






Mapping Caste Violence in the Domestic Front: Representation of the Caste Questions in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

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Mapping Caste Violence in the Domestic Front: Representation of the Caste Questions in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract

Conservative modes of representations of the Dalit lives and the caste questions in Malayalam cinema used to adhere to the stereotypical portrayal of caste-based violence as a tool to evoke pity, fear or laughter. However, recent movies emphasise the revolt of the subaltern both in personal and public domains of discourse. This paper attempts to analyse two recent Malayalam films, *Puzhu* (the Worm) and *Malayankunju* (The Malaya Child) released in 2022 that blatantly deal with caste-based violence operational in the domestic sphere. The critique is based on two major questions: how does caste identity and caste-based violence function in the domestic interiors and in what ways do the dominant patriarchal discourses complicate the subjective positioning of women within and outside the household. The study identifies various elements that contribute to the construction of subjectivity of the Dalit and discusses the issues embedded in caste pride leading to catastrophe at the home-front through ostracisation and excision (either through murder or through mutilation) processes of those ones who do not conform to the dictated norms of casteists. Within the theoretical framework of structural and cultural violence, the paper analyses how caste-based violence and gender-based violence are types of structural violence and discusses the legitimisation of it sanctioned by various cultural elements.

[**Keywords:** Caste Questions, Caste Violence, Malayalam Cinema]

Introduction

Malayalam cinema recently began to address the alarming questions of caste-based violence through subtle but 'positive representations', in contrast with the usual derogatory portrayal of subordinate classes and Dalit community as 'commodities' to evoke laughter or fear. Till recently these "characters have been either victimised or exoticised by the mainstream cinema to peddle a distorted identity of secular India" (Nisha 2020:15). However, many a time these representations are confined to the portrayals of helpless 'Dalit characters' being rescued/helped or rehabilitated by the upper caste heroes. In other words, archiving the helplessness of the subjugated and underprivileged segment is the usual mode that Malayalam cinema adopted when it comes to the question of caste on screen. Yet, movies like *Second Show* (2012) and *Kammattippadam* (2016) had protagonists who were from subaltern backdrop, though not being subalterns themselves, and these movies portrayed various aspects of the lives of people at the periphery. Films in which the late actor Kalabhavan Mani acted were exceptions as these movies largely portrayed

protagonists who were of Dalit identity. Such films challenged the norm of heroes being the mainstream actors who hail from privileged backgrounds. A few other films discussed caste-based violence through the presentation of the dominance of the upper-caste and the subconscious authority they have in their social interactions with the underprivileged as in *Papilio Budha* (2013), *Ozhivu Divasathe Kali (The Game on the Holiday)* (2013), *Kala (The Weed)* (2021), *Nayattu (The Hunt)* (2021), and *Prajapathik Thooran Muttiyappol (When the Emperor Wanted to Shit)* (2022). The social aspect of violence is being foregrounded through these films. Interestingly, seldom these movies looked at the domestic aspect of caste-based violence even when there were subtle and very negligible kind of references towards it in some macho movies. *Unda (The Bullet)* (2019) and *Anthakshari (a musical game)* (2022) were two films which briefly discussed how the caste-based discrimination pollutes the police department placing the caste questions within the law-and-order system. Again, these were based on the social aspects of caste.

In Kerala, caste-based violence was not apparent as it is in many other parts of India till recently. Honour killings, the murders committed by family members of a kin who has been perceived to have brought dishonour to the family (Edachira 2020), were not recorded in Kerala till Kevin, a young man from the district of Kottayam was brutally killed by his wife's family in 2018. Even though caste discrimination and the subsequent perpetration of violence was operational in the Kerala society, it was with this incident that it became a matter of concern and made it to news desks and social media platforms to be discussed and debated. (The Mammooty starrer film *Bhishma Parvam* (2022) was dedicated to Kevin and the movie consciously attempts to address the caste issues though that does not form the crux of the film). Cinema as a medium did not address the atrocities, both psychological and physical, that casteism can inflict in the domestic sphere until recently. In other words, in general, as Konda (2020: 64) argues, with "a few exceptions, Indian cinema has played blind to the caste discourse for most of its course".

In this analytical study, I would like to identify and document the ways in which questions of caste identity and caste-based violence intrude into the domestic space, into the masculine order in which that microcosm of the society is expected to function. It is, therefore, important to review the earlier representations of casteism in Malayalam cinema as a beginning point.

Casting caste to evoke laughter

As briefly mentioned in the previous section, caste was used in many Malayalam films as a tool to evoke laughter. This was attained through the depiction of a Dalit character or characters, with or without disabilities or strange behavioural issues, on screen as the comedian/s. A dark-skinned actor or actress is employed for this purpose and mostly their picturization demands the characters being idiotic owing to which the comedy sequences are generated. Actors like Harishree Ashokan, Kuthiravattam Pappu, Mala Aravindan, Indrans, Salim Kumar, Sreenivasan, and Kalabhavan Mani were some of the actors who were chosen to depict the Dalit characters who generated laughter through the idiocy scripted for enactment. Later during the early decades of the 21st century, Malayalam cinema witnessed more body politics in play on screen.

Disabilities, skin tone and various occupations that are categorically attributed to certain castes were laughed at. Usual depiction of women characters of Dalit identity were as prostitutes with tagging the character's name with a place's name in a derogatory sense and in theatres it used to

evoke laughter. Many of such depictions were obviously subplots or supplementary sequences in the film narrative to the major or 'serious' plot. For example, the movie *Manichithrathazhu* (The Ornate Lock) (1993) which has been remade into Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Hindi had a Brahmin priest and a lower-caste priest in the narrative. The Dalit priest's role is to create sequences for laughter. There were scenes in which this Dalit priest played by Kuthiravattam Pappu was tricked by the male protagonist of the film, a psychiatrist, by confusing him with his mental illness condition, its symptoms and remedies. Mocking the mental illness of a Dalit character evoked much laughter in theatres but later these narratives were also discussed for the brutal dismissal of human rights.



Figure 1: The psychiatrist Dr. Sunny and the lower caste priest Kattuparamban-A scene from *Manichithrathazhu*

A film that nonsensically portrayed the Adivasis as uncouth and idiotic with the entire movie narrative centring around their idiocies and their utter incompetency to come to terms with "urban civilisation" was *Bamboo Boys* (2002). This film too was later critiqued for the lack of sensitivity towards the concept of caste justice, gender justice and inclusivity constructs that a society always must orient towards. Caste was represented in these movies either through names, or through the skin tone of the character. Disabilities, not conforming to the norms of physical charm and intellect, and occupations that the *savarnas* or the elite caste and class would not undertake were the identity markers of Dalits in movies of this period.



Figure 2: Harishree Ashokan and Kalabhavan Mani as adivasis in *Bamboo Boys*

The “social ecology”, as used by Guru (2013), the politically structured condition, views a particular group as “other” and this grotesque representation involves “degenerated, disgusting, and dispensable objects and objectified bodies” (2013: 40) and this was evident in the Malayalam films of the 90s. This social ecology still permeates in the films but increasingly the nature of representation becomes sensitive towards the imbalances. Or in other words, to counter the grotesque representations of the caste questions, at least a few filmmakers are problematising the grotesqueness and inappropriacy of the yesteryears’ representations.

Trope of the ‘to be rescued subalterns’

Dalit characters in Malayalam cinema had another function which largely was to endorse the machoism of the hero who was invariably from an upper caste and class. The “social ecology”, with the *savarna* gaze always favouring a view they prefer to have on the *avarna* bodies, and their crises assert the “socially vigilant and politically correct” (Guru, 2013: 39) elitist disposition within the film narratives. In Malayalam cinema, the heroes who are of upper caste are seen as usually being “assisted by a supporting character who could be a close friend, subordinate or employee, typically with dark skin and from a religious minority” (Koickakudy, 2021:64). The subaltern characters whether females or males are pitted against conditions that demand their emancipation but as a helpless community they are incapable of asserting their identity and troubleshooting their issues. Therefore, the protagonist there appears as a saviour who raises voices against the atrocities done towards these subalterns and rescues them. In the sequence, usually pity is evoked through the rape of the Dalit women, the annihilation of their habitats, casting them against economically deprived conditions or even through the depiction of their brutal murder. Evocation of pity through these tropes was an imperative segment in many screenplays. While these sequences add to the melodrama, it also ratifies the heroic actions of the protagonist who takes it as a responsibility to rehabilitate the downtrodden, pretty much similar to that of the project of the Whiteman’s Burden. The upper caste hypocrisy is still to be perceived from the screen as most of the efforts that the elite protagonists undertake to ensure the

emancipation of the downtrodden (Dalit characters) become mere sweet talk about their “utility” (Koickakudy, 2021).

In many of the films, rape was an integral part of the screenplay not only to adhere to the then conventions of mainstream cinema but also as a tool to evoke pity and fear in the minds of the spectators. Sexual violence for the perpetrators is “a metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition” (Spivak, 1988: 303) and the portrayal of rapes on screen, even if it is camouflaged with the “pure” intention to evoke pity, in fact is the “gaze” (Mulvey, 1975: 6-18) in operation. The *savarna* gaze on female bodies of Dalit is yet another perpetration of aesthetic vandalism. As Kumar (2013) points out, in many of the films, especially when the sexual violence is pictured there is an eroticisation of violence which is a conscious attempt to please the male/ upper caste gaze, thereby dismissing the argument of “showing” violence to present or represent caste-based gender violence on silver screen. Dalit females and their bodies are thus within the “mutually bracketing” (Guru, 2000:112) caste and gender.

The to be civilised subalterns

The civilisation project that the Brits had left long back has been taken up by more privileged Indians at least through the innumerable discussions that covertly happen over various social media platforms. Representations of this could be traced to films which always used to present an upper caste/class hero against a Dalit villain. As Edachira (2020) states

In Indian myths, negative characters, mostly Asuras (demons), are depicted as dark (both in appearance and characterisation). Similarly, in popular cinema, villains are shown as having a dark skin colour. Moreover, darkness has been used as a marker of “lower” class/caste identity in most of the films (52)

The gangsters in Malayalam movies are always Dalits who on screen depicted as thriving on anti-social activities. The psychological conditioning to which the society as a whole was subjected to made it appear naturalised. The audience derived pleasure when the villain gets beaten up or taught a good lesson by the hero if not killed. Such stereotypical representation of Dalits as villainous recently underwent changes. However, this trope still remains and functions as a way to subtly communicate the casteist ideals of the filmmakers who have mostly come from the privileged caste and class. The films which depicted upper caste villains or bourgeoisie rapists were all social cause movies whether they were mainstream films or parallel films. These movies were conscious aesthetic archival of the atrocities inflicted upon the Dalits in the past. Such movies are historical in their genre irrespective of the time of their production the latest ones being *Mizhi Thurakkoo* (Open Your Eyes) released in 2019 and *Pathonpathaam Noottand* (The Nineteenth Century) released in 2022.

The re-presentation of caste

In the second half of the 21st century, especially with the upsurge of the new generation films, and with the advent of active social media engagement and the public’s entitlement towards unedited criticism on these platforms, there had been significant changes in the way the lower-caste was given representation in Malayalam films. Moreover, many of the earlier films underwent staunch criticism for the ill-framed depiction of the people at periphery. This kind of an increased sensitivity

towards the issues of caste, gender, and disabilities redefined the film narratives to a great extent though at times subtle references in the old pattern are employed either deliberately or subconsciously. Although, at this juncture, the films in Malayalam began to address the caste questions differently and the representations on screen became more representative rather than the romanticised version that the film makers employed for its commercial value. Thus, representation largely gave way to the presentation of the subaltern lives, concerns and caste-based violence.

One major change was the Dalit protagonist's role being played by the mainstream actors and the depiction of events in a believable and realistic manner. While most of the films looked at the caste-based violence and underscored the need to empathise with the subjugated, some other movies portrayed the revolting subalterns as in *Prajapathik Thooran Muttiyappol (2022)* and *Kala (2021)*. However, in the former the revolt is suppressed whereas in the latter and in the movie *Anthakshari (2022)*, the revolt involves bloodshed and leaves the audience with ethical questions of being right and wrong. All these films largely looked at the society and discoursed the societal aspects of casteism and caste-based violence.

Although a film named *Kismat (Luck)*, released in 2016, discussed caste and its operation at the domestic spaces, it did not foreground the honour killing episode in the film but pictured it as an accident. Like other films, *Kismat* too attempted to cast caste questions in a larger social context. Two films that portrayed casteism operating in the domestic spaces are *Puzhu (2022)* and *Malayankunju (2022)* which differed from the other films that discussed the questions of caste by directly addressing the issue of honour killing literally in the former and metaphorically in the latter. The protagonists of both these movies are bigots who take pride in their caste identity. These roles were played by Mammooty and Fahad Fasil respectively who are among the most celebrated actors in the industry. Perhaps, this is the first time Malayalam cinema employed actors with such star value to act as casteist bigots who define and set the social order for themselves and for others with the precision of a dictator within the interior of their household. In these movies, rather than representing the issues of casteism and the social order driven by it, the film makers provide a presentation of the scenarios where caste becomes destructive and make human lives vulnerable. In particular, the movies dealt with how the interior of the household is designed as per the caste equations that the bigots (the protagonists) formulate. First, it is important to analyse how the patriarchal, *savarna* notions of caste identity infiltrates into the domestic realm and how this in turn reflects in the macro level, in the exterior of the household that is in the society. It is also important to elucidate the victimhood that surges up through the narrative and contextualise it within the framework of caste-based violence as presented in the films.

Categorisation of Violence

Violence is the reason for the difference between the *potential* and the *actual*, or what could have been and what is, regardless of whether a clearly identifiable agent is present or absent (Lee, 2019). Any threat to the basic needs of a living entity can be termed as violence and in this context. Galtung (1985) classified fundamental needs as survival needs, well-being needs, identity, meaning needs, and freedom needs. Negation of survival needs results in death or mortality whereas the denial of well-being needs culminates in misery and morbidity. Negating identity,

meaning needs results in alienation and ignoring or curtailing the freedom needs results in repression. Galtung (1990) categorised violence into direct, structural and cultural violence and this categorisation is adequate explain and understand the caste-based and gender-based violence that is being analysed in this paper. Direct violence according to Galtung manifests through physical and verbal abuses but is also in synergy with structural and cultural violence. Scheper-Hughes (2006) underscores that structural violence often refers to the ease with which humans reduce the socially vulnerable to dispensable “non-persons” and this capability to dismiss the very essence of the vulnerable human lives subtly provides the perpetrators with the licence to exterminate them. Structural violence is associated with shame, stress, discrimination and denigration that result from a lower status and as Gilligan (1996) argues this association results in a psychological condition that triggers the violent act. Domination, exploitation and humiliation are all structural violence and this culminates in physical violence to coerce the victims to a subjective position in the power hierarchy.

Caste-based violence is structural violence because a system assists the perpetrators to venture upon inflicting damage to the socially construed powerless humans who are discriminated based on their religion, caste and creed. Honour killings are legally condemned but there are clans of people who believe in the cultural sanctioning of it based on their deep- rooted beliefs in the purity of their own castes and customs. Lee (2019) points out that

Aspects of a people’s culture such as religion, art, ideology, language, science, communal and symbolic elements being used to justify or legitimise structural or direct violence (134)

In other words, cultural violence provides the shades of legitimacy to direct and physical abuses and violence by making them appear to be right and justified. Galtung (1990) further emphasises that

One way cultural violence works is by changing the moral colour of an act from red/wrong to green/right or at least yellow/ acceptable...Another way is by making reality opaque so that we do not see the violent act or fact, or at least not as violent (292)

Thus, caste-based violence and gender-based violence are clear cases of structural violence where the cultural violence that follows from them influences the social psyche to give them legitimation or social sanction. When the collectivities called casteists sanction the caste- based violence, the patriarchal chauvinistic group validates the gender-based violence. These forms of structural and cultural violence are in operation in the Indian domestic spaces and a slice of them is being represented through the films *Puzhu* (2022) and *Malayankunju* (2022)

Domestic spaces and caste play

Puzhu showcases the intriguingly monotonous life of an upper caste police officer, a widower, fondly called as Kuttan with his son Kichu in his luxurious flat. His restricted friendships, paranoia that someone is in hunt for him, obsessive compulsive behaviour towards the child and his mixed feelings of hatred and affection towards his sister Bharathi who left home and her husband’s family to live with the Dalit theatre activist Kuttappan, contribute to the complexities in the narrative. Bharathi and Kuttappan moving to the same apartment in which Kuttan lives challenges his already baffled mindset and even though he tries at times to compromise with the ‘reality’ (the

reality that Bharathi and Kuttappan are married), ultimately the casteist sentiments in him win over the affectionate brotherhood that he conceals in himself. This results in the murder of both his sister and brother-in-law. The final sequence of the film which looks like an enforced appendix to embellish the theme portrays the murder of Kuttan by an offended youngster who was awaiting his turn to avenge the catastrophe that Kuttan had wreaked on his family.



Figure 3: An uncomfortable Kuttan at the 'success party' thrown by Kuttappan

Although the casteist sentiments of the protagonist and inter-caste marriage as a trigger for hatred become the common strains in *Puzhu* and *Malayankunju*, the second one differs by screening the transformation of the casteist Anikuttan after encountering a natural calamity. The chauvinistic casteist undergoes a major psychological change when he survives death and manages to rescue the child of a Dalit couple who lived in his neighbourhood with whom he picked up arguments regularly. Loss of life and the emptiness or hollowness of caste pride when encountered by the fear of death and meeting it face to face kindles the 'change of mindset'. Pain and helpless predicament and the vulnerability of human lives to natural disasters function as agents that initiate such a psychological transformation. The protagonist's sister's matrimony with a Dalit person triggers the issues in the domestic sphere and the caste pride they nurture resulted in the suicide of his father after being insulted by the members of the Dalit community to which his sister walked in. The vengeance and anguish triggered by this endorse the hatred that the protagonist already had towards the Dalit and all his future actions then get defined by this hatred.



Figure 4: Anikuttan unable to heal his hatred towards his sister's choice

In both these film narratives caste pride primarily operates at the home-front. Owing to a personal "tragedy" (the "tragedy" of a sister choosing to live with a Dalit partner) the protagonists redefine their social relationships. However, this marriage is just a trigger for the slumbering casteists in them to awake. It does not mean that the caste spirit was initiated by the marriage. It was always within them and this disposition of being born into the privileged class gets hurt when the marriage actualises without the patriarch's sanction and that too with someone whose caste identity is not acceptable to the bigots. As Veticad (2022) points out in her review

If a personal ordeal causes you to turn against a community, then it does not mean – as people tend to say, while whitewashing fundamentalism in the real world – that "he's not really such a bad guy, he's not actually casteist/communal/racist/homophobic/misogynistic/etc". It simply means he always was; the ordeal stirred his confirmation bias and caused him to reveal his true colours.

While the police officer in Kuttan uses corrupt means to save him from being accused of the murder of a suspected perpetrator of violence towards him, the narrative throws light onto the law and order system that assists the casteist elites to escape the rule of the land. The obsessive nature of Kuttan is visible in his parenting and this is the reason for his son to hate him to the extent that he attempts a simulated patricide by firing rubber bullets onto his father's photograph. Kept under the threat of punishment for even stating the facts, the child is perennially ill-treated. Kuttan's superiority in terms of his caste and gender becomes more evident when he approaches his mother as he plans to kill his sister. The idea of an upper caste woman being impregnated by the Dalit man becomes a moral crime for this patriarch and this leads him to the extreme action after which he walks away freely without being locked by the law and order owing to his power

positioning in the society. Here the caste power, gender power and political power are together in operation to set the culprit free and to subtly sanction the casteist-violence.

Food, shelter and a culture of untouchability

Kuttan's occasional sentiments towards his sister makes him eat what she cooks and tolerate her presence in the household though rarely. However, the vibes that surround him from the social premises inject the casteist venom by which his transient sentiments evaporate and the casteist in him awakes. Others in the society especially the ones from the privileged class and their sympathy towards him hurts his ego and caste pride. This results in shame and it is the same shame that leads the father of the protagonist of *Malayankunju* to commit suicide. The food that is cooked or served by the sister who lives with the lower-caste man becomes the untouchable one for Kuttan. Although there are frames which capture the tug of war that goes in the mind of Kuttan about the acceptability of the untouchable's food, and there is a segment where he eats what she cooks, brings and serves, the awkwardness and the feeling of aberration from a social norm is visible in the character's behaviour. Similar frames occur in *Malayankunju* too where Anikuttan selectively approaches the eatery shop and orders food. He does not eat the food that is touched by or shared between the people whom he considers as Dalits. He spills the bowl of curry from which the gravy was taken by the fellow eaters who were of Dalit identity. The scene in which Kuttan and the *savarna* friends/neighbours meeting the Swiggy delivery boy is a powerful one that requires one to read the movie carefully to understand caste- based violence. Kuttan's elite neighbours wonder how people could eat "such" food. Definitely it is not a reference to pizza but it is a reference to the dark-skinned boy who delivers it. Untouchability of food is underscored here, though the caste-based violence is not very easy to perceive from this frame.



Figure 5: Anikuttan spilling the curry touched by the fellow-eaters in the hotel

Even in metropolitan cities in India, caste system operates in terms of food and habitat. Malayalam cinema hitherto has not discussed the issues in renting houses to non-brahmins or Dalit people. In *Puzhu*, Bharathi and Kuttappan struggle to get a rented house as the house owners are reluctant to let their houses to a Dalit person. Kuttan's neighbours talk about the importance of ensuring the flats being rented to "people like them". The mob lynching of Madhu, the Adivasi youth from Kerala, and his death is still a matter of discussion in Kerala. If one analyses the same case closely, it is evident that his ethnic and racial identity is what provoked the mob to this heinous act. Branding someone as powerless and casting that powerlessness or subjective position of them as

the weapons against them is the brutal rule that the sophisticated modern society still nurtures. Basic needs of a human being are violated continuously based on the caste system and this is presented poignantly in both these films.

The pragmatics of caste play

The casteist language interplays in both the films showcase the stigma that is associated with the Dalit bodies and their lives. In *Puzhu*, Kuttan encounters Kuttappan, when he finds Bharathi's portrait made by Kuttappan, who boldly proclaims that they both are in love. The then police officer Kuttan uses his legitimacy and power as police officer to violently dismiss the social and artistic rights that Kuttappan has and the angry Kuttan states to Kuttappan: "Go and get a life cleaning some toilets". This idea of associating the caste with a particular occupation has its roots in the Chaturvarnya system. When the mainstream Malayalam films made fun of the Dalits by attributing certain occupational roles to them, such narratives also maintained that upwards mobility in the social ladder and the identity as an educated and professional social being cannot be endowed to the Dalits because they are Dalits by birth. In *Puzhu*, the casteist's arrogance and toxic masculinity get unleashed through many dialogues. Similarly, language use that defines the social relationship between Anikkuttan and his neighbours is plenty in *Malayankunju* too.

The caste pride and casteist arrogance of Kuttan makes his son vulnerable and his behaviour at school gets affected negatively. All atrocities that his father inflicts upon him have been vented through the assignment that he wrote in which he replaces the word 'father' with 'mothe'r. The child, even at school, cannot be truthful to his feelings of hatred towards his father owing to sheer fear which made him create a mother who is toxic, undertaking brutal punitive measures. The benevolent despotism that Kuttan exercises makes him interpret the nodding, tears and even the eye contact that his paralysed mother tries to make, especially in the scene where Bharathi and Kuttappan are brought to her home to see her, just after Kuttan declaring to his mother that "she is making them do it (the murder)". Although the mother of Anikkuttan in *Malayankunju* declares her freedom in meeting her daughter, she is also fearful of the unpredictable behaviour of the protagonist.



Figure 6: Kuttan after revealing his plan to his mother letting Bharathi meet her

As Babu (2022) indicates, the use of the trophy that Kuttappan was awarded for his performance in a play named Thakshak has implications. In many vignettes, it is shown that the sage, in the myth of Parikshit and Thakshak, is not casted in Kuttappan's play as a Brahmin but as a tribal sage, thereby juxtaposing both the caste, class and political power in play when Parikshit insults the

sage by throwing a dead snake around the meditating sage's neck. This retelling of the myth is an attempt of the theatre artist to bring the question of violence based on the power assigned to people who belong to various social cadres. Kuttan is part of this continuum of violence infliction.



Figure 7: Kuttan picking up the Nangeli statue, which soon becomes the murder weapon: from *Puzhu*

The memento is a sculpture of Nangeli, the legendary Dalit woman (Kuniyath and Sankaranarayanan, 2017) who fought against the “breast tax” imposed by the royal rulers of Travancore by amputating her breasts using a sickle and presenting it to the alleys of the King who came to collect the tax. Kuttappan, before being attacked by Kuttan, states that he wishes to have a baby girl whom he wants to name Nangeli. This becomes a very powerful moment in the film as the lower-caste name Nangeli suddenly provokes Kuttan and using the Nangeli sculpture that Kuttappan won for his merit in art becomes the weapon that takes his life. The suggestions of the legendary woman’s struggle against the violation of basic human rights is juxtaposed with the artistic revolution through theatre activism that Kuttappan performs. However, as Nangeli loses her life, Kuttappan also gets annihilated by the caste system in the society. Any kind of social or academic recognitions that the Dalit people achieve irritate the casteist and that annoyance results in heinous violation of the fundamental right to live with dignity.

Casting females in the caste equations

The sexual purity of the females of the household being ‘corrupted’ by the Dalit even within the institution of marriage is unthinkable for them. In the honour killing case of Kevin and in the innumerable cases of psychological trauma infiltrated on the women who get involved in romantic relationship with people outside their caste and clan what operates chiefly is the pride that is associated with caste and progeny. When it is juxtaposed with the gender aspect, it becomes doubly oppressive for females.

The females who dare to be choosers of their marital destiny in both these movies are upper caste women but as they are women who married Dalit men, they are also subjected to violence. Their bodies are the major component in the argument. The entire caste narrative and the narrative of shame pivots around the female body and its sexual purity. Bearing the child of a Dalit man is seen as pollution and the caste pride gets hurt as it ‘brings dishonour to the family’. The women characters who asserted their individuality at least when it became the matter of choosing a life partner, undergo severe emotional mayhem. When Bharathi manages to derive more courage and

walk away boldly, Sandhya in *Malayankunju* goes through a distorted phase of tussling with the responsibility of bearing the burden of being the protector of her clan's pride and prestige and being ethically incorrect if she walks away. Both these women are kept outside the domestic sphere even after years of their marriage.



Figure 8: A baffled Sandhya on her wedding eve before she elopes with her lover: A scene from *Malayankunju*

In both movies, the mothers of the protagonists are sympathetic towards their daughters. In *Malayankunju*, the mother manages to meet her daughter and they sustain their relationship though she is not allowed to bring her daughter into her household. In *Puzhu*, the paralysed mother's emotions are interpreted by her son Kuttan and he believes in the righteousness of his interpretation. However, from the narrative it is clear that the mother wants to meet her daughter and especially in the scene where he subtly reveals his plan to kill his sister, she vainly tries to express her disagreement but becomes voiceless and helpless owing to the physical disability. Here her inability to speak is not only her physical reality but is a metaphor to emphasise the casteist-patriarchal order that Kuttan has established within the household.

Bharathi, unlike the wife of Kuttan, manages to challenge him and go beyond his restrictions and instructions. This is clearly visible through the sequence where the always half-played home-video of the baby Kichu falling down and his mother being instructed not to pick him up as the father wants him to get up on his own plays uninterrupted, immediately after Kuttan murders Bharathi and her husband and comes back home. The uncut or resumed segment of the video shows Bharathi negating her brother's instructions picking the baby Kichu up indicating her bold character that does not fit within the constrained boundaries of patriarchal assumptions of female subordination. Her love and humane nature become the cause of her catastrophe. This is indicated in one of the very first scenes too when she picks up the memento from the destroyed house and carries it with her to the flat where she lives. The same memento is used by Kuttan as the weapon to kill her and her husband later.

Metaphorical murder occurs many times in the narrative of *Malayankunju* when Sandhya is disowned by her brother. He has no sympathy towards her and loathes the sight of her. Even though she leads a happy life, it does not provide him any solace. Generally, the inter-caste marriages involve a lot of psychological trauma for the females owing to the arguments and issues that happen between the families. In India, marriages do not happen between individuals but between families and cultures. This results in conflicts both physical and psychological the scars of which are left generally for the females unhealed. Over and over such psychological murders

happen when they are verbally disowned and literally not allowed to the entitlement of love and care. The tender psychological condition that the females with choice are subjected to becomes very significant in their entire life narrative. Their vulnerability is usually exploited and this too leads to traumatic ordeals both in their marital and social life. Ostracisation results in anxieties of being accepted in the social premises and the females perennially live under the pressure of uncertainty of being accepted or rejected in the society.

Conclusions

Analysing the film narratives unravels the ways in which caste-based prejudices and subsequent violence stem from the domestic front. Unleashing it into the society generates undesirable and catastrophic consequences both for the individual and for the society. Rather than following the pattern of usual props and tropes to indicate casteism, both the films boldly narrate and present the operation of caste both in the domestic interiors and social exteriors. Rather than using dark skinned bodies of Dalit men and women to evoke pity, laughter or fear, the filmmakers facilitated platforms on which those characters assert their individuality and existence rather than vulnerability. The films underline the structural violence perpetrated in the domestic front by social sanction operating effectively to normalise the violence. Underpinning cultural violence, subtly referred to through the dialogues of the likeminded casteist characters in both films, functions to provide legitimacy to the heinous crimes of ostracisation and annihilation. The analysis also unveils the gender question within the casteist equations. For women, the narrative indicates that, the subjugation is not just in terms of their caste identity or their transferred caste identity owing to their wedlock but also in terms of the gender imbalances and patriarchal governance which they are cursorily subscribed to. Those who break the conventional norms of patriarchal rules and attempt to perform their roles outside the expected gender roles that masculine social order assigns to them, they are either being outcasted or murdered or perhaps both. This subservient role of women get depiction in both the films and the lack of support from the domestic front resulting in larger social exclusion is presented accurately through the characters of Bharathi and Sandhya. Psychological violence is potentially more damaging than the physical violence and this aspect which is usually neglected in the case of inter-caste marriages and the familial issues that ensue is emphasised in the films. In both these films, the depiction of the subalterns, whether their subordination is defined by their caste identity or gender identity, traverses beyond the customary representation of helplessness to them being more articulative, assertive and unapologetic about their identity and their revolt against the social system that sanctions caste discrimination discernibly or furtively.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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