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# Subverting hegemonic perceptions: decoding the liberated tribal woman in the Malayalam movie *Ayyappanum Koshiyum*

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## ABSTRACT

The image of the tribal woman in movies is inextricably linked to patriarchal biases and pleasure aesthetics. What counts in representation here is the depiction of the alienated subject as an eroticized object with show-girl connotations. Even as progressive film makers valorize the sexuality of tribal women, movies like *Ayyappanum Koshiyum* offer a totally different and subversive perspective. Tribal woman as portrayed in the movie is displayed not as a spectacle but as a woman who defines her own power equations. This paper critically analyses the visual nuances that subvert the hegemonic subaltern female discourse using the example of the Malayalam movie *Ayyappanum Koshiyum* and attempts to decode the politics of representation that continuously engages in redefining identities through various art forms especially films.

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Representation has traditionally been used as an ideological tool to reinforce systems of inequality and subordination. Literature and film as disciplines necessarily involve representation and apparently, they become proxies that fail to authentically represent the voice of the “Other.” The nature and approach of filmic representation is often enigmatic as representations are largely influenced by ideological and political issues and it is impossible to cut off the relation between representation and the culture that produces them. Since representations work as signs within the sphere of culture, there is always the scope for misunderstandings, falsehoods and errors.

The accuracy of representations can by no means be guaranteed, as they operate in a system of signs that can never work in isolation from other signs or cultural factors. For example, the interpretation and readings of representations function in the context of a body of rules for interpreting, and within a society, many of these codes or conventions are informally agreed upon and have been established over a number of years. Such understanding, however, [is] not set in stone and may alter between times, place, peoples and contexts. (William Mitchell 1995)

It is pertinent to point out that the binary dialectic of centre or margin (periphery) is largely the product of representation and relationship that exists between the colonial and the colonized subjects. This binary not only legitimized colonial control but also effaced the multifaceted nature of colonized cultures. However, the relationship is dialectical. The “periphery” often resisted this imposed identity, asserting cultural agency and

contesting the centre's dominance. Such resistance can lead to a renegotiation, even a reversal, of the centre-periphery dynamic. Ultimately, centre and periphery are not fixed positions, but relational concepts in constant flux due to ongoing processes of representation and contestation. The post-colonial theorists draw upon these ideas to dismantle the "claims of any culture to possess a fixed, pure and homogenous body of values, and exposes them all as historically constructed, and thus corrigible formations" (Bill Ashcroft 1995: 37).

The problematics of representation in the case of tribals can be attributed to the fact that the known and the comprehensible is accepted and defined according to the worldly paradigms of civilized, whereas the unknown or remote or peripheral is treated as abnormal, inferior and primitive. Any kind of representation is fraught with inevitable half-truths due to the modes and means of representation especially involving the perception and methodology used for presenting reality. As Kumkum Yadav (2003) rightly says, "the idea of difference as a condition for the framing of an identity gets translated into an idea which divides 'us' and 'them' in terms of a 'more' perfect and 'less' perfect humanity" (6).

In the specific cultural context of India, the notions associated with a woman's role privileges and social position are determined from the dominant culture's perspective and therefore are as such opposed to the ideals of tribal traditions.

The tribal woman's independence, for instance, is misread so very often as frivolity or even immorality, her resourceful handling of nature is seen as witchcraft and her fearlessness is translated as a criminal bent of mind. Obligated to face the double jeopardy of being women and also tribal, the tribal women have to contend with images of which presents them as "bright and comely" but "hopelessly immoral." (Yadav 157)

The representation of tribal women in movies can reinforce stereotypes and prejudices or challenge them by presenting more complex and nuanced depictions of their lives and experiences. Even progressive film makers are not immune to the crime of misrepresenting tribal women in films. Women tribal characters are often trapped in sexualized portrayals and the gaze is mostly urban. Tribal women have largely been depicted in cinema as easy prey for upper caste men to satisfy their carnal desires. The depiction of the tribal woman is often limited to a few dominant tropes and stereotypes that perpetuate gender, class and caste hierarchies and reinforce the dominant narratives about subaltern femininities. Some of the common tropes and stereotypes include:

- (1) The victim: Tribal women are often portrayed as helpless victims of social and economic inequality. They are shown as being subjected to violence, abuse and discrimination and their agency and resistance are ignored.
- (2) The saviour: In some movies, the tribal women are depicted as saviours of their communities, using their feminine qualities to bring about positive change.
- (3) The exotic "other:" Tribal women are often portrayed as exotic and otherworldly, emphasizing their difference from the dominant culture. This trope reinforces stereotypes about subaltern communities and ignores their complexity and diversity.
- (4) The sexualized object: Tribal women are often sexualised in movies with their bodies used to titillate the audience. This trope reinforces gendered power relations and reinforces the idea that subaltern women are primarily valued for their physical appearance.

If not rape survivors, tribal women get featured through the exotic gaze like Silk Smitha in *Adharvam*. She is portrayed as an assistant of a sadhu (Mammootty) who practices exorcism and as part of a ritual she agrees to sit nude. The attempt in this paper is to focus on the politics of representation of tribal women in the Malayalam movie *Ayyappanum Koshiyum* and analyse how the film resists and subverts the hegemonic subaltern female discourse against the backdrop of contemporary Malayalam cinema.

*Ayyappanum Koshiyum* (2020) is a Prithviraj Sukumaran- Biju Menon starrer movie directed by the late K.R. Sachidanandan, popularly known as Sachy. The movie revolves around two characters who suffer from the traits of toxic masculinity and patriarchal privilege. The two hyper-masculine men enacted by Biju Menon and Prithviraj Sukumaran get into a bitter class of egos and let their fight consume their lives. Though a testosterone-filled film, the movie makes subtle remarks on issues of caste, class, gender, performance and patriarchy. The characters who catch the attention of the audience after the main leads would be Koshy's father, Kurian and Ayyappan's wife, Kannamma.

Kannamma, a tribal activist, stands in sharp contrast to the stereotypical male identities. Through Kannamma, the female subaltern, the director subverts and resists the hegemonic subaltern discourse rampant in Malayalam film industry. Her rough and compelling performance makes Kannamma stand out in all the scenes where she is present. Though a member of the tribal community, her social positioning does not in any way hinder her words and actions; in fact, she demands respect whenever she appears on the screen.

Kannamma's (Gowri Nandha) introductory scene, also the one in which she meets Koshy for the first time, establishes the voice of her character in the film. Hearing Ayyappan call Koshy "Sir," Kannamma quickly retorts: "Isn't he a criminal? Why are you then calling this bourgeois, Sir?" Kannamma's deliberate choice of the word "bourgeois" establishes her deep-rooted belief in the Marxist ideology and her awareness of the prevailing capitalist hegemony. Kannamma does not flinch even when she is placed in phallogocentric settings. When Koshy and his driver Kuttamani attempt to confront Ayyappan at his residence, they find only Kannamma present. Even as she finds herself in a masculine environment, Kannamma stands bold and confronts Koshy for insulting her husband. She asks: "Is your mother still alive? If she is, it's better to kill her. At least that way she won't suffer watching what her son has become."

The director also pays special attention to the appearance of Kannamma. As against the eroticised representation of tribal women found in mainstream films, Kannamma roams around with unkempt hair, shabby clothes and dark complexion with a baby in her arms- a deliberate and artistic way to show her marginalised yet independent identity free from the male gaze. Even in emotionally charged scenes like the one where Ayyappan bids farewell to Kannamma before confronting Koshy for his "final battle," Kannamma maintains a calm demeanour. She confronts Ayyappan and tells him that she would take care of their son's education. Though independent and bold, Kannamma never shuts her eye to the fact that her son "will have to face a lot of strong winds and rain in his life, let him normalise it from a young age." She does not become a tokenized female subaltern who gets victimised on account of her doubly marginalized status. Instead, she accepts the turn of events with a passive yet mature acceptance.

The relationship between Kannamma and Ayyappan is based on mutual respect and devoid of gender binaries. Ayyappan is a liberated husband who has utmost respect for Kannamma which is very much evident in the language that he uses. He tells her: "If you can make a cup of tea, I will have it." Traditionally, feminist scholarship (e.g., Robert W Connell 1987) highlights the unequal distribution of domestic labour, where women are expected to fulfill nurturing roles and maintain the home. This expectation is often reinforced through seemingly innocuous actions, such as the wife serving tea to her husband. Ayyappan's statement disrupts this normative script. The use of "can" instead of "will" reframes tea-making from an obligation to a freely offered act. This subtle shift in language dismantles the traditional gender binary that positions women as solely responsible for domestic service. Furthermore, it potentially acknowledges the concept of emotional labour, as explored by Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983). Emotional labour refers to the unpaid management of emotions to create a harmonious domestic environment, a burden often disproportionately placed upon women. Ayyappan's respectful phrasing suggests an awareness of emotional labour and a subversion of the patriarchal entitlement to such service. He does not impose upon the female the responsibility to feed her husband and therefore the language that he employs brims with respect and thoughtfulness.

Another remarkable feature to be noted in the movie is that, in many instances, Kannamma the empowered subaltern is juxtaposed with Ruby, Koshy's wife, the voiceless subaltern in an upper-class household. While Kannamma has a vibrant role both within an outside the household, Ruby is a victim of domestication and is physically, verbally and spatially subjugated. Kannamma is seen as engaging herself in the fights and struggles of the tribal community. The domestic exploitation and marginalization of Ruby serves to reinforce the inbuilt idea of the narrative that exploitation is the whole mark characteristic of the upper class.

Kannamma's imposing presence within the narrative is so strong that her place could be opposite to Kurian himself. She embodies an aura of assertiveness usually denied to females in mainstream cinema. She displays immense will power and courage in the face of trouble and this is particularly evident in the scene towards the end of the movie where she gets arrested by the police.

In spite of the glorification of Kannamma, several other factors within the narrative invite criticism in the portrayal of this empowered female subaltern. A prominent factor to be noted here is that whenever she commits some form of crime, her husband saves her from trouble as he happens to be the Sub-Inspector of the local police station. In fact, Ayyappan himself reveals that the very reason why she married Kannamma was to save her from the after effects of an otherwise notorious case. This makes Kannamma inadvertently dependent on a male character.

Nevertheless, Kannamma's portrayal as a solid feminist figure addressing convoluted issues concerning the tribal community cannot be ignored. The film subverts the idea of hegemonic subaltern victimisation by representing a dynamic and vibrant tribal woman free from the stereotypical and eroticized perceptions of mainstream cinema.

## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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