

Identity Crisis In Shaji N Karun's Vanaprastham

HariPriya S R¹, Anu Sathyan², Dr. Sreena K³

¹HariPriya S R, Integrated MA English, Department of English, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi.

²Anu Sathyan, MA English, Department of English, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi.

³Dr. Sreena K, HOD, Asst. Professor, Department of English and Languages, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Kochi.

ABSTRACT

Vanaprastham is an Indo French movie directed by Shaji N Karun. Set in the backdrop of Kathakali, a native dance form of Kerala, the movie visualises the tale of a tormented dancer. There is art, emotion, drama, social injustice and other perspectives of life discussed in this movie. It represents issues related to marginality in terms of caste and class in different ways through the plot, characters and settings. The protagonist of the movie Kunjikuttan, a Kathakali artist, faces dilemma and confronts a conflict between his self and on-stage persona. There is an identity crisis and social exclusion experienced by the protagonist in various stages in his personal and professional life. A confusion between the real and the fantasy adds to the trauma in life of the lead characters. Everything around questions the existence of Kunjikuttan as an individual, as a family man and as an artist. The paper is an analysis of the protagonist in existentialism and Dalit identity faced by the protagonist. Even in this 21st C, these issues are widely taken for discussions, as even now our society faces a lot of issues that deals with identity. Thus, the study is very relevant to understand the depth of inner conflicts of the marginalised sections of the population. The paper attempts to analyse the representation of the 'real' self and the art from the perspective of caste system.

Key words: Dalit identity, Identity crisis, Social stratification.

INTRODUCTION

Vanaprastham, the movie is a complete work of art in terms of its script, casting, camera, cinematography etc. The movie evolves around the main character Kunjikuttan played by (Mohanlal), who lives an alienated life and tries to overcome all his glitches when performing Kathakali with great passion. Kunjikuttan is rejected by his father and later by his son because he belonged to the marginalised community. Here the identity of being a Dalit, leads to exclusion by the caste Hindu, as he is part of the history where ascriptive identity is considered as a parameter of the excellence in life rather than individual achievement. Subhadra, the heroine is in love, only with the 'costumed' artist and not the real man. The infatuation towards the epic character Arjuna, that Mohanlal plays, leads to the birth of an illegitimate child. After giving birth to his child, she completely abandoned him. Thus, the real man in life here is only considered as a costumed character with the mask. The original self is been rejected and his existence is being questioned. Kunjikuttan himself get into conflict with his own identity and later turn into a self realisation that, he wasn't a human at all, but rather a character, a mere entity tasked with entertaining his audience.

The protagonist considers Kathakali, as an instrument to cover up all his personal traumas and misfortunes. He seems to express his emotions only during his performance. Otherwise, he has to rely on alcohol to erase all the problems of his conscious self. It is found that, only his daughter is a healing figure for him in his personal life. Though the art form only earns him a little income, he is happy and self-satisfied in the form of art that he performs. In between the movie it is shown that the lower caste, Kunjikuttan(as a child) is

beaten and denied of learning Kathakali, as it was considered as an art form that is very divine, and thus only the upper caste were allowed to perform. According to a lower caste person, when able to perform a character from the great Hindu epic Mahabharata, it is a great blessing. Even in this 21st C, there are many concerns faced by people on their race, ethnic and caste identity. Vanaprastham, has clearly depicted the issues faced by the lower caste Hindus during the 1950s. During this era identity has been questioned on several aspects. There are several issues still going on in this world, mainly the identity clash of Dalit, where they are brutally beaten and killed in the name of their backwardness, colour, illiteracy and among others which has turn to be a frequent issue that take place in newspapers every now and then. Thus, the relevance of this topics is very much important in this current scenario. The paper focuses on the dilemma faced by Kunjikuttan, the Kathakali dancer, and the conflict between his life and on-stage persona. Considering all these issues, theories of Dalit identity is taken for further analysis.

OBJECTIVES

The main aim of the paper is to explore the issues turned up due to the clashes in identity and about social exclusion in varied layers from personal to professional sphere of life. Even in this 21stC, there are many obstructions raising up in the name of being in bottom of the rigid caste hierarchy. The movie is a mixture of art and culture. The relevance of art in terms of the lower caste is shown in the movie. Shaji N Karun, beautifully picturizes, Kathakali, the divine art form, through which he also shows the perpetual conflict within oneself (kunjikuttan) and existential crisis faced by the protagonist. The essence of existence is questioned by society. Victimisation due to identity crisis during the late 1950s caste Hindu society is discussed.

HYPOTHESIS

This study is designed to assess the identity crisis in an Indian context. The concept of Dalit identity is brought in order to bring in a strong appeal to the paper. It is found that there are a lot of problem raised because of being lower in the social class. There are a lot of people who has the calibre and will power to attain heights. But then our society, though conveys the message that all men and women are equal, the poor, lower caste people and other vulnerable sections suffer a high degree of deprivation and injustice in this society. It is not because they are not being capable, but they are pushed back and labelled as the lower in position as per our rigid social stratification which is essentially based on exclusion and inequality. The self is getting alienated and thus they are moving forward in the way in which the society has tuned them. This concept is found in *The Brave New World*, where there are no souls, but only machines. In this movies, Mohanlal portrays a character who is self alienated and faces problems with his own identity. A man who is not able to come out of the *vesham* (character) and is still playing. Human being is considered as an 'it' than 'thou'.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative analysis approach is conducted on the basis of a close understanding and thorough analysis of the primary text YouTube and the secondary sources such as certain articles and blogs. Theory of Dalit identity is used to enhance the research. Certain research papers are referred to find some valuable evidences.

The primary aim of the thesis is to examine the identity crises and exploitation faced

by the protagonist (Kunjikuttan). The study intent to show the varied layers of emotional trauma. The failure of Kunjikuttan as a son, father and husband is critically examined. This study therefore, utilised on interpretive methodology, as it sought to learn from and through a close and intense investigation of this case, how Dalit identity has impacted upon the protagonist and manifesting in his personal and professional life. The paper aimed to provide some level of light on Dalit studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, India is a country with a mixture of multiple identities, but socially the caste identity takes its dominance. Society considers Dalit as the marginalised. Indian constitution has abolished the practise of untouchability in Article 17 and has made it punishable offence. Parliament of India has passed The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Act, to prevent the offenses against Dalit and to protect the rights of other backward castes. Dalit are beaten, murdered and shunned from society but no attention is paid. Around 6 Dalit women are raped every day. On June 2020, a seventeen-year old boy was shot dead in Uttar Pradesh for visiting a temple in Armoha. Nearly 90 percent of all the poor Indians and 95 percent of all the illiterate Indians are Dalit's, according to the data presented at the International Dalit Conference in Canada on May 2020. Even after several developments, degradation of the Dalit identity is visible.

Abanti Bose, in his article discusses the conditions and challenges faced by Dalit and other backward classes in India in the 21st century. He has examined caste as one of the major socio-cultural issues and how the Indian judiciary has failed to protect the rights of the people. India though a country with diversities, faces challenges. 'Dalit goes Online: The Construction of Identity and Social Space', conference paper (2018), presented by Dhyam Sing, in which he reviewed about the importance of media and how it helps Dalit to come into frontage.

The character analysis of the protagonist is one of the major subject that has been discussed mostly in research papers. In several other papers, the conflict between the self and reality has also been examined. Julie Marsh (2010), in her paper, 'Maya, Tradition and Modernity in Shaji Karun's Vanaprastham', reflected the changing world of the south Indian community. By depicting life episodes of Kathakali dancer, who is still engaged with traditional social mores and mythologies, and how society struggles to absorb influences of modernity. Than research papers, several articles, blogs and interviews are to be found more on the movie. Reading through certain blogs and articles anyone would be fascinated to watch the movie. This paper discusses on the theories related to identity crisis and marginalisation.

ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

In Hinduism, Ashrama is a four age-based life stages discussed in Indian texts of the ancient and medieval eras. The four ashramas are: Brahmacharya (student), Grihastha (householder), Vanaprastha (forest dweller), and Sannyasa (renunciate). Vanaprastha in Sanskrit means "one who gives up worldly life", or literally "retiring to forest". Vanaprastha starts when a person hands over household responsibilities to the next generation, and gradually withdraws from the world.

The caste system in Indian context can be considered as a rigid and closed system of stratification. Caste ideology is indeed deep rooted in social institution of India with slight regional variations. But its common features include differential treatment of

individuals, unequal opportunities, marginalisation, and deprivation and so on. The principle of hierarchy can be identified as a core feature of caste system from the ancient scriptures and traditions. People in a caste based hierarchical society are arranged on the basis of their level of stratification and mobility in the society. Caste at top of stratification or the Chaturvarna system have the access to high mobility and privileges. On the other hand, Avarnas is lagging behind privileges enjoyed by the caste Hindus. And the principle of 'purity and pollution' creates unequal opportunities that results into the occupational differentiation and leads to double standards among Avarnas and caste Hindus. And this multiple deprivation results into social exclusion.

The 20th century contemporary human, is a neurosis of meaningless, insignificance and hollowness. For Satre, he considers absurdity as the dilemma of modern human, crumpled under the hypocrisy of the society.

The conflict between his(Kunjikuttan) own identity and the art form is very relevant from the beginning of the movie. The movie begins with the scene where Kunjikuttan's friend imagines him falling over, dressed in costume. Thus, the beginning of the movie itself shows the downfall of an artist who belongs to a lower caste. It is also very interesting to find out that the movie's name is written upside down. This could mean in two ways, either the downfall of an artist or as a real man. Detachment of an artist from his personal life and his retirement, is what Vanaprastham is all about. The essence of existence is lost and thus he lives an alienated life. Character Kunjikuttan, is destroyed by his own life. He finally returns from the burden of life in search for the paramaatma, or the absolute self.

Dalit do not appear in common culture as equals, and as a result, they are not a source of concern in our daily lives. Street cleaners, manual scavengers, domestic workers, farm labourers, and office workers are among the Dalit semiotics in the broader so-called upper castes, or, to put it more accurately, oppressor caste groups. Their pain is often rationalised by a karmic theory. Dalit's were positioned at the bottom of this rigid social stratification, deprived of their human rights and victims of social exclusion. Moreover, socially and religiously they have confined rights and their language, culture, traditions, and participation are not given much importance by privileged Hindu society. The Dalit is a 'global' group of people. Its neoliberal oppression is linked to that of other marginalised peoples around the world.

The social condition of the Kathakali artists are shown in extreme poverty. The tearing of the traditional drum (chenda) is a catastrophic event in the film. The artist only receives a pittance in compensation for the efforts rendered and no sufficient support of any kind is provided to them. There is a scene, when Kunjikuttan and his group gets an opportunity to perform in front of The Maharaja and the Lord has remarked that the performance has elevated his mind into a high realm and made him contend. When Kunjikuttan reveals that his group is in complete poverty, it's ironic that the Maharaja only looks down and says what a "pity". Here, the crisis challenged by Kunjikuttan as an artist is indicated.

India is a country with diversities in art, culture, tradition, etc. The movie shows the relevance of an art form and the artist who performs it. Being an artist, his satisfaction is when his role impresses the audience. An artist is respected when his characterization subjugates the mind. Kathakali is an art that has to be performed with great dignity and respect. The role of the Kathakali dancer performed by Mohanlal, the great actor has brought in full justice to the art, and thus the movie indeed. Only a fully dedicated person

can perform an art such as Kathakali, as it requires a lot of patience and practise. Mohanlal uses his eyes to express the emotions of his character.

Towards the end, Kunjikuttan decide to leave sattvika bhava and perform negative roles on stage as revenge to Subhadra. Anger of the mythological character is the representation of his own unrelenting anger. As a real man, he is not able to speak against Subhadra, as she belonged to the upper caste. Thus, towards the final lap of his life, he flashed his anger and frustrating on the stage. He performs the same aattakatha, 'Subhadraharanam' that Subhadra has written, with his own daughter. The failure and the crisis displayed here is that of a lover in Kunjikuttan.

Being rejected by his landlord Brahmin father, Kunjikuttan decides to offer the sacrificial ceremonies for his father. The Poojari tells him that he is not capable to perform the last rites, as he is not considered as a legitimate son and only a child born from a Brahmin mother can perform the ceremony. The father that gave him birth says that he is not his son, and the mother who gave birth to his son says he is not the father of his child Abhimanyu. Here, Kunjikuttan says that, for him father, mother, son all are just the mudras. Mudras have no differentiation between the upper caste and lower caste. 'I am a normal man, I want my father,' says him. This situation exhibits the crisis faced by Kunjikuttan as a son who has been denied his own identity.

In every way Kunjikuttan is a failure, both in life and art. It is better to say that the society and the imposed caste system is the ultimate evil that has shattered his life. Being born as backward, he was rejected by his own father and later his son. Is man 'born' as backward? The so-called society has imposed certain name tags to each one in the society that leads to social stratification. Why are Dalits considered marginalised? Aren't they too humans with the same features as the upper caste? In this new world men are crumpled between their thoughts. When one lost his self, his essence of 'being' become useless. Kunjikuttan is existent only as a mere object and not the true self.

The film won three awards at the 47th National Film Awards: Best Feature Film award, Best Actor award (Mohanlal), and Best Editing award (A. Sreekar Prasad). IBN Live ranked the film #9 in its list of greatest Indian films of all time.

CONCLUSION

Men, as a social being has a tremendous influence of the external environment or the society he or she fits in. Kunjikuttan being a victim of his unprivileged birth had suffered all kind of social and cultural suppression and subjugation. All through the life, he had faced the psychological traumas and as a living portrait of wide range of underprivileged communities, who denied the opportunities to flourish and get acceptance in an unequal world. The traumatic occurrence processed by the protagonist from the very beginning of his life finally leads him to questioning his existence in a world, which is unequal in every aspect of it process. This perpetual trauma with one's identity has been fuelled by Subhadra's denial of his right as a father. Kunjikuttan's mother was rejected by his father, whereas he himself has been rejected by Subhadra. In both the cases, the rich abandon the poor, because the social hierarchy enjoyed by rich or upper class, who enjoy the fruits of their high social mobility wasn't cared about the harm they caused upon the less privileged or the downtrodden. Thus kunjikuttan is indeed a victim of the traumas of 1950s society which was in midst of casteism, social exclusion, class conflict, occupational differentiation and so on. The adversities of an unequalled world are vividly portrayed through the character of kunjikuttan. This movie thus belongs to the canon of Indian art

cinema.

REFERENCES

Primary source:

1. MalayalamHits. “New Malayalam Full Movies | Vanaprastham | Pilgrimage | Mohanlal | MalayalamHits.” YouTube, YouTube, 10 Feb. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFB2QqrCe4Y.

Secondary sources:

2. Constructing Dalit Identity, Book by C. Joe Arun, 2007.
3. Mahalingam, R. (2007). Beliefs about chastity, machismo, and caste identity: a Cultural psychology of Gender. *Sex Roles* 56, 239–249. DOI: 10.1007/s11199-006-9168-
4. Sekher, Ajay. *Representing the Margin: Caste and Gender in Indian Fiction*. Delhi: Kalpaz/Gyan, 2008.
5. Winn, Ralph. *A Concise Dictionary of Existentialism*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1960.