

Challenging the Myth of Rural Innocence Utilizing Gaze as a Thematic Element A study on selected Malayalam Movies

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Abstract - This research paper entitled “Challenging the Myth of Rural Innocence Utilizing Gaze as a Thematic Element” is a study on how the thematic element of gaze is utilized to question the myth of rural innocence in two Malayalam movies Varathan (2018) and Jallikattu (2019). Both the movies showcase the different dimensions of the term gaze. However, the major focus of this research paper is on how such dimensions of gaze result in shackling the picture of the serene and innocent villagers as depicted in several other Malayalam movies. The ideas put forward by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and film theorists Laura Mulvey and Jean-Louis Baudry are used in support of the arguments proposed in this paper.

Index Terms - deconstruction, gaze, film theory, myth, psychoanalysis, rural innocence.

INTRODUCTION

The English Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850) advocated the language of rustic life as the language of the poems for it denoted purity. There have been many attempts from the part of the artists of all ages since to glorify the innocence of the village. The Malayalam films have often shown tendency to show the city life as corrupted and devoid of morality. In the movies of Malayalam directors like Satyan Anthikad, the village is the place where virtues unbound. These tendencies have easily helped in the creation of the myth of rural innocence. For instance, the entry of Aby and his friends into the village in the high ranges of Kerala in the film *Elsamma Enna Aankutty* (2010), a Malayalam movie directed by Lal Jose shackles the balance of life of Elsamma, the protagonist of the film and the people close to her. The association of rustic life with the term “innocence” can be largely attributed to human beings’ belief in the idea of tradition or goodness of

the past. In this piece of writing, we will look at the idea of rural innocence within the context of Kerala. When we read poems like Changampuzha's “Gramabhanga” (taken from *Ramanan*, 1936), the act is supposed to paint in our minds the picture of a village which attracts one with its rich greenery. And suddenly this whole green colour suggests something of purity, a purity which could be seen in the hearts of the people and whatever crops they cultivate. This innocence or purity is usually seen as the result of lack of rapid developments (like that of in cities) in the villages which could have possibly ruined the balance of life in the villages.

In fact, what is to be understood is that rural innocence is a desire to stay in the past and a fear or resistance towards change. It is a mere fancy to cling onto the past or a mere attempt to portray our previous days as good ones. We cannot completely call life in particular context completely innocent. Life in any place whether it is the village or city is to be lived logically. Being ethical or morally upright innocent being is by and large an individualistic thing. Sometimes people with their dubious attitude towards change must have created the myth of rural innocence. It is to be noted that village is the place where traditional culture still exists in its best form possible. But it is also the place where superstitions and myth related to a particular culture are still preserved. Therefore, arises the question whether a superstitious community be blameless. At times ignorance gets to be equivalent to innocence with regard to rustic life. There are many Malayalam movies which propose a reverberation of this myth of the innocence of village life. A recent example could be *Ketyolanante Malakha* (2019). Sleevachan, the protagonist in the movie is a village man who is too innocent. In fact, he is to be understood more as ignorant rather than innocent.

GAZE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

This research paper tries to explain how recent Malayalam movies *Varathan* (2018) and *Jallikattu* (2019) make use of the different aspects of gaze in the movies to question the myth of rural innocence. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb gaze as 'to look fixedly, intently, or deliberately at something'. The existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) introduced the concept of *le regard*, the gaze, in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), wherein the act of gazing at another human being creates a subjective power difference, which is felt by the gazer and by the gazed, because the person being gazed at is perceived as an object, not as a human being. Objectification thus lies central to the idea of gaze. For Jean Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), gaze becomes the anxious state of mind that comes with the self-awareness that one can be seen and looked at. This generates self-consciousness in an individual and a considerable loss of autonomy. Lacan initiated his study on gaze, in relation to the Mirror Stage. In Mirror Stage, as proposed by Lacan, the child begins to acquire a subjectivity which involves a narcissistic pleasure of being looked at and could now also identify the mother as the Other. The Other becomes a center of fascination in the movies as well. For Lacan the fascination for the Other is related to the idea of desire.

No investigation on gaze would be complete without a mention of male gaze. The cinematic concept of the male gaze is presented, explained, and developed in the essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), in which the film theorist Laura Mulvey proposes that sexual inequality, the asymmetry of social and political power between men and women, is a controlling social force in the cinematic representations of women and men; and that the male gaze (the aesthetic pleasure of the male viewer) is a social construct derived from the ideologies and discourses of patriarchy. In the fields of media studies and feminist film theory, the male gaze is conceptually related to the behaviours of voyeurism (looking as sexual pleasure), scopophilia (pleasure from looking), and narcissism (pleasure from contemplating one's self). In both the movies *Varathan* and *Jallikattu*, the idea of sexual gaze is explored to a large extent. "Feminist film theory has, for the most part, taken shape around the notion of the male gaze." (Columbar 2).

Cinema, according to Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, is the ultimate pervert art. It teaches how and what to desire. It has hidden objectives and technicalities behind it which keep the subjectivity of the viewer under question. Jean Louis Baudry's (1930-2015) essay "Ideological Effects of Basic Cinematic Apparatus" (1974) brought self-related assumptions about the processes involved in film making and film viewing. "The 'reality' mimed by the cinema is that first of all that of a 'self'" (Baudry and Williams 7). In psychological terms, to gaze is not to simply look at something, but it signifies a psychological relationship of power in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze. The consciousness of a person about any object may lead to the consciousness that he/she is also an object in material reality. Once an individual becomes aware of the fact that they are visible objects, they experience a loss of autonomy. Similarly, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, in their *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (2009), argue that the gaze is (conceptually) integral to systems of power and that to practice the gaze is to enter into a personal relationship with the person being looked at. In the context of surveillance, Foucault has observed that gaze not only creates a particular discourse about the object of the gaze but also about the gazer.

HOW GAZE AS A THEMATIC ELEMENT DESTROYS THE MYTH OF RURAL INNOCENCE IN VARATHAN AND JALLIKATTU

The movie *Varathan*, a Malayalam action thriller film directed by Amal Neerad. The Malayalam word *varathan* means "outsider". The movie revolves around the central theme of xenophobia. The major characters in the movie are Aby and his wife Priya. The character of Aby enacted by Malayalam actor Fahad Fazzil is the outsider intended in the title. As Aby loses his job in Dubai and Priya suffers from an abortion, the couple decides to leave Dubai for the time being. After reaching their homeland Kerala, Aby and Priya shifts to Priya's ancestral home. The villagers are often shown ogling at the character Priya in the movie. This indicates their propensity to intrude into the lives of Aby and Priya. In the scene in which the married couple reaches the village a man who is at the teashop laments at the loss of culture seeing Aby and Priya in the modern attire. The society has often

exhibited the tendency to hold “girls/women responsible for unnecessarily arousing the lustful and lecherous male gaze through their ‘careless’ attire and movement outside the household sphere during the ‘odd’ times is not new” (Rai 1). This kind of moral policing by the villagers is a recurring element in the movie. The couple’s stay at Priya’s ancestral farmhouse in the hills in Pathinettam Vayal gradually becomes one of insecurity. Priya feels that something is not right with the attitude of the villagers right from the start. Aby on the other hand, gets no glimpses of the irritation as experienced by Priya. Priya on being consistently the victim of the male gaze of finds it extremely difficult to spend a single minute alone and is equally distressed by her meek husband, although she loves him.

The movie not only deals with the maniac villagers lusting for Priya’s body but also trying to point out Aby as an impotent man who in their concept may not be able to perform the duties of a “masculine” husband. Thus, Aby is also constantly watched by the villagers as well. But the dimensions of gaze of the villagers vary deeply from Aby to Priya. Aby is looked upon with disgust, envy and pity whereas Priya is looked upon with pleasure, lust and longing. The villagers’ sexual gaze towards Priya is one of the key elements in the movie which problematizes the myth of rural innocence. There are many other incidents in the movie that gives the degenerated and low-grade behaviour of the people in Pathinettam Vayal. These scenes make the village a twisted Eden of sex crimes, moral policing, honour killings and xenophobia.

The Malayalam movie *Jallikettu* (2019), directed by the Malayalam film director Lijo Jose Pellisery, deals with the events happening in the course of a day and night in a fictional village. Although the movie span is only about ninety minutes, the film revolves around the central theme of Nature vs Nurture. A buffalo kept for slaughter escapes into the hilly jungle. Varkey, the butcher who was supposed to kill the buffalo vows to catch it and kill it. The whole village engages in the task of cornering the buffalo to kill it. Buffalo manages to make a fair share of ruckus in the village as well. It tramples the crops at the rubber plantations, smashes a vendor cart and many other properties of the villagers. This instigates the wild nature of the villagers and their hunt for the buffalo becomes similar to a wild animal’s hunt for its prey. The villagers find Varkey as the responsible one for all of the damages made by the

buffalo. The events which follow try to show the instinctual animalistic nature inherent in men.

Similar to the movie *Varathan*, *Jallikattu* also deals with the theme of gaze. The villager’s continuous search for the buffalo is their way to assert their superiority over the animal. The buffalo becomes the victim of their gaze. The people of the hilly village assumes that one who manages to kill the buffalo would be sanctioned as the most masculine. The search for power gets aligned with the search for the buffalo. The gaze can be understood in psychological terms. For Lacan, to gaze implies more than to look at. It signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze. As the movie progresses, we get to see how the women folk in the village becomes the victims of the male gaze. Thus, the sexual gaze of the men is another feature in the movie which contributes in destroying the myth of rural innocence. For Pellisery, the bull that escaped from the slaughterhouse is an opportunity to employ all the tools available in his cinematic repertoire. In “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus”, Jean Louis Baudry problematizes the way audiences are conditioned to recognise on screen events as reality. *Jallikattu* is one such movie which shows the reality which man knows is real but would hesitate to admit as real.

CONCLUSION

A detailed analysis of the thematic element of “Gaze” in the two Malayalam movies *Varathan* and *Jallikettu* proves that the idea of understanding village as a peaceful place is not completely true. Sometimes a simple change from the routine life in the village could result in complicating the life in village. Thus, it could be induced that no matter where one lives the life there is dependent on many factors. The kind of events the movies discuss are embarrassing but true. The movies are perfect examples of how the Malayalam movies have evolved in depicting the village life. It is the mindset of the people which makes a place serene or chaotic.

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