mimic documentaries and newsreels (Kozloff 1989:74).

Montage:

Montage scenes may simplify a life and give it a more "cinematic" feel. They can represent a person's progression over a long period of time as well as their climb to prominence or fall from grace. The most common type of montage in movies is rhythmic. This is because they lessen the abrupt transitions between opposing visuals and elicit strong emotions by altering the speed of shots (Custen 1992: 184-186).

Flashbacks:

Flashbacks are used in traditional Hollywood biopics to recreate history from a particular narrator's perspective, which "allows the narrator to define the life not simply in terms of the sequence and substance of events, but to frame its meaning." (Custen 1992: 183). In his study of "traumatic flashback" in British cinema, Roger Luckhurst makes the case that biopics and intricate temporal arrangements, mosaics, and narrative loops have been used to express traumatic experience since the 1990s (Luckhurst 2008: 177-208).

Archival Material:

Archives are used in biopics to depict historical events and locations. It's important to think of the use of archive video—news and documentary footage, photos, artefacts, and historical sources—as a British filmmaking practice. By establishing context and historical period, documentary footage from news programs and documentaries serves to both enlighten the audience and support the allegations

made in the documentary (Custen, 1992: 111-118). Using footage from news programmes and documentaries, for example, can corroborate the assertions made in a docudrama while also defining the place and historical period (Paget 1998: 69).

Casting and Performance:

The style of biography that is made depends largely on the stars that are available because of studio contracts, as well as how their star personas and physical similarity shape our understanding of the subjects. Constraints and expectations specific to the genre are present in biopic casting and performance. The first problem is to appease the people who are represented or who are related to those who are represented (Custen, 1992: 193-205).

Historical Accuracy:

The most obvious way a biopic differs from other films is in how accurately it depicts its subject's background. If the biopic is about someone who has a tremendous myth surrounding them, the filmmaker can be more interested in producing a movie on the person's legend than the facts. On the other side, biopics frequently alter the truth to produce a better picture. This is nothing new; plays and artistic creations have always exaggerated the truth to further their trade. After all, movies aren't based on actual events, and if someone truly wanted to learn about someone's life in depth, they could read a biography (Street 2002: 53).

Biopic: Themes

Public and Private Lives

The biopic's second central theme depicts characters as being torn between their "private" desires and their "public" responsibilities. Women are forced to choose between heterosexual desire, marriage, and romance and their professional obligations, but in movies about males, "the male star is so caught up in his job that he is unable to give love," according to the career/love conflict theory. Because of this, "the contemporary popular newspaper, created at the end of the Victorian era, set a template of abundance of images, accessible language, and news that stressed human interest features" (Temple 1996:176). The person's life is divided into two parts: "public," which includes their recognised accomplishments, and "private," which includes their personal goals, relationships with their family, romantic interests, and obligations (Custen, 1992: 149).

The Role of Family

When characters are too old to be affected by family, biopics use narrative tropes such as "in medias res," which emphasises the subject's self-creation and power to choose their own future. Some people "inherit" a professional path from their family, even though it is more typical for individuals to forge their own path rather than follow in their family's footsteps and emphasise their self-creation. It's uncommon for studio biopics to focus on the family's influence on the character. When the family is present, participants experience resistance from members of their own family who oppose their aspirations to pursue careers (Custen 1992: 154).

The Film: Celluloid

Celluloid, written and directed by Kamal, is a biopic based on the life of J.C. Daniel, who is recognised as the father of Malayalam cinema. The Malayali audience, who consider themselves film lovers, give more importance to stardom than to the plot or execution of the film. The producers fear the risk of the film becoming a failure, as it lacks jaw-dropping action sequences and punchy dialogue from the protagonist. Recently, there has been a change in the tides. It is to be noted that among the directors, Kamal is the only director who has brought out two films in this genre, namely Celluloid and Aami. The following analysis tries to examine the biopic Celluloid by Kamal in the light of the general conventions and themes that are specific to the genre.

The movie has borrowed its material largely from a novel titled *Nashta Naayika* by Vinu Abraham, which is largely on the life of Rosy alias Rosamma, the heroine of the first Malayalam film. Thus, the movie blends the biographical elements of J.C. Daniel and Rosamma set against the backdrop of Kerala society of the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. On the one hand, it is the story of a man who followed his passion against all odds and the story of a lower-class woman who was denied her rightful place by a patriarchal caste based society. It is to be noted that the movie and its thematic concerns were of paramount significance in 2010, the year of release of *Celluloid*, when debates on women's rights and caste prejudices had become widespread.

The movie opens with a child playing with the film stock (celluloid) and accidentally sets it on fire. In the next scene, the narrative goes back several decades to 1928 and opens in Bombay, where a young man goes to meet D.G. Phalke, the father of Indian Cinema at the studio of Hindustan Film Company. He meets Phalke and introduces himself as J.C. Daniel, and tells him that he has come down for the meeting as per their letter correspondences earlier. He is very excited to see Mr. Phalke and expresses his dream of making a film in Malayalam. Phalke inquires about Daniel's knowledge in filmmaking and learns that the young man is a novice. Phalke gets busy with his shooting and tells Daniel to contact him some other time, but he gives consent to Daniel to watch him shoot the next scene of his film.

Daniel gets back to Travancore, and on the way, he passes by the Capitol Cinema Hall. He is excited to see the cinema hall as he hopes to screen his movie one day. The domestic scenes provide ample information regarding Daniel's family and its rich, aristocratic financial background. Daniel explains to his wife about the history and concepts of filmmaking. He shows his wife, 'film stock' or celluloid, which is the key component of a movie. Janet, his wife, is sceptical whether they have enough money to produce the movie. Daniel arranges the camera and the necessary equipment with the help of William Derrick and establishes a new film production company named Travancore National Pictures at Pattom.

Daniel starts working on his first film project titled *Vigathakumaran*. He begins the casting for the film and approaches an actress in Bombay for the lead role. Even though her pompous manners, hefty fee and rude behaviour put off Daniel, he hires her. However, her unbearable attitudes and unreasonable demands after arriving at Travancore drive Daniel to his wits' end, and he sacks her from the film. Daniel and his friends search for an actress for the lead role, and finally they decide to cast Rosamma, a lower caste Pulaya woman who had converted to Christianity. Rosamma has some acting experience, as she had played the role of Parvathy in the *Kakkarashi* play. Daniel tells Lala that one shouldn't think of caste and colour in cinema.

At this juncture of *Celluloid*, Kamal makes a deliberate shift in the narrative of his film and introduces a new character, Chelanghatt Gopalakrishnan, a curious biographer who goes in search of information regarding the fate of J.C. Daniel and his maiden film *Vigathakumaran*. The time frame shifts to several decades later when Gopalakrishnan goes in search of J C Daniel to Agastheeshwaram. After much efforts, he finds the house. Daniel is bedridden, and he is reluctant to share his past. Gopalakrishnan waits until Daniel's wife Janet, returns from Nagarcoil. It is Janet who narrates what followed after the shooting of the film. The movie was successfully completed in spite of many hurdles and was announced to screen in Capitol Cinema, in Trivandrum. The crowd chased Rosamma and her family away and burned her house to ashes. The audience at the screening of the 1928 film inside this film, as well as those watching *Celluloid*, quickly forget Rosamma, denying her the simple recognition of her life that she craved. Rosamma remains buried with her caste and gender in *Celluloid* decades later, despite efforts to recognise J.C. Daniel as the 'Father of Malayalam Cinema'. Daniel's old passion for films began to reawaken in his mind. Daniel gets acquainted with a famous Tamil actor P U Singappa. Singappa urges Daniel to follow his movie dream once again. Daniel goes to madras with all of his fortunes made from his dental profession. Daniel falls into bad company with Singappa and his friends. He loses all his money in drinking and he once again became bankrupt. He loses contact with his family and wanders the street of Madras for 2 years. He managed to return

to Agastheeshwaram, but is unable to restart his dental profession as he is too weak. His life is now confined to the corner of a room. He now hates the very idea of cinema as it has ruined his life. He tells Daniel that his efforts couldn't do anything for bringing recognition to Vigathakumaran.

In 1972, Janet writes a letter to Chelangadan about J.C Daniel's poor health condition and request for financial assistance. Chelangadan goes again to meet the cultural secretary but this time with the recommendation of Vayalar Ramavarma, the renowned Malayalam Poet. Nevertheless all efforts of Chelangadan becomes futile due to the arrogant attitude of the cultural secretary. Chelangadan leaves the office in disappointment saying that J.C Daniel would be rewarded for his hard work after his death.

J.C Daniel is now on his death bed. As he lay dying, the visuals of Vigathakumaran playing in Capital Cinema flashes before his mind. The next scene makes a further shift in time and narrative. It opens in year 2000 with the screening of a documentary about the life of J.C Daniel made by R. Gopalakrishnan, during the release of the movie Narasimham. Chelangadan explains his efforts that finally made the Government of Kerala officially recognize J.C Daniel as the father of Malayalam cinema. J.C Daniel's youngest son, Harris Daniel confesses that he is solely responsible for the destruction of the Film stock or Celluloid of Vigathakumaran. He thinks that if they hadn't burned the celluloid, his father would have been famous before his death. The film Celluloid closes with the very opening scene.

The movie follows many conventions of the biopic genre, though it deviates from a linear narrative pattern and employs shifting narrative points of view. While the movie, after the title, begins with an objective linear representation of the story of Daniel's pursuit of making a movie, it shifts into the perspective of Gopalakrishnan, who was struggling to establish the rightful recognition of Daniel as the father of Malayalam Cinema. The cruel fate of Rosy is also touched upon in the course of the movie.

In the customary style of biopics, Celluloid too is a pursuit after truth, as it claims to represent the true story of J.C. Daniel and his making of the first movie in Malayalam. The movie employs flashbacks as the basic narrative style, as the whole movie can be seen as the story of why and how Harry Daniel came to set the film footage on fire. It is also suggestive of the movie that tries to bring alive the life of a man from the ashes of forgotten memories. The movie makes use of archival material to highlight the truth claim of the content. The convincing performance of Prithviraj also lent credibility to the movie.

Though a biopic seemingly attempts to recreate the life of an individual, it can be argued that beneath the surface, a biopic is also an attempt to comment on certain contemporary ideas or practices. In Celluloid, Kamal attempts to blend the life of Rosamma, the Dalit artist who was rejected by a patriarchal society, with the story of J.C. Daniel. Rosamma is acknowledged as the first heroine in Malayalam films, and the recognition comes against the backdrop of the Dalit movements to establish their rightful place in society.

Conclusion

This study was an attempt to take up the film, Celluloid and, by celebrated Malayalam film maker Kamal, to see to what extent it adheres to the conventions and thematic concerns that are proper to a biopic, and to see if the Malayalam biopic shows variance in some way.

The biopic genre stands out from other genres due to identifiable norms and themes. These tropes and motifs are not exclusive to the biography, as is the case with certain other genres, but their inclusion in some or all biopics sets them apart from those genres.

Biopics uses 'titles and captions' as one of the 'formal elements' which are utilized to prove a biopic's authenticity. They strive to support the "truth" discourse. The film's message and rhetorical stance are anchored by "the introduction declaration of truth" in the opening title cards. Biopic conventionally uses voiceover, flashback, and montage sequences as formal devices to establish the truth value of its content. The voiceover also serves as commentary on historical events or as links in the narrative.

Endorsement by living persons or witnesses, either real or as characters, also is a feature of the biopic. The use of archival material further establishes the authenticity of the claims made in the movie.

It is also seen that biopics in general deal with certain broad themes which can be traced in every film of the genre with varying degrees of accuracy. The biopic portrays historical characters as being torn or compelled to choose between their "private" desire and their "public" duty. Frequently, subjects are required to decide between love and a job. In contrast to movies about males, women are shown as conflicting with their professional obligations, heterosexual desire, marriage, and romance. The person's life is divided into two parts: "public," which includes their recognised accomplishments, and "private," which includes their personal goals, relationships with their family, romantic interests, and obligations.

It is found that Indian cinema has an impressive history of Biopics. Interestingly, the first feature film produced in India is a biopic Raja Harishchandra (1913). Biopics are a hot favourite of Bollywood as well as regional film industries. However, the Malayalam film industry has not hitherto significantly tapped into the potential of biopics to a very great extent. There are only about nine films that can be treated under the genre of biopic produced in Malayalam, of which Kamal has brought out two films, namely Celluloid and Aami.

The analysis establishes that Celluloid follows many conventions of the biopic genre, though it deviates from a linear narrative pattern and employs shifting narrative points of view. In the customary style of biopics, Celluloid too is a pursuit after truth, as it claims to represent the true story of J.C. Daniel and his making of the first movie in Malayalam. The movie makes use of archival material to highlight the truth claim of the content. The convincing performance of Prithviraj, also lent credibility to the movie.

Thematically, the movie presents the struggle of man in the pursuit of his passion. The movie also poignantly portrays the Kerala society of the time that was divided on the basis of caste and social status, which eventually resulted in the undoing of Daniel's efforts. In Celluloid, Kamal attempts to blend the life of Rosamma, the Dalit artist who was rejected by a patriarchal society, with the story of J.C. Daniel.

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