

Kaaka Muttai: A Representation of Subaltern Identity

Sanma Santhosh¹, Dr. Sreelakshmi N.²

¹Integrated MA Student, Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, India

²Research Guide and Assistant Professor (Sr. Gr), Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, India

Abstract: *Kaaka Muttai (The Crow's Egg)* is a 2015 Tamil movie directed by M. Manikandan. The movie narrates the poverty-stricken life of two siblings dwelling in a Chennai slum. The director of the movie presents two children - Periya Kaaka Muttai and Chinna Kaaka Muttai as the protagonists and it is through their life, that the audience witnesses the impoverished life led by slum dwellers. Globalization started to make the life of the slum dwellers to be more pathetic. The movie can be considered as a social document that chronicles the deplorable conditions of the life and struggle of a distinct subaltern group – the slum dwellers. The movie focuses on the effects of globalization and its effect on the marginalized section of society.

Keywords: Subaltern, slum - dwellers, poverty, child protagonists, globalization, marginalized

1. Introduction

Film is considered as one of the most influential mediums to communicate with people all around the world. It is evident that along with being a mode of entertainment, film is also a tool to communicate various social issues. Those films which convey social issues act as a mirror that reflects the social reality. They can be considered as an efficient tool to instigate discussion on a variety of social issues such as discrimination based on class, caste, race, and gender. From the beginning of the 20th - century film industry has always devoted space to discuss these social issues and reflect on reality. Racial discrimination, gender bias, and class disparity are harmful blights that divide the entire world. On closely analyzing these issues in the Indian context there are many films in different languages that audaciously spoke against these social evils. Many of them became the voice for the marginalized section of society.

Kaaka Muttai is a Tamil movie that centers around the life of two siblings dwelling in a Chennai slum. The director presents two siblings as the protagonists in the film to reveal the bitter experiences faced by the people who are marginalized to the fringes in the name of class division and consumerism. Slum - dwellers are among the most deprived and socially excluded sections of society at present. They appear as ruptured subjects with limited roles in mainstream society, deprived of basic rights to education, health, and shelter. The film *Kaaka Muttai* chosen for the study presents the poverty - stricken life that the Kaaka Muttai brothers and their family face amidst the developments that happen around them.

The entire movie and the child protagonists will be analyzed from the subaltern perspective. The term subaltern was coined by Antonio Gramsci, according to Gramsci subaltern means a group of people excluded from institutions of society who were denied their voice. While analysing subalternity from the context of globalization subalterns are those who struggle against the new developments that happen around them. Ranajit Guha defines subalterns as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South

Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way" ("Preface" 35). So, the term subaltern accommodates all sorts of fringe voices ignored by society. Thus, the protagonists Periya Kaaka Muttai and Chinna Kaaka Muttai can be analyzed as subalterns, it is through their life and experiences that the audience comes across the grim realities of slum life.

2. Objective

This research paper attempts to analyse the subaltern position of the protagonists. By closely analysing the movie and the characters the study intends to focus on the impoverished life endured by the slum dwellers. Food acts as a major symbol in the film to give more insight into the poverty faced by the slum community. Kaaka Muttai symbolizes the poverty filled condition of the slum dwellers, while pizza represents the elite class of the society. The desire to taste pizza that develops in the Kaaka Muttai siblings can be viewed as a struggle faced by them to be part of the privileged section of society.

3. Hypothesis

Kaaka Muttai is a film that may appear as a simple tale that narrates the life of two siblings and their desire to taste a slice of pizza. The desire to taste pizza is a metaphor for aspirations that the protagonists have in their minds. Globalization has started to employ its powers on the marginalized section of society. The pizza outlet and the television sets can be viewed as symbols of interruptions caused to the life of slum dwellers. Both these elements signify the class division that exists in society. All these aspects are conveyed in the film through various experiences that the Kaaka Muttai siblings encounter.

4. Research Methodology

Qualitative analysis is used to analyse the content of the film, based on the concept of subaltern theory. In the last

two decades of the twentieth century, subaltern studies grew in popularity. It is influenced by Marxism and Post structuralism, and it is a form of postcolonial criticism. Antonio Gramsci coined the word "subaltern" to describe working - class people in the Soviet Union who are subservient to the ruling classes' hegemony. Workers, peasants, and other people who are denied access to hegemonic authority are considered subaltern classes. In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985), the notion of subaltern received more importance and currency. Spivak was of the opinion that the subaltern does not have a voice. Indian history did not give due recognition to the life and experience of the subaltern and marginalized sections, but Spivak gave importance to these sections. She found that the dominant political, economic, and cultural strategies have blighted the lives of many marginalized communities. The protagonists in the movie belong to this disempowered section of society and thus they can be viewed as subalterns. They represent millions of unheard voices from the marginalized section of society.

5. Review of Literature

Films that discuss social issues have always been an interesting area for researchers. Discrimination based on class, gender, and race are issues that contemporary society witnesses. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by Gayatri Chakravorty was an important essay that discusses subaltern identity. Ranajit Guha's work *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, and Shahid Amin's *Event, Metaphor, Memory* were a few other notable works in subaltern studies. Various articles, reviews, and research papers have been published on this particular movie. Researchers have analyzed the movie as a reflection of social reality. The film has also been analyzed based on the representation of food in media and also analyzed the lack and excess of food presented in the film. *Slumdog Millionaire* is a 2008 film by Danny Boyle which narrates the story of a poor child who has been abandoned in the street, and after much struggle, becomes a millionaire. The film projects urban subalterns of Indian society placing children at the center of it, similarly *Kaaka Muttai* also places children at the center and realistically portrays the hardships endured by slum dwellers.

6. Analysis

M. Manikandan's 2015 Tamil film *Kaaka Muttai* opens up the struggles faced by slum dwellers in a faster - developing city. It narrates the story of two slum - dwelling siblings whose favorite pastime is finding a crow's nest near their slum to have their eggs to satisfy their hunger. The director of the film masterfully captures the struggles that slum inhabitants encounter through the various experiences that the Kaaka Muttai siblings face in their day - to - day life. The film delves into the onerous nature of economic exclusion and poverty through the eyes of two kids who call themselves Periya Kaaka Muttai and Chinna Kaaka Muttai.

The film begins by presenting the desolate and poverty - stricken life of the Kaaka Muttai family. Their family dwells in a single room where they sleep, cook, eat and do other

daily activities. This is not only the condition of the Kaaka Muttai family alone; similar is the situation of all other families that inhabit the slum. The siblings live with their mother and grandmother, their father was imprisoned and the reason for that is not revealed in the film. Since their mother was the sole breadwinner of the family the kids had to give up their schooling. They started to help their mother to manage the family, both the brothers collected coal from the railway tracks and sold it to earn money to help their mother in running the household. While proceeding with their daily tasks the siblings were involved in another pastime activity. They would climb up a tree and drink crow's egg as it would provide relief from empty under - nourished stomachs. This idea of drinking crow's egg was suggested by their grandmother to the kids as they couldn't procure chicken eggs. This scene alone conveys the poverty faced by the Kaaka Muttai family. When the kids steal eggs from a crow's nest, they make sure to take only two eggs and keep the remaining in the nest itself. Similarly, both the kids never forget to keep food for the crow before taking the eggs. This nest from which the brothers steal a crow's egg is placed on a tree and this tree is located on a ground where the slum kids play and spend their past time. The entire narrative takes a different turn to reveal the effects of globalization when the ground in which the kids play is sold to a businessman who later builds a pizza spot there. The ground was the only space where the kids from the slum could enjoy their leisure time, when the businessman buys the land, it can be considered an intrusion into the private life of the subalterns. The Kaaka Muttai family nor any other families dwelling in the slum had access to basic rights. The lack of proper food, education, and shelter were the major concerns of the Kaaka Muttai family and the entire slum.

Before the construction of the pizza spot, the tree was cut down. When the tree was cut down it made the siblings feel depressed as the crow's egg was the only source of nourishment for them. Similarly in the same scene we see Chinna Kaaka Muttai's concern for the crow, he asks where the birds would go as they had lost their space in the dwelling. Thus, the scene in which the birds lost their nest can be considered a foreboding for the slum dwellers.

Globalization has reached the doorstep of the slum dwellings which is powerful enough to displace the people from their small shelters. The scene can be considered the director's reflection of the consequences that globalization can bring to the life of the slum community. The introduction of the pizza outlet near the slum and its interference with slum life itself is an example of globalization. Similarly, the television sets in the household as well as mobile phones and other gadgets also show the effects of the emergence of globalization. The child protagonist Kaaka Muttai brothers can be considered the voice of millions of marginalized children living in slums. Pizza can be considered a symbol of globalization, there is a scene in the movie when the grandmother tries to prepare a homemade pizza. This act done by the grandmother can be considered a mode of resistance against the dominating powers. Electronic gadgets also represent the power structures. The kids from the slums become victims of those gadgets, few kids commit theft to possess those gadgets. The director of the movie puts forward the desires that the kids have in their minds. Both

the kids ask their mother to buy a television, but their mother couldn't purchase it. Later the household gets two television sets as a present for the financially weak ration holders, this situation reveals the domination of the powerful over the powerless. One day, two brothers while watching television happen to see a pizza commercial. To the brothers, the attractive pictures and images of pizza make the food appear to be manna from heaven. The magnificent opening of a pizza spot in their neighborhood by actor Simbhu and the pleasant feeling on his face as he tastes the pizza adds to their dilemma. From this scene onwards we see that the desire to taste pizza strongly develops in the brothers. This desire later develops as a quest to attain the unattainable element 'pizza'. When their grandmother learns about the desire that the kids have, she tries to make them a home-cooked pizza, but it turns out to be an utter failure. The director vividly distinguishes between the lives of the privileged and the impoverished in this scene. When one sector of the society struggles to satiate their hunger by consuming crow's eggs, the other enjoys the highly-priced western luxuries such as pizza.

The film shows two faces of food which represent two sections of the society. The crow's egg signifies India's destitute slum residents, while pizza acts as a symbol to represent people belonging to the upper class of the society. The introduction of two different kinds of food in the film shows the audience the lifestyles led by the people from different classes. The Kaaka Muttai siblings try hard to earn three hundred rupees so that they can taste a slice of pizza. But finally, when they manage to gather the money and reach the pizza spot, they are denied entry because of their attire. Realizing that they cannot enter a pizza outlet without dressing decently, the boys manage to obtain a new pair of clothes from a couple of wealthy children by purchasing them panipuri from a street vendor in exchange for the new pair of clothes. This scene also reflects the division that exists among different classes. The rich boys' father was unwilling to buy them panipuri as he finds it to be unhygienic and not suitable for consumption. The filthy living conditions of the poor are symbolized by street food, which the upper-class people avoid consuming. The reality of the society hits the Kaaka Muttai siblings when they are denied entry even after dressing decently. They are mistreated by the pizza store manager and the watchman; this incident raises a question in the mind of Kaaka Muttai siblings regarding their identity and existence. Proper attire or money cannot give them a position in the society that is enjoyed by the people belonging to the upper strata. This scene reflects the prejudices that the upper-class people have in their minds toward the slum dwellers.

In the film, pizza represents an abundance of food while Kaaka Muttai represents a scarcity of it. Pizza and crow's egg represent two symbols of food that are powerful enough to bring in the class difference that exists in society. The protagonists in the film are directly affected by this class disparity which reminds them of their position in society. Later in the film, the audience sees the power play of the media, politicians, and elite business class people. Few kids dwelling in the slums witnessed the ill-treatment received by the Kaaka Muttai siblings, they unknowingly record the video and it gets circulated on various media platforms. To

save his business, the owner of the pizzeria gives the Kaaka Muttai siblings a grand welcome and offers them free pizza for a lifetime. Earlier neither media nor politicians showed concern for the kids in the slum, but after this incident, they came up with modes of protest. The media did it for ratings while politicians did it for fame and publicity. The kids were tools in the hands of powerful oppressors which included the politicians, media, and the businessmen, none of them had genuine empathy for the kids. Finally, after all the struggles when the siblings taste the pizza, they do not find it as tasty as it was pictured on the television and both of them find it hard to complete the slice. At that moment the kids get reminded about the pizza made by their grandmother and felt that it was tastier than the original pizza served at the pizza spot.

The quest that the siblings face for tasting a slice of pizza can be a form of revolt against the oppression that they face from the superior class. Pizza which seemed to be unattainable for the slum dwellers is a metaphor that marks the economic and class differences. The toils that the Kaaka Muttai siblings face can be compared to the hardships that the slum dwellers face in a globalized society. The title of the movie itself represents the marginalized and poverty-stricken condition of the slum inhabitants. The protagonists in the film do not have a name, they address themselves as Chinna Kaaka Muttai and Periya Kaaka Muttai. Every individual is known by their name and it is part of a person's identity. Here in the movie, the Kaaka Muttai siblings do not understand the significance of having a name of their own, the lack of education might have led the kids to such a state. The director might have included such a situation in the film to emphasize the lack of identity faced by the slum dwellers. All these scenes in the film are a reflection of the deprived life led by the slum dwellers.

7. Conclusion

The film *Kaaka Muttai* presents a slice of the life of slum dwellers. Periya Kaaka Muttai and Chinna Kaaka Muttai with their strong desire to taste pizza emerge as the voice of millions of children from slums who are denied opportunities due to their lower class and status in society. The director brilliantly brings in various issues faced by the slum dwellers through this simple tale. The film clearly shows how the poor become instruments in the hands of the powerful. Here in this film the local area politicians and businessmen have the major power while the slum dwellers become oppressed subjects under their power.

The film can be viewed as an indirect cry against the dangers that the slum dwellers may have to suffer from the developments happening around them. Developments are necessary but when progress happens our society should not side-line the weaker sections of people. The pizza that was presented as unattainable to the kids can symbolize the denial of basic rights that the slum community had to face in different phases of life. Films that discuss social issues remind us about social reality. The marginalized section belonging to the lower strata gets representation through these films. Such films discussing social issues convey the greater truth that both the rich and the poor have equal rights in this society.

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