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The Hunter and the Hunted: Problematizing Dalit Representation in the Movie Nayattu

Harinarayanan S

A critical analysis of the history of Malayalam cinema would show the intensity of casteism and upper caste hegemony inherent in its structure from its inception. Little efforts had been made by filmmakers to alter the traditional hegemonic patterns of narration. Malayalam Cinema has seen the arrival of a novel movement that was valiant enough to deconstruct the existing social hierarchies of the Malayalam film industry only recently. This movement, labelled as the 'New Generation Wave' did bring in positive changes as far as the power relations in the portrayal of characters from different sections are concerned. The systemic discrimination faced by the Dalits, hitherto ignored by Malayalam cinema was brought to focus. Though this inevitable change was welcome, a careful analysis raises certain questions about the portrayal of Dalit characters and their relationship to the society. This paper analyses the film Nayattu(2021) directed by Martin Prakkat and tries to find out the problematic patterns of portrayal employed in the representation of Dalit characters.

Key Words: Dalit, Cinema, Society, Hegemony, Power

The debates involving the viewers and critics of cinema regarding the methodology to be adopted in analysing the medium has been going on ever since its inception. A section believed that cinema should be free of any ideological or thematic examination stressing on its artistic credentials while the other section argued for an ideologi-

cally grounded analytic pattern. The Malayalam film industry has often been flayed for its silver screen portrayal of social reality marked with prejudice and hypocritical perspectives of human conditions. The critics of the ideological realm have pointed out the partisan nature of Malayalam cinema in the portrayal of Dalit and subaltern characters. Thus, the casteist and hegemonic structure of Malayalam cinema makes the thematic and ideological readings immensely significant. In commercial mainstream Malayalam cinema, the male protagonist usually belonged to an upper class/caste background and even if he had to be shown as a representative of the financially impoverished class, Malayalam cinema was so particular about the caste status of the individual that it made sure that upper caste surnames adorned the hero's name. This trend of relegating the characters from Dalit and backward castes to the margins was in vogue till the onset of the 'new generation' wave around the second decade of the new millennium. A bunch of filmmakers of the new generation, who experimented with the rigid thematic and structural formation of Malayalam cinema created the ambience which made the depiction of Dalit protagonists possible. This paper intends to examine the Malayalam film, *Nayattu* (2021) which has Dalit characters playing significant roles, to delineate the subtle ideological factors at play when Dalit characters are portrayed.

In art, literature and cinema, the representation of Dalits and tribals have always been an area of contestation as the aesthetic norms have been hegemonized by the traditional casteist structure. This rendered the manifestation of Dalit lives and experience alien to Indian popular culture. This adherence to the 'savarna' (upper caste) aesthetic design has been flayed by Dalit intellectuals and thinkers. Sharankumar Limbale, in his famous work, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* says that,

Satyam, shivam, sundaram- these are fabrications used to divide and exploit ordinary people. In fact, the aesthetics concept of 'satyam, shivam, sundaram' is the selfish mechanism of upper caste Hindu society. It is necessary to replace this conception of aesthetics with one that is material and social (Limbale 21).

Limabale stresses on the need to invent a novel aesthetic schema which is inclusive and devoid of any hegemonic influence. He questions the traditional concepts of 'satyam' (truth), 'shivam' (holy) and 'sundaram' (beauty) and replaces it with untruth, unholy and unbeauty (Limabale 21). Limable posits that the Brahmanic notion of truth caters only to their own ideological preferences which exclude the underprivileged castes. Holiness according to the Brahmin scriptures considers the presence of a Dalit as defilement. Beauty in the caste Hindu aesthetic sense, treats symbols related to Dalit life as repulsive. Thus Limable deconstructs the hegemonic aesthetic system and advocates for the conceptualisation of an aesthetics that includes the Dalit lives and experience.

The notions on the manner of representation of the Dalits raise some pertinent questions related to art, literature and culture. The most significant one among these is, whether such an inclusive aesthetic sensibility is at work. When the area of analysis is trimmed down to Malayalam cinema, a notable transformation is visible especially in the last decade owing to the much celebrated and path breaking 'new generation' trend. A number of films with noticeable Dalit characters drew the attention of both ordinary film goers and film critics. Films like *KammattiPaadam* (2016), *Manhole* (2016), *Kismath* (2016), *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* (2015), *Melvilasam* (2011) and *Karie* (2015) generated intense discussion around the issue of caste discrimination and the artistic representation of the subaltern class. This trend has its continuation in recently released films as well as the movies *Nayattu* (2021) and *Puzhu* (2022), which created headlines for the brave depiction of Dalit characters in significant roles. Though these films have casteism as a major theme of discussion, a close analysis of *Nayattu*, in particular, raises certain apprehensions about the manner of portrayal.

Released in 2021, *Nayattu* starring prominent Malayalam actors like KunchackoBoban, NimishaSajayan and Joju George created ripples in the discourses related to Malayalam cinema. The film shows the life of three cops who have to flee following the death of a Dalit party worker. The film investigates how power employs caste as a tool to subjugate Dalits who have to fight the oppressive system to

survive. Praveen Michael (Kunchacko), Maniyan (Joju) and Sunitha (Nimisha) faces the wrath of a Dalit political party which resulted in them being chased by the State. Maniyan, after realising the futility of their escapade commits suicide whereas Praveen and Sunitha become the scapegoats to save the blushes of the partisan State machinery. The film, which belongs to the thriller category, bagged State film awards for the best actor, story and editing. *Nayattu* made headlines for the brave portrayal of the issue of caste even though the film is commercial in nature which is not common in Indian cinema. The presence of prominent Malayalam actors too made this an interesting artistic piece which deserves serious attention. A commercial movie with popular stars that discusses the issue of caste may seem like a welcome phenomenon at the initial glance. Yet, *Nayattu* has to be disseminated and examined for a detailed understanding of the ideological and thematic layers the film offers.

The most striking and problematic premise in *Nayattu* is the noticeable portrayal of Dalit characters. In the film, a line is intentionally drawn to separate socially acceptable and unacceptable Dalits. Cops such as Maniyan and Sunitha belong to the socially acceptable faces from the oppressed Dalit section whereas, Sunitha's cousin Biju (Dinesh Alleppey), who creates ruckus at the police station is portrayed as uncultured and rude, who lacks social etiquette. The film, which was hailed for focussing on the issue of Dalits in the society, meticulously creates a division between the 'good Dalit' and the 'bad Dalit'. This notion comes from a savarna Brahmanic gaze, which places Dalits and Muslims in black and white columns by creating the good/bad binary. As film critic GP Ramachandran says,

In the name of the reckless activities of a selected few in the Muslim community, who has little influence over the Muslims, the entire community is put in the dock. This proves that the real problem lies not with the community or the terrorists, but in the dominant outlook and representation created by the State, cultural and political critics, historians and media. This proves that the idea of a Muslim being a stranger is shared by the so called secular society. (Ramachandran 211-212)

GP Ramachandran is accusing the hegemonic state and its ideological designs for this. As the hegemonic savarna gaze dictates the dominant perspectives, an artificially created balancing equation is formulated whenever Dalit and Muslim lives are portrayed in art, literature and cinema. In his book *Malayala Cinema: Desham, Bhasha, Samskaram* he cites the example of the popular Malayalam movie *Dada Sahib* to argue that there is a visible attempt to create the division between good, nationalist and socially responsible Muslim and the anti-national, terrorist Muslim (2009, 289). A number of war movies in Malayalam too cater to the same ideological manipulation. Films such as *War and Love* (2003), *Keerthi Chakra* (2006) and *Kurukshetra* (2008) were criticised for its portrayal of Muslim characters where some continuously proved their nationalistic feelings whereas the other selected few were portrayed as traitors or terrorists. This conflict in portrayal can be seen as a process in continuation even after the arrival of the 'new generation' trend with all its iconoclastic charms. In *Nayattu* the 'bad Dalit', who attacks the police and misbehaves with others is contrasted with the socially acceptable 'good Dalit'. This problematic portrayal becomes more evident as Maniyan and Sunitha had to face the wrath of the State due to the adamant nature of Biju. The State hunts them as Biju and his group can be seen as pressurising the State machinery to act according to their political designs. Maniyan's daughter is planning to participate in the State school arts festival and it is his dream to see his daughter win the dance competition. The arts festival is designed as a socially acceptable space with all its upper caste embellishments. This arts festival has kept out art forms such as *Chavittu Natakam*, a classical performance of the Latin Catholics, a backward Christian section till recently. Recognition at this fest can be seen as the acknowledgement by the hegemonic society. Maniyan is striving for such an acceptance for his daughter which he couldn't achieve throughout his life as a cop. The aggressive stand by the Dalit group has put in peril a Dalit police officer's long cherished dream. Thus the State, which hunts Dalits with its casteist and prejudiced political scheme, is exonerated and the burden is put on the back of fellow Dalits.

In Indian politics, ‘vote bank’ is a common term used by media and political commentators to highlight the penchant of certain castes or religions toward certain political parties. In the political climate of Kerala, Dalits are never considered as a vote bank that can pressurise political parties to carry out their agendas. Historically, the Dalits in Kerala have shown an inclination towards the left, even though, the political right too possesses a fair share of Dalit support and votes. But they could never transform themselves as a pressure group that could influence the ruling class or swing election results. In *Nayattu*, a Dalit organization is shown as pressurising the Government to enforce their regressive schemes. This fictional portrayal runs counter to the political reality of Kerala and paints a bizarre picture of the existing political and social scenario. The upper caste gaze of the movie becomes evident in this faulty portrayal of the power relations. The scene in which the Dalit youths barge into the police station and threaten the police is unrealistic and farcical. Kerala police is infamous for its partisan attitude towards Dalits as the deaths of Vinayakan and Kevin reveal. Vinayakan, a Dalit youth was harassed by the cops for growing long hair and as result of the continuous humiliation and threats he took his own life. Kevin’s was a case of honour killing which was aided by the police. It must be assumed that, more than mere ignorance about the socio-political milieu of Kerala, the makers of *Nayattu* should have been led by the socially hegemonic belief systems and myths about the caste equations in Kerala. The Dalits in Kerala are still facing marginalization and discrimination but the hegemonic savarna narratives blame them for the illusory political power they possess. Unfortunately, *Nayattu* subscribes to this flawed notion and portrays a weird picture of Kerala society and polity.

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 was enacted by the Indian Parliament to prevent discrimination and hate crimes against the socially backward Dalits and Tribals. The caste hierarchy at play in the Indian social sphere had made the formulation of such an act an absolute necessity. Since the enactment of this act, Caste Hindus were fighting it tooth and nail accusing the act for being discriminatory against them. In recent times, various courts in the country too have come down heavily on certain

instances where this act was supposed to have been misused. In a recent judgement by the Karnataka High Court, the Judge has observed that for this act to be applied, the abuse must take place in a public place. When the socially dominant casteist forces create an impression that the constitutional provisions for the protection of the vulnerable sections are being misused to target the underprivileged, it is the responsibility of socially sensitive artists to take a balanced and nuanced stand in favour of the underprivileged. In the case of *Nayattu*, it is quite evident that the filmmaker is trying to put across the notion that the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act is grossly misused by the Dalits for political and financial leverage. The arrogance attributed to the Dalit organization is supposed to have come from the possession of the ‘deadly weapon’, the SC/ST act. The savarna propagandist narrative of the misuse of this act is justified by the filmmaker. In the attempt to toe the line of this Brahmanic narrative, *Nayattu* highlights the stark contrast between two sections of Dalits; one who misuses the legal apparatus and the other who has fallen victim to this vicious agenda. The upper castes are again relieved of the accusation of scheming against the Dalits as the agony faced by them is shown as the result of the highhandedness of the evil forces within their own caste.

From the earliest of times, the pattern of meting out tragic ends to subaltern characters has been the norm in Malayalam cinema. The film *Neelakkuyil*, which holds epic stature in the annals of the silver screen, tells the tale of Neeli, a Dalit woman who was deceived by the aristocratic male protagonist which results in her death. Though the fate of Neeli is focussed, the movie ends up eulogizing the hero’s repentance thus ignoring Neeli and the Dalit issue at large. According to film critic K.P Jayakumar, “Neeli is the metaphor of the tragedy of a Dalit woman, in a hypocritical, patriarchal, caste conscious society” (2014,130). As he puts it, the story of Neeli has great resemblance to the story of PanchavankattuNeeli of C.V.Raman Pillai’s historical novel *Marthandavarma*. Both Neelis met with tragic death which is not coincidental. Jayakaumar further states that,

It is undoubted that Malayalam cinema left Neeli in the lurch. The first decade of the 21st century ends with the leaving out of an-

other Neeli. She is the wife of ThalaykkalChanthu of the historic film *KeralavarmaPazhassiraja* directed by Hariharan (K.P. Jayakumar 133).

The historical film *KeralavarmaPazhassiraja*, that narrates the heroic life of King Pazhassithrows light on the heroics of Neeli, a tribal woman who fights a relentless battle against the colonial might. Yet, the movie leaves her behind and the character is left in the lurch without citing the reason for her sudden omission.

Only recently has Malayalam cinema started portraying Dalit lives with due significance attached to it. But a careful look at the plight of these characters raises serious concerns about the invisible patterns in such portrayals. Movies such as *Kammatti Paadam*, *Ozhivudivasathe Kali*, *Melvilasam* have certain notable similarities as the Dalit protagonist in all these films die at some point in the film. The pathos is highlighted rather than resurgence or revival. Film critics have pointed out the significant difference in the representation of Dalit protagonists in Tamil and Malayalam. Recently, a revolutionary wave is visible in Tamil cinema as a number of films that portray Dalit lives and protagonists hit the silver screen. Films of Pa. Ranjith, Mari Selvaraj and Vetrimaaran have showed rejuvenation of the Dalit self instead of harking back to the existing traditional method of focussing only on their pathos. In *Nayattu*, Maniyan, the vulnerable cop commits suicide and Sunitha is left pessimistic about the evil designs of the State. They are portrayed as hapless and ignorant victims. There is no attempt on the part of *Nayattu*, to bring in a semblance of positivity regarding the representation of Dalits and the similarity with the above mentioned Malayalam films is hard to ignore. Indian judiciary and executive have been criticised for its insensitive attitude in matters related to caste discrimination. *Nayattu* has absolved the repressive police apparatus and carefully shifted the focus on to the violence unleashed by a section of Dalits. This distorted representation questions the motive of the film even as it tries in vain to create an impression of aligning with the Dalit cause. Though *Nayattu* pretends to be the saga of the hunted, it turns out to be a paean for the hunter.

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