

The Urban as the Site of Emancipation in Early Telugu Movies

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Abstract

The urban stands for a space, culture, lifestyle, context and time that is relatively named and identified in comparison to other entities and identities. This urban could be a small town for a villager and a city for a townner and a metropolitan for a city dweller. The experience of the urban depends as well as decides the location of the dweller. The urban, when it is defined and described, assumes several markers and manifests several measures. It is these markers and measures that construct inclusions and exclusions and condition people to constantly struggle to get admission for survival and success in the urban. This paper proposes to study such manifestation of urbanity in the early Telugu cinema when the urban was being understood and represented in its multiple dimensions, not just as a site of moral corruption but also as a site of liberation and transformation.

Keywords : Exclusion; Inclusion; Location; Site; Urban.

Julie-Ann Boudreau, in her article “Reflections on Urbanity as an Object of Study and a Critical Epistemology”¹, proposes a critical urban epistemology that calls for a dialogical and socio-anthropological approach through which an object of study is seen as an indicator of societal and political dynamics instead of a problem-solving approach to urban studies (P. 57). This paper attempts to study urbanity as a critical epistemology from a gender perspective as represented in the early Telugu cinema. The object of representation, that is women, in the select films become the critical category of analysis in this paper which helps us understand the societal and political dynamics not only as an indicator but also as an embodiment particularly of the urbanity.

When I say early Telugu cinema, I am not referring to the silent movies

1. *Critical Urban Studies: New Directions* edited by Jonathan S. Davies and David L. Imbroscio. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010

but to the speaking movies, talkies as they are called. Regional cinema, as it is described, is allowed a place only in the margins because there is “the Indian” cinema that is already constructed and mainstreamed. From the margins, the regional cinema tries to construct the mainstream and the fringes based on the contexts and identities. It is this mainstream-margins multiple contexts and creations that I am going to focus on.

The twentieth century opened public sphere for women in the name of performance and cinema. The debates about women going on in various forums such as newspapers, magazines, theatre, fiction, so on and so forth continued to be represented on the silver screen bringing the gender and the nation questions together. As spectators, makers and dancers, women started to inhabit the spaces of theatre including the movie theatre. Early talkies, the movies made in 1930s and 1940s are dominated by the mythologies. It will become an entirely different but fascinating study to look at the mythologies. However, for the present, I am going to focus only on the social movies that were indeterminately trying to weave the contemporary into its construction of “life”. Most of them clearly declared that their agenda was not just to entertain but to change the existing circumstances, thus attempting to become part of the reform discourse. The films that I am going to majorly concentrate are *Malapilla* (1938), *Vandemataram* (1939), *Sumangali* (1940), and *Devatha* (1941).

Urbanity is quite often presented as a synonym of modernity as it brings in new lifestyles, ideas and cultures. Modernity is also quite often represented through urbanity. The visual and filmic representation of modernity has often taken the means of urbanity to convey the advent and effect of modernity and vice versa. Urbanity could stand for education, change and liberal lifestyle. It could also stand for the larger movements and ideologies. This paper intends to study how this urbanity, as a means of modernity, turns into markers on the women’s bodies, expressions and lives as represented in the early Telugu cinema, particularly the four Telugu films mentioned above. Veena Das discusses² how memory is etched on the bodies of women and how women’s bodies become the sites of memory, personal as well as collective. I take this point of turning women’s bodies into the canvass for collective memories to elaborate my discussion on representation of urbanity as markers on women’s bodies in Telugu cinema. This paper also argues that urbanity and modernity were not always complementary, supplementary or synonymous to each other.

2. Veena Das. “Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain”. *Daedalus*, Vol. 125, No. 1, Social Suffering (Winter, 1996), pp. 67-91. The MIT Press <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027354>

er. Rather, tradition was reiterated in the guise of modernity in an urban setting. There was more of a need to establish this disguised tradition in the urban location because it was important to cling onto the tradition as well as urbanity and also to defend urbanity against charges of polluting the tradition.

Malapilla revolves around a Dalit girl and a reformist upper caste man. Their families and communities strongly object to their relationship. The couple reach Kolkata to start a new life. Finally, there is a happy ending when the entire village, apart from the couple's families realise that the caste boundaries are all human-made. The movie combines the themes of anti-caste movements, the National movement and the reform movement. *Vandemataram* has a young man Raghuramaiah in the centre who is married to Jaya. He is a passionate student and a patriot who participates in the freedom movement. He is supported by his friend Jayalakshmi. The couple is separated for a few years only to be united in the end. *Sumangali* focuses on Saraswati, an educated, urban, talented, young woman who realises after her father's death that she was a child widow and has to re-locate herself to her village to live in widowhood. Her love for Satyam becomes a mirage. Finally, Satyam returns from abroad and marries her. *Devatha*, which means goddess is the title given to a woman who becomes a scapegoat to the desire of a man who violates her succumbing to the western influence. She suffers silently and finally forgives him and accepts him when he comes back in repentance.

All these four films are majorly located in the urban though they also present the interactions between the rural and the urban. These interactions include temporary as well as permanent displacements and migrations. People meet and separate, they achieve and lose, transform and tantalise in the urban. The urbanity and the urban are represented and portrayed in myriad ways. The themes and characters revolve around the urbanity. The urban is a destination for many people while the urban is a transit for some others. 1930s and 1940s was the crucial time for India that was raising the questions about the nation as well the questions about where India lives and where and how it should be living.

It is interesting to study the "objects" that were used to draw the dynamics on. The object that carries the markers most is always considered to be the best medium to carry more markers. In this case, it is the women's bodies and lives that are chosen to represent the urbanity. It's a pleasant surprise to note that these films do not represent women's education or educated women as evil, like the way many of the later Telugu film pro-

claim. These films by and large associate urbanity with education and English and above all, riches. The urban women or the women who migrate to the urban are the rich and elite women who are well-respected and accepted in the society. On the other hand, the poor women who step into the urban setting are either reformed by men or are subjected to hardships which finally get resolved with the help of the men who are responsible for such hardships.

Women's bodies carry the markers like their tennis/badminton rackets, well-designed blouses, fluent articulation in English, books in their hands and in their houses, familiarity with musical instruments like piano and located in educational institutions, elite clubs, sports grounds and drawing rooms. Veena Das, while discussing the Great Partition of India in 1947 in her *Critical Events*, argues that women's bodies were turned into canvases on which men wrote their religious chants, left their mark by sexually violating their bodies and the governments took a stand by mass-sanitisation of abducted women's bodies before restoring them to their original location. The context might be different. But, what we are trying to invoke here is the etching of indelible memories on women's bodies as Veena Das argues in the context of carving out urbanity on women's bodies. Like the two nations and two religions were marked on women's bodies in the Partition, the narration of the nation finds the canvas of women's bodies to be portrayed in the colours of religion, caste, class, region and language.

Urbanity consequentially brings in the connotations of modernity. The debates around urbanity as modernity abound in the academic circles. Urbanity and modernity might be related, one might consist of the other and in some rare contexts they might even become synonymous. All urban locations may not have the modernist ideology and all modernist platforms may not have the urban places that neutralise or eliminate the hegemonic as well as subjugated identities. Modernity in several urban contexts is the tradition in the disguise of modernity. Some of the films that we are going to discuss might be trying to say that the urban places are more relaxed, liberated and progressive. This does not mean that such places are liberated for all the sections and at all times. All these four films introduce the urban as the locale in a major manner. Either the story is located in the urban space or it moves from urban to the rural or vice versa. This location is not a mere landscape or a geographical location. But, it carries loaded nuances as they mould characters, cultures and lifestyles.

Let us examine how such problematic of urbanity is represented through women as characters and how men as characters contribute to this mark-

ing apart from the writers and the film makers. I propose to analyse the four films independently, to begin with, and compare the films as the crucial points in weaving of the pre-independent urbanised India that was inspiring women to become better companions and home makers.

The movie *Malapilla*, as it was said in the beginning of this article, deals with a very important aspect of the contemporary reform movement. Influenced by the Gandhian principles, it weaves the story around the love story between a Mala girl and an upper caste boy. Being a Gandhian activist, the hero does not believe in the caste restrictions. There is only one way left for the lovers, that is to leave the village which is divided into two as touchable and untouchable sections over their love story. Interestingly, the story moves from a village where people are divided, prejudiced and controlled to a city which gives shelter for the couple and gives a work status for the hero. The city here is neither Chennai nor Hyderabad which were closely and strategically located in the Telugu region. It is Kolkata, which is far off from the place where they hail from and alien in terms of language and culture as well. This city is not just a place of industrialisation, riches/poverty and impersonal human relations but it is a place of progress and change for individuals especially for those who are rebels against the repressive and hierarchical systems.

This progress and transformation are represented in many ways, starting from the job that the hero finds to the house that they live in. However, women's bodies represent this change much more intensely. This is done not only to show how the woman who is supposed to represent and preserve the tradition and culture is moving towards progress and delineating herself in new colours, but also to present the reformed and reformable woman as an outcome of the women's reform movements. *Malapilla* brilliantly brings together the aspects of caste, class, nationalism and gender. Shampalatha is not any woman but she is a Mala woman of the lowest class. When she is transformed into an urban, educated housewife in the film, it is also portraying the two extremes of a woman's location. Shampalatha learns to read and write, thanks to her husband who teaches her to. Her demeanour changes, so is her speaking style and spoken language.

Take a look at the following pictures to perceive the glaring change that the film is trying to present. Pictures one and two show Shampalatha and her younger sister in the rural atmosphere wearing the traditional dress against a rustic backdrop while the pictures three and four show Shampalatha and her husband in an affluent, "civilised", educated and groomed home. They are sitting at the coffee table, holding silver tea



cups in their hands and particularly Shampalatha is wearing a sleeveless blouse in complete contrast to her dress in the first two pictures that is in her rural location. The fourth picture shows the educated Shampalatha who no longer grazes the cattle but engages herself in modern education.

Brinda Bose, in her article “Modernity, Globality, Sexuality and the City: A Reading of Indian Cinema”³ argues that the city occupies a confrontational as well as contemplative space in the Indian nationalist imaginary throughout the process of nation-building signifying modernity as well as the traditional. She says, “Such progress, seen as necessary but demeaning, is perceived as a moral degeneracy of the nation easily analogous with female sexual transgression/promiscuity with the nation personified as woman...The newly freed urban space thus assumes the metonymic equivalent of available sexual freedom for women, its powers, and its dangers”. (p.36) However, the movie *Malapilla* adds a more insightful turn to the urban by representing the city as a place that can liberate people from caste discrimination and pave the path towards social egalitarianism. In fact, the othered woman, in terms of social identity, is brought into the mainstream and made into a respectable family woman. The woman

3. Brinda Bose. “Modernity, Globality, Sexuality, and the City: A Reading of Indian Cinema”. *The Global South*, Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 2008, pp. 35-58. Indiana University Press

who is made to live on the outskirts in the village breaks those boundaries and claims a home that has a drawing room as well where the reading, singing, sharing, relaxing and comforting happens. It is a question as to whether Shampalatha claims the urban space or the urban space claims/appropriates Shampalatha. However, the film conveys in clear terms that the urban that this couple claimed was not haunted by the casteist institutions and biases. Mulk Raj Anand's novel *The Road*(1961) does show the road towards the city as a means of liberation for a rural lower caste youth. Much later, the rural was studied from the caste studies perspective only to understand that the so called independent and interdependent unit of a village is a miniature of the caste-ridden Indian society that clearly demarcates the differences and barriers between people of different identities. Probably this representation also tries to hint at the debates among the marginalised sections about migration to the urban in order to get rid of the caste discrimination.

We get to see other urban women who are professional women like a nurse and a personal secretary (White/Anglo-Indian) in this movie. Shampalatha can be contrasted with a politically conscious Congress woman for whom the rural and the urban do not really matter as she brings the urban and the nation to the rural. While Shampalatha reveals the signs of the reformed women, the Congress woman speaks and lives the Gandhian ideology. We see a similar woman in the film *Vandemataram*. Urbanity stands for education, change and liberation; but it also stands for the national movement, intersecting movements and ideologies. The independent and rich woman Jayalakshmi, prefers to be called Jaya, is motivated and motivating woman. The hero Raghuramaiah and Jaya decide to devote their life to "desaradhana". Jaya turns to tears agonising that Andhras did not get the status of an independent status. Her character glorifies Andhranness.

Jaya proposes to Raghuramaiah and when he explains his disinterest in her, she is ready to accept it. This urban woman is not only equipped with the qualifications and material credentials, but is also able to maturely think about the political movements and ideologies and take decisions about her personal life. When she decides along with Raghuramaiah that she will devote her life to "desaradhana", she comes in totally contrast to Raghuramaiah's wife who is devoted to her family though she is one of the driving forces in Raghuramaiah's life, as a loving wife and a doting mother and a tortured daughter in law.

Not only the rural women but the rural itself comes in as a contrast to the

urbanity in the film *Sumangali*. Satyam, the hero, travels from a village to a town to Delhi and from there abroad. Saraswati's journey is from a town to a village. Town, the urban, becomes a transit for Satyam. For Saraswati, the urban stands for liberation and reform. In her life, urban is a space where everything is better, especially for a woman. The urban helps to keep the secrets, the revelation of which leads to "widowhood" for the woman. The urban and heterosocial spaces like tennis court, railway station, theatre are contrasted with the homosocial spaces in the rural like wells. The cordial and socialising home atmosphere turns into a confining space in the rural. Public spaces and the public sphere in the rural subjects women to alienation. Travel from urban to the rural is a revelation for Saraswati while the travel is an achievement for Satyam. Like many of the films of this time, this film also has love in the centre. This love is juxtaposed with the man's love for nation. Satyam's guru advises him to get married before going abroad as a man needs a bond to bring him back to his motherland. Satyam answers if the bond of love with the motherland is not enough to bring him back.

There is another angle to the rural woman who migrates to the urban unlike in what happens in *Malapilla*. While the urban woman is portrayed as an outspoken, bold, self-reliant and capable woman, the rural woman dislocated in the urban is portrayed as a victim. *Devatha* is about one such woman who is victimised in an urban household that is supposed to give her shelter. Not only the urban but the abroad/foreign plays a negative role here. The man, corrupted by the foreign pictures seduces the woman and deserts her. This rural woman in the urban setting is seduced, deserted, lured and jailed. She makes a statement before leaving the city that she is not able to adjust in the city. It is rather the city is not able to adjust with her. She looks out of place in the midst of the urban women in making in the Telugu films. The man finally realises his blunder and pleads for forgiveness. The urban here multiplies as the site of victimisation, realisation and reunion especially glorifying the forgiving woman.

The city, in these movies, is a meeting place and a parting place as well. The urban woman can take their decisions and their bodies carry the markers of riches, education and open/public space access. Public/open spaces at home and outside available for the urban woman. An urban woman drives car, plays piano/tennis, can read and write, and experiments with clothing. Interestingly, these women are never located in the kitchen. Most of the time they are seen in the drawing room, in the company of men in discussion with them. The absence of kitchen in such settings speaks volumes about the location of these new women.

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