

AARAM THAMPURAN – THE ARCHETYPAL CELEBRATION OF UPPER-CASTE HEGEMONY

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ABSTRACT

Films are an important form of mass communication in India today. Apart from being a mode of entertainment, films also shape the ideology in the mind of viewers because cinema is an ideological apparatus by nature of its very seamlessness. The audience does not see how the cinema creates ideology it invisibly renders and naturalizes it. This Paper tries to understand the celebration of upper caste hegemony and the way in which this is subliminally diffused into the society through popular Malayalam cinema “aaramthampuran”.

The paper deconstructs the cinema to understand the role of Brahmin hero with fair skin complexion, Kshatriya villain, glorification of caste hypocrisy in the field of Carnatic music, the condition of a Brahmin with dark skin complexion and portrayal of Muslims and Christians in the cinema.

KEYWORDS: *Hegemony, Discourse, Brahmins, Caste, Religion, Skin Complexion*

INTRODUCTION

“The spirit of the age is in favor of equality, though practice denies it almost everywhere” (Beteille, The promise of equality, 2001)Nehru remarks on the eve of India’s independence. Nehru being an optimist adds that “yet the spirit of the age will triumph”. Even after 70 years of independence, the spirit of the age has not triumphed (Beteille, The promise of equality, 2001). The contradiction between equality and the practice of inequality still remains in Indian society deeply and firmly (Beteille, 1999, p. 127) in different forms. Indian popular Cinema, be it from Bollywood or Kollywood continues to be a major site which sustains and nurtures the caste system and brahminical social order (Anand, 2003, p. 24).

The situation in the Malayalam film industry is not much different. The polysyllabic names of the heroes’ in Malayalam cinema itself hint the lineage of the characters towards the upper caste starting from MannaranthudiJayakrishnan, MeledathuRaghavan Nair etc (Harikrishnan, 2016).

This study is based on the Malayalam movie AaramThampuran (English: The Sixth Lord)1997 Malayalam movie scripted by Ranjith Balakrishnan and directed by Shaji Kailas. The story follows Jagannadhan (Mohanlal), a stranger who comes to a village named Kanimangalam and shifts the balance of power there and eventually comes to be known as "AaramThampuran", or the Sixth Lord. The movie revolves around the fight between two Kshatriya families the kolappulli

and the kanimangalam. People associated with kanimangalam palace in the movie are considered to be inclined to good while the people associated with the kolappulli are considered to be lean towards the demonic side. Rest of the characters in the movie is the poor vulnerable villagers and few administrative officers who are associated with the Kanimangalam palace, and the brutal henchmen of Kolappuli family. The villagers on the screen are just to strengthen the value of the good thampuran.

Aaramthampuran is proclaimed to be one of the must watch a movie of Mohanlal and considered as the all-time blockbuster in Malayalam cinema (The Times of India, 2016).

This study looks forth how the movie aaramthampuran positions different caste, class, and religion and celebrates the upper caste hegemony. The movie aaramthampuran wisely uses different sets of incidents within the movie to nurture and sustain the caste system and constructs a clear division between various classes in society.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative content analysis is administered to understand the differential treatments projected in the movie pertaining to the marginalized castes, religion and politics of skin color. The paper is framed on the basis of the Marxist theory of ideology and theory of power/knowledge by Michel Foucault.

BRAHMINS - SAVIOUR OF REST IN THE CASTE HIERARCHY

The festival of Kanimangalam temple is something which the villagers consider important. Kolappulliappan the Bad thampuran in the movie were not allowing the village people to take forward the festival due to his vengeance he has on the KanimangalamThampuran. Jagannadan (role played by Mohanlal) comes to the village and buys the Kanimangalam Palace. Since he is opposing the henchman of KolappulliThampuran and Kolappulliappan the villagers consider him as their new thampuran. There are instances were common people expecting the new owner of the Kanimangalam palace to take forward the festival.

It is interesting to note that, the people accepted Jagannadan not just because of the fact that, he stood up against the bad thampuran but also because of the mere fact that he portrays himself as a thampuran of some other family which he is not. Towards the end of the movie when the problems become worse, he himself reveals the fact that he is a Brahmin by birth. He says that lived as a pure Brahmin till the age of 18 and when his caste identity became a barrier to work in a tea shop he removed his Brahmin identity by throwing away his sacred thread in Yamuna river.

A double tired nurturing of the cast is done through this dialogue. One, he is clearly telling that work at a tea shop are meant for people in the lower class of the community at the same time it gives a connotation that, the Brahmin's are not supposed to do such work.

In the movie, Jaganandan is saving the villagers, which includes Dalits the intermediate class and at the same time, Jagannadan is also saving UnnimayaKrishnavaramaThampurana and Subhatha who are Kshatriyas. Here Jagannadana Brahmin is saving the entire village and defeats the bad Thampuran.

By portraying a Brahmin as the savior of the rest in the hierarchy, the association between Brahmin as Powerful and the rest in the society as vulnerable is reinforced and becomes an accepted common sense in the society through the film. Common sense as Antonio Gramsci points out is the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world that has become “common” in any given epoch (Gramsci, 1996). The existing norm of Brahminic personae which is the intermediately between the god and the masses (Quigley, 1999) is being reinforced through the movie. In fact, Jagannadhan played the role of the priest who takes forward the festival of the temple and thus saving the people. Through this, a Brahmin is again raised to the elevated position of a powerful priest and the rest of the sections in the society as helpless.

THE HOLY THREAD – AN OBSTACLE FOR JOB!

In the movie, Jagannathan tells that, he lived as a pure Brahmin till the age of 18 and when his caste identity became a barrier to work in a tea shop he removed his Brahmin identity by throwing away his sacred thread in Yamuna river.

The scene again shows the hypocrisy of the upper class in the cinema. The reason why he threw away his sacred thread is because that was a barrier for him to work in a tea shop. Which means he is clearly telling that such works are meant for people in the lower class of the community or the Brahmin's are not supposed to do such work.

Even though the dialogue is meant to portray the hard times the protagonist had to undergo, this dialogue could create a stereotypical image of the caste that is portrayed.

UPPER CASTE AND THE AFFILIATION TO CARNATIC MUSIC

T.M. Krishna is widely regarded as a genius who has shaken the foundations of the Carnatic music world. In his interview with Telegraph magazine tells that, “Carnatic music is a Brahmin-dominated male chauvinistic world” (Swamy, 'Carnatic music is a Brahmin-dominated male chauvinistic world', 2014)

In the movie AaramThampuran, this concept is seen but not very evident. in the movie, Jagannadhan's friends along with Jagannadhan asks Mangalam (Role played by KuthiravatamPappu) to sing a song, which he couldn't. The caste of Mangalam is not been evident in the movie but, the style of dressing and his appearance gives an insight that Mangalam is not from the upper class. Mangalam tells that he can sing only if he gets a harmonium. Nambeesan who is also portrayed as a common man who does not belong to the upper class suggests that Krishna Varma has a harmonium. He then asks Krishna Varma his harmonium to take it to the place where Jagannathan and other people are drinking. Krishna Varma tells that the harmonium something important to him and Unnimaya tells Nambeesan that, harmonium can't be taken to a place like that where people are drinking. Ezhuthachan also tells that he can go ask for harmonium from Krishna Varma were Jagannathan then blocks it.

What has to be noted here is how class hypocrisy has been portrayed through music. Mangalam was not able to sing, Ezuthachan and Nambeeshan who are common people were willing to take harmonium to the durbar where they were drinking and they were not able to sing. Even though Jagannathan insisted to take the harmonium to the durbar first he then asks others to leave the matter. Krishna Varma who belongs to the upper class of the society and a scholar in music values music and due to financial constraints sells the harmonium. Unnimaya who is the daughter of the 5thThampuranDathan also

portrayed as someone who knows the value of music and she goes back to take the harmonium back. And Jagannadhan who is a Brahmin is portrayed as a man with immense knowledge in Carnatic as well as Hindustani Music when he sings the famous song Harimuraliravam.

Here people who are not from the upper class of the society are portrayed as having no respect for music or who don't value music. While Krishna Varma and Unnimaya and Jagannathan who belongs to the upper-class respects and values classical music. There are few more dialogues which make the element of music concentrated to the upper class. LaxmiThampuratti who is the real owner of the palace is not shown in the movie but it is said that Krishna Varma was invited to the palace by her to teach music to the children in the palace. Jagannathan himself tells that the base of music was thought to him by his mother (Nair, AaramThampuram, 1997). Since Jagannathan and his father are Brahmins it could be assumed that his mother also should have been a Brahmin. Which again shows the concentration of music to the upper class of the society.

Here a clear differentiation between overt and covert is been portrayed. The people belonging to the upper class of the society are inclined and good in arts and music while the subalterns have no relation with art or music.

This is again enforcing the existing stereotype related to Carnatic music which TM Krishna points out in his article in EPW that, in the different realms of Carnatic music, namely teaching, performing, research, audiences, and the spaces, it is the Brahmins that predominate in all of these (Krishna, 2018, p. 118).

THE CONDITION OF A BRAHMIN WITH BLACK SKIN COMPLEXION

The role played by Kalabhavan Mani is an important aspect of the movie. Kalabhavan Mani who is playing the role of a brahmin in the movie. Two aspects of this brahmin character are that the character has got black skin complexion and at the same time he is mentally retarded. The character himself in the movie claims that he has learned all the ceremonial rituals but there is no use in that because at the end of the day he will be termed as useless by other people. It is also seen in the movie that, the Brahmin with this skin complexion also likes to smoke a cigarette.

It is said that certain colors are associated with four varnas - White with Brahmins and Black with shudras (Hutton, 1963, p. 66). In the same way, the Brahmin with dark skin complexion is equated to the color of shudra and treated disrespectfully. This shows the stereotype related to color portrayed in the movie. A person even if he is a Brahmin by birth is having a black skin complexion he will have some disability.

THE MAGICAL NEGROES AND THE MUSLIM EQUATION

The role of bappu is also an important factor in the movie. Bappu who belongs to the Muslim community plays a supporting role in the movie. The role of Bappu in the movie is to give financial support to the upper-class protagonist. What is important here is that he not expecting anything in return. Even though this shows the altruistic attitude of the character, this gives a subliminal message that the role of this character is to serve the upper-classmen.

Here the concept of magical negro could be applied. In the article titled Cerise L. Glenn in his study titled The power

of black magic: the magical negro and white salvation in the film how black people are stereotyped in films the authors quote K Anthony Appiah and defines magical negroes. Magical Negro is defined as “the notable good-hearted man or women” who’s good sense pulls the white character through a crisis (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009)

Here also the same effect is seen. Bappu is a good-hearted man whose good sense pulls the upper-class character through a crisis. For Jagannadan the crisis must have been the money needed to take forward the festival. Bappu gives him the money and helps him.

In the same article, the author says that the authors state that the black characters use their powers to help the white characters but do not utilize them to help themselves. Here Bappu is not using the money for his purpose he is giving it to the betterment of the upper-class protagonist. and as the authors say This creates a stereotype that the primary function of black is to use their gift or power to please white characters or to aid them with their problems (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009), what portrayed in AaramThampuran may create a stereotype that the function of this religious minority is to aid the upper class with their problems.

It is not the only time that Shaji Kailas and Ranjith combination has constructed a Muslim man to aid the upper caste hero. CI Habeeb in the movie Narasimham is the best example to show this.

This shows that the role of a Muslim man in the society is to aid the Upper caste man resisting this section of the society to rise up and come to the forefront.

THE BUSINESS PEOPLE

The movie has just two Christian characters, Abey Mathew and James. Abey Mathew in the movie is a successful businessman. But he will have a clash with Jagannathan due to the unethical business deal that he has done. The tag line for Aby’s company given in the movie is ‘The Business people’ and this is shown in tight close-up twice. An instance where the Christians are stereotyped as businesspeople. Jagannathan mentions that Abey’s grandfather was also a business man can teach Abey Mathews ethics in business. In the climax scene when Nandakumar tells him to stay here in Kanimagalum Palace and come to Mumbai to visit him, Jagannathan tells that, he will come when new Aby Mathews makes problems which could be interpreted that, people belonging to this community are problem makers.

Aaramthampuran is not the last time were Christians are portrayed as Business people. In the movie Sprit 2012 directed by Ranjith Balakrsihnan, the scriptwriter of the movie aaramthampuran their numerous instances that project the business identity and the unethical business practice of this community.

Francis W Alexander in his article stereotyping as a method of exploitation in film explains how the majority race will use stereotype to hold down a minority race and how this is used in the movies of yesterday and it being used in the movies of today and what black people must do to get ridthemselves from such stereotyping. The author claims that the common stereotypes of the society tend to be the copies of the mass media of the communication and the mass media purposely stereotype the exploited to keep it down and satisfied (Alexander, 1976).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As Michel Foucault points out, the set of procedures which produce knowledge and keep this knowledge in circulation can be termed as 'episteme' (Mills, Michel Foucault, 2003). The knowledge produced is called as discourse (Nayar, 2008). Foucault argues that in every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected and redistributed by a certain number of procedures to gain mastery (Foucault, 1981).

There are sets of procedures that could be seen in the movie that produce knowledge within the spectator. Cinema exerts such an influence in the State that cinematic representation of a class or caste practically results in a form of codification, and a lot of the time, some lazy stereotypes are codified (Rangan, 2015). The movie portrays the conflict between the subalterns and the dominant cast. It is portrayed that when a conflict arises between the subalterns and the dominant caste, the subalterns had no way to oppose or react against the dominant caste. For 16 long years, the subalterns of the village had to sacrifice struggle and tolerate the hypocrisy of the dominant caste people of the Kolappuli Palace. The subalterns were able to speak only after the arrival of the Upper caste hero Jagganadhan.

The movie creates a discourse that for the subalterns it is impossible to save themselves from the torture and the hypocrisy of the upper-caste people in the society and if they have to speak out they must need the support of a man from upper caste background. The role of Bappu the Muslim character in the movie also depicts the same notion that the role of a certain minority group is to serve the upper caste man. Even though he is rich enough he can't do anything of his own. In the case of art to the same discourse is being promoted that only an upper-classman will have the talent for music. The retardation of a Brahmin with dark skin complexion also points out to the stereotype related to skin color that the fair complexion is superior. The upper-class protagonist in the movie is given an elevated position and he is the savior of the rest of the society. By these ways, the movie is celebrating the archetypal positioning of Upper Caste and creating a discourse.

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