

THE DEPICTION OF THE MARGINALIZED CHILDHOOD IN THE MALAYALAM FILM *KARUP*

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Abstract

*Childhood is not a 'homogeneous state of development' for all children across the globe. Many childhoods have been marginalised in literature and mainstream films. My paper will look into how childhoods have been projected in the Malayalam film *Karup* and how the film *Karup* deals with the theme of marginalised childhood. The paper will closely examine the conflicts and experiences of the film's young protagonist, a victim of a caste, class, colour conscious society. It will analyse how the movie attempts to break stereotype and create a consciousness among audiences to 'annihilate caste' and preserve the indigenous culture of the land.*

Keywords

Childhood, Marginalized, Caste, Indigenous Culture, etc.

Full Article

Problem Statement:

Childhood cannot be understood in a 'monolithic way' (Menon 1) for all children across the globe. Many childhoods have been marginalized in literature and mainstream films. Previous scholarships have largely focused on white, upper-caste, male, western childhoods whether it be a research or publication of children's books or films. Childhoods of the lower caste, the Adivasis, have been marginalized and rarely portrayed in films and stories. This research aims to address the gap by specifically focusing on the marginalized childhood of an Adivasi child using the critical insights of Dr. Ambedkar, KK Kochu, Narayana Guru, C. K. Janu and of Gramsci.

Thesis Statement:

The Malayalam film *Karup* examines the theme of marginalisation of an Adivasi child in a school by the teachers and peers who differentiates him from other students in terms of colour, caste, class and culture.

Research Questions:

- ✓ How is childhood projected in the movie *Karup*?
- ✓ How does the movie *Karup* help us understand the marginalization of a child in the classroom?
- ✓ How are stereotypes that still exist against the lower castes in a school in the 21st century portrayed in the movie?

Research Methodology:



The basic research method will be an analytical approach. The selected movie will be the primary text for analysis. Secondary sources will consist of academic articles, books on Dalit identity, interview with the co-producer of the film. Essays and books by renowned researchers like KK Kochu, Dasan, Dr. Ambedkar, C. K Janu will provide the theoretical framework. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony and how dominant ideologies shape education will also be examined. Cesare Zavattini, the Italian neo-realist's film theory will be applied to analyse *Karup*.

Literature Review:

Malayalam cinema is popular for exploring different themes. But as the filmmaker Bijukumar Damodaran in the Hindu newspaper on July 7, 2018 notes that Malayalam cinema has failed to engage with Dalit issues. No film has yet been made in Malayalam on the Muthanga or Chengara struggles led by Adivasis and Dalits or a biopic on people like C.K. Janu.

The book *The Oxford Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing* explores how “Kerala identity is informed by an ‘othering’ of ‘lower caste life’ and everything and anything that did not belong to the ‘lower’ caste became the mainstream” (Dasan, 282). The book also highlights how the word “Dalit appeared in the socio-cultural milieu of Kerala only in the late 1970’s” as the state “camouflaged and silenced many discourses not acceptable to the ‘hegemoniser’” (Dasan, xiii).

EP, Manju's Ph.D thesis on *Affective archives caste and contemporary Malayalam cinema* discusses active gaze and passive gaze (Mulvey, 1975), oppositional gaze (Hooks, 1992), panopticon (Foucault, 2011), unseeability (Guru, 2009) and invisibilizing gaze (Roberts, 2016) to study cinema within cinema as a historiography of cinema.

Introduction:

Childhood is an important phase in the life of an individual. It has often been romanticised as an ideal, innocent phase with no worries or tension. Many children's texts and films in India usually foreground the experiences of the childhood of the urban, educated, middle and upper class children which are considered the norm and all other childhoods are marginalised or not considered worthwhile for any kind of a serious study. The Malayalam film *Karup* depicts the story of a marginalised Adivasi child in the spaces of the school environment. This depiction foregrounds the issue that caste is still embedded in the psyche and as “Ambedkar argued that in India there are two nations: Puruskrit Bharat (ideal, pure India) and Bahiskrut Bharat (actual, polluting India)” is a living reality (Guru, 34) Schools which should be the ideal place for learning becomes the site of politics, bias and stereotypes.

Context of the film *Karup*:

Karup is a Malayalam film and apart from its uniqueness in its theme and approach, it also leaves a mark in the history of film production as “it is the first Indian feature film to have been made entirely by school children.” (“Film Produced”.) “It was in 2017 that the Nayanar Smarak Government Higher Secondary school in Vengad, Kannur District, Kerala approached the award-winning director, T. Deepesh with a proposal to make a film” (“Film Produced.”) The film has been shot in Kannur and Wayanad district and the child actors had been chosen following an acting camp. The film gained recognition internationally by winning the Druk International Film Festival in 2019. The co-producer of the film, Mr Shinith, in a telephonic interview with the researcher stated that the film *Karup* was inspired by John Abraham, ‘ ‘ a Malayalam film maker, short story writer and screenwriter known for his revolutionary film movement, the Odessa Collective which aimed to create a people's cinema through collaborative efforts and non-commercial distribution’. Through crowd funding, the NSS Unit of Nayanar Smarak Government Higher Secondary school collected the required amount to produce the film. The film was not accepted to be screened in movie theatres and like the Odessa collective, which aimed at people's



cinema, the members of the film unit popularized the film by personally approaching and screening the film in schools, colleges and libraries in Kerala through mobile vans.

The director T. Deepesh in an interview to The Indian Express had stated the context of how the film came into form. He had been approached to make a film by the “NSS students of Nayanar Smarak Government Higher Secondary school. But the real idea of the film came during a trip to a hillock”. Deepesh noticed a dark complexioned thirteen-year-old tribal boy happily swimming in the water. The boy was happy all alone and when the director asked the boy why he did not go to school, he sadly said that that ‘Everyone had ostracised’ him because of his colour’. This meeting with the young tribal boy kept the director ruminating about the “pressing social issue of racial discrimination faced by marginalised tribal kids” and thus the idea of the film *Karup* meaning ‘Black’ was conceived. The caste system, in all its subtleties, exist even-today in the 21st century and he decided to discuss the relevant theme of the marginalisation of the lower caste child on the big screen.

Caste Politics in Kerala:

Dasan in *The Oxford Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing* notes that the “Dalit cosmogony in Kerala is still not understood in all its subtleties” (Dasan, xxviii). In fact in literary writings and popular media, “Kerala identity is informed by an othering of the lower-caste life” (Dasan, 282) It has always been “savarna aesthetics lauded as the literary mainstream” (Dasan, 282). The poet Poikayil Appachan has aptly said “About my race...I see no alphabet”. (Dasan, 4) Malayalam Cinema also has a history of othering Dalit issues, concerns and even actors. In The first film Vigathakumaran, in 1928 (*The Lost Boy*), the actress P. K. Rosy, a Dalit Christian was brutally tortured for playing a Nair woman’s role. The caste system, in all its subtleties, exist even-today in the 21st century in a progressive state like Kerala

The film *Karup* released in 2019, discusses the relevant theme of the marginalisation of the lower caste child in an ironically progressive space of an educational institute. The irony is that leaders like Dr Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, Ayyankal. Narayana Guru, articulated the need for education to empower the lower caste children. But formal education is still a dream for many Dalit and tribal children. It becomes difficult due to power structures that dominate lives.

Film Theory by Zavattini:

Cesare Zavattini, the Italian neo-realist and film theorist who wrote more than 126 screen plays including the popular film *The Bicycle Thief*, in his essay *Some Ideas on the Cinema* emphasized “a documentary style of film realism, the use of nonprofessional actors, real locations as opposed to studio sets.” The scenes in *Karup* are not shot in the studios and have a natural setting that makes it realistic. It has also non-professional actors where the child actors were selected and trained after an audition by the director T. Deepesh. Nandu, the main protagonist of the film is a non-actor who belongs to the Paniyar community. Zavattini advocated “an avoidance of dramatic or intrusive editing, and contemporary, everyday subject matter about the common man”. *Karup* realistically visualises the life of an ordinary Adivasi child in a school.

Analysis of the movie, *Karup*:

The first shot in the movie is a long wide shot that captures Nandu, the protagonist at the centre of the frame in a green canvas. The central space is also occupied by a herd of buffaloes with a traditional, melodious music in the background. Right from the first shot, the scenes capture the visual imagery of Nandu in deep connection with nature. Nandu’s reluctance to go to school and his silence in the class reveals a larger malaise of the discriminatory policies of the upper caste teachers who discriminate on the basis of caste, colour and class. When Nandu expresses disgust



about his black colour and discrimination that he faced in school, it is his grandfather who pacified that were at least not slaves now. Nandu's grandfather refers to their ancestors who were slaves and had to toil like buffaloes without any self-respect.

But as Gramsci argued "the ruling class in a capitalist society maintains its power not only through economic control and the threat of force but also through the establishment of a hegemonic culture that shapes the beliefs, values, and norms of the entire society. This hegemonic culture is propagated through various institutions, such as education, media, religion, and cultural institutions, which serve to reinforce the dominant ideology and marginalize alternative world views." (Sardar, 1). Nandu is often mocked within the school precincts by his peers and teachers for his dark black colour and stereotyped as "inferior, unintelligent, uncivilized" as he belonged to backward community.

When the literature teacher waxed eloquently poetic lines about the black crow, some of the students immediately compared the crow with Nandu. It was a perfect time to have a conversation about inclusion. But apart from silencing the class, the teacher made no efforts to discuss about racial discrimination, caste, its history, the leaders who strived to abolish it and the dangers of still practising it.

Prof. Geetha Nambissan points ' ' to a major problem in Indian schooling where there is complete silence over the issue of caste inequality and graded subjugation of Dalits on many accounts of life' (Krishna, 59). She notes that "schools join with the society in thinking that caste is a metaphysical issue and it is the destiny or fate of the Dalits that they are born as untouchables and nothing can be done to alter their situation in society" (Krishna, 59).

Nandu is deeply affected and ashamed by the racist comments based on the dark colour of his skin. There is a scene in the film where he scratches his body to remove the blackness of his skin that differentiates him from the rest of the students. It is his old grandfather who calms him and compares him to the local deity Muthhapan who is of a similar colour. Legends state that Sree Muthappan was born as a saviour for the lower caste, the poor and needy and rituals such as offering toddy and fish in opposition to the needs of the upper caste Gods are practised in the Northern Malabar of Kerala. Du Bois considered the pioneer of the Critical Race Theory argued that "the black could never see himself as himself. He saw himself through the eyes of the white. The double consciousness meant that the black man was always two-a black man and an American" (Nayar, 219) Nandu also saw himself through the eyes of the upper caste people. He saw himself different from others of his class.

When the attendant entered the class with a notice for scheduled caste students, the teacher in a highhanded way asked if there were any students from SC or ST. All the students immediately turned towards Nandu on the last bench and Nandu being aware of being the 'Other' in the classroom, reluctantly stood up only to be mocked and satirised by the teacher that the SC'S and ST's get special freebies because of the tax that the ordinary citizens pay. This exemplifies the ignorance of the upper caste about the struggles of the Dalits and 'the Dalit's subaltern status that is inherited from birth..... and is eternal and unalterable' (Limbale, 3).

Kancha Ilaiah in his memoirs also narrates the exclusive policy adopted by his teachers when he revealed that "I am not here to teach Ilaihas, Yellaiahs, Pullaihas who know nothing about education. I cannot suffer teaching you kids who could never be taught" (Shepherd, 6). These episodes highlight the 'stringent resistance' among the high caste teachers in assimilating students from the lower caste and tribes thereby maintaining the ideological and cultural dominance over the marginalised communities.

When Mr Sajeevan, the new Maths teacher joins the school, he is afraid that his son will befriend Nandu' from the backward caste. When his son hugs Nandu after winning a small game of Kabaddi in school, he is furious and on reaching home asks his son to take a good bath to purify



himself. It is shocking that concept of pollution and need to purify on touching a lower caste child exists even today. Even a fruit like a mango has a caste and a 'Nambiar Mango' that Sajeevan Nambiar proudly offers is a variety of mango that belongs to his own community.

Nandu is humiliated by the teacher in front of the whole class for scoring zero. As a favour to reform the Adivasi child who is considered to be in need to be civilized, the teacher resorts to corporal punishment and canes him hard. He is threatened to show his bag and notebook and the teacher is aghast to find only stones in his bag. It is through violence that the teacher aims to 'reform' or 'educate' the child. There is no attempt to find out the reason for the stones in his bag. Apart from labelling Nandu as a rat, the teacher shows complete apathy towards Nandu's needs. American educational theorists like Henry Giroux have truly stated that "educational theory all over the world has based itself largely on the experiences of the middle class and majority culture" and students "who do not fall under this tag of middle class and majority culture are subjected to immense suffering at school" (Krishna, 61).

Nandu enjoys best amidst nature and this connection with nature is brilliantly captured in the movie as he smiles and converses when he sees the colourful snails or butterflies. He observes the buffaloes, the crows and is sensitive to the sounds and rhythms of nature.

There is a scene which shows Nandu completely immersed in deep water and this meditative pose is a metaphoric happy space for him unlike the enclosed school which only enforces discipline and in Foucauldian terms trains one to be mere 'docile bodies' who do not question authority and are akin to prisons with a panopticon gaze. It is nature that has taught him that there needs to be a distance of at least six feet between trees so that they do not dash against each other. He passes on this knowledge to his school companion who is surprised with his information. Nandu is also aware of the medicinal value of the juice of leaves to be applied on the wound. He is totally comfortable to tend to the young crow who had fallen from the nest and is adept to reunite with the mother crow.

These skills are not valued in the school which only emphasizes marks and facts as emphasized by Charles Dickens in his novel *Hard Times*

The scene where Nandu uninhibitedly dives into the deep waters and naturally enjoys swimming convinces the new PT teacher of his aquatic skills. He fiercely protests when the Principal shows no interest in sending Nandu for a competition far way in the town. The opposing dominant forces had stereotyped Nandu as a failure and considered him unworthy of any attention. Nandu's victory in receiving the first prize in the swimming competition is symbolic of a victory for all the marginalized children who are ostracized overtly and subtly even now in educational institutes.

Conclusion:

Nandu's victory at the end of the film brought relief and poetic justice for the sufferings, alienation and isolation that he experienced within the institution of the school. But not all children from the lower caste may be able to shine and win to prove their talent to gain acceptance by society. There should be an ideological change within society to annihilate differences made in the name of caste, creed or colour. The curriculum in schools must be inclusive where communities of different castes must be represented in a realistic way where the protagonists have an agency of their own and are not just stereotyped as the 'Other' who are at the mercy of the dominant class. Saeed Mirza has aptly suggested that Indian cinema must "experiment with content to challenge the existing form" (Rai, 101) Realistic films that explore existing inequalities will help in building a just and equal society where 'humans are of one caste' (Bose, 67) Zavattini succinctly notes "The true function of the cinema is not to tell fables.... but to excavate reality" (Zavattini, 216).



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