

Ostracized lower caste and silenced womanhood in Ponthanmada

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Abstract:

The term “subaltern” refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station whether in terms of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. It also refers to lower strata people of illiterate peasantry, non-elite cultural groups who are under-represented, under-taught, non-canonical and the subordinated group who are always directly or indirectly influenced by ideologies of dominant class. In literature, it has become the most discussed and exploring area. In India, the term got its prominence and exposure in its full fetched form say after colonization. Women, Dalit, rural, tribal, immigrant labourers are the major categories taken into consideration under Subaltern. Indian literature and films possess a pivotal role in representing the subaltern issues and often eligible even to compete with international products of arts and literature. Almost all of the Indian languages have worked in subaltern literature – some spoke for them and some for themselves.

Recently the postcolonial traits in subaltern studies are widely discussed both at academic and cultural strata. Some of the recurring works commented in this contexts are Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable, Coolie, Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, translations like Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature, Perumal Murugan’s One Part Women, the novels of Aashapurna Debi and Jayamohan’s Nooru Simhasanangal. Indian film industry too had produced innumerable examples on this context. Some of the notable and most discussed ones are Bayen, Kancheepuram, Slum Dog Millionaire, and from Malayalam industry the chain continues through Vigathakumarantill Pappilio Buddha. This paper intends to anatomise or examine the subaltern representations in the Malayalam movie Ponthanmada, a 1994 Malayalam film directed by T V Chandran. The film portrays the ostracised and exploited lower class and silenced womanhood, sometimes back in the history and of course a realization that the contemporary time is in no way better than the past except some alterations in the way it express – as old wine in new bottle.

Key Words: *subaltern, ostracised lower class, silenced womanhood, outcast, voiceless voice*

I. Introduction

The term “subaltern” refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station whether in terms of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. Not only this it also refers to lower strata people of illiterate peasantry, non-elite cultural groups who are under-represented, under-taught, non-canonical and the subordinated

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group and they are always directly or indirectly influenced by ideologies of dominant class. In literature, it has become the most discussed and exploring area. In India, women, Dalits, rural, tribal, immigrant labourers come under Subaltern. Indian literature and films possess a pivotal role in representing the subaltern issues and often eligible even to compete with international products of arts and literature. Almost all of the Indian languages have worked in subaltern literature – some spoke for them and some for themselves. Its main goal was to retake history for the underclasses, for the voices that had not been heard previous. In other words, proponents of subaltern studies suggest that we need to find alternate sources to locate the voice of the subaltern historically. Elite records, like those at the home office or foreign office could still be used, but you had to read them with a different pair of lenses. So even though we might be subject to using these same sources, we can read them "against the grain" – this phrase comes from Walter Benjamin's theoretical work.

In Indian English literature, oppressions and the oppressed were depicted even from its pioneering stage onwards. But recently an abundant production of subaltern discussions can be traced out, especially in a postcolonial point of view. Some of the recurring works commented in this contexts are Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, translations like *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, Perumal Murugan's *One Part Women*, the novels of Aashapurna Debi, Jayamohan's *Nooru Simhasanangal* and so on. Talking about films we have innumerable examples throughout in every Indian language. Some of the notable and most discussed ones are *Bayen*, *Kancheepuram*, *Slum Dog Millionaire*, and from Malayalam industry the cup run over with *Vigathakumarantill Pappilio Buddha*. This paper intends to anatomise or examine the subaltern representations in the Malayalam movie *Ponthanmada*, a 1994 Malayalam film directed by T V Chandran. The film portrays the ostracised and exploited lower class and silenced womanhood, sometimes back in the history and of course a realization that the contemporary time is in no way better than the past except some alterations in the way it expresses. Indian peasant studies as a field developed in the late 1960s early 1970s as a response to a number of national and global mobilizations by agrarian groups in the global south. *Ponthanmada* can be read placing very much close to this context in the light of subaltern studies.

Ponthanmada (1994), directed by T V Chandran, is based upon two short stories written by the well known Indian writer C V Sreeramanviz; *Ponthanmada* and *SheemaThampuran*. It was a well applauded film in the stage of National Award 1994 and still in the list of best movies in Malayalam industry. The film is about the unbreakable bond between Ponthanmada (Mammootty), a lower caste peasant, and SheemaThampuran (Nazeeruddin Shah) a land lord. Set in 1940s, it portrays the then prevailed customs and caste - discriminations, also the rise of communist party. In a single line the plot can be said as:

The film is about the extraordinary, uncanny and touching relationship between the so-called low-caste PonthanMada and his colonial landlord SheemaThampuran, who was expelled to British India from England during his youth for supporting the Irish Republican Army. Crossing the class boundaries, the two communicate through Thampuran's window with Mada hanging from a palm tree.

The entire story oscillates between the present and past were Mada narrates the story of SheemaThampuran and there by revealing himself to the daughter of the present land lord. Here Mada possesses no voice. He is the mirror image of the entire peasant community then who are ought to lend their health and individuality in under the steps of their land lord. The only one who agrees him as a human being is his lord. Every

night Mada clutches the palm tree and hanging on the top he communicates with SheemaThampuran. He observes Thampuran's room and deeds and sits there being mesmerised in the music played. Probably the palm tree is the only place where Mada as a lower caste could find an upper place. This challenges the then prevailed class customs and discriminations indirectly. Mada waits outside the gate all the day until he is gets the command. He is served food in the farm where the cattle are tied to. Amid of the movie when Mada started to live with Karthu his love, some outsiders came in front of his hut and started to abuse him. One dialogue they uttered was: "You bastard, how dare you being a Molayan to elope with a Chotti lady". (*Ponthanmada*)

Here even amid of the lower classes they keep caste boundaries, though they work in the same field and equally experience the same shrewdness and discrimination from the upper class. Not only that after many years, in the post independence time, where the "Janmi-Kudiyar" (the landlord and the tenant) walls were demolished, even then Mada used to be the same one who waits for someone's orders. Here we can see that, Mada pushes his livelihood by selling baskets to the nearby shop. The shopkeeper buys those for 2-5 rupees each and sells it for 25-30 rupees. For this pittance money Mada stands in the scorching sun till the shopkeeper shows his mercy on him. Another characteristic of T V Chandran films are well expressed here also – demolishing the stereotypical barriers on masculinity. It is known fact that 99.9 percent of the literature and films have played their roles in moulding certain stereotypes in the society. Though they never brought anything new, they were able to reinforce the existing ones: like a man should not cry in any situation and a mother-in-law is ought to torture her daughter-in-law. Masculinity is a cultural creation, a mask that all men wear. But in T V Chandran's movies like *Danny* and *Ponthanmada*, he places his male characters inferior to all other characters. But we couldn't say that in *Ponthanmada* since Mada possess less masculine features all other women characters are highlighted as the other word of courage and independency. Mainly there are two female characters, Karthu, lady love of Mada, and Resmi, the daughter of the present land lord. Taking the case of Karthu, she loves Mada, his physique, but marries someone other who later abandoned her and eventually she started living with Mada. The only place where Karthu raises her voice and shows her power is in front of Mada. In that way too our poor Mada is being ostracized, who fail to control his family. Later she went to another landlord's house as a maid and never came back. Though Mada once went to bring her back she herself refused to go with him and chose to live in the lord's house and obey all that he says. When they meet for the last time Karthu has converted to Christianity and decided to leave the land. Here Karthu being a representative of the women folk of that time portrays the true picture of their life then. Women were just a pleasure seeking thing to men irrespective of class. The thing we need to notice here is that even their thoughts were moulded in such a way, so that lying with a man of strength seems nothing wrong to them. An instance in the movie shows this mentality: A night after abandoning by her husband Karthu went to the field for some sort of work and along with her there were Mada and two more. Sometime later Mada discovered that the other two having sex in the field and when he said it to Karthu as a big thing he found her response was denouncing than seducing – "These all are assigned to men, not someone like you who is neither man nor women". (*Ponthanmada*)

At last like any other women her sap was sucked and was thrown away like the peel of orange. Commenting on the character Resmi, she may be the most sympathy gaining character after Mada. It's to her that Mada narrates the story. For Mada she seems to be the daughter of SheemaThampuran in the later time. Resmi wishes to continue her studies but forcefully gets married to her aunt's son who is a doctor. Though he agrees her demand to complete her degree later he denies it. Though he marries her Resmi refuses to let her husband touch her.

Seeing this attitude a big failure he and his family abandon Resmi letting her live in her own house as a widow. Here she is silenced and when she attempted to react she is ostracized as mentally unhealthy.

In short Mada is just a sample taken for the microscopic examination of then class and caste discriminations, and Karthu and Reshmi became the silenced women hood of two different periods, who are assigned to be under the shoulders of a man. Ostracism or exclusion may not leave external scars, but it can cause pain that often is deeper and lasts longer than a physical injury. This pain and injury can be traced in Mada even after decades. Same sort of agony is seen in Resmi too. If Mada was silence due to his lower caste and effeminate nature, Resmi was detested since she put forward an initiation of questing the male superiority hammered on her.

In an interview with Spivak she once quoted that through her essay “Can Subaltern Speak? was intended to tell that the problems and the soul of the subalterns could be represented only if they speak for themselves. Hitherto someone else is speaking “for” them by not letting them to speak. In the film, Mada possesses no voice. It is others who speak for him, say Resmi arguing with the shopkeeper for Mada’s wage and so on. At the same time, Resmi’s voice is subdued by her husband and his family. Both of them uses silence as their voice. While silence is patience and longing alms from others for Mada, it is a kind of rebellion for Resmi. The dominant class here, in short, mutes the inconspicuous or unassuming class represented by Mada and Resmi and pretends they talk for those voiceless.

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