

Psychoanalytical Interpretation of the legend of Perumthachan.

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ABSTRACT

Psychoanalysis facilitates the study of human mind. The aim of this research paper is to understand the character of Raman Perumthachan, the protagonist of the Malayalam movie *Perumthachan*, using the different psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. This paper aims at emphasizing on the fact that unconscious mind, plays a great role in shaping one's behaviour. This paper also attempts to portray a snapshot of the ancient Kerala.

Keywords : Psychoanalysis, mind, behaviour, unconscious, ancient Kerala.

Introduction

Malayalam cinema is a repertoire of presentations of psychotic disorders which is evident through movies such as *Manichithrathazhu*, *Njangalude Veetile Athithikal*, *Anantharam* and many more. Psychoanalysis and cinema are closely related to each other since time immemorial. The advent of both psychoanalysis and cinema were during the second half of the nineteenth century. Then onwards there have been various representations of human psyche throughout the different genres of movies. Psychoanalysis is referred to as a set of psychological theories and curative techniques that have their origin within the work and theories of Sigmund Freud such as in *The Interpretation of Dreams* which was published in 1900 and is regarded as the first major work of psychoanalytic theory.

Objective

This paper is an attempt to dwell deeper into the mind of the protagonist of the Malayalam cinema *Perumthachan*. Though a movie from the old times, its study has significance even in today's modern world

where parents force their children to follow the same profession as theirs. Following the same profession as that of the preceding generation has become a common practice in the modern days too. Therefore, there are chances for such happenings occur again. As this movie portrays the negative consequences of such happenings, it may help people with same attitude from committing such negative deeds.

Literature Review

The essential aim behind the creation of any film is to satisfy the psychological needs of the audience as well as the artists. There are several psychoanalytical approaches in films. First is the cultural myth analysis which focuses on the myths surrounding the film. The second approach is regarding the filmmaker's biography in reference to the films he/she creates. In this approach, the films are studied in relation to the life of the filmmaker including the childhood traumas, desires, repressions etc. Another approach is regarding the analysis of the characters within the films. Here the plot of the film is studied on the basis of the characters in the film, usually in reference to the protagonist.

There are numerous movies in Hollywood that were inspired by Freud's psychoanalysis. One among them is Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* that was released in the year 1945. This is a film that focuses on the dreams and their meanings. The movie's connection to Freud's theory of psychoanalysis is evident in the introduction itself. The introduction mentions that the plot of the movie deals with psychoanalysis, the method used by modern sciences to treat the emotional problems of the normal people. The analyst helps the patient to talk about his problems that are basically internal in order to open the locked doors of his mind. Some of the other films that have made use of the psychoanalytical theories are *A Clockwork Orange* by Stanley Kubrick, *Black Swan* by Darren Aronofsky, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* by Michael Gondry etc.

Analysis

Malayalam cinema is a treasure trove of movies that represent the human psyche and the psychotic disorders. Various type of disorders such as mood disorders, substance use disorders, anxiety disorders, mental retardation and dissociative disorders has been depicted in movies such as *Ore Kadal* (2007), *Spirit* (2011), *North 24 Katham* (2013), *Ithiri NeramOthiri Karyam* (1982) and *Manichithrathazhu* (1983) respectively. In the movie *Manichithrathazhu*, the protagonist Ganga had a lonely childhood which actually tampered her mind. The loneliness and the constant fear of her parents leaving her, affected her inner self and turned into a complete psychological breakdown during her adolescence. Nagavalli was an alter ego of Ganga, an attire which her unconscious mind deliberately selected. Her abnormal behaviour is evident through her curiosity in exploring the unknown and through her aggressive adamant nature. Several other Malayalam movies have gained popularity in its depiction of the human mind, the internal turbulences of the mind and in providing partial solutions for the same. Dr. Vidya Chathoth, the author of *Reel to Real* believes that cinema is the best medium to understand the mental health issues and has the ability to help the audience liberate from the pain and sufferings of the mortal world.

The character of Perumthachan has been studied as a part of the long prevailing folklore of *Parayi Petta Panthirukulam*, but no studies regarding the psychology of Perumthachan has emerged. The source of a film can be literary texts, non-literary texts, folklores, mythological tales, newspaper reviews etc. The filmic translation of such sources is different from the actual sources to some extent. It is this difference which makes the movie much more interesting even though the success of a movie lies in its fidelity to the actual source. The aim of such differences is to achieve aesthetic purposes. Perumthachan movie is an adaptation of a novel of the same name written by M.T Vasudevan Nair. In this paper, the film text is taken as the basis for studying the character of Perumthachan. This is because film is a mass media and the people will be able to understand the character of Perumthachan more explicitly through visuals than through words. Moreover, no major works about Perumthachan has come up. The character of Perumthachan is studied in order to reaffirm the fact that the behaviour of an individual is largely influenced by the unconscious realm of the human mind. Films help to bring forth the aspects of the unconscious mind with the help of sounds and images. The cognitive ability of the human mind on seeing the moving images is at a much higher level.

Andrew Slade in his book *Psychoanalytic Theory and Criticism* states that Psychoanalysis is a revolutionary theory of mind, of feeling and of behaviour (1). Psychoanalysis operates on the basic division of mental life into conscious processes and the unconscious. The analysis of internal conflictual feelings has always been central to psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud is regarded as the father of psychoanalysis. "In the years from

his first psychoanalytic publications in the 1890's to the first major work of psychoanalysis, Freud worked in his clinic to establish psychoanalysis as a path of treatment and research into the workings of the human mind" (Slade 2). In this research paper, theory of personality and the defence mechanisms proposed by Freud and Anna Freud are taken for studying the character of Perumthachan. According to Sigmund Freud's theory of personality human psyche is a combination of the id, ego and superego. Theory of personality gives emphasis to the unconscious realm of the human mind. Human behaviours are largely influenced by the unconscious realm. Id cares about the instant gratification of basic physical needs and urges. Superego is concerned with social rules, ethics and morals. Ego is the realistic part which balances both the id and superego. Psychoanalysis is beneficial in the sense that it helps the audience to identify themselves with the protagonist. Such an association of the self with the characters portrayed on the screen helps the audience to adopt the correct measures that can restrain themselves from extremist activities.

Carl Jung's archetypes are also analysed in this research paper in order to study the character of Perumthachan. Anthony Stevens in his book *Jung: A Very Short Introduction* states that Archetypes are identical psychic structures common to all which together constitute the archaic heritage of humanity (47). Carl Gustav Jung was a Swiss psychoanalyst who proposed a model of psyche different from that of Sigmund Freud. He explained about the human psyche with the help of a dream he had. In the dream he was on the top floor of a house. Unlike the lower floor, the top floor was well maintained. He saw that the floor of the house was made of the stone slabs. In order to explore the house further, he pulled the slab and saw narrow stone steps leading into the depths. There he saw two human skulls, bones etc. "To Jung, the house was an image of the psyche. The room on the upper floor represented his conscious personality. The ground floor stood for the first level of the unconscious, which he was to call the personal unconscious, while in the deepest level of all he reached the collective unconscious" (Slade 47).

Perumthachan is a movie directed by Thoppil Ajayan and written by M.T. Vasudevan Nair. This is a movie that explicitly represents the inner conflicts of the protagonist, Raman Perumthachan. The downfall of the protagonist added from the pedestal of a well renowned carpenter to a tragic hero is depicted in the movie. With the different psychoanalytical theories this paper attempts to bring forth the emotional turbulences in the mind of the protagonist that paved the way for his tragedy. The character of Perumthachan is also studied as a part of the myth of *Parayi Petta Panthirukulam*.

The importance of mythology in Kerala is evident through the importance given to oral stories like *Parayi Petta Panthirukulam*. The legend of Perumthachan belongs to this oral mythological tale. Perumthachan was one among the twelve children of *Parayi Petta Panthirukulam*. He was the abandoned child of a Brahmin scholar and a low caste mother. Since he was brought up by a carpenter family, he belonged to the carpenter caste. His talents grew with him and his outstanding talents gave him the tag of 'Perumthachan', the master carpenter. In spite of his extraordinary abilities to sculpt religious statues, build amazing temples and houses and interpret the Holy Scriptures, he is considered inferior by the Brahmin families who employ him. Though a person with great talents, the fact that he belonged to the lower caste made him alienated in many of the situations.

Caste system was one of the many social stigmas that characterised the ancient Kerala. It was the period of 'Chaturvarna Vyavastha' which modelled the four-fold division of society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. In the ancient Kerala the Namboothiris and

Brahmins formed the elite class and low caste people such as the shudras were outside the caste system entirely. The irony is that it is Perumthachan who creates the idol of Gods and Goddesses after several days of hard work and finally when the purification process is being done, he is not allowed to touch the idol due to the false belief that the touch of the low caste people makes the idol impure. The societal stigmas, especially the caste system present at that time is brought to the forefront through the character of Perumthachan. He is respected only for his talents and is otherwise largely marginalised. The dress of the characters, their habits, manners and speech style etc.; helps the audience to feel that age. A microcosm of society prevalent at that time is depicted here in the movie.

The relationship between man and nature can be seen in the movie. There was a close relationship between man and nature. Perumthachan scolds his son for not asking the permission of the trees before felling them. This shows how closely related were humans and nature during those days. Moreover, the gender, disparities prevalent at that time is also explicitly represented in the movie. Perumthachan says that there is men and women even in trees and stones. He touches a stone and regards it as men to which he assigns the highest qualities and touch another stone and identifies it as female and says that it is best for making chairs. This indicates that women are always to be submissive and remain lower to men. On the contrary, the power dynamics in a marital relationship between an economically independent wife, Bhargavi Thampuratti and her financially dependent husband, Unni Thampuran is also depicted in the movie.

It is the society which gave Raman thachan the title of Perumthachan and it is the same society that disregarded him and his talents as outdated with the arrival of his son Kannan. With this he gradually started to lose his confidence. Though he was happy at the excellence of his son, unconsciously he had a sense of suffocation and a fear of fall. He wished to be the master carpenter without any substitutes and wanted to be remembered over years.

Perumthachan has all the traits of a tragic hero. A tragic hero is the protagonist of the tragedy. The character of a tragic hero is usually a mix of the heroic traits and flaws. The heroic traits help them earn the sympathy of the spectators, whereas the flaws are also known as the Hamartia, added ultimately leads to their own downfall. Perumthachan was a man of noble character, one who was respected by everyone for his extraordinary talents and craftsmanship. He was a capable carpenter who was successful at creating mind-blowing sculptures. Unaffected by time the legacy of Perumthachan still lives on through his works. He was virtuous in character which is evident with his dealings with Bhargavi Thampuratti. Even though his mind swayed at times, he was able to control himself from committing all those deeds that could put down all the fame he has acquired. His tragic flaw was his ambitious nature and jealousy which ultimately lead to his downfall from a well-known carpenter to a tragic hero. It is this jealousy and fear of fall that made him kill his own son Kannan.

Jealousy according to Sigmund Freud is a complex emotion that can be divided into several other components such as a grief of loss, a narcissistic wound, feelings of enmity against the successful rival etc. Complex emotions being psychological states are not subject to logical analysis. According to Freud, jealousy is never a rational emotion since it is under the control of the subconscious mind. Psychoanalytic discourse argues that jealousy is a fact of life and a painful 'normal unhappiness' that has to be endured. Freud also comments that jealousy has an irrational component to it, because of its relationship to the unconscious. Freud is of the opinion that jealousy can be normal, projected or delusional.

Perumthachan always had a constant fear of fall from the time his son started to overpower him and his talents. Raman envies his son Kannan, whose technical prowess and personal strength may surpass his own. The love and pride of a father gradually started to turn into envy and jealousy. It is the tragic flaw, the source of which is internal to the character helps the audience to identify themselves with the protagonist. Perumthachan was very adamant and didn't want anyone to surpass him. From the very start of the movie itself one can see the adamant nature of Perumthachan which is evident from the words of Bhargavi Thampuratti when she says she had heard stories of Perumthachan leaving the work place without completing the work. This is because he was a man who has his set of rules and regulations at his workplace and expects the others to follow the same. He was ready to go to any extent to prove himself. There is a scene in the movie where his truthfulness was under question. To prove his innocence, he burnt his hands by promising on the lighted lamp. That much adamant was he. All his works had his signature and with each work he proved his talents to be at more and more heights. In the early stages, he appreciated the excellency of his son and he took the credit of his son's intellect in his name. When people around started praising his son and degraded the talents of Perumthachan that hit him hard. The movie clearly represents the mixture of emotions of Perumthachan as a proud father and also as an elderly architect. Moreover, Perumthachan was a social person who lived in strict accordance to the ways of society and on the contrary his son Kannan, being a young person, restless in nature wished to travel in his own ways according to his own desires. His son's tendency to overlook the traditional rules and values of sculptural art largely irritated the mind of Perumthachan and added to the fire of jealousy. However, Perumthachan cautions his son on the same.

Differences in opinions and conflicts between a generation and the other are something very common. The story of Perumthachan and his son can be compared to the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus to some extent. Daedalus like Perumthachan was a skilled architect and was seen as the symbol of wisdom, knowledge and power. Daedalus is famous as an architect of the Minotaur's labyrinth on Crete. He and his son were imprisoned in the labyrinth he himself created by King Minos of Crete for helping Queen Pasiphae and Ariadne, the daughters of King Minos. In order to escape from the Crete, Daedalus created wings out of wax and warned his son not to fly too high or too low as it could damage the feathers. But Icarus who was overwhelmed by the thrill of flying, flew too high near the sun and as a result of which the wax in the feathers melted and he was drowned to death. Like Icarus Perumthachan cautions his son's ambitious ways, finally to which he himself brings an end to. Perumthachan was a dedicated carpenter as he left aside his personal life for his works. He was very much involved in his works. There are scenes in the movie which depict Perumthachan forgetting about his son and getting involved in his works. He prioritized his work life over his personal life.

In psychoanalytic theory, a defence mechanism is an unconscious psychological mechanism that functions to protect the ego which may be threatened by anxieties from the id, super-ego or outside world. Richard Appignanesi and Oscar Zarate in their book *Freud for Beginners* comments that positively defence mechanisms are used by the ego to channel or to control the forces which may lead to neurosis. Defence act as a compromise between wish and reality. The ego modifies the id's urges for immediate gratification and allows disguised satisfaction. The point of any defensive compromise is to keep the conflicts it resolves out of conscious awareness (170). Defence mechanisms are used when our id or super-ego becomes too demanding. It was Freud who developed the defence mechanisms, later to which his daughter Anna Freud added. The defence mechanisms include repression, denial, projection, displacement, sublimation and regression.

Repression is a “defence mechanism by which unacceptable impulse or idea is rendered unconscious” (Appignanesi and Zarate 172). According to Andrew Slade, Repression is a secondary process that aligns with the demands of waking life and the demands of reality to conceal our most coveted wishes (12). In repression the unconscious ideas that are felt to be too dangerous to become conscious are pushed out of the consciousness but which can be brought to the consciousness in certain circumstances. It is an unconscious mechanism employed by the ego. “Ego development depends on repression” (Appignanesi and Zarate 172). In the movie Perumthachan, one can see Perumthachan’s desire to initiate a relationship with Bhargavi Thampuratti, the wife of his loyal friend Unni Thampuram. But in order to maintain the status quo, here the sexual desires are repressed. There is another scene in the second half of the movie in which Perumthachan physically attacks his own son Kannan when he stood against the words of his father. Perumthachan asked Kannan to stop the work and leave the place in order to stop the relation between his son Kannan and Kunjikavu, the daughter of Unni Thampuram going further. His son Kannan reacts in the negative way saying that it is the idea of Perumthachan to claim the excellency of the work in his own name. This physical attack can be seen as the outburst of the repressed feelings of Perumthachan. The close-up shots in this scene helped the audience to feel all those that the character felt.

Another important defence mechanism that is evident in the movie is denial. The defence mechanism of denial involves blocking external events from awareness. If a situation seems to be too much to handle the person just refuses to go through the situation. In the scene where Perumthachan’s son was assigned a work, we can see Perumthachan leaving the workplace even when he was asked to stay back. He knew that if he had stayed back, he would have been insulted there. Therefore, he just decided to leave the place. In the second half of the movie, Perumthachan is avoided in the name of his son. He is wanted only as a helper at the workplace. Perumthachan on hearing this leaves the place without a word. There are various scenes in the movie where Perumthachan resorting to the defence mechanism of denial is depicted.

There is a scene in the movie in which Perumthachan creates a doll beside a bridge. The doll rises from the river with mouth full of water and would spit if someone enters the bridge. This in a way started to humiliate the passers-by. Later his son Kannan made another doll against the one made by his father. That doll would slap the doll created by Perumthachan when it rises from the river to spit on people’s face. Everyone was amazed and clapped at the doll made by Kannan. Perumthachan’s id works here, but with the influence of super-ego he keeps quiet. The fluctuations between the id and super-ego are seen in the character of Perumthachan throughout the movie.

Several Malayalam movies have made use of the concept of archetypes which was developed by Carl Gustav Jung. Anthony Stevens comments that Archetypes are identical psychic structures common to all which together constitute the archaic heritage of humanity (47). The concept of archetypes is taken from collective unconsciousness, which was proposed by Jung. Jung believed that the cause of human behaviour was not only the past experiences but also the future aspirations. The major archetypes according to Jung are the self, the persona, the shadow, and the anima/animus.

The persona archetype allows the people to adjust with the society in which they live. Persona acts to shield the ego from negative images. It is like the different masks humans wear

to get along the different social situations. Becoming too closely related to this archetype can lead people to lose hold of their true selves. Persona creates a form of us which are acceptable to the people around. It can be understood as a mechanism employed by the ego to make sure that the people will think well of us. The persona of Perumthachan is that of calm, appreciating elder carpenter and a father who is proud at the excellency of his son. His persona helped him to conceal his true self, that of an elderly jealous carpenter. There are many scenes in the movie in which his son Kannan overpowered Perumthachan's talents. Perumthachan remained calm in all those situations. He responded in a very sensible manner without giving a chance to bring forth the emotional disturbances of his mind. In most of the situations silence was his answer.

The other archetype is the shadow archetype which represents the dark side of human psyche. The shadow archetype consists of the selfish, the repressed and the turbulent instincts of the individual. Usually, the individuals are not aware that they possess such feelings. It is entirely unconscious. This archetype is related to the repressed sexuality and criminality of an individual. This is evident in the character of Perumthachan as unconsciously he was against his son and it is the outbreaks of these unconscious feelings made him physically attack and later kill his own son. Jung also referred to the shadow archetype as the id and believed that it represented an unconscious aspect of the personality which the conscious ego does not identify in itself.

One of the main psychological archetypes is that of the father archetype. The father archetype takes several forms such as that of a God, giant, judge, doctor, executioner, devil, boss and of course that of a father. The father archetype we hold in our psyches indicates how we feel about being capable, productive and artistic within the outer world. In this archetype both light and dark aspects exist. The shadow father emerges when the caring guidance and protection turns into abuse of authority as is evident with Perumthachan. The negative father archetype involves rigidity, control and an intellectual way of relating. This results in ego and intellectual inflation and a state of hubris. The negative father has grandiose thoughts of transcendence and leads to a fate almost like Icarus. Icarus was warned about the dangers of flying too high near the sun but he ignored that which led him plummeting back to the earth.

Conclusion

Through the use of different psychoanalytical theories and cinematic techniques, this paper concludes by reaffirming the fact that human behaviours are largely influenced by the unconscious mind. It is the functioning of the unconscious mind that made Perumthachan kill his beloved son Kannan and paved way for his own tragedy. Moreover, the societal stigmas of caste system, which made Perumthachan alienated in many of the situations also added to the internal turbulences of his mind. Therefore, this paper also concludes that the character of a person largely depends on the environment in which he lives

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