Veritas: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

Voices from the Margins: Caste, Power, and Resistance in *Bramayugam*

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Abstract:
The Malayalam film industry has increasingly sought to engage with caste as a critical axis of social experience, offering space for nuanced discussions of power, oppression, and resistance. *Bramayugam* (2024), directed by Rahul Sadasivan, stands out as a compelling cinematic exploration of caste hierarchies, deeply embedded cultural structures, and the resistance of subaltern voices. This paper analyses *Bramayugam* through the lens of postcolonial theory, drawing primarily on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to interrogate the film's engagement with themes of caste-based subjugation, silencing, and agency. By situating the film within the socio-political history of caste in India, the paper explores how *Bramayugam* not only portrays the physical and psychological mechanisms of caste oppression but also provides a cinematic platform for the subaltern to confront, question, and resist dominant structures. The film's narrative and symbolic framework are critically examined to understand how it disrupts hegemonic discourses and challenges traditional representations of power, caste purity, and hierarchical control. Through its stark setting, carefully crafted characters, and allegorical storytelling, *Bramayugam* reveals the unspoken histories of caste violence and the persistence of inherited privilege. The analysis further examines the film's use of voice, silence, and space as tools of both suppression and rebellion, aligning with Spivak's interrogation of whether the subaltern can truly speak within dominant epistemological frameworks. Ultimately, the paper argues that *Bramayugam* contributes to postcolonial and Dalit discourse by subverting entrenched narrative norms and providing a rare cinematic instance where the marginalized confront not only their oppressors but the historical systems that render them voiceless. In doing so, the film reclaims narrative agency and foregrounds the spectral, yet powerful presence of subaltern resistance within Indian cultural memory.

Keywords: *Power, Caste, Oppression, Postcolonial resistance, Subaltern voices.*

Introduction

The Malayalam film industry has always managed to bring forth the socially relevant issues of its contemporary times through the thematic and technical aspects of the different genres of movies that it has produced till date. Out of these, the aspects of poverty, class, caste, gender, and the power relations existing beneath these social constructs have always remained one of the main focal points. The approach of the Malayalam film industry towards these issues has resonated with the attitude of the Kerala society through the changing times. Movies were made that completely adhered to the societal expectations of the patriarchy-lead Kerala society, where women were *antharjanams*[1]- forced to stay inside the enclosure of their homes and where only men thrived in the public sphere. The issues of *makkathayam*[2] and *marumakkathayam*[3] formed the central narrative of Malayalam films, and there were movies made that adhered to or spoke against these norms of Kerala society. The characters that were brought into life through these movies supported as well as opposed the societal constraints that created a divide between people. The number of characters that adhered to and submitted themselves to

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

the norms of the patriarchal, heterogeneous society were more than those characters who raised their voices against the restrictions. Beginning from J.C. Daniel's *Vigathakumaran* (1928) to the contemporary times, Malayalam cinema has travelled a long way and has stepped into a time where the directors and scriptwriters create characters who raise and establish their voices amid the mainstream society, from where the low-born, underprivileged lot are excluded and ostracized. The determination to speak up for themselves and the negation to bow down their heads and step back in front of the so-called masters are portrayed in the present-day Malayalam cinema.

Bramayugam (2024) directed by Rahul Sadasivan brings into light the major issues of class, caste, and power, lurking in the Kerala society, corrupting the minds of its people, which may expand itself to brutal violence, honour killing, and other atrocities. The movie is set in the mansion of Kodumon Potti (Mammooty), a magician who comes to ensnare the evil spirit (*chathan*[4]) that tormented and ruthlessly murdered all the members of the mansion. The characters Thevan (Arjun Ashokan) and the cook (Sidharth Bharathan) perform the next two lead roles where they are members of a lower caste who eventually retorts against the authoritarian, domineering rule of Potti in the mansion. An in-depth analysis of the movie brings out the elements of power and resistance embedded along with the themes of caste, class, and gender. This paper aims to analyse *Bramayugam* through the lens of postcolonial theory, focusing on its portrayal of caste oppression, resistance, and the voices of the marginalized. By examining the intersectionality of caste with power structures and the ways in which marginalized voices challenge these systems, this paper delves into how the film disrupts dominant narratives and engages with postcolonial themes of subjugation, identity, and resistance. This study aims to conduct a postcolonial analysis of the movie based on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay titled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" which would provide a critical framework for examining the mechanisms of power, dominance, and resistance hidden within the cinematic narrative. *Bramayugam* can be understood as a cinematic text that critiques the socio-political hierarchies of caste while also offering a platform for the voices of the marginalized to resist and reclaim their agency.

Bramayugam takes place in a rural setting dominated by caste hierarchies that are reinforced by economic and social power. The film is layered with symbolism, utilizing its setting, characters, and plot to underscore the deep-rooted caste-based inequalities that have been perpetuated for centuries. It presents caste not as an abstract or distant issue but as an integral and pervasive part of the social fabric that continues to shape individual and collective lives. In doing so, *Bramayugam* challenges the sanitized depictions of caste relations that are often prevalent in mainstream Indian cinema. One of the core aspects of this paper is an analysis of how *Bramayugam* portrays the mechanisms of power through the lens of caste. Drawing from Spivak's concept of the "subaltern," the film positions its characters from marginalized castes as subaltern subjects. Their daily lives are marked by exploitation, humiliation, and violence, but what sets *Bramayugam* apart is how it gives space for these characters to express their subjectivities as well as resistance. The film consciously avoids framing them as passive victims. These moments of resistance serve as disruptions to the caste hierarchy and highlight the ways in which the marginalized resist subjugation. Another key element in this paper is the exploration of the intersections between caste and colonialism, specifically how caste functions as an internal colonial mechanism within Indian society. This paper explores how *Bramayugam* critiques the

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internalization and implementation of the caste system and emphasizes the importance of decolonizing the mind as a necessary step towards breaking free from caste oppression.

One of the most significant aspects of the movie is its emphasis on the role of narrative in resistance. This paper argues that *Bramayugam* functions as a counter-narrative to dominant caste discourses, in line with Spivak's call to "let the subaltern speak." The film centres the voices and experiences of the marginalized, allowing them to tell their own stories rather than being spoken for by dominant caste perspectives. This act of storytelling is itself a form of resistance, as it challenges the hegemonic narratives that have historically silenced the oppressed. In doing so, *Bramayugam* engages in what postcolonial scholars describe as the "writing back" to empire or, in this case, to caste power structures. Additionally, this paper examines the visual and cinematic techniques used in *Bramayugam* to represent caste oppression and resistance. The film employs a realistic style that brings attention to the material conditions of the marginalized, using close-ups, long takes, and muted colour palettes to emphasize the starkness of their lives. The combination of realism and symbolism mirrors the dual nature of postcolonial critique, which must address both the tangible and intangible forms of subjugation.

Theoretical framework

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay titled "Can the Subaltern Speak?"- first published in 1988 as part of the edited volume *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*- provides a strong foundation for the postcolonial analysis of *Bramayugam*. Spivak opines through her essay that the attempts of criticism arising from the West is the result of a "desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as subject" (Spivak 66). She talks about the work *Intellectuals and Power*, which was a casual conversation between the two celebrated French philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, published in the 49th issue of L'ARC, an issue dedicated to Deleuze. The main topic of discussion in this conversation is about the place of theory and practice within large social movements such as workers' struggle. Both the critics emphasize the heterogeneity in the networks of power, desire, and interest and that the intellectuals of the society must attempt to know the discourse of the society's Other. According to Spivak, while both Foucault and Deleuze discuss important topics like these, they ignore the question of ideology and its implication in economic and intellectual history. Spivak talks about the main aim of the workers' struggle as "the desire to blow up power at any point of its application" (Spivak 67). According to Spivak, the subject lacks desire. Spivak quotes Althusser:

> The reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class "in and by words" (Spivak 68).

Spivak writes that "the theoretician does not represent (speak for) the oppressed group" (Spivak 70). Those who act and struggle are considered to be mute when compared to those who act and speak for themselves. For Spivak, the formation of a class is "artificial" and "economic." She talks about Karl Marx's usage of the term *vertreten* (represent or act on behalf of) and his opinion that "the small peasant proprietors cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must

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appear simultaneously as their master, as an authority over them, as unrestricted governmental power that protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above" (Spivak 71). Through these words, what Spivak tries to point out is that the underprivileged and the people of the margins are considered as a group who do not have the agency to represent and speak for themselves; rather, they need an external agency to speak for and about them, and these subjects should remain in a master-slave relationship with their representatives. Spivak critiques the concept of subjectivity as a collective agency that was used by the colonisers- the so-called saviours- to keep the colonised under control.

For Spivak, the clearest available example of epistemic violence is the portrayal of the colonial subject as Other. The narrative of imperialism can only be seen as a text of 'subjugated knowledge,' as the real life of the colonised, as it is, is nowhere documented. Spivak discusses how the British codified the Hindu law which was based on the four major texts of *sruti*, *smriti*, *sastra*, and *vyavahara*. She also talks about Macaulay's Minutes which described the imperial masters' need for a group of people who would refine the vernacular dialects of the country and act as translators for the British.

> A version of history was gradually established in which the Brahmans were shown to have the same intentions as (thus providing the legitimation for) the codifying British: In order to preserve Hindu society intact the successors (of the original Brahmans) had to reduce everything to writing and make them more and more rigid. And that is what has preserved Hindu society in spite of a succession of political upheavals and foreign invasions (Spivak 77).

This passage shows how Hinduism deeply rooted itself on rigid frameworks and laws which formed a strong foundation based on class and caste distinctions in Indian society and how these laws were strictly followed and imposed upon the Other by the ruling Brahmin class. The existence of the Indian social system was entirely dependent on this rigid framework that separated its people based on class, caste, and religion.

Gayatri Spivak then moves to talk about those living in the margins- "the silent, silenced centre" (Spivak 78). Here is where she raises the question- "can the subaltern speak?" Spivak talks about the need for a Subaltern Studies group where its intellectuals should "rethink Indian colonial historiography from the perspective of the discontinuous chain of peasant insurgencies during the colonial occupation" (Spivak 78,79). She chooses the views of Derridean deconstruction over the discourse of Foucault and Deleuze in the definition of the subaltern classes or the marginalized. Derrida does not speak about 'letting the other(s) speak for himself' but rather invokes an 'appeal' to or 'call' to the 'quite-other.' (Spivak 89). Derrida describes the situation of in-betweenness faced by the marginalized using the term *antre*. And this experience of in-betweenness cannot be homogenised as it is different for the marginalized from one area to another, and is heterogeneous. The consciousness of the Indian nation should be rewritten for the subaltern to be able to speak. To emphasize the importance of "measuring the silences," Spivak talks about Pierre Macherey who said that what is important in a work is what it does not say. The subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow (Spivak 83). She emphasizes the need for a revolutionary struggle from the side of the subalterns.

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

> …if it is against *power* that one struggles, then all those who acknowledge it as intolerable can begin the struggle wherever they find themselves and in terms of their own activity. In engaging in this struggle that is *their own*, whose objectives they clearly understand and whose methods *they can* determine, they enter into the revolutionary process…by fighting in those places they find themselves oppressed (Spivak 85).

Film Analysis

This paper analyses the film *Bramayugam*, written and directed by Rahul Sadasivan, through the postcolonial lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The movie discusses the rigid, age-old caste system and its atrocities that were prevalent 16th and 17th centuries in Kerala- the character of Thevan (Arjun Ashokan) is that of a *paanan* who has run away for his life from the king's court when war broke out and the cook (Sidharth Bharathan), too, is a low-caste bound for his lifetime in Kodumon Potti's (Mammootty) mansion. The different dimensions of the caste system and the powerplay associated with it is clearly shown throughout the movie. The movie opens with a scene where a yakshi- an enchanting, sensual female spirit with long hair and an enticing physique- allures Koran (Manikandan. R. Achari), Thevan's companion in the dark, dense forest. This opening scene itself becomes a postcolonial mouthpiece used by Rahul Sadasivan as it depicts the female subject, who is even more deeply in shadow according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, as overpowering the male gender and establishing her agency. The movie is a spectral narrative that intertwines reality with the supernatural, giving voice to the long-lost communities of Kerala represented by the yakshi (the oppressed female gender), Thevan (a low-caste figure), and chathan (a low-caste deity/spirit). A spectral narrative is a storytelling approach that emphasizes the presence of elusive, haunting, or ghostly elements within a narrative. Chathan, the central character and antagonist of the movie, finds its roots in Malayalam, and it refers to a supernatural entity, often depicted as a dark-skinned figure, and is believed to have the power to protect and fulfil the wishes of devotees as well as to ward off evil forces.

The opening shot of Kodumon Potti shows the ring on his hand, showcasing the power he holds in the mansion and on all those who entered its premises. The powerful, domineering Potti has ensnared the time and life of the cook and Thevan and for the two, the river, the plains and mountains are nowhere else but the mansion and its surroundings. The gradual realization that it is not Potti, but Chathan who is using the body of the deceased Potti as a physical agency to exercise all the power in this world, disrupts the narrative of the caste system, where the high-caste dominates the low-caste. A process of caste inversion is employed by the director where the low-caste Chathan overpowers and avenges himself by murdering his wrongdoers and taking hold of the mansion, a symbol of the power and dominance of the upper caste Brahmin community. This technique again contributes in labelling the movie as a postcolonial text. *Bramayugam* also plays the role of a narrative discussing the central role of power and power relations that comes along with the caste system or any such hierarchical systems, where power corrupts those who are exercising it. The cook and Chathan are blinded by the alluring rewards that power offers them, and both suffer from this undying thirst for power and position. The cook, who is the illegitimate son of Kodumon Potti, born to a low-caste woman, has come to avenge his father's death and inherit his hereditary wealth and power. But this ends up in a tragedy where he

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loses his life and power is transferred to Thevan, again showcasing the victory of low-caste over high-caste.

The cook always scorns the Paanan for which he is scolded by Potti (Chathan). The entire filmic narrative is that of caste inversion where the flow of power is in the opposite direction. There are dialogues in the movie which challenge the patriarchal notions of caste system: "No one becomes a Brahmin by birth, only through karma" (*Bramayugam* 17:02). When Thevan asks whether he is allowed to enter the mansion, Potti (Chathan) says, "What if I am unconventional that way?" (*Bramayugam* 21:41) and recites a Sanskrit shloka from the second verse of "Ashtadasha Kandam" which translates as: "A delightful guest is most graciously welcome. Be they lowborn or of noble caste!" (*Bramayugam* 21:53-21:59) which also shows Chathan's (low-caste) knowledge in those things which are meant to be learned by members of the high-caste only.

The shot of a spider on its web is a symbol of how Chathan is weaving a trap to ensnare anyone who enters the premises of the mansion. He becomes a figure who empathizes with the members of his community while at the same time he does not move back from removing those who become an obstacle in his way to acquire power. Chathan himself is trapped inside the web of power of which he himself is the master. "I have been alone for quite a few years now. I have forgotten the last time I stepped out of the gateway" (*Bramayugam* 27:33-27:38). In the words of the cook, "relishing in the intoxication of power, the goblin enslaves and dominates anyone who comes close to it. It has created a realm of control around itself. The goblin is both the master and the prisoner of that realm" (*Bramayugam* 01:23:28-01:23:42). Chathan becomes a representative voice for all those who are residing in the margins- "the silent, silenced centre" (Spivak 78). He denies the existence of God and expresses his dislike when Thevan talks about the favour that God has done for him. Potti (Chathan) tells that it is fate and not God that brought him there.

The game of dice becomes an important symbol of power exercised by Chathan in the movie and later becomes a symbol of resistance employed by Thevan. It becomes the symbol of Chathan's never-ending power and domination where he makes Thevan pawn his time as part of the game. Chathan says that it is Thevan's destiny that brought him to the mansion and narrates each incident from the latter's life that ultimately brought him there. The supernatural element of spectral narrative is employed here where Chathan lists out the past events from Thevan's life and even makes the dice turn into number six. Chathan finally succeeds in making Thevan stay at his mansion for the rest of his life. The same game of dice becomes an agent of resistance when Thevan uses it to know where Chathan has hidden the key to the secret chamber with the lamp inside. Thevan makes use of the same words that Potti (Chathan) said to him before playing the game: "When one is drowning in a deluge of boredom, *pakida* is the finest remedy!" (*Bramayugam* 01:29:32-01:29:37). This becomes an instance of the empire writing back where the colonised uses the words of coloniser, here in the colonial context of Kerala's caste system.

"What if he is not wearing the holy thread! He is a great Brahmin after all!" (*Bramayugam* 44:47-44:49)- These words by Thevan depict how physical appearance is not a necessary mark to label someone as a high-caste or low-caste. The cook's outburst towards Thevan shows the low-caste is looked down upon and crushed down by those of the upper classes. "Who are you to command me? A

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

lowlife who survived on the scraps of some palace! A mere moth that came rushing towards the sight of a flame!" (*Bramayugam* 45:25-45:34). The reply which Thevan gives to this insult is a poignant proof that the voiceless is given voice in a postcolonial narrative: "We are both equals here. Puppets, swaying to the master's tune. I may be a lowly Paanan in your eyes. But the master considers me as his guest" (*Bramayugam* 45:44-45:53). Potti is shown as eating meat which is against the Brahmanical practice, thus breaking the conventional Brahmanical norms. He retorts against the cook who speaks against him saying, "Keep your head down, you dog!" (*Bramayugam* 50:35).

The cook narrates the tale of Kodumon Potti, his ancestor Chudalan Potti and others, who came to ensnare Chathan to Thevan, who is struck with horror after seeing Kodumon Potti's other face. Chathan was a gift from the goddess Varahi to Chudalan Potti, the former enclosed inside a magical box. But Potti enslaved Chathan and made him suffer. The exhausted Chathan told Potti that he will show him hell if he looks into his mouth. The intoxicated Potti looked into his mouth and Chathan sucked up Potti's soul and killed him. Thus, liberated from Potti, Chathan gained control over the mansion and mercilessly killed all its members. Many powerful sorcerers came to banish him but they failed. And Kodumon Potti is the last descendant that has come to destroy Chathan.

Potti covering his body with crushed bones, the union of the yakshi and Potti (Chathan), and Chathan bringing rain that lasts for days- all these elements of mystery and supernatural traits make the movie a spectral narrative. Potti (Chathan) had killed the dancer who became a nuisance to him, and in his position of power states that he would kill anyone who comes in his way, which denotes that he would not hesitate to kill Thevan too, for the single purpose of attaining and maintaining his power and supreme authority. Thevan replies by saying that one who has forsaken the rituals and customs may not understand the divinity of music as an art form- once again giving voice to the oppressed and marginalised. Potti's (Chathan) reply to this is shown as his shadow replying to Thevan, thus indicating the absence of a physical body and Chathan's existence as a non-material body.

The cook befriends Thevan to make him his helper in destroying Chathan. During their conversation, Thevan raises the agony of all those who are low-born: "I think our birth itself is a mistake" (*Bramayugam* 01:10:02). Chathan succeeds in not letting Thevan leaves the mansion and erases his memories, trapping him forever. "Those in power take pleasure in toying with the freedom of others. It need not be the result of wrongdoing" (*Bramayugam* 01:25:08-01:25:15). "The goblin has only one aim- to stop anyone from seizing his power and attain immortality" (*Bramayugam* 01:27:52-01:27:58).

The colonising masters observed the subjugation and subjectivity of the colonised as something that aided their easy rule on the natives. In the same way, Chathan took away the last thing that was left for Thevan as his own- his time- and made sure that the latter remains his servant for life. But later, Thevan uses this consent to subjectivity as a tool against his cruel master to find the key for Chathan's destruction. He says, "The key to my destiny is in your hands, master…You hold the key to my freedom" (*Bramayugam* 01:30:13, 01:30:29). He courageously speaks against Chathan who has erased even the slightest hope of survival he had in his life. "I know you have not held me here to sing. To shatter my faith, to completely wipe away the thought of God. To lose all hope, to suffer in pain until I die in this hell. So you can revel in my suffering" (*Bramayugam* 01:37:38-01:38:02). This is the same as what the colonisers did to the colonised.

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

The corruptive nature of power is depicted in various forms in the movie. The cook uses Thevan as a mere bait to destroy the Chathan forever; Chathan tortures Thevan and the cook by creating a maze. He even takes the form of a young Kodumon Potti to allure the cook into his trap, just as he did to his ancestors. Chathan himself utters words signifying how dangerous power can be: "Once he confines me within that box, he will kill you! …He will make me kill you! ...This power will be nothing but a waste for you! You will be struck by lightning's wrath!" (*Bramayugam* 01:59:36-01:59:41, 01:59:48, 02:01:06-02:01:12).

After Chathan comes out of Kodumon Potti's body, the cook takes the ring and asks Chathan to come to him as he is his new master. Thevan tries to prevent him from wearing the ring saying that whoever wields power will be corrupted and commoners like him will always be its victims. The cook tries to kill him if he stands in his way. A fight follows between the two ending with the scene of the mansion falling down. The board of the dice game is shown where all the big sticks have fallen and only the smaller ones remain. The movie ends with Thevan with a stud on his right ear instead of the left, showing that the Chathan has now taken the body of Thevan, who lies dead under the crumbles of the mansion. Thevan (Chathan) sees his reflection in the river as that of Potti's- showing that now he has the power that was only accustomed to the high-born people. This shot ends the movie by making the unheard voices of the marginalised, voiceless, and oppressed people heard through a tale that inverts the hierarchy of the caste system, and at the same time underlines the corrupting nature of power.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper argues that *Bramayugam* is a significant film in the context of postcolonial and caste studies, as it offers a complex and layered portrayal of caste oppression and resistance. Through its focus on the voices of the marginalized, the film challenges dominant narratives and offers a powerful critique of caste hierarchies through the inversion of the caste system. By analysing the film through postcolonial theory, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of how caste functions as an internal colonial structure in India and how marginalized communities resist this form of oppression. *Bramayugam* not only engages with themes of power, caste, and resistance but also offers a cinematic space for the marginalized to assert their agency and voice.

Notes:

[1]Antharjanam in the Malayalam language refers to a woman from the Namboodiri Brahmin community, traditionally confined to living indoors. The term literally translates to "one who lives inside."

[2]Makkathayam refers to the custom in the Hindu communities of former Kerala, governing the system of inheritance and property rights. It is characterized by patrilineal succession, meaning inheritance passes from father to son and his descendants. The term itself is derived from the Malayalam word "makkal," meaning "children."

[3]Marumakkathayam is a matrilineal system of inheritance and kinship traditionally practiced in Kerala, especially among the Nair community. It literally means "inheritance through sister's children" or descent traced through the female line. This means that property and lineage are passed down through a woman and her daughters, rather than through a man and his sons.

[4]In the context of Hinduism, particularly in the state of Kerala, "chathan" (also spelled "kuttichathan") refers to a deity often associated with magic, sorcery, and protection. It is believed to be a powerful demigod, a divine spirit, or even a negative spirit, depending on the specific belief. Chathan, often invoked through "chathan seva" (a ritualistic practice), is revered as a guardian and protector by many in Kerala.

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

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