

The Dwarfed Despots: The Modern Portrayal of Casteism in Malayalam Cinema with Reference to the Movies *Puzhu* and *Malayankunju*

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Abstract – India is a land that was handicapped by casteism even in the early years of twenty-first century. Current progressive Kerala, a small state in the south of India, has adopted a nuanced approach where casteist bigotry is laughed at rather than lauded. The art reflects life when the caste bigots in the chosen movies *Puzhu* and *Malayankunju* are portrayed as psychotic and neurotic respectively. Space theory is not a new approach but it is effective in showcasing how casteism is viewed in the modern society. Michel Foucault's theory of Heterotopia that he has discussed in the paper is used not to argue that casteism does not exist, as it very obviously does, rather to shift the focus from the criminal acts committed by the despots wielding their sceptre of caste supremacy to the way they are perceived by people occupying the same spaces.

Index Terms – Casteism, Foucault, *Malayankunju*, *Puzhu*.

I. INTRODUCTION

The country of India sadly is one of the few nations that have culturally and generationally witnessed discrimination of its citizens based on caste. This nearly heathenish system has its tentacles wrapped tightly around the varied communities of Kerala, the small state south of the nation. The modern society of Kerala would like to live in the fool's paradise presuming caste-based violence where people of certain castes are discriminated and abused by certain other privileged castes solely on a baseless and incriminating social hierarchy to be a thing of the past, but the reality is harrowing. Apart from the covert displays of everyday casteism there have been recent reports of people ranging from PhD guides and school teachers to police training camp authorities and government officials exercising their power to deprive lower caste citizens of their dignity, employment, and economic well-being.

Historically, casteism has been portrayed as a part of life rather than an anomaly in Malayalam cinema. The current generation of film makers and writers though are taking it upon themselves to bring a change to this unfair system. The researcher intends to analyse the unique portrayal of casteist men in the movies *Puzhu* and *Malayankunju* to show how the belief in caste system in the current times is a state of oddity or even social abnormality. The men who partake in these acts of casteism and caste-based violence are no more deemed the norm but are portrayed as a recluse or as paranoia. The garb of familial love that they believe to be forcing them to partake in these acts are stripped down to reveal the true monstrosity that dwell beneath.

The first movie taken for analysis is the 2022 movie *Puzhu* directed by the debutant director Ratheena. The story by Harshad and Suhas-Sharfu is brilliantly supported by the cinematography of Theni Eshwar. It talks about the life of the upper-caste Brahmin IPS officer Kuttan, his estranged sister Bharathi and her husband, the theatre artist Kuttappan who is from an oppressed caste. Kuttan is a casteist bigot who takes it upon himself to harm and kill people from oppressed castes taking advantage of his position of power as a rich and affluent man.

Kuttan feels that he is constantly hunted down by people whom he has harmed in the past. He behaves in a neurotic way and even doubts his young son of attempting to harm him. He is portrayed as a psychotic person who due to his intense hatred for people whom he deem lower than him in caste, even experiences bouts of paranoia. Kuttan who was already angry with his sister and her husband gets more agitated when they start living in his apartment building. Kuttan gets to know that Bharathi was pregnant and he could not handle the thought of his family genes intermingling with that of a lower caste man. He kills both of them despite them extending a hand of friendship during a hard time in the name of honour. He is arrested and sent to jail for his crimes.

Malayankunju, the second movie taken for analysis, is also a 2022 release which was directed by Shajimon Prabhakar. Mahesh Narayanan wrote the script and did the cinematography. It talks about the life of Anil Kumar aka Anikuttan, a service mechanic who despises lower caste people. His father hung himself when his sister Sandhya eloped with her lover from a lower caste, the day before her wedding. Since then, Anikuttan grows neurotic and shows bigotry even towards a small child belonging to a lower caste.

II. ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION

Anikuttan refuses to evacuate to the nearby school during a landslide warning because he is uncomfortable sharing a living space with lower caste people. His behaviour comes out as neurotic and his internalised casteism is visible through his misplaced anger towards circumstances. His house falls apart and he gets trapped in a giant abyss during the landslide. He through sheer grit and brute force comes out alive only with the help of the cry of the baby girl, whom he was earlier irritated with, leading him to safety. His experience changes him and the love for the baby, Ponni, that he feels in the end of the film frees him of his wrong convictions, resentment and casteist bigotry.

Michel Foucault's theory of Heterotopia can be deployed to show how the text portrays the protagonists as men with shades of grey, depicting them as abnormal is a move in the right direction as the tradition of Malayalam cinema is infamously supportive of casteism and caste-based discrimination. Etymologically, the word 'hetero' in Greek means other and 'topia', space. Foucault, in his paper titled "Des Espace Autres" which was later translated to English as "Of other Spaces" by Jay Miskowiec, describes Heterotopias as spaces where norms of human behaviour remain suspended. These spaces have undesirable elements like power play and disparities that prevent them from becoming a utopia making them mere approximations or as the name suggests, other spaces. Heterotopia of Crisis, Heterotopia of Deviation, Heterotopia of Juxtaposition, Heterotopia of Time, Heterotopia of Ritual or Purification and Heterotopia of Illusion and Compensation are the six types of heterotopic spaces that humans occupy according to Foucault along with the rare space called the Foucauldian Ship where there is no power inequality.

The first of the six heterotopias is the heterotopia of crisis. This is a space occupied by individuals who are in a state of, mostly emotional, crisis. Menstruation homes, honeymoon quarters, and hostel rooms are good examples of heterotopia of crisis. Heterotopia of deviation refers to the spaces occupied by individuals whose behaviour has deviated from the usual cultural or socio-political norms of the society. Examples of heterotopia of deviation include jails, terrorist camps and psychiatric wards. There is heterotopia of juxtaposition where several spaces get brought together or juxtaposed in one specific area. Examples of heterotopia of juxtaposition include a conference hall where delegates from several countries have gathered or a garden where species of plants from various parts of the world are raised. Heterotopia of time is a space which captures a slice of time; where time stands still. Examples of heterotopia of time include architectural museums, renaissance painting exhibitions and libraries. Heterotopia of ritual or purification are spaces that may look easily accessible but actually require the performance of a ritual or a purification process to enter. An example of heterotopia of ritual or purification is a temple where one has to wash his or her feet before entering or a public urinal where one has to undergo the ritual of paying a small amount as an entrance fee. Heterotopia of illusion provides for the people who are put in this space a sense of illusion, tampering with their actual state of mind. Brothels where prostitutes fake love or theme park rides which inflict fake danger are examples of the same. Heterotopia of compensation creates an alternate space as if to compensate or commemorate the absence of the original space. The isolated colonies where outcast people live and memorials for the dead are examples of this type of heterotopia.

Foucault also mentions an additional heterotopia which is famously called as the Foucauldian Ship. This space boasts of equality like a ship kept afloat by an equal number of oarsmen rowing on both sides. These spaces will be devoid of powerplay making them quite rare. The room shared between a couple in love who are equal partners in their relationship is an example of this type of heterotopia.

Both the movies chosen for analysis have the titular characters who exhibit casteism but their behaviour which would have been revered in olden times is shown as disturbing and abnormal. The spaces that the characters occupy shapes their behaviour but also how they are being viewed. Casteism which has been part of the Malayalee culture is seen as an abnormality here because the spaces that the participants occupy even changes the culture that people often mistake to be reverential and unchangeable.

In the movie *Puzhu*, Kuttan has been committing brutalities to lower caste people utilising his power as an IPS officer. He views them as vermin, the titular "Puzhu", and goes to all extents to stay away from them. He does not allow lower caste people to enter his apartment and even tries to stop them from renting flats in the building. He is not comfortable with his son Kichu playing with children from other castes and reprimands him for making friendships with kids near the apartment. He maintains his home like a Brahminical fortress which makes the home which should have been a heterotopia of Foucauldian ship a heterotopia of deviation for his son.

In *Malayankunju* Anikuttan has a lot of resentment towards lower caste people because of one incident. He does not eat food served from the same bowl as lower caste people and does not allow them to enter his house even to do menial jobs. He would not let his mother interact with lower caste people or even dandle the newborn next door. She is irritated by his behaviour but does not reprimand him, knowing the past. The house becomes a heterotopia of deviation for the mother instead of the heterotopia of Foucauldian ship that it was supposed to be.

In both the movies the people living with the protagonists are deeply affected by their casteism despite not being casteist themselves. Kichu despises his father and his surroundings because of the heterotopia of deviation that he is confined to. Anikuttan's mother faces serious isolation and anger towards her son because of the heterotopia of deviation that she is confined to. Both of them are not in power to change or positively influence the protagonists. So, the familial bond or the relationship between the parent and child sours in both cases.

A common issue that triggers both Anikuttan and Kuttan is that both their sisters married men from lower castes. Anikuttan would not even look at his sister Sandhya's child's face even after years of ostracising her from the family. He restricts his mother from meeting her grandchild and makes sure that the Sandhya is often reminded of the fact that their father

passed away from trauma caused when she eloped with a lower caste man. Kuttan enters a murderous fury when he realises that his sister Bharathi married a lower caste man. He also ostracises her from the family and does not allow her to even meet his son. Kichu is suffocated within the walls of his father's house and would have loved to be in the company of his aunt who had recently moved into the same apartment building.

In both the cases the sisters act as a catalyst for the men to overtly exhibit casteism. In *Malayankunju*, the house that Sandhya grew up in became a heterotopia of deviation for her, a space that is not her home but that of exclusion. She approaches the space with caution and fear and she is marked as an outsider. It is also a reminder of rigid norms and unnecessary restrictions she lived with prior to her marriage to the man she loves. Bharathi faces a similar yet more violent situation in *Puzhu*. She was beaten and shamed before she was unceremoniously thrown out of the house she grew up in. Her house and Kuttan's apartment become a space which she feared making it a heterotopia of deviation. Anikuttan and Kuttan considers their sisters' act of marrying according to their will as an act of rebellion and shame instead of their fundamental right and take active role in shifting their home from a heterotopia of Foucauldian ship where these women are valued and respected to a heterotopia of deviation where they fear for their life and dignity.

Casteism has been ingrained in the minds of both Anikuttan from *Malayankunju* and Kuttan from *Puzhu* despite the people surrounding them being refined in their thoughts and actions. Anikuttan behaves as if lower caste people pollute him and his surroundings if they enter his space. He looks visibly uncomfortable and throws down a bowl of curry which was passed around in a local eatery and pretends it was a mistake. He did this because some lower caste people have also sampled the dish and touched the bowl. He thinks that he made it look like an accident but other people do not view it that way. The talk behind his back and think he has mental issues. His behaviour is neurotic and abnormal making the space a heterotopia of illusion instead of a heterotopia of compensation where Anikuttan thinks he has executed his caste privilege but is laughed and mocked at behind his back.

Kuttan has committed severe caste-based violence during his time as an IPS officer and is still a very dangerous man. He makes it a point to ensure that apartments in his building are not sold to lower caste people to make sure that they do not enter his space. His sister Bharathi sublets an apartment from a friend who was a Brahmin. Kuttan had tried his best to throw her and her husband out of the building but the legal protection aided them from his intrusion. Kuttan is in constant fear that someone is trying to kill him and it could be someone from the lower caste. He thinks of them like a toxic virus trying to end his life and goes on all extent to keep them away from his space. He too, like Anikuttan, thinks he is exercising his caste privilege but his behaviour is seen by others and even his own son as psychotic and toxic. The space he inhabits thus becomes a heterotopia of illusion instead of the heterotopia of compensation where he thinks he is respected but is terrified of and hated by the people around him including his own son, Kichu.

III. CONCLUSION

Malayalam cinema used to normalise caste atrocities by brushing paste them or glorifying them shamelessly. The movies *Malayankunju* and *Puzhu* are steps in the right direction where caste atrocities and bigotry are called out and criticized. They are often laughed at, feared or hated by the other participants of the spaces that they occupy including their own family. The aforementioned incidents show how the characters are seen as antagonists and criminals instead of the usual glorification that existed in this realm. It also sheds light on the fact that caste violence and discrimination is rampant in the current society even in the realms occupied by educated and successful individuals.

The paper sheds light into the nuanced portrayal of casteism and bigotry and how Malayalam cinema is showing progress in this very niche area. The study also paves way for further research where studies based on psychoanalysis can be conducted on the lead characters of the chosen films. Research based on poststructuralism, gender studies, and Cultural studies can also be conducted on the movies discussed in the paper. A postmodern approach towards the new wave of transition in Malayalam cinema can also be conducted considering the chosen films as a representation of the fast-paced, ever evolving change.

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