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HISTORY IN THE INTERSTICES: THE COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND THE ART FORMS IN THE MALAYALAM FILM *ANANTHABHADRAM*

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ABSTRACT

Technology, endowed with the immense power to connect the world, dons the role of an equaliser of differences. With the advent of communication technology and its proliferation, the non-canonical writers also find a broad platform to express their views. The present times is an era of re-writing grand narratives and re-thinking perspectives, with increased focus on individualised narration of incidents. In such an era, what is the status of the history of the margins that emerges in the interstices? The objective of the research paper is to analyse the cultural art forms, Theyyam and Kathakali, and the martial art form, Kalaripayattu as interstices where the dominant and the counter-narratives meet. The paper seeks to analyse if the blurring of boundaries through these variant forms serves to emancipate the subjugated masses, specially the characters Digambaran and Chemban, in the Malayalam film *Ananthabhadram*.

Keywords: History, interstices, narratives, subjugation, emancipate

Culture is an amalgamation of contrasting opposites, preserving within its folds, elements of an elegant heritage and remnants of a rejected past. The borderline or marginal lives thrive in the existence of gaps or interstices, voicing their concerns through the reconstruction of available narratives and cultural art forms. However, the reconstructed versions are to be interrogated for their double-headedness, as the demands voiced lose their significance upon commodification of the art form as a source of popular entertainment. Therefore, in any form of entertainment, the voice of the downtrodden is to be detected beneath the layers of rhythm and superficial expressions. A significant example in this regard are the numerous nursery rhymes that has dictated the lives of children in Britain and its colonies following the calamities. The chant of these rhymes transmit a legacy, a saga of suffering undergone by a large

number of unhistorical men in Britain. Without these songs, the history of the victimised would have been restricted to a few lines, cautiously preserved within texts, often branded unworthy to be read and unhistorical to be remembered.

In the pre-colonial and the colonial times, the societal structure of India was largely determined by the caste-based Hindu culture. Though the latent intent of the *varna* system was systematised division of labour, the dominant ideology manipulated the wisdom of the *vedasto* subjugate the Other. Direct protest against Brahmanical supremacy had devastating consequences. Moreover, the corrupt teachings of religion propagated by the dominant ideology served to curb rebellion and encourage docility. As a consequence, the historicity is to be studied locating oneself in the interstices, determined by the contrasting opposites of class and caste and the

conflicting interests of Vaishnavism and Shaivism. On a perpetual basis, the narrative that defines the pages of history is written from the perspective of the dominant. Often the viewpoint of those who exist in the margins seep into folk songs and art forms that border on the irrational, blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy. The objective of the research paper is to analyse the history of the margins that emerges in the interstices of the dominant narrative, as manifested in the Malayalam film *Ananthabhadram*. For the purpose of study, this paper analyses the songs and the art forms in the film as interstices where the dominant ideology and the counter-narratives meet.

The plot of the film *Ananthabhadram* revolves around the mysterious stories of the mother and the grandfather that mould the characters of the hero, Ananthan and the anti-hero/villain, Digambaran respectively. Gayathri carves a world of mystery for her little son, Ananthan through the stories of her native land, Shivapuram. The mother's stories reveal the intricacies of a rigid culture that weave the life of the ancestors, the elite who reside in the Madampi *tharavaad* (ancestral family house). This elite family evolved from a generation of powerful magicians, bestowed with the responsibility of protecting the *nagamanikyam* (Jewel of the Snakes) preserved in the *manthrikapura* (House of Magic). For years, the members of the Madampi *tharavaad* practised the tradition of anointing the daughters of the house as Goddesses, virgins who held supreme power over the *nagamanikyam* and possessed miraculous powers that can cure even diseases. The mother of Ananthan was the first among the daughters chosen to be anointed as the Goddess. When she eloped with Sethu, the eldest daughter in the next generation, Subhadra was conferred the role. The film commences at a point when Bhadra, the only remaining virgin female of the family, is awaiting the anointing upon murder of Subhadra by Digambaran. After the demise of his mother, Ananthan returns to the mysterious ancestral village to light the lamps in *Shivakavu* (Sacred Grove), in obedience to the wishes of his deceased mother. But the black magician Digambaran, who arms himself with the mission of securing the *nagamanikyam*, opposes the

lighting of the lamps. Digambaran attains the legacy of his grandfather, Siddhayogikkal, who transmitted his mission of protest against the elite to the grandchild. Chemban, the blind martial expert, fights against the witchcraft of Digambaran, who lures the former's sister Bhama using tantric seduction rituals. Digambaran seduces Bhama through evil rituals in order to regain the soul of Subhadra, the murdered lover. Meanwhile, Bhadra faces the dilemma of choosing between the love of Ananthan and becoming a Goddess, in obedience to the tradition of the Madampi *tharavaad*. Digambaran enters the body of Ananthan through the process of transmigration and attains his motives to a great extent. The film ends with the restoration of the *nagamanikyam*, the lighting of the lamps in *Shivakavu* and the union of Ananthan and Bhadra.

In any society, the subjugated masses are haunted by the constant desire for an upward social mobility, which threatens the unchallenged position of the hegemonic power structure. In order to legitimise and naturalise the existing power structure, the dominant regime employs repressive measures and indoctrination and reverse subversion into subjugation. As a consequence, the forbidden wishes of the subjugated masses are repressed into the unconscious. The repressed wishes remain dormant until they achieve a fantasied satisfaction in distorted forms that disguise their motives from the conscious mind. In the film *Ananthabhadram*, the childhood trauma of being characterised as the monstrous Other produces a kind of neurosis in the subjugated characters. The conflict between the powerful urge to identify with the culture of the elite, who denigrates the status of the Other characters and the socio-cultural need to suppress this desire in a strictly caste-based society, permits only the expression of desire only in the form of fantasied wish fulfillment. Therefore, this study analyses the cultural art forms, Theyyam and Kathakali, and the martial arts, Kalaripayattu as the manifest content of the desire for an upward social mobility expressed by the subjugated characters, Digambaran and Chemban.

Theyyam is an art form that is traditionally associated with the lower caste community. The first part of the performance is an invocation, in which

the deity of the shrine is honoured with a song ritual called *thottam*. The dancer and the drummers recite the ritual song, which describes the myths of the deity. On completion of the primary ritual, the performer retires to a temporary structure and metamorphose into the particular deity. The headress is placed on the artist in front of an altar before he is shown a mirror. When he looks into the given mirror, he no longer sees himself but the divine being. This part of the ritual is known as *mukhadarshanam*. These deified forms possess unpredictable natures and harbour the absolute power to bless or curse. The transformation of the lower caste performer into the deity is a re-writing of the traditional notions that equate the elite castes with Brahma. Therefore, Theyyam is a form of carnivalesque that grants the victimised section of the society a temporary opportunity to voice their protests and conceive the universe according to their will.

In the film *Ananthabhadram*, the dance movements and the gestures emoted by the song "*thiranurayumchurulmudiyil*" exemplify the features of the traditional art form, Theyyam. The performer Digambaran is a member of the lower caste community whose ancestor, *Siddhayogikkal* is categorised as an evil black magician by the elite Nair society on account of manipulating tantric rituals. Therefore, the dance movements of Theyyam emoted by Digambaran can be analysed as a desire to achieve a place with the elite class, through the possession of Subhadra Devi, the virgin worshipped as the Goddess by the elite Nair society in the film's narrative. The content of the song, which extols the beauty and the appeal of the Goddess figure, Subhadra, bears a thematic resemblance to the song ritual of Theyyam known as *asthottam*. Parallel to the trident on the Theyyam dancer's mask, Digambaran has a mark of *trishulon* on his forehead. A phenomenon similar to *mukhadarshanam* is displayed when Digambaran sees the deity emerging from the figure of Bhama, who is the living counterpart of the deceased Subhadra. Therefore, Bhama is the metaphorical mirror that reveals the deity, Subhadra to Digambaran. After the *mukhadarshanam*, Digambaran runs through the courtyard and

circumambulates Bhama's body, which is symbolically the shrine that beholds the deity, Subhadra. In a disguised form, Theyyam manifests the unconscious desire of the downtrodden for a voice in the society which is dominated by the dictates of the elite culture. Theyyam is a moment of carnivalesque and sublimation, in which the repressed dream of rising above the derogatory status is projected onto the cultural art form.

Since the film depicts the character of Digambaran as the undesirable caste, the appropriation of the cultural art form of Theyyam is justified. How can the adoption of the Kathakali dance movements in the song be explained, Kathakali being an upper caste art form? Before discussing the significance of the Kathakali dance movements in the song, it would be appropriate to analyse the attitude of the elite men towards the rituals practiced by Digambaran, donning the absolute authority of the deity of the elite class. When Digambaran says "I am a simple man who lives in this claustrophobic setting with my rituals", Raman *jyothsyar* (an upper caste man) warns him thus, "You are practising evil rituals" (*Ananthabhadram*). The exaltation of the superiority of the elite culture by the society produces an unconscious state of dependency in the minds of the subjugated masses. The internalization of this superiority creates an inferiority complex, which persuades the masses to imitate the culture of the elite. The adoption of the Kathakali dance movements along with the art of Theyyam is the result of this inferiority complex. The song "*thiranurayumchurulmudiyil*" begins with the music of the *chenda* and the dance movements of Kathakali before it merges with the Theyyam traditions and gestures harbouring sexual innuendo.

In the film, Kalaripayattu is a martial art form that depicts the ambiguous space occupied by the subjugated masses. Unlike the caste-based nature of Theyyam and Kathakali, Kalaripayattu exhibits both the higher and the lower forms. Traditionally, the northern style is practised by the Pada Nairs and the Thiyyas and the southern style by the Nadars. Masters in the northern style are referred to by the title *gurukkal* and those in the southern style are known by the term *asaan*. The

northern style involves elegant and flexible movements, evasions, jumps and weapon training but the southern style concentrates on the hard impact techniques like empty hand fighting and pressure point strikes. The important difference between the northern and the southern styles is that the former places more emphasis on weapons rather than empty hands. In the film *Ananthabhadram*, there is an explicit portrayal of Chemban as a practitioner of Kalaripayattu. The body movements and the gestures of Digambaranalso display features of Kalaripayattu. The title *gurukkal* endowed on the great magician of Madampi (the ancestral Nair family in the film), Madhavagurukkal, identifies him as the master of the Northern Kalaripayattu and the title Siddhayogikkal conferred on Digambaran's grandfather, identifies him with the Southern Kalaripayattu. *Siddhas* signifies the medical treatment that is associated with the southern style. From the beginning, there is a clear division of the martial art form of Kalaripayattu based on the caste structure. The association of Madhavagurukkal with the Northern Kalaripayattu places this form in the category of the elite culture.

Prior to the analysis of the real nature of Kalaripayattu practised by Chemban, let us explore why Chemban is an appropriate representative of the subjugated masses. Chemban is a victim of the colonial mentality, the remnants of which establish the white colour as a sign of culture and high birth. The marginalization of Chemban on account of his dark colour is evident in the dubious expression of the hero, Ananthan when one of the characters identifies Bhama as the sister of Chemban. Ananthan asks, "Did you say that she is his sister?" and he answers, "That is a big story. A beautiful mother..." (*Ananthabhadram*). The *tharavaad* of the elite class, Madampi, is a restricted area for Chemban. Though the plight of Subhadra and Bhama is similar and Bhama suffers for the cause of the Madampi *tharavaad*, the Nair family is indifferent to the sufferings of Chemban and his sister. Though the members of the Madampitharavaad lament on the plight of Subhadra, they do not utter a word of grief on the misfortune that plagues the life of Bhama. The

warning Raman *jyothsyar* gives Digambaran "What happened to Subhadra must not happen to Bhama" is only the imitation of the saviour role (*Ananthabhadram*). Chemban primarily uses the Southern Kalaripayattu, practised largely by the community of Nadars but also uses techniques of the northern style. The Nadars as a community are listed under the category of the Other Backward Class by the government. Digambaran, through the use of empty hand fighting and pressure point strikes, clearly represents the features of the Southern Kalaripayattu. Digambaran, known for his *marmasiddhi*, employs it efficiently in the murder of Raman *jyothsyar*. Chemban fuses the northern and the southern style of Kalaripayattu when he gives equal importance to the use of weapons, evasive and flexible body movements and pressure point strikes. The film introduces Chemban as a character who points a sword over the pressure point on Ananthan's forehead. When Digambaran projects his desire to achieve upward social mobility through the sexual desire for the upper-caste woman Subhadra, Chemban expresses his protest against the injustices through the appropriation of the culture of the weapons and the flexible movements demonstrated by the northern style (elite culture). The image of Chemban, prowling around with the sword, seems to establish him as the guardian of the society, through the appropriation of the elite power of the weapons. However, on a close reading of the film, it can be inferred that Chemban is allowed to use the sword only for two purposes. One is to protect his sister Bhama and the other is to fight against an equally undesirable man, Digambaran. The role performed in the beginning of the film as the saviour of Ananthan ends once Chemban discovers him to be a member of the Madampi family. Shivaram advises Chemban to rebel against Digambaran to protect his sister Bhama.

What is the status of the history that emerges in the interstices of the dominant narrative? Does the projection of desire onto the cultural art forms and the martial art form serve in the emancipation of the subjugated characters in the film *Ananthabhadram*? The study reveals that the appropriation of Theyyam and Kathakali do not

grant Digambaran a voice. Instead the elite condemn his rituals as witchcraft. Though Chemban is the *asaan* of Kalaripayattu, he is allowed to use his sword only for two purposes. One is to protect his kind and the other is to fight against his kind. Thus, the appropriation of the instrument of the dominant caste by the subjugated only serves to perpetuate the ideology of the former. Therefore, the history that emerges in the interstices dwindles into a history determined by the dictates of the dominant ideology.

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