Waterscapes in the Celluloid: Illusory Gratification amidst Parched Reality

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Abstract

It has been long realized that water is an elusive fluid in the medium of films, and it has the power to express the hidden emotions. In this paper it is argued that such water-based narratives do have a 'virtual' interplay with audience who are feeling the 'lack', the absence and it is a kind of gratification for those who toil under this reality. The movie makers make use of images which will satisfy the audience for purposes which are more than one. The paper touches upon the multifarious dimensions of water in the socio-political arena and then focuses on how water becomes a fluidic entity which merges the visual giving a scopophilic sensation to the audience.

Keywords: celluloid, public sphere, waterscape, enwaterment.

Introduction

In various cinematic work, bodies of water have often been represented as romantic spaces where an imaginative and fantastic life can be discovered, encouraging critics to argue that the water-sites within such narratives function 'as the mise-en-sce`ne of desire and sexual liberation'. Water sites are predominantly represented as chaotic spaces beyond the rational plane of society, reflecting the unstable dualism found in local myths and folklore.

In the given context of the paper, scenes taken from Tamil are focused. The rural and semi-urban are often replete with traditional belief systems. The water, as it is going to be argued in this paper, is a precious commodity and this aspect has greatly influenced the film makers to project the folklore wherein gods and goddesses are part of the fertility ritual and water is considered sacred due to its scarcity.

Although such bodies of water frequently foreshadow a fertile, sacred realm, they also possess a darker side because on many film narratives the water could also signify darkness and death. In continuation with the pan Indian belief of the sacredness of watery places such as Ganga, with its all-pervasive presence, it is often considered as a source of fertility and salvation. Further, the fluidity of the film medium goes well with the nature of water as they create a substantive union for the cause of the ultimate image/meaning that is produced.

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Public Sphere and Water Resources

Water is generally viewed as part of common resource. It is often viewed as coterminous with the settlement of a village. The provisioning of water is often the legal responsibility of the administration. The committees constituted for such purposes draw their sustenance from the ecological significance of the community life in such contexts. Further, in the village public sphere, the potability of water depends on the quality of the "source village". Hence it is a common sight that woman folk come forward to draw water from distant villages. Such territorial margins become insignificant when it comes to sharing of water resources in public sphere. Water scarcity has spread to many parts of the world as population and consumption levels have increased against a fixed supply of renewable fresh water. As Sandra L. Postel (2000) states, "meeting the challenges water scarcity poses to food production, ecosystem health, and political and social stability will require new approaches to using and managing water. Greater efforts will be needed to reserve water for the maintenance of ecological functions and, where necessary, to return water to natural systems to restore those functions. Concerted efforts will also be needed to slow the growth in human demands for water".

It may be noted that water thus becomes more than a mere commodity. If it is just a commodity, then the use will be probably only for irrigational (commercial agricultural) purposes, industrial purposes, affluent needs such as recreational facilities. "Man's concern over water includes water quantity; its availability and volume, in time and place; and water quality, its physical, chemical, and biological condition, which directly affect its availability for use." (Hennigan 1969)

The popular perception is that water belongs to the 'commons', the public sphere, because water is a matter of basic right, a human right with all obligations to other species, as it sustains life. "Being an area without any rivers of importance, the southern part of the country is forced to harvest the rains and store the downpours from less than 30 days of contributing rainfall. This is the reason states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka have thousands of tanks, ponds, and channels - all artificial. The entire landscape is interspersed with water systems of all sizes, shapes, and type". (Seenivasan, 2016)

The reality regarding the availability of water to the public sphere is still a challenge and this paper may not fully deal with overcoming the shortage of water since the focus is on film and the projection of water. But one needs to state that much depends on decentralization of resources when it comes to the phase of planning. Satyajit Singh (2014) puts it succinctly; the need is to implement "appropriate technology, equitable distribution of developmental benefits and prioritized targeting of the poor, greater gender equality and sustainable use of resources".

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Further, water is also seen as a sacred resource. Eliot has referred to river as a "strong, brown god" in *Four Quartets*. Since time immemorial, the element of water has been associated with the 'great mother,' the one that sustains life on Earth. Aristotle focuses on the interplay between the properties of 'hotness and coldness, dryness and wetness' for sustaining the nature of the elements. In India the classical text *Puranānūru* refers to the preservation of water: "Those who construct dams so that the water collects/ on low ground in the field are assured, in this world, of glory!/ Those who build none will have no renown enduring in this world". (section 18) and "...there is a little bit of water/ from a red place, from a well dug into red-soiled ground/in a ravine, and the water is fit to drink. (section 319). In the Jewish and Christian tradition, "Darkness covered the deep and the Spirit of God hovered over the water" (Genesis 1: 2). In the New Testament, water is a means of purification, a factor of regeneration.

Throughout the traditional narratives such dualities of purification and contamination, life and death, transparency and opacity, blessing and curse, reformation and damnation exist. Still that binary prevails in blue water footprint and grey water foot print. The concept of "Water resources" implies focusing on the relationships between water and the human societies and questioning the various uses of the different type of resources (sea, streams, ponds, groundwater, ice). As Stephane Frioux (2014) opines, "Throughout several millennia, the representations of water drastically changed, evolving from a vision in which water was like a treasure, or a tool, given by divinities to men, to an increasingly anxious point of view, conscious of the non-renewable character of many sources of water and of the multiple risks associated with water pollution".

Interestingly, even in the Sangam literature, water harvesting is referred to extensively. Munneer Vizhavu (the festival of three waters) refers to the three waters that create the soil, nourish, and erode it. As Kavitha Muralidharan (2019) states, "Ancient Tamil literature had different terms to connote different types of water. Munneer refers to the sea – a convergence of water from rains, river and spring. The term also refers to its antiquity, implying that the sea was formed before the lands. Water from river was called Nanneer (good water) and water used for drinking purposes was called Inneer (sweet water)". "The emphasis on water is already evident in the earliest stratum of Tamil literature dated around the beginning of the Christian era. The poetic convention of the five tinais, areas of human geography, associates stages of love and war with geographical features. In no fewer than three of the five tinais, the mountainous region kuriñci, the fertile well-watered riverine zone marutam and the seashore neytal, bathing is cited as people's pastime" (Zvelebil: 1973). In Tamil films, there are films which treated scarcity of water as a central theme and they include *Thaneer Thaneer* (1981), *Desiya Geetham* (1998), *Karmegham* (2002)*, Kaththi* (2014), *Aramm* (2017) to name a significant few. Interestingly for creating water based visuals, the Tamil film makers often come to the neighbouring state Kerala (location at Athirappally water falls) and films like *Punnagai Mannan* (1986), *Raavanan* (2010) are made there.

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Marking the Water Sites

The water sites are considered as spheres of comfort and security. But they also stand for loss, dysfunction and death. Many film makers perceive the water body as an emblem of womb. The aesthetics of the medium of film merges with the waterscapes. It becomes a discursive site. Here boundaries are drawn, experiences are externalised and the fluidity of confinement is questioned. The fluid nature of rivers, which is in sharp contrast to the fixedness of landscapes, opens up the dynamics of spatial practices. The pleasure of watching the water bodies, especially documenting the fluidity, produces undeniably a form of art. Spectator merges with the visibility and exquisite transparency.

Anjelika Şimşek (2018) refers to scopophilia, i.e., excessive interest watching the performers in everyday scenes, conditions, acts of violence and privacy (quoted in Metz, 2004), and this is quite integral to the narrative. Water can visually produce multiple layers of meanings in consonance with dark deep human desires and dreams. The deep relationship that binds water with film produces a characteristic harmony and fluidity wherein the spectator voluntary submits himself/herself to the aquatic modes of expression. The highly charged up emotional atmosphere of the film narrative easily blends with the whirlpool created by the waterbody. Film makers have recognized this convenience created by this convergence. The language of film and the potential of water are no different. This semantic fluidity helps the film maker to convince the audience and the viewers in turn voluntarily submit to the flow of visual images. The fluid nature of rivers, virtually counter to the fixedness of landscapes, motivates film makers to visualize and to philosophize the nature of space.

Henri Lefebvre (2004) has proposed different types of space: i.e., "perceived space" (that of everyday social life), "conceived space" (that is theorized by planners, cartographers, and the law, for example), and "lived space" (as it exists imaginatively and is sustained through artistic practices). His "triple dialectic" encapsulates the multidimensional nature of sites. As Andrew Lothian (2021) states "The visual diversity or variety of the landscape is often an important component in generating scenic attractiveness. Visual diversity is the busyness of the scene, the combination of its landforms, land cover (trees and other vegetation), land use, presence of water, colors and textures. In a river context it is all of these plus the characteristics of the river itself – fast or slow flowing, wide or narrow, rapids or smooth, shallow or deep, clear or turbid."

A. Koskina and N. Hasanagas (2013) identify the water-related landscape values as enumerated in Spitalas (2000) They include:

1. The sound of water or water birds
2. The movement of rivers, waterfalls, waves, etc.
3. The colors of water and coasts

4. The reflections on the water surface
5. The possibility of expanding biotopes of certain species
6. The opportunities of emphasizing structural materials and lighting
7. The opportunities of environmental education

Enwaterment

Adriano D'Aloia (2012) uses the term 'enwaterment' to designate this unique phenomenon of water-based experience. From early days itself, films have realized the potential of water to convey the desires of human beings. By making use of multifarious techniques, films represent emotional intimacy, depression, fear and a whole lot of emotions. Through the technique of enwaterment, film makers conjoin the planes of psychology and cultural codes. The aquatic modes of expression help the film maker to make the spectator to get 'inside the water, a kind of 'embodying' experience, there by binding water and film viewer. They willingly permit themselves to be caught in the whirlpool of emotional experience. "Diving into water, for example, or sinking into a bath, we are not only in the realm of the audiovisual sensorium; all our senses, in fact all of our body, is encapsulated, surrounded. In that sense, it is a haptic experience, not merely an optical one" (Holmberg 2003, 132). It can provide the spectator to merge with the scene. Movies capture this water created illusion to perfection. This can be for stating something thematic- usually in terms of romance, tragedy or even social evils.

What is argued here is not just a film technique but a necessary creation of illusion of water. This waterscape is admired by millions of Tamil movie spectators. There is a kind of 'double illusion' working here. The real life of scarcity of water is gratified in the presence of the plentiful availability of water just as the thematic hero-gets-heroine central narrative. Even if a song sequence is set within the film narrative, the hero-heroine will have to make it out within this waterscape to make it all the more gratifying to the audience. This result in a mode of achievement in the fictional space created. The waters merge, infiltrate and satisfy the long drought drawn helpless viewer. One can discern a synesthetic perception, often engaging the visual and aural stimulation achieved by the medium.

A few examples can be given:

1. Experiencing water in a bodily, immediate, empathetic, and reflexive form. This locates the viewer to the long-range panoramic view of water bodies with community people around. This helps to create a collective water consciousness.
2. Water is a plane of separation and connection between two different but not incompatible worlds viz., the actual world and the fictional world. Generally this is quite subjective. Here the emphasis is on the on-screen associations.
3. The surface of water replicates the surface of the screen. It is a body-image view of the man or woman. Usually romantic or even dramatic but with perfect artistry of the camera crew, it can speak volumes about the embedded multilayered relations.

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4. Visual concretization of the dynamic properties of water. It can thematically represent a mental mode of expression. Water takes the centre stage and it vocalizes the shock, trauma or even a movement of time.

5. A liquid film style that calls for a liquid spectatorship. Generally underwater mode of representation. Here it is more submerged and subtextual.

Conclusion

The medium of films can convey in a deep sense a concept of illusory reality. This is very much evident in the way water is used for conveying the cinematic reality. It plays a crucial role in narrative development of the movie sequence. In Tamil films one can perceive a pattern of using water based narrative modes for gratifying an audience who find it difficult to obtain in real life. The audience merges with flow of the image which sustains the movement of the film as well as giving each one a psychological healing process. The fluid properties of water thus engage the spectator in a 'water-based relationship.'

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