

## HEROIC IMAGERY IN VADAKKAN PATTU FILMS AND KERALA VARMA PAZHASSI RAJA

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### **Abstract**

The current paper is of the view that both the Vadakkan Pattu genre films and Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja exhibit what Sobchack has called “a carnal experience of history”. As by which a sense of impression of being immersed in the flow of historical time and space is created: “our sense of historicality . . . begins in our reflexive existence as embodied subjects. It is as carnal as well as cultural beings that we presently sit in a movie theatre to see a representation of past events and somehow get caught up in a comprehension of time”. For the analysis of the texts mentioned the paper borrows Ramond Williams observation of relevance of identifying different moments within a popular text and practice. To Williams these elements articulated depend in part on the social circumstances and historical condition of production and conception. As by this the paper analyse Vadakkan Pattu films exhibited during the emergency period and aftermath so as to intersect various defining moments like that mentioned above. The paper identifies “Utopianizing effect” (borrowed from Jane Gaines) as one of the prime aspect of Vadakkan Pattu genre films during the above mentioned period. An analysis of various other popular films (box office hits) of the period is also made so as to understand other aspects of heroic imagery evident Vadakkan Pattu genre apart from the externalised /celebrated heroic chivalry. The paper also analyse the film Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja; a totally different text from altogether different context to show that the heroic deed evident in the film is centred on the heroic imagery of the actor Mammootty.

**Keywords:** Popular culture, Utopianizing effect, Hyperrealism

### **Introduction**

The history of cultural theory’s engagement with popular culture is a history of the different ways in which the two terms have been connected by theoretical labour within particular historical and social context.<sup>i</sup> We can see that the enthusiasm and concern for cultural studies and popular culture has various defining moments in history. In the ‘dominant’ scholarships over time these defining moments ranges from Mathew Arnoldian notion of high and low culture; the best that have been thought and said, Rechard Hoggart and to many extend the Frankfurt concern of popular and mass culture, concerns shared and issues debated by Ramymond Willims, E.P Thompson, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel to the populist attack on the elitism of modernism by postmodernists.

Raymond Williams’s observation on the study of popular culture seems valid in accordance with the perspective of the current paper’s first session namely; ‘Different Moments in *Vadakkan Pattu* films’. Williams suggests that we can identify different moments within a popular text or practice—what he calls ‘dominant’, ‘emergent’, and ‘residual’—each pulling the text in different direction.<sup>ii</sup> A text thus is made up of a mix of different cultural forces. To Williams the articulation of these elements depends in part on

the social circumstances and historical conditions of production and consumption.<sup>iii</sup> The second session namely; ‘*Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* and the Mammootty effect’ deals with a totally different text from a different context. This session tries to study the embedded expressions of the text in relation to its social circumstance and conditions by borrowing the interplay of what Jean Baudrillard calls ‘hyperrealism’. Methodologically the paper is not an attempt to provide a quantitative analyse of the experience of the discussed films from the part of audience. The attempt is to reveal certain embedded facet of these texts in relation to its historic circumstance and context. The paper is also not intended to analyse the mystery of what made the above mentioned films in topic popular; rather the intention is to offer the post facto analysis of films that have already been popular.<sup>iv</sup> The current paper is of the view that both the *Vadakkan Pattu* genre films and *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* exhibit what Sobchack has called “a carnal experience of history”. As by which a sense of impression of being immersed in the flow of historical time and space is created: “our sense of historicality. . . . . begins in our reflexive existence as *embodied subjects*. It is as carnal as well as cultural beings that we presently sit in a movie theatre to see a representation of past events and somehow get caught up in a comprehension of time”.<sup>v</sup> From this context of aesthetic experience the paper identifies *Vadakkan Pattu* genre films and *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* as historical films. From this perspective the paper intend to reflect on themes that runs through these films be used as an entry point to prompt discussions on the features and functions of perceived history.

### Different Moments in *Vadakkan Pattu* films

Malayalam cinema has a history of *Vadakkan Pattu* genre since 1961. It has produced almost eighteen films since 1961 (with a count of one film in every two year) of which except for *Kadathanadan Ambady*(1990) and *Puthuram Puthry Unniyarcha* (2002) all were box office success.<sup>vi</sup> Cultural theorists in their study of popular films in India have largely considered paradigms of national imagination at large. In this respect the *Vadakkan Pattu* films of Kerala have always been a subject/text of special attention. There is no doubt that such genre transfigures the ‘accomplishments’ of the past into an inspirational entertainment for the present, trading on received ideas of continuing national or cultural consciousness. However, the paper is of the view that the multiple dimension aspect of popular text and practice observed by Ramymond Willims should be considered to the context of *Vadakkan Pattu* film genre of Kerala. As by this apart from national imagination one can intersect various defining moments within the text of *Vadakkan Pattu* films that may dominate it at various ‘events’ of its perception. For instance *Vadakkan Pattu* films exhibited during the emergency period and its aftermath (1975-78) intersects the mentioned defining moments in a more externalised way. One of the prime aspects of *Vadakkan Pattu* films in this respect seems to what Jane Gaines describes as “Utopianizing effect” of cinematic aesthetics. This “Utopianizing effect” to Gaines is conveyed through certain cinematic forms and techniques, specifically the panorama, the magnification of scale, the widescreen proportions and the epic magnificence.<sup>vii</sup> Though the convection of “Utopianizing effect” and the experience of history is evident in the entire genre of *Vadakkan Pattu* films there is every possibility to consider the dominance of this aspect in the *Vadakkan Pattu* films during and in the aftermath of emergency period. Here it is to be noted that this period in Malayalam film never created poster of distressed angry young man as done in Hindi films. In Hindi films this was done to such an extend that it ultimately led to the emergence of Amithab Bachan to stardom. *Vadakkan Pattu* films of this period namely *kannappanunni*

(1977), *Kadathanattu Makkam* (1978), *Thacholi Ambu* (1978) all has Prem Nazeer in its lead role. Prem Nazeer's body was always adhered for its 'Ideal-subject' appeal.<sup>viii</sup> The deeds to which these *Vadakkan Pattu* films addressed were thus also centred on the above mentioned 'Ideal-subject' passion. This ideal effect has more to do with the discussed utopianizing aspect which can be observed as dominant heroic imagery mood of these films.

### ***Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja and the Mammootty effect***

When compared with the previously discussed *Vadakkan Pattu* film genre, *Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja* is altogether a different text from a different context. The heroic imagery in *Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja* thus has different ideas to communicate in relation to its social circumstance and conditions.

Like majority of films from Hollywood of the time the caption '*Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja*' of the film too appeared with a 'message' attached to it. It self imposes it as a historic film. Similarly the designs and colour shades used in the posters of *Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja* have striking parallels to that of similar genres from Hollywood (see Fig: 1, 2, 3, 4&5). It is interesting to note that the film *Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja* follows nuclei formula of representation namely; Separation — Initiation —and Return like some of the historical films of Hollywood. Thus in some sense the film offers a global experience.<sup>ix</sup> One of the key features of these Hollywood films mentioned is its typical portrayal of male body: "The viewer's experience is predicated on the pleasure of seeing the male 'exist' (that is, walk, move, ride, fight) in or through cityscapes, landscapes, or more abstractly, history. And on the unquiet pleasure of seeing the male mutilated . . . and restored through violent brutality."<sup>x</sup>This aspect of male body centring mainly on the lead role is much evident in the film *Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja*.

This portrayal of male body and concomitant hero image in *Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja* can be understood when compared with similar portrayal in *Vadakkan Pattu* genre films of the early period. The *Vadakkan Pattu* genre in its casting many a times opted to do with multiple heroes who in turn were the lead actors of the 'industry'. Moreover these films paid more attention to various 'heroic deed' where the body of the lead actor was immersed in the participatory performance in fulfilling the mentioned 'heroic deed'.<sup>xi</sup> On the other hand the body of the hero 'exist' in *Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja* in the sense that it preponderates in every deed visualised in the film. This aspect can be noticed right from the introductory shot of hero's entry, his movements depicted in song sequences, his armed exercise with seemingly superior masculine body of his counterpart *Edachena Kunkan* ([Sarathkumar](#)), instance of sporting arrow on target and in every feud which hero indulge in the film.

A major difference in this heroic imagery in *Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja* when compared to similar genres of Hollywood is that it offers a vivid experience; where both *Pazhasi Raja* (the lead role of the film) and Mammootty (the person who plays the role) are sinked together in the experience of the film. Here several plots in the film *Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja* is either a continuation of various Mammootty stared film or replica of imagery ascribe to him by the masses. One of the key factors that facilitate this process in the Malayalam speaking space is the interplay of what Jean Baudrillard calls 'hyperrealism'. As by this "The real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality . . . . a panic stricken production of the real and the referential".<sup>xii</sup> In the realm of the hyperreal, the distinction between

simulation and the ‘real’ implodes; the ‘real’ and the imaginary continually collapse into each other. This is not to suggest that people can no longer tell the difference between fiction and reality: it is that in some significant ways the distinction between the two has become less and less important.<sup>xiii</sup> One of the major factors that led to this hyperreal experience in Malayalam speaking space is the perceptivity of film’s output generated by television since cable and dish networking. Ramymond Willims way back in 1973 has made an observation regarding films broadcasting on television in Europe and America: “The distribution of films through the television networks is something different in kind from their distribution through cinemas. A degree of loss—in the case of some films, a quite unacceptable degree—is inevitable in present conditions. Yet to most viewers the film repertory of television is a welcome resource”.<sup>xiv</sup> In the present situation this film repertory of television has created a paradigm of its own as a viewing experience. Studies shows that with the wealth of old films at its disposal some of the films transmitted through television gets wide acknowledgement than what it got early from its theatre exhibition.<sup>xv</sup> The channel rights on films now play a key role in profit appropriation. Even films are now made for the sake of television broadcasting rather than for the movie houses.

The cable and dish networking had made viewing experience a flux from the part of every subjective perceiver leaving to him a wide option of selection at his finger tip. By this experience many now enjoys the fragmented view of films by selecting their favourite sequence from it. Further Malayalam programmes broadcasted through cables and dish are stuffed with film related or its complementary transmission. The very intrinsic value experience of these programmes itself plays a great part for hyperreal experience. The star talks, their appearance in various advertisements, campus shows attended by film stars and technicians for promoting of their new releases, film location news, film reviews, programmes named after film actors, film trailer shows, songs on demand and certain ‘reality’ shows staged centring film actors/actresses life are few to list.<sup>xvi</sup> These experiences of films on television are happening on the background of what Baudrillard calls the dissolution of television into life and the dissolution of life into television.

So a new filmic experience is been created by the frequency of films (with option of selection and also with the instance of fragmented views of various type) and other related programmes on television. It is quiet apparent that along with other aspects these filmic experience through television has played major role in boosting the stardom of the actors. An externalised expression of this is evident in the formation of various ‘fan’s clubs’ of actors in the ‘industry’. More than mere appreciation for actor’s performance in the film one of the dominant aspect in the formation of these ‘fan’s clubs’ is the interplay of hyperreal situation facilitated by television and other mediums.

A sinking of *Pazhassi Raja* and Mammootty in the heroic imagery of the film as noted earlier can be better understood from this background. Mammootty was considered the lead actor and in turn a super star of Malayalam films since late 1980s. The actor in his carrier successfully teamed up with various director—writer teams in producing hits in various genres over time. Here Mammootty proved to be a key variable sustaining the changing trends when compared with several director—writers he earlier teamed up with. This endurance of the actor from the time span say 1990s was facilitated more or less by the interplay of hyperreal aspects discussed earlier. Various features like aristocracy, dignity, masculinity, male dome, anger, spontaneity and care for which the actor gained appreciation through various box-office hits of his [In *Avanazhi*(1986) as policeman, *The King*(1995) as

District collector, *Mazhayethum Mumbe* (1995) as college Lecturer, *Vartha* (1986) as journalist, *Koodevide* (1983) as military personal, *Abhibashakante Casediary*(1995), *Narasimham*(2000) as lawyer ,*Vatsalyam*(1993), *Thaniyavarthanam* (1987) as Family man, Hitler (1997), *Valyettan* (2000), Big B (2007) as big brother] is by now identified the hallmark of the actor/person.<sup>xvii</sup>

The heroic imagery in *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* becomes more intelligible when we read it from this perspective. Here one may see that the early observed preponderance of hero's body in every deed of the film is thus the body of Mammootty.<sup>xviii</sup> Though this aspect is embedded throughout the experience the film, a more externalised vision of this imagery can be sighted from some of the sequence of the film. The sequence of poster and attire, the way of indulgence with the heroin, the solo heroic deeds and in the lengthy English dialogue towards the climax are all examples of the external imagery mentioned.<sup>xix</sup> Also one can read the film *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* as of a global experience where the existing/perceived body in the heroic imagery of the film is often that of the actor Mammootty.



Fig: 1. *300* (2006) Director: Zack Snyder

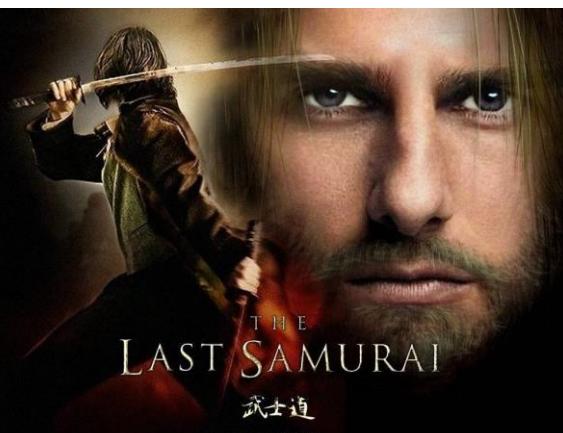


Fig: 2. *The Last Samurai* (2003) Director: Edward Zwick

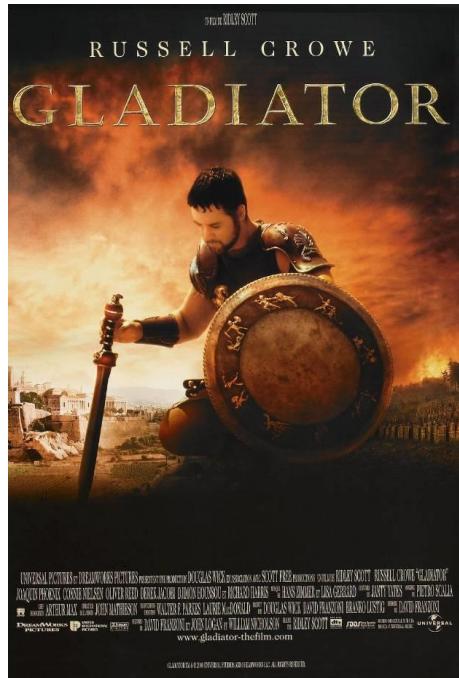


Fig: 3. *Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja* (2009)  
Director: Hariharan



Fig: 4. *Gladiator* (2000)  
Director: Ridley Scott

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<sup>i</sup>John Story' *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture An Introduction*, Pearson Longman, London, 2009. p.5.

<sup>ii</sup>Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory" in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, Verso, London, 1980. Rpt, *Culture and Materialism*, Verso, London, 2005.pp.35ff.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid., passim.*

<sup>iv</sup> There are difficulties involved in defining whether a film is "popular." First, box office hits are calculated as aggregates, and such a calculation conceals variations in the success of a film in different regions and over a period of time. The notion that films of this kind follow a formula is also an issue. In an industry driven by the profit principle, all successful films spawn a series of clones. Yet not all commercial films supposedly following such formulas are successful as business ventures, and most of them suffer bad at the box office. The films included in this paper are only those that captured the public's imagination—an outcome not easy to replicate. Popularity is a matter of contingency, and success depends on a combination of factors such as historical context, publicity, and the formal aspects of the film: acting, style, script, star quality, and production values. Popularity cannot be explained away simply as something dependent on certain formulas, since the "formula" is infinitely changeable. For similar methodological appropriation see Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London, 2003.*passim*.

<sup>v</sup> Robert Burgoyne, "Bare life and sovereignty in gladiator" in Robert Burgoyne (eds), *The Epic Film in World Culture*, Routledge, New York, 2001.p.92.

<sup>vi</sup> P.S.Radhakrishnan, *Charithrum Chalachitravum*, The State Institute of Language, Thiruvananthapuram, 2010.p.40.

<sup>vii</sup>Jane M. Gaines, "Dream/Factory," in Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds), *Reinventing Film Studies* Arnold, London, 2000. pp.100ff.

<sup>viii</sup> It is observed by Dr P.S.Radhakrishnan that Prem Nazeer (1926-89) throughout his roles has made an 'Ideal-subject' appeal while Sathyan (1912-71) the other lead popular star of the period can more often be associated with an 'Other-subject' presentation.

<sup>ix</sup> Popular Hollywood films like Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves (1991) Director: Kevin Reynolds, Braveheart (1995) Director: Mel Gibson, Gladiator (2000) Director: Ridley Scott, The Patriot (2000) Director: Roland Emmerich, The Last Samurai (2003) Director: Edward Zwick, 300 (2006) Director: Zack Snyder all follows the mentioned formulaic representation namely; Separation — Initiation — and Return to its core. Globalization has entailed the success of Hollywood cinema in penetrating into foreign markets and dominating international film distribution networks. The integration of the world economy has, however, also brought other national cinemas to global prominence, including Chinese, Hong Kong, Indian, and other non-Western film industries emerging in the developing world that have been aided by transnational financing and production practices. Some of the non-West historic films of the last decade in this respect are Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Taiwan), Asoka (Hindi), Suriyothai (Taiwan), Lagaan (Hindi), Hero (China, Hong Kong), House of Flying Daggers(China, Hong kong), Curse of the Golden Flower (China), Mongol (Russia) and Jodhaa Akbar(Hindi). Each of these films are lavishly staged monumental spectacles, the stories of which build around anxieties of contested identity and moral standards and are usually linked to matters of homeland and belonging; their technological proficiency is so remarkable that it is often emulated by Hollywood. Though the film *Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja* was not able to make such global market appeal the formulaic representation, its technological proficiency and more importantly the aesthetic expression is akin to some of the historic genre films mentioned above and thus global experience.

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<sup>x</sup> Paul Willeman, “Anthony Mann: Looking at the Male,” *Framework*, 15–17, (summer 1981): 18. Friedrich Nietzsche found a similar appeal in epic literature as well. Writing about the “will to power” displayed in the Greco-Roman fascination with agonistic battle, he stresses “the visual stimulation of seeing muscular bodies in vigorous exertion, defying death and injury.” See Ekhart Koehne, Cornelia Eggleben, and Ralph Jackson (eds), *Gladiators and Caesars: The Power of Spectacle in Ancient Rome* British Museum Press, London, 2000, p. 47. For these observations see Robert Burgoine. “Bare life and sovereignty..., *Op.cit.*, p.87ff.

<sup>xi</sup> For instance in performing every heroic deeds in *Thacholi Ambu* (1978) the lead character *Ambu* (Prem Nazeer) is in participatory performance with other characters of the film namely *Kunjaly* (Vincent) and *Kutty* (Jayan). Even the heroin of the film *Kanni* (Unni Marry) rescues the hero *Ambu* from a do or dies deed. Similarly in *Mammakam*(1979) the character *Musa* (Jayan) gets similar attention due to his participation in various deeds along with the hero *Chandhutti* (Prem Nazeer). Similar instance in heroic deed can be sited from every Vadakkan *Pattu* genre films till 1980.

<sup>xii</sup> Jean Baudrillard, (2009), ‘The precession of simulacra’, in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 4th edn, edited by John Storey, Harlow Pearson Education. London, 2009.p.12-13. Also see William Pawlett, *Jean Baudrillard Again Banality*, Routledge Abingdon, Oxon, 2007 pp.70ff.

<sup>xiii</sup> John Story, *Cultural Theory and ...*, *Op.cit.*, p.189.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ramymond Willims, *Television*, first published 1974, Routledge, London, 2003 Rpt.p.59.

<sup>xv</sup> P.S.Radhakrishnan,*Charithrum*..., *Op.cit.*,pp.100ff.

<sup>xvi</sup> A programme named *Kadha Thudarunnu* broadcasted by a Malayalam channel *Mazhavil Manorama* on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2012 depicted the on and off screen life of actress Kaviyoor Ponnamma as one with ease.

<sup>xvii</sup> Role played by several genre of magazines in solidifying this image of Mammootty is been studied. For details in this regard see P.S.Radhakrishnan,*Charithrum*..., *Op.cit.*,pp.131-45. The differences and similarities in presenting the actor Mammootty as ‘real’ life Mammootty in films like No: 20 Madras Mail ([1990](#)) and One way ticket (2008) are also to be noted.

<sup>xviii</sup> The understanding of body develops in cultural studies through the reconnection of the body as a site of meaning. A semiotic approach can also be taken to the study of body .The body is also studied as ‘communication machine’; a key site at which culture and cultural identity is expressed and articulated. The mentioned body of Mammootty and the earlier noted Prem Nazeer’s body use the ‘body’ in relation to the body of the actors; the way how various gestures, mannerisms, interactions of actors/characters throughout certain popular films/roles had made appeals of various representations.

<sup>xix</sup> For instance Mammootty/ *Pazhasi Raja*’s relation and interaction with his counterparts; *Edachena Kunkan* ([Sarahkumar](#)), *Thalakkal Chandhu* (Manoj K Jayan) and *Kaiheri Ambu* ([Suresh Krishna](#)) is replica of relations portrayed in Hitler (1997), *Valyettan* (2000), Big B (2007) as big brother. Also the indulgence, interaction and body language involved with *Makkam* (Kanika) is typical to any Mammootty film and also the instance of English dialogue delivery is evident in many popular films of the actor like *Abhibashakante Casediary*(1995), *Narasimham*(2000) King(1995) and much many.