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Deconstructing Power, Myth and History: A Critical Exploration of the Movie *Bramayugam*

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Abstract

The Paper is a critical exploration of the movie *Bramayugam*, a movie that redefined Malayalam horror genre depictions. It was directed by Rahul Sadasivan and was released on 15 February, 2024. The film falls into the genre of dark fantasy horror drama, that showcases the exceptional performance of Mammooty, Arjun Ashokan and Sidharth Bharathan. The dialogues written by T. D. Ramakrishnan magnifies the mysterious plot and has redefined the horror genre in Malayalam cinema. This black-n-white movie portrays the folklore elements of 17th century Kerala in a totally different manner and unfolds an intriguing tale that has interconnections with myth and History. A film can mirror society in many multifaceted ways. By deconstructing the underlying power, myth and History in the movie, this paper illuminates on the intricate relationship shared between these critical terms in analyzing a society. The paper also discusses on the ways in which the movie questions the power dynamics, mythical representations and historical depictions of the 17th century, Malabar.

Keywords – Power, Myth, History, Cultural Studies, Horror Drama

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Deconstructing Power, Myth and History: A Critical Exploration of the Movie *Bramayugam*

Introduction

Bramayugam: The Age of Madness has made a distinguished place of its own in the history of Malayalam movies. It was released on 15 February, 2024 and the script was written by Rahul Sadasivan, dialogues by T. D. Ramakrishnan and was produced by Night Shift Studios and YNOT Studios. Christo Xavier's striking sound effects enhance the overall horror atmosphere of the movie along with the six music tracks. The black and white tone builds up an atmosphere of mystery and horror. The entire technical team overall has created a successful output which has set standards in the international level. It was successful in redefining Malayalam horror genre to the next level. The movie has an overall captivating experience, weaving the myth and history of Malabar in seventeenth century.

The story unravels when *Paanan* and *Kora* have lost their way in the forest and *Thevan*, runs away out of fear on seeing a *yakshi* and reaches the *mana* of Kodumon Potty, the role brilliantly played by Mammooty. In the *mana* he meets the character of Sidharth Bharathan who plays the role of the cook. Kodumon Potty, asks the *paanan* to sing a song and he likes it, so he invites him to stay in his *mana*. The *paanan* at first is shocked to see the hospitality of a Brahmin towards a *paanan*. The complexity of the narrative builds up as we come to see the body of Kodumon Potty in the attic and realize the fact that it is the *chathan* who is harboring the body of Kodumon Potty. The mind games, the dark settings of *mana*, the captivating dialogues, black and white shades all play a perfect role in building up the mysterious plot. In the work *The Critical Difference*, Barbara Johnson remarks that, "A deconstructive reading is a reading that analyzes the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself" (5). This paper is a deconstructive reading of the movie *Bramayugam*, that analyzes the critical difference in portraying power, myth and history of the 17th century South Malabar. It also studies the intricate relationship between these three critical terms. These terms are active in literary and cultural discussions, as they are critically analysed to study a society in detail. The paper is structured into four parts i) Analysing power dynamics in the movie ii) studying mythical representations underlying in the movie iii) evaluating the dimensions of history and the last part is an attempt to iv) critically explore the relationship between power, myth and history in the movie in particular, and in a society in general.

Analysing Power Dynamics in the movie *Bramayugam*

Power always circulates in a society and man always have an instinct to gain power. The main theme of the movie is related to power dynamics and how power can corrupt the powerless. In every power relation, there lies a binary opposition between the oppressor and the oppressed. Arya Suresh in her review states that, those in power need reassurance that they are indeed the most powerful. Kodumon Potty is the representation of power who controls the other characters in his sphere. The movie begins with the seemingly cordial Potty, educating the meek *Thevan* on who a real Brahmin is. He remarks that it is the actions and not birth, which makes one a Brahmin. Towards the end of the movie, it becomes clear that both actions and caste are the relevant characteristics to be an oppressor. Afees Ahmed, in his review states, "the vitality of an antagonistic force that uses power, which is presented as an inherently immoral idea/virtue to possess, is the actual aesthetic theme of the movie."

Throughout the movie, the 'ring of power' is an important symbol that portrays shifting of the power dynamics. At first the ring was with *chathan*, then we can find *thevan* and the chef fighting for the ring. The one with the 'ring of power' can destroy the others life and by the end of the movie the arrival of Portuguese is shown to highlight that they were the brutal oppressors the land has seen. This shows that power circulates in a society from one hand to the other and the powerful always exploit the others. This can be easily connected with the

political parties fighting for power and when they gain power, they exploit the common people. Power circulates from one party to the other, but the atrocities faced by the common people remains same.

Mythical Representations in the movie *Bramayugam*

Myth refers to age old stories that are still active in the contemporary world. They define the nuances of meaning underlying in the depths of a community or society in general. The movie mainly highlights the myths of *chathan* and *yakshi*. In stories and movies *yakshis* are portrayed as beautiful and alluring women with long black hair, wearing a white saree who instils fear by their echoing laughter. The movie portrays *Yakshi*, who is killing innocent men and is cavorting with the *chathan* in the body of Kodumon Potty. The image of *yakshi* in the movie is so captivating because of her appearance. She only wears a white cloth around her waist, her long black hair covers her chest and her antique ornaments presents her as a mythical creature. Though there is no dialogue for her, she was successful in instilling a fear impact. *Chathan* was a gift given to Chudulan Potty as a token for his devotion but Chudulan potty misused his power and made *chathan* his slave. When *chathan* became powerful by killing the last descendent, he was ready to take out his revenge. The *chathan* is saying that everything was predetermined and no one can alter it, he knew everything that was going to happen. He was captivated in the *mana* for long and he needed the body of a *thevan* to escape. Myth of *chathan* and myth of *yakshi* is portrayed by the director in an appealing way as it gets blended with the traditional roots and the contemporary structures.

Evaluating Historical elements in the movie *Bramayugam*

History is the recordings of the past events but the true fact is that only the powerful are recorded in the pages of History. It is difficult to find the history of the ordinary people and their lives. Kodumon Potty is the representation of the real-life character Kunjamon Potty who is known for his magical powers. The family members filed a case against the makers of the movie to change the name of the main character as it defames the reputation of the family. Hence, the name was changed to Kodumon Potty. History does not have a single face, but those in power always do their best to be in the historical limelight, neglecting the marginalised people. Their lives, their stories and their atrocities are unheard and are not marked in records. The 17th century Malabar was infected with casteism and the Brahmanical hierarchy exploited the lower caste people. When this forms the backdrop, the movie begins with questioning the caste. When Kodumon Potty walks to the verandha, even that sound makes the cook and the *thevan* to bow their heads down. *Thevan* is shocked when Potty asks him to raise his head. He even welcomes him to his *mana*. By using the subaltern mythical figure of *chathan*, the movie questions the powerful upper caste people. By the end of the movie, arrival of Portuguese is shown who were the brutal invaders of Kerala. But still we glorify them, their trade ignoring the atrocities they did to our motherland. The Portuguese man kills the cook who is trying to escape the *mana* and when his officers enquire, he says it was a madman. The first thought about Keralites by the foreign traders was that they are mad, superstitious, cultureless and inferior. They constructed an image to exercise their power over us. These instances highlight the need of exploring the multidimensional perspectives of history.

Power, Myth and History in *Bramayugam*

The movie apart from entertainment comments on social systems like caste system and power dynamics prevalent during the 17th century, Malabar. It was a time when the Brahmanical hierarchy was dominant in the society and they oppressed the low caste people. There is a line where the *Thevan* remarks that the key of my freedom is in the hands of you, my master. This one remark portrays the lives of the lower caste people in the 17th century Kerala, where they had no freedom. The upper class established their power through violence and brutality. The interesting common factor of the powerful is that they enjoy exploiting the

others. Be it caste system, be it colonisation the one who exercises power, always enjoy playing with the freedom of others.

A disruption of dichotomy can be seen when analysing the characters – *chathan* as the oppressor and the oppressed, the cook as half Brahmin and half low caste. This forces the viewers to think about the grey areas and their meanings apart from the extreme black and white. The roles of the oppressor and the oppressed in the power dynamics is being questioned in the movie where the *chathan*, considered to be a subaltern figure who harbours the deceased Brahmin, Kodumon Potty's body. In the beginning, Kodumon Potty treats *thevan* as equal and invites him to stay with him in the *mana*. He also eats meat in an unusual way portraying the true nature of *chathan* in a Brahmin body. The line of the oppressor and the oppressed gets blurred as many acts are done by the *chathan*, the subaltern figure and not the Brahmin Kodumon Potty. He at the same time is the master and the prisoner of the realm he has created. In the movie, *chathan* remarks that he came to the *mana* ages before and he feels bored and expresses a desire to escape. That is a hint given to the viewers that it is *thevan* who can help him escape from this *mana*. *Chathan* knows everything before using his wicked powers. Similarly, the cook is half brahmin and half lower caste, he talks authoritatively towards Potty because he knew *chathan* was inferior to a Brahmin and this attitude is shown towards the *thevan* too. The cook from the beginning shows hatred towards *thevan* as if he doesn't like anyone else coming to the *mana*. He also treats *thevan* as inferior to him. It is during the last part of the movie; we realize the fact that the household chef is the illegitimate son of Kodumon Potty. He yearns to become powerful as he believes it is his right over the inferior *thevan* and *chathan*. The politics of Power portrayed in the movie is that the one who has power will indulge in corruption.

Soumyabrata Gupta, in his review for Times Now News, discusses about the supernatural entity, *chathan*, in the movie to seek retribution against caste-based oppression. With the help of a subaltern figure, the caste system prevalent in the seventeenth century, Kerala is questioned. Gupta comments "Contrary to conventional perceptions, it becomes evident that the true villain of the story is not the *chaathan* but the entrenched caste pride of the Potti family". There are scenes in which the Brahmin treats *thevan* as equal but the moment he takes the name of the God, even though being a Potty he gets irritated and remarks, there is no God in this age. Dr Rajesh Komath, in his review, opines that in the movie, *chathan* is depicted as more problematic than Brahmins. He suggests that such a depiction weakens the idea of *chathan* as a tool to oppose Brahminical hegemony (Global South Colloquy). But *chathan* has become an important tool in depicting the power dynamics between powerful and the powerless. In the movie, we have two symbols of Power, one being the flame that is a source of power to *chathan* and the second, the ring. *Thevan* and the chef extinguish the flame to diminish the power of the *chathan* but it finally takes the body of *thevan*. *Chathan* realises that he is again a slave, there is no absolute freedom for him.

By blending power, myth and History, the makers of the movie question the dominant hegemonical systems prevalent in the society. It is a political movie that has many layers that connects the society and History. The movie also highlights the fact that in this 21st century also, we are captivated in the prisons of caste, superstition and power dynamics. The beginning of political and cultural oppressions of the Portuguese is represented in the last part of the movie. The last sound of the gunshot awakes us from the age of madness to the age of modernism. The *mana* is portrayed as a different world, anyone who enters the *mana* is entering into a time loop and they forget their name, place, date and month. In ancient stories, *chathan* is portrayed as a slave who has to obey his master. *Chathan* is similar to the character of *paanan* and both of them are meant to be slaves. When this *chathan* enters the body of a Brahmin, he enjoys it. Though he is in a Brahmin body, he is a slave in the *mana*. The role of

master and slave is disrupted in this context. When the *mana* is destroyed and the *chathan* enters the body of *paanan*, he realizes the fact that he is again a slave. The usual binary constructions of power are disrupted along with alternate constructions of myth and history.

Conclusion

By deconstructing Power, Myth and History in the movie *Bramayugam*, the dependable nature of these three critical terms is evaluated. The movie uncovers the interconnected relation of power, myth and History of the 17th century, Malabar. Power and history are on the same parallel lines, as the powerful people find place in History. Meanwhile, myths have the potential to lend a novel meaning. They fill in the gaps and provide another perspective to power and historical narratives. The movie emphasises on the fact that power can circulate and corrupt the powerless. The underlying meaning in the movie is that, power is evil, be it in the hands of upper caste or lower caste. History always reminds us the fact that only the powerful is marked in the pages of History and there are many ordinary lives outside the History book like that of the role of cook and the *paanan*. There is a high need to analyse history through the lens of subaltern historiography that focusses on the lives of the marginalised. Myths are stories that are still relevant because they enter into the contemporary world with multiple perspectives questioning the power structures like that of the *chathan*. They can play various roles in constructing and deconstructing meaning in society. Hence, these terms have a vital role in providing meaning to an individual, or group or a community in a society.

The *mana* can be considered as a representation of the society and the interaction between the three characters, Kodumon potty, *Thevan* and the household chef portrays the ways in which power, myth and history are inter related. There is a unique kind of inseparable relationship between myth, history and power, where they question each other, resist each other and overlap each other. The movie is a great success in portraying the interdependent relation of power, myth and History as they combine to question the constructed and accepted social structures. Analysing in depth, these terms form the important factors in studying a society and its function. The exploration of their interconnectedness reveals the fact that every matter has multidimensional faces and the need of subaltern viewpoint is essential. Not only the powerful should be marked in history but the ordinary people too. This paper illuminates on the fact that, when the movie portrayed the underlying meanings of power, myth and history of the seventeenth century, Malabar, it opened new doors to understand the subaltern perspective of power, myth and history.

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