

Fantasy Realism and Cultural Authenticity in Minnal Murali: Reimagining the Superhero Genre in Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract—The emergence of regional superhero cinema in India has significantly transformed the landscape of popular culture and film studies. Minnal Murali, directed by Basil Joseph, represents a landmark intervention in Malayalam cinema by combining fantasy realism with cultural authenticity. This paper critically examines how the film negotiates global superhero conventions while remaining deeply rooted in Kerala's socio-cultural milieu. Using qualitative textual analysis and cultural studies methodology, the study explores themes of locality, realism, folklore, humour, class identity, and moral conflict. The paper argues that the film succeeds because it indigenizes fantasy rather than merely imitating Western superhero aesthetics. Through its grounded narrative structure, regional language, village setting, and emotionally complex characters, the film creates a culturally resonant superhero discourse. The study contributes to scholarship on regional Indian cinema, OTT-era globalization, and genre hybridization in contemporary film narratives.

Index Terms—Fantasy Realism, Cultural Authenticity, Malayalam Cinema, Superhero Films, Regional Cinema, OTT Platforms, Minnal Murali, Basil Joseph

I. Introduction

Indian cinema has historically engaged with mythology, folklore, and fantasy; however, the superhero genre remained largely dominated by Hollywood productions such as Spider-Man, Batman Begins, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. While Hindi cinema experimented with superhero narratives through Krrish, regional industries seldom explored the genre comprehensively. Malayalam cinema, known for realism and socially grounded storytelling, entered this terrain with Minnal Murali.

Released globally on Netflix in December 2021, the film achieved international recognition for blending local storytelling traditions with fantasy-based superhero conventions. Critics observed that the film retained its rootedness despite engaging with a globally recognizable genre. This paper investigates how fantasy realism operates in the film and how cultural authenticity becomes central to its narrative success. The study focuses on the intersection between realism and fantasy in Malayalam cinema and evaluates how regional identity reshapes the superhero archetype.

II. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the representation of fantasy realism in Minnal Murali.
2. To examine how cultural authenticity is constructed through setting, language, and characterization.
3. To study the localization of the superhero genre in Malayalam cinema.
4. To understand the role of OTT platforms in globalizing regional narratives.

III. Research Questions

1. How does the film combine fantasy with realism?
2. In what ways does the film preserve cultural authenticity?
3. How does the film reinterpret Western superhero conventions within Kerala's cultural framework?
4. What role did digital streaming platforms play in the global reception of the film?

IV. Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach rooted in film studies and cultural theory. The film text serves as the primary source of analysis. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, reviews, online discussions, and critical essays related to Malayalam cinema and superhero narratives.

The study applies:

- Narrative analysis
- Cultural studies framework
- Genre analysis
- Semiotic interpretation

Critical reviews and audience reception data were examined to understand the film's cultural positioning.

V. Literature Review

Superhero cinema has evolved into a dominant global cinematic form. Scholars argue that superhero narratives often reflect national anxieties, morality, and ideological structures. Hollywood superhero films generally focus on urban spectacle, advanced technology, and individual exceptionalism. Malayalam cinema, in contrast, has traditionally emphasized realism, ordinary lives, and socio-political nuance. According to reviews at rotten tomatoes online platform dated 24 December 2021 of Minnal Murali, the film successfully integrates superhero elements into a realistic Kerala village setting.

As per Guru Somasundaram review on Onmanorama online platform dated 23 December 2021, critical discourse surrounding the film emphasizes its "hyper local superhero story" and rooted cultural

narrative. Audience discussions on Reddit similarly praise the film's grounded storytelling and relatable characters. The concept of fantasy realism refers to the integration of extraordinary events into believable social realities. Unlike escapist fantasy, fantasy realism depends on emotional and cultural plausibility. Minnal Murali demonstrates this through its rural setting, social relationships, humour, and class-based conflicts.

VI. Fantasy Realism in Minnal Murali

Fantasy realism emerges when fantastical elements coexist with realistic social environments. In the film, supernatural powers originate from a lightning strike, yet the narrative does not abandon everyday life. The protagonist Jaison remains a tailor struggling with migration aspirations, family pressures, and village politics.

The realism of Kurukkanmoola village becomes essential to the film's credibility. Rather than creating a futuristic metropolis, the film situates the superhero within tea shops, local churches, narrow roads, and social gossip networks. Critics noted that the film "never loses sight of the fact that it is set in a real place."

The humour and emotional texture of Malayalam cinema further strengthen fantasy realism. The superhero is neither invincible nor alienated from society. He is awkward, confused, and deeply embedded in community relationships. This approach differs significantly from the solitary heroism common in Western superhero cinema. The villain Shibu also embodies fantasy realism. His transformation is emotionally motivated through social exclusion, loneliness, and psychological trauma. Instead of presenting evil as abstract destruction, the narrative humanizes the antagonist through social suffering. Reddit discussions highlighted how the film carefully develops the villain's emotional arc.

VII. Cultural Authenticity and Regional Identity

One of the film's greatest strengths is its cultural rootedness. Malayalam language, local humour, social customs, and Kerala's rural geography create a strong sense of authenticity. Rather than imitating Western superhero aesthetics directly, the film indigenizes the genre. The use of regional dialects and village-centered storytelling allows audiences to identify emotionally with the characters. The narrative includes references to migration dreams, social mobility, caste-coded behaviors, and community-based morality. These elements create what may be termed "localized heroism."

The costume design of Minnal Murali further reflects regional authenticity. Unlike armored superhero suits associated with Hollywood, the costume is simple, handmade, and connected to local aesthetics. This grounded visual language enhances realism. The film also integrates Malayalam cinema's long-standing emphasis on family and community. Heroism is not defined solely through violence or spectacle but through

ethical responsibility toward society. Critics and audiences repeatedly praised the film for remaining “rooted to its culture.”

VIII. OTT Platforms and Global Visibility

The release of Minnal Murali on Netflix significantly contributed to its international visibility. OTT platforms have enabled regional Indian cinema to reach global audiences without dependence on theatrical distribution networks. Malayalam cinema has increasingly gained global recognition because of its realistic storytelling and culturally specific narratives. The success of the film demonstrates that regional authenticity can coexist with universal appeal. The OTT ecosystem also allowed the film to participate in global superhero discourse while maintaining linguistic and cultural specificity. Rather than diluting local identity for global consumption, the film uses local culture as its core strength.

IX. Technical Excellence and Visual Language

The cinematography by Sameer Thahir contributes significantly to the film’s fantasy realism. The visual composition balances realism with spectacle. Natural lighting, rural landscapes, and grounded framing techniques create a believable world before introducing supernatural elements. The background score by Shaan Rahman enhances emotional immersion without excessive dramatization. Reviewers praised the film’s technical competence and visual storytelling. Visual effects are employed selectively rather than excessively. This restraint prevents the film from becoming visually artificial and maintains emotional realism.

X. Comparative Analysis with Western Superhero Cinema

Unlike Hollywood superhero narratives centered on large-scale destruction and technological spectacle, Minnal Murali prioritizes emotional intimacy and community relationships.

Aspect	Western Superhero Films	Minnal Murali
Setting	Urban Metropolis	Kerala Village
Hero Identity	Exceptional Individual	Ordinary Common Man
Conflict	Global Threats	Social & Emotional Conflict
Visual Style	Spectacle-Oriented	Realism-Oriented
Cultural Base	Western Mythology	Kerala Cultural Context

Humour	Sarcastic/Action-based	Regional Situational Humour
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This distinction reveals how regional cinema adapts global genres without surrendering local identity.

XI. Findings

The study identifies the following major findings:

1. The film successfully merges fantasy with realism through grounded storytelling.
2. Cultural authenticity emerges through language, setting, costume, humour and social relations.
3. The superhero genre becomes localized through Kerala's cultural environment.
4. OTT platforms played a crucial role in internationalizing Malayalam cinema.
5. Emotional realism and community-centered narratives distinguish the film from Western superhero cinema.

XII. Conclusion

Minnal Murali represents a transformative moment in Malayalam cinema and Indian superhero storytelling. By integrating fantasy realism with cultural authenticity, the film demonstrates that regional narratives can achieve global resonance without compromising local identity.

The film's success lies not merely in technical sophistication or visual spectacle but in its ability to humanize the superhero through ordinary social realities. The narrative transforms the superhero figure from an unattainable icon into a culturally familiar individual shaped by Kerala's social landscape. The study concludes that fantasy realism and cultural authenticity are not contradictory modes but complementary cinematic strategies. Future regional Indian cinema may increasingly adopt this model to create globally accessible yet culturally grounded narratives.

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