

**HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS AND RITUALS OF RESISTANCE:
DOMESTIC LABOURERS
IN SELECT MALAYALAM FILMS**

*Dissertation submitted to the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the award of the degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**

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This is to certify that this dissertation entitled **“Hidden Transcripts and Rituals of Resistance: Domestic Labourers in Select Malayalam Films”** submitted by Ms. MUHSINA K.K., bearing Reg. No. 17HCHLO2, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Master of Philosophy in Comparative Literature is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance which is a plagiarism free thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in the topic was developed out of a very common but spontaneous response of a group of audience, specifically their discontents, about the 'passivity' or compliance of a servant character while watching a popular Malayalam film in a very informal friend circle. The discontents were primarily against the servant not reacting or initiating any resistance against the subordination that he underwent in the film. The response was followed by a very general statement about Indian peasantry as a very unimpressive category whose docility and passivity have led extensively to the lack of a revolutionary experience in India unlike many other countries.

The above-mentioned sense of discontent of the audience were predominantly against the domestic laborer's lack of initiative to resist the subordination and it ended up reiterating the fixed notions on peasants in general and domestic servants in particular as essentially docile or passive subjects. While there was an immediate sympathy associated with the subordinate subject from the side of the audience, there was also a very spontaneous sense of anger and dissatisfaction on their inability or lack of willingness to wage resistance.

This inspired me to think more on the popular dissatisfaction with the non-revolutionary behaviour of peasants. What would have been the history of peasants or other manual laborers who might have resisted the subordination that they underwent but cannot afford an open and public defiance? Why is it that there is no historical or archival data on people's acts of unorganized but continuous forms of resistance if it doesn't constitute a danger to the state or the existing social order?

Corresponding to these questions, this dissertation tries to look at the major ways through which the question of peasantry and peasant revolutions have been approached,

engaged and conceptualized. This further motivated me to extend the category of peasants beyond agricultural labourers and to engage with other subordinate subjects who undergo similar experiential realities and who are also not in a position to wage open resistance and show bold defiance. As a result, domestic laborers are being taken as a major concern of this study as well as the subject of analysis. Also, analyzing the practices and dialectics of power and the multiple forms of subordination, whether historical or contemporary, particularly in the context of Kerala would be useful for this study.

Labour has been an important tool in legitimizing servitude across history. Spanning across cultures and nationalities, the history of slavery is predominantly the history of servitude built on forced labour. As a system which enables one to own and transact individuals, slavery remained primarily as a relationship based on ownership. Being the testimonies of slave lives, slave narratives have been instrumental in challenging the historical consciousness of colonial countries and unveiling how these nations were built on the institution of racism. Written as the autobiographical accounts of enslaved people, these narratives also exposed how slavery is the most vulnerable condition of physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual servitude.

Similarly, indentured labour also has a long history in colonial nations like Britain and the United States of America as it acted crucially in their state making process. Indentured servants sign a forced contract to work for a particular employer for a fixed time and it serves as the primary source for colonial planters to meet the increased demand for labour. Most of the indentured servants worked either as farm laborers in tobacco or sugar plantations or as domestic servants.

Whereas, servitude in India is mainly legitimized by caste system as a social stratification characterized by strong sense of purity and pollution and strict practice of division of labour. The division of occupation under caste system is based on one's birth and mobility was strictly prohibited. The labour servitude in India is also strongly related to agrarian social relations enhanced by the feudal land relations and agrarian slavery was predominant. It was built upon caste system and semi feudal agrarian system in India with the ownership of land concentrated in the hands of *Jenmis* and the upper caste families.

The master-slave theory of Hegel has been used as major theoretical praxis to talk about the evolution of society as a whole. Hegel proposed the dialectic of *Herrschaft und Knechtschaft* (master and servant), as a means of human interchange in the course of history that inherently regulates power in the society. According to Hegel "In order to attain certainty, in order to exist in and for itself, self-consciousness must therefore exist in this way for another – must be recognized as self-consciousness by another self-consciousness" (111). Hegel calls this as 'the process of Recognition' and says: "When two self-consciousness meet at this stage, they seek to reflect themselves in one another: the other provides the Possibility of seeing oneself" (111).

Hegel's model of historical consciousness became the centre of Marxism and a materialist historical method based on class struggle was proposed by Karl Marx and Friederichs Engels. Taking cues from the Marxist rhetoric of developing consciousness, feminism also took up the master-slave dialectic to talk about women developing consciousness in order to fight patriarchy in modern society. This was followed by the formulation of Simon de Bouvier in explaining the relationship between men and women in history as an instance of master-servant dialectics.

Hegel's formulation was replaced by Foucault's theory of bio-power which questioned the explanative power of master-slave dialectic challenging the notion of truth and power associated with it. Foucault points out how new ways of social control and strategies of power emerged with modernity and remained very effective in regulating and governing the lives of people in a modern state.

Despite the well-received materialist critique proposed by Marx, his thesis on peasantry is widely criticized for characterizing peasants as petite-bourgeoise. Contrary to Marx's expectations of peasants forming an alliance with the industrial proletariat in their struggle against the bourgeoisie, the French peasantry did not support the working class during the revolution in 1848. As a result, Marx called them petite-bourgeoise and as "a sack of potatoes that lack interconnections, common political identity and organization" (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* 174-8) and even despised them as representing barbarism in the midst of civilization. Marx in his political writing, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851) noted that French peasantry cannot constitute "a unified and purposive political force" as they are isolated, unsophisticated, and unaware of the larger happenings around them.

Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests forms no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not constitute a class. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or a convention. They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, an unlimited governmental

power which protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. (Marx 62)

Countering Marx's assumptions regarding the inability of peasant communities to form a collective solidarity, inability to represent themselves and the assumption that only urban workers had the potential to develop a revolutionary consciousness etc., James Scott, an American political scientist maps the political capacity and consciousness of the peasant communities. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance*, written by Scott, provides an alternative account of the everyday acts of resistance waged by a group of paddy field workers in the village of Sedaka in Malaysia. Based on a rich ethnography on the peasants of the South East Asia and their techniques of resistance to various forms of domination, this work looks at how various forms of resistance, often invisible and circumspect, effectively counters domination quite different from the Gramscian idea of hegemony which is largely drawn on the question of consent to the domination.

Whereas Eric Hobsbawm's work *Peasants and Politics* traces the "political relations of 'traditional' peasants to groups and institutions outside their local community reinforcing the separation of peasants from non-peasants" (3-22). "The relative isolation of local communities, and their consequent ignorance, does not confine peasant politics only to parish pump or undefined millennial universality. However, it makes certain forms of nation-wide peasant action without outside leadership and organization difficult and some, like a 'peasant revolution', probably impossible" (Hobsbawm 3-22).

The new left historian E.P. Thompson in his *The Making of the English Working Class* provides the history of working class in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who constitutes a new class of people as the products of industrial change. Being critical of turning the working class into an inhuman statistical category, Thompson posits

them as people who were not just the victims of history, rather as people who possessed agencies over their own making. “The working class made itself as much as it was made” (Currie and Hartwell 194).

While comprehensive accounts of peasant struggle of other countries are largely available, studies that systematically analyse and engage with Indian agrarian movements are comparatively less. A.R. Desai’s *Peasant Struggles in India* argues that “India has been a theatre of varieties of struggles involving various categories of rural population during the entire period of British domination” (1979). Desai points out how these struggles were considered as “dysfunctional, anomic and disintegrative phenomena obstructing the rapid and smooth development of the capitalist path since independence” and were also viewed as law and order problem (100).

A Subaltern Studies Reader (1986-1995): Society, Government and Urban Growth edited by Ranajith Guha, one of the founding members of the Subaltern Studies collective, has been crucial in rupturing the idea that peasants were powerless agents who rebelled blindly against British imperialist oppression and local landlord exploitation. James Scott in his introduction to Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* points out how the work maps the common elements present in rebel consciousness during the Indian colonial period and presents an alternative subaltern history from below providing a comprehensive account of the “peasant revolts and popular insurgencies with engagements on more complex processes of domination and subordination”(1983)

Whereas the dominant Indian historiography has portrayed only violent incidents like Jallianwala Bagh massacre or Chauri Chaura incident as part of nationalist struggle for independence. M.T. Ansari in “Refiguring the Fanatic: Malabar 1836-1922”, illustrates how the uprisings of Mappilas of Malabar against “Hindu landlords and Christian overloads”

were referred to as ‘outbreaks’ or ‘outrages’ and how Malabar rebellion was not regarded as part of nationalist imaginary of anti-colonial struggles (38). While the Muslim casualties in Malabar rebellion were systematically ignored, the peasant uprisings that resulted only in violent revolts, were regarded as peasant movements.

It is quite important to look at how only violent peasant uprisings against feudal structures or the foreign enemies of the nation are considered as peasant movements in Indian history. There has been an over emphasis on the more dramatic forms of peasant violence systematically dismissing the day to day struggles. Various forms of everyday resistance of the peasants against those “who seek to appropriate labour, interests, rent, food, profits and taxes “from them are not being considered as resistance

Gayatri Spivak’s seminal work “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is also significant in understanding the agency and voice of peasants in the Indian context. Providing a powerful critique of the influence of western narratives and discourses in the construction of subaltern historiography, she talks about how dependence on western frameworks and western intellectuals to speak of subaltern conditions negate the possibilities for the subalterns to speak for themselves. Pointing out the dangers in a logocentric assumption of cultural solidarity among the heterogeneous people and critiquing the left intellectuals who tend to essentialize the subaltern through colonial discourses, she discards all the essentialist assumptions. Bringing out the case of Bhubaneswari Badhuri’s suicide note, she analyses the historical and ideological factors that impede the possibility of being heard for those who inhabit the periphery.

Most of the academic scholarship on peasantry are primarily engaged on organized, large-scale, protest movements or rebellions or revolutions that form a potential threat to the

state. Keeping in mind the fact that most subordinate classes cannot afford the luxury of open, organized political activity, this dissertation intends to explore the unorganized, invisible, everyday forms of resistance of domestic laborers. It is apparent that the formal, organized political activities and revolutionary protests are conventionally the domain of the middle-class intelligentsia. Peasant politics, more specifically, the political life of domestic labourers or other subordinate subjects cannot be traced in these formal, organized protests that forms the hallmark of the middle-class protest culture.

It is important to understand how the objectives or motives behind the idea and practice of protestor resistance differ for both the subordinates and the dominant groups before negating the small scale, unorganized acts of resistance as politically insignificant. Changing the structures of the state and the law do not form the immediate interest for most of the subordinate classes. In such a premise, where peasants are widely critiqued for their alleged compliance and servility, it is important to look at how peasants or other subordinate subjects engage with or negotiate their experiences of subordination. What would be the means through which they negotiate their discontents and manifest their protest?

Domestic labourers are less privileged than peasants in general and are often at the receiving end of the employer's disposition. They have to directly engage and negotiate with the employer and his or her family since they live within the household along with the family. As a result, helps are often imagined either as a 'loyal subservient' or as an 'enemy within' who is potentially dangerous. This dichotomy has been very instrumental in defining and fixing the behavioural patterns of helps and any mobility from the given standards were regarded as aberrations. Subsequently, contesting domination or experiences of oppression is more dangerous and even suicidal for domestic helps in most of the cases.

Keeping this in mind, it is important to think about how a shared critique of domination of domestic labourers would look like and explore if there were any attempts to archive their resistance or acts of defiance in dominant historiography. Can the people under subordination remain unchallenging the power relations within which they are caught up and by which their identities are exclusively defined? What would be the mechanisms through which they develop a critique of domination and what would be the possible paradigms to engage with, understand and interpret their ways of resistance. To exhibit their protest in public or express retaliation as open defiance can be even suicidal for them. Hence, what would be the dynamics and politics of their resistance? Keeping in mind the idea that a public performance that challenges the master-servant power relations or a speech language that defies the authority of the master is least viable, the major intent of this dissertation is to contest the dominant imaginaries on domestic labourers as passive and servile subjects by examining the hidden transcripts that manifest their everyday acts of resistance, often invisible, low profile acts yet quite remarkable in challenging the authority.

Servants as a category, whose roles and services are mostly relegated into the domestic spheres are largely not taken as part of the material discourses of the outer world. Similar to the peasants who were never historical actors in dominant history, domestic servants always remained as anonymous numbers and statistics contributing to labour migration, land holding, taxes, conscription and other records of services. It is quite important to look at why is that the discourses on domestic servants are never part of a state's history? Have they ever been recognized even within peasant rebellion? How can we understand the dynamics of resistance by domestic servants? Is it because they are failed revolts, that they do not form part of the written history? Even as failed revolts what would be the results they would have achieved? "Like a few concessions from the state or the

landlords, a brief respite from new and painful relations of production and not least, a memory of resistance and courage that may lie in wait for the future” (Scott 29)

How everyday forms of resistance that the subordinate classes who undergo exploitation may exhibit on a day to day basis are different from the organized struggles? What are the factors which distinguish the nature and dynamics of both these forms of protests? Quite different from outright collective defiance, these resistances are constant and prosaic in nature. The strategies of these everyday forms of acts that are highly invisible include “foot-dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, arson, slander, sabotage” etc. (Scott 14).

The violence inherent in the dominant practices of attaching docility or passivity as an essential trait of peasantry can be understood only through a remapping of the dominant imaginations on domestic laborers as a category that is deprived of any potentialities to show defiance in public or in the face of their masters. Most of the narratives on their servility or compliance were drawn from the lack of a public speech for them. The speech and language of the servants were more of a situational logic which varies according to the presence and absence of their masters. The repressed speech or the so-called contradictions in the speech of the servants were often critiqued as the lack of willingness to initiate a resistance. It is important to look at how this repression of speech is a result of a possible physical pressure on them. It is also crucial to understand how developing a hidden transcript for them is important as even a misspoken word or a misplaced gesture can have gruesome consequences.

James Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* notes how structural kinship of these forms of subordination presents the common features as:

These similarities in the cases of slavery, serfdom, and caste subordination are fairly straightforward. Each represents an institutionalized arrangement for appropriating labour, goods, and services from a subordinate population. As a formal matter, subordinate groups in these forms of domination have no political or civil rights and their status is fixed by birth. (Scott 11)

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first chapter titled as *Labour Servitude and Cultural Imaginaries on Domestic Labourers* maps the cultural imaginaries on domestic labourers in popular imaginations. The chapter attempts to trace how the dominant imaginaries on domestic labourers, as a static category that is essentially compliant to domination, is a continuum of the labour servitude that manifests in different forms across the world. Labour remained a crucial factor in legitimizing servitude differently, as slavery legitimizing indentured labour, caste system justifying caste slavery, feudalism defining agrarian slavery and so on. This chapter explores how the idea that servants, as persons employed in service of others, legitimizes domination through domesticating them in terms of their roles, appearance, behavioural patterns, mobility and so on.

The first chapter will further look at how Indian servants were an integral part of the construction of colonial domesticity in British India as they were the only group of Indians with whom Memsahibs, the wives of British officials had substantial contact with. As many of their children developed a close relationship with their Indian Ayahs, they wrote back to Britain about their anxieties over their children's contact with the Indians and a possible acculturation which on the other hand provided them with a sense of partaking in the growth of the empire. The male domestics, mostly the landless labourers from the outlying areas of

colonial India, were considered as effeminate and doubly inferior through an engendering of labour under colonial woman's gaze.

The chapter seeks to understand how caste slavery was instrumental in defining labour servitude in Kerala as a system of control and ownership. Looking at how agrarian slavery and caste structure are mutually constitutive; the chapter explores the advent of colonial modernity and the subsequent emergence of new modern subjectivities enhancing the lower caste groups like *Parayas* and *Pulayars* with social transformation. The chapter also gives an account of the subaltern historical accounts on how land reformation did not benefit Dalits and they were refused farming land despite the claim that it put a partial end to landlordism.

The final part of the chapter analyses the cinematic experiences of servitude tracing the servants on and off the Malayalam silver screen. Tracing the entry of lower caste heroines into the cinematic scene like P.K. Rosy, the first Dalit heroine of Malayalam cinema, the chapter looks at how caste and gender identities still constitute significant agents of exclusionary practices in Malayalam cinema. The chapter provides a short picture of the major shifts in Malayalam cinema from the dominance of realism to movies of the 70s, set in the backdrop of the gulf boom and popularity of laughter films in the 80s etc. These films portrayed servitude in different ways but relegated lower caste and minority religious subjects as servants varying from domestic helps to the attendees of the upper caste male heroes. It looks at how, irrespective of the changing patterns of master-servant relationships in terms of class status, change in the nomenclature etc. in the contemporary movies, the behavioural patterns set and defined for the domestic labourers remains unchanged but continue to imagine them between the omniscient "loyal subservient" or "internal foe" who is a threat to the sacred conjugal family spaces.

The second chapter titled as *Public Transcripts and the Hegemonic Aspirations: Contesting Servility and Compliance* interrogates the dictions of servility and compliance attached to the identity formation of domestic labourers as expositions of the public transcript of the dominant groups according to which they imagine and want the subordinates to act on. The chapter questions the dominant practice of attributing domestic servants as essentially submissive and devoid of any agential positions. It reinforces the idea that it is not the public behaviour or the interaction that forms the response of the oppressed to domination but a shared critique that they develop often backstage and beneath their evident public behavior.

Rather, looking at the hidden transcripts which is often invisible or done in the back stages would be helpful to contest this dominant rhetoric. In order to elucidate the argument, I have adopted James Scott's concept of *public transcript* which he finds as the "self portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen" (18) and his idea of *everyday Resistance*. Scott notes that "public transcripts are designed to be impressive in order to affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites and it is often used to conceal or euphemize the dirty linen of their rule"(Lawrence and Karim 2000).The chapter seeks to argue that the submissive behavioural patterns that the domestic labourers exhibit as an effect of the flattering self-portraits of their masters.

The chapter maps various symbolic gestures of domination through which the hierarchical order between the master and the servant is reinforced including language, display of hegemonic masculinity, use of honorific terms, spectacles of public punishments, discursive affirmation of power etc. In such a backdrop, the chapter tries to understand how public performances of deference and loyalty, that inherently denies scope for public defiance for the subordinate subjects, are symbolic displays to "naturalize" coercion or dominance and crucial in sustaining power and hierarchy for the master. Also, these

behavioural patterns that are easily taken as submission or compliance to the domination are defined by the unwritten but well-maintained public transcripts that are in circulation.

These flattering self-images of the master or the employer are carefully maintained to serve the enactment and sustenance of power and dominance in the selected movies through a valorization of the goodness of the upper caste employer or desirability of his hegemonic masculinity. While Malootty Amma is presented as an epitome of the goodness of Nair domesticity in *Neelathamara*, Sheema Thampuran is emblematic of feudal benevolence, whose spectral presence does not allow Mada to leave his identity as a slave even after generations. Thus, it is important to understand how these self-presentations of the master/employer are constructed, leaving the servant subjects totally disinformed of the socio-political transformation of the time and the newly achieved socio-economic and political literacy of their communities.

To draw a theoretical backdrop for the chapter, some of the existing theoretical engagements on power and domination including the normative assumption on power as essentially negative and thus to be morally disapproved, the idea of power as dispersed and pervasive yet a productive and positive force in society as proposed by Michel Foucault, the master-slave dialectic of Hegel etc. are looked at.

The third chapter titled *Beyond the Will for Change: Mapping Quotidian Resistance* is divided into two parts. While the first part looks at the dominant imaginations on the idea and practice of resistance and the standards that qualify an act as resistance, the second part of the chapter traces the quotidian, everyday forms of resistance that go beneath the surface and evident public behaviour of the domestic labourers. James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990) argues that "all subordinate groups employ

strategies of resistance that go unnoticed by superordinate groups, which he terms “infrapolitics” (19).

This chapter looks at how a critique of power is developed offstage as a “hidden transcript” totally different from the open, public interactions between dominators and oppressed that can be called as the “public transcript”. The chapter calls into question the dominant sociological frameworks on resistance, only as actions that are necessarily visible, collective and “political” against structures of power with a will for change and points out how diverse mechanisms of actions and behaviours also constitute resistance which do not necessarily qualify these parameters.

Locating how various theoretical engagements have contested the dominant idea that peasants were powerless agents in history, the chapter explores various acts of resistance or retaliation that do not qualify the standard parameters of a resistance, like visibility, sense of opposition, consciousness or intent, coordination, will for change, recognition by others etc. It seeks to understand how the invisible, pervasive, unorganized and everyday forms of defiance of domestic labourers constitute powerful forms of resistance challenging the power and domination in multiple ways.

These forms of passive and invisible strategies, including disguise, language tricks, innuendos, gossips, anonymity, are crucial for domestic labourers as visible or open defiance would bring dangerous consequences and hence remain suicidal for them. Being that the case, these hidden transcripts are mostly drawn in the backstage of their social life. The low-profile techniques, like stealing, pilfering, foot-dragging, gossiping, deception, character assassination, rumour-mongering etc. become powerful means of resistance for them. Thus, these rituals of resistance done within disguise and anonymity provide them with a social space in which their offstage dissent to the official transcript of power can be articulated.

The chapter also looks at how certain resistance are realized through various symbolic behaviors like speech, silence, resisting the attributed identities etc. Nevertheless, it is important to understand how the public mask of deference and loyalty and various dramaturgies of dissimulation are always the self-conscious strategies for domestic labourers in addition to their powerful critique of domination that they develop off stage.

The dissertation is titled as *Hidden Transcripts and Rituals of Resistance: Domestic Labourers in Select Malayalam Films*. The concept of “hidden transcripts” proposed by James Scott is the major theoretical trope upon which this study is developed. The term hidden transcripts are used in this dissertation to refer to the diverse strategies, both physical and symbolic, adopted by the domestic labourers to counter the domination as they cannot afford an open defiance. The term is thus employed to make reference to the backstage stories that lay beneath/outside the evident public behaviour of the domestic labourers. Similarly, the term ‘rituals of resistance’ is also used in the title to indicate the domestic servants’ acts of resistance or behaviours that are more prosaic in nature. These quotidian resistances which form a ritualized part of their social life are quite different from the formal, organized and well-coordinated protest movements which has a fixed time frame with a clear sense of the immediate target.

The work has chosen cinema as the text for analysis since discourses around labour and servitude are defined and mediated by cinematic images to a greater extent. Cinema not only constructs realities or meanings rather acts as conscripts of the meanings produced by the power relations. Also, domestic labourers has been constituting a regular feature of Indian cinema since long time. Cinema has been presenting diverse and nuanced experiences

of servitude spanning across experiences in domestic spaces, social hierarchies, peer circles, feudal set ups etc.

I have chosen *Neelathamara* (The Blue Lotus¹, 1979), *Vidheyan* (The Servile, 1993) and *Ponthanmada*²(1994) as texts for analysis despite the availability of many films on peasantry. The common factor that all these films revolve around domestic labourers as central protagonists forms one of the reasons to choose these texts although *Mada* in *Ponthanmada* is not a domestic as such. Also, all these movies are set in feudal backdrops. More importantly, these three films were familiar to me as often quoted among my friend circles and acquaintances as highly disturbing films to watch for the degree of servility that its servant characters exhibit.

Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha (2009) is one of the films I wanted to incorporate along with the selected films. It depicts the complex nuances of master servant relationship in the backdrop of the first recorded murder case in Kerala. The public transcript of Murikkin Kunnath Ahmed Haji, starred by Mammooty as a tyrant feudal landlord who lived in Paleri, a small village in northern Kerala during the 1950s is so powerful to not get figured in police reports after raping and Killing a Dalit woman of the region. Also films like *Kasthooriman* (2003), *Rappakal* (2005) *Khaddama*(2011) etc. with servant characters as central protagonists and portraying different dimensions and nuances of master servant relationship would have been useful for the study. Also films like *Pappayude Swantham Appoos*, *Melepparambil Aanveed*, *Devasuram*, *Ravanaprabhu*, *Vietnam Colony*, *Ezhupunna Tharakan*, *Nandanam* etc. are some of the films among many others that can form a detailed filmography for this dissertation.

¹All the translations/transliterations are my own and all emphases are as in the original, unless otherwise mentioned.

² An appropriate translation for *Ponthanmada* was not available. *Ponthan* means fool and *Mada* stands for cattle. It can be loosely translated as bovine fool.

Also, there is not a particular time period that binds these movies together but all of them are set in peculiar historical situations. While *Vidheyan* is set in the backdrop of labour migration to south Karnataka from Kerala during the 40s, *Ponthanmada* portrays an uncanny relationship between a colonial landlord and a Dalit servant in the 60s. *Neelathamara* on the other hand revolves in a Nair domestic setting in Kerala portraying the dynamics of caste and gender intersections in master servant relationship during 70s. More broadly this dissertation is a film analysis that is informed by the concepts of “hidden transcripts” and “everyday resistance” of James Scott. Along with a close discourse analysis, it is informed by many of the existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks on peasantry and master-slave relationship. I have used/consulted the ideas of Hegel, Marx, Foucault, Hobsbawm, Spivak, Saba Mahmood and others to develop and substantiate my arguments. The dissertation has used historical method along with using the broader possibilities of comparative literature. The research has been built on inter disciplinary of film studies, literary studies and cultural studies.

Most of the translations in the dissertation, particularly of the dialogues in the movies are my own unless, otherwise mentioned. They are loosely translated from Malayalam to English as no subtitles were available. And I have used acceptable method of transliteration while mentioning non-English words.

This dissertation is no way an attempt to romanticize the low-profile techniques or the so-called unethical acts like pilfering, cheating, foot-dragging, character assassination, rumours, sabotage etc. that the domestic labourers adopt to wage their resistance through an off-stage critique as open defiance is not viable for them. Neither is this an attempt to morally disprove of their acts of resistance. Rather the larger interest of this study is to engage with the fissures in the existing studies on peasants, particularly on their exclusive preoccupation only with the organized and large-scale protest movements and the more dramatic and

violent rebellions and revolutions that supposedly pose a threat to the existing social order with broader prospects for social change and thus form part of nation's imaginary. Pointing out the absence of an archive on the unofficial accounts or backstage stories of peasant politics in dominant history, this work explores how domestic labourers are never regarded as historical agents. The study also intends to challenge the conventional Marxist paradigm of understanding peasant responses and their strategies of protest, looking at how their claim of political nullity negates the quotidian resistances of powerless people. It also looks at how they are either absent or left out in the fabric of the popular protest movements that form the corpus of the middle-class intelligentsia across the world.

CHAPTER ONE

LABOUR SERVITUDE AND CULTURAL IMAGINARIES ON DOMESTIC LABOURERS

Servant characters in popular imaginations are easily predictable for their fixed behavioural patterns and assumed socio-cultural and economic roles. As persons in service of others, servants are constantly watched and domesticated by employers in particular and society in general. Concomitantly, their roles, appearance, social identity, nomenclature etc. are strictly defined by the dominant elites and prospects for mobility are least encouraged.

This chapter is an attempt to map the landscapes of servitude and the dominant imaginaries on servants in popular discourses with a special focus on Malayalam cinema. It will look at how the cultural imaginaries on domestic labourers are either the manifestation or continuum of labour servitude which was prevalent in Kerala in the form of caste slavery. The chapter will explore how Indian servants were an integral part of the construction of colonial domesticity in India by looking at the nuances of memsahibs'³ engagements with Indian servants. The narratives of Memsahibs, the wives of British officials in colonial India, on Indian Ayahs who were taking care of their children were seminal in the construction of oriental knowledge of Indian domestics as “filthy” and “corrupt” and thus legitimizing the colonial enterprise of cleaning the “filthy”. It would further analyse the category of servants, on and off the screen, looking at caste slavery as a major trope to legitimize labour servitude in Kerala. It will also focus on the varying trends of Malayalam Cinema, particularly after 70s, that negotiate with its historical and political contexts analysing the presence/absence

³ Mem sahib is a white foreign woman of high social status living in India; usually the wife of a British Official. The term mem sahib is often used as a respectful form of address by non-whites particularly Indians.

of the structural as well as discursive transitions in body politics and behavioural patterns of domestic labourers.

Servants in Indian Cinema: Family Retainers/Helps/Domestic Servants

Servant characters have been constituting the regular feature of Indian cinema since long time. The cinematic representation of servant characters and the portrayal of their sense of servitude were much more subtle and appealing than literary presentations. Cinema addressed varied senses of servitude cutting across experiences in domestic spaces, social hierarchies, peer circles, feudal set ups etc. The category of servants or domestic labourers in cinema was thus not merely confined to people who work in the master's households performing domestic labour. Rather helps in cinema varied from domestic helps to the attendee of the central protagonist who were often destined to be the foil presence.

A family retainer is quite popular in Indian cinema as a domestic servant who has been associating with the master's family for long time. The quintessential loyal family retainer became a cliché of Bollywood cinema after the box office success of *Devdas* (1955) directed by Bimal Roy. The movie has been seminal in establishing the saviour figure of domestic servant in Indian literary imagination and subsequently Ramu Kaka became a universal prototype of loyal rescuer figure of family retainers of upper middle-class Indian families. The family retainers were thus imagined as people who were blissfully willing to risk his own life in order to rescue the master or the heir of the family who are either in danger or in self-destruction.

Family retainers were an integral part of Indian cinemas set in feudal background. As an emblematic of feudalism, family retainers were also the marker of social status for feudal joint families. They were presented as loyal "outsider" within the family who is

entrusted to look after and maintain the family properties and take care of the requirements of the family. Mostly as aged or middle-aged male member, who has been associating with the family for long time, they were supposed to be the sources of “wisdom” and wit with which they would save the family members from any harms and uphold the family’s honour.

Family retainers in cinema are easily identifiable for their names which were universalized after *Ramu Kakka*. They are usually presented as “unmarried, white-haired and dressed in what appeared to be the same short-sleeved kurta and dhoti with which he first entered the house decades ago” (Ramnath). They are essentially known for their “supplicatory manner and unbeatable level of intimacy” as a source of comfort or a wise advisor. Most of the time family retainers are also presented as god like figures that would save the family from any sort of threats and be a strong supporting pillar during the times of crisis. It is quite interesting to look at how this conception gets reflected in the popular imaginations around family retainers as they are often given the names of gods as Krishna, Shiva, Ramu, etc. Similar to this, they are also presented as unmarried, ageless figures negating their materiality, desires, roots and identities.

Domestic servants on the other hand are less privileged and are often at the receiving end of the employer’s disposition as people who directly engage with the employer and his or her family. As an extension, domestic helps in cinema and literature are also used as tropes to portray the temperament of the employer and his or her family. Domestic workers or helps, unlike servants in general, directly engage with the master’s family as in most of the cases they live within the household along with the family. As a result, helps are often imagined either as a ‘loyal subservient’ or as an ‘enemy within’ who is potentially dangerous. This dichotomy has been very instrumental in defining and fixing the behavioural patterns of helps and any mobility from the given standards were regarded as aberrations.

Similarly, the servants in cinema or literature are often named after the service they provide. As a result, most of the servant characters are called as Mali (gardener), Ayah, cook or sweeper. These universal nomenclatures of servants with their profession clearly negate their subjectivities by erasing their identities and socio-cultural locations. Apart from this, the generalized names of servants in cinemas are either Ramu or Chotu and “Ram Singh is the archetypal driver character of any nineteenth or early twentieth Hindi cinemas” (Ramnath).

Although the new movies mark the ‘arguably’ changing class relationships in the master servant networks, they also provide set standards of mobility for lower caste servants. Nonetheless, domestic servants in new movies are not privileged to attain social mobility and they remain easy preys to the disposition of the employer. Bhudan (played by Balendra Singh) in the recent Bollywood movie *Piku* (2015) written by Juhi Chaturvedi and directed by Shoojit Sircar is at the most vulnerable victim of Bhaskor Banerjee’s obsession with his digestion problem. “He must accompany his crabby employer to the facilities and is put in charge of a toilet-friendly chair (called The Throne). In one of the movie’s more sharply observed slice-of-life moments, he waits outside the latrine at a highway stop and obligingly makes the appropriate sounds as Bhaskor urinates inside, as the parent of a brat would” (Ramnath).

Similarly, servants do not remain a homogenous category and they are divided into different groups according to the service that they provide. A major category of domestic servants includes those who serve as cooks. Due to the sense of purity and pollution that is widely followed and practiced in domestic spaces in India, members of relatively upper caste background form the category of cooks. Also, women are commonly employed as cooks because of their historically conditioned relationship with food and as an extension of the stereotypical gender roles. The complex, conditioned and nuanced relationship of women

with food also serves as a means to legitimize domestic labour. Nevertheless, there has been a major shift in the assumed gender roles around cooks and men began to be widely employed as cooks irrespective of the age barrier.

Apart from caste, religion also plays a crucial role in defining the service that a domestic help is supposed to provide. While domestic labour is commonly understood as a class category, the dynamics of power relations between the employer and the labourer is defined by other identity markers which include religion, gender, age etc. In most of the cases, members of the lower caste communities constitute domestic labourers especially for jobs like cleaning, washing etc. Whereas servants from Muslims and Christian communities are in relatively privileged positions to serve as attendees, care takers or cooks and thus not get subjected to discrimination on the basis of caste outrightly.

On similar lines, gender also plays a crucial role in defining the nature of labour, categorizing among labourers and fixing standards of selection and so on. Domestic labour is often viewed as woman's work and as a result, men doing domestic labour were viewed as effeminate. Similarly, age old or middle-aged women are mostly preferred as domestic labourers for they are generally viewed as the sources of unconditional love and care. They are preferred for the reason that they are arguably more mature and devoid of sexual desires unlike the "sexually promiscuous" young women help.

It is quite interesting to look at how only middle aged or age-old women from upper caste backgrounds are seen as the unconditional source of wisdom and affection. Whereas women from lower caste backgrounds are often seen either as comedy tracks or as transgressors who steals or malign the family's honour. For instance, Kaviyoor Ponnammamma who hails from an upper caste background remains the ever-green Malayali face of goodness and virtues and becomes a prototype of age-old women helps who provide unconditional

love and support whereas helps from lower caste locations like Philomina and Kalpana are always portrayed as transgressors.

While the master servant relationships in rural backgrounds were mostly drawn on the old servile cliché, servants in urban spaces remain relatively mobile and maintain more democratic relationships with the master. Because of the educational and economic capital that the urban population has achieved, there has been considerable changes in the dynamics of relationship between the master and the servant. These changing relationships were manifested in terms of changes in the behavioural patterns and assumed roles, nomenclatures, mobility etc. Correspondingly, they are called by their names instead of their professions and terms like help began to be widely used in spite of being addressed as servants. At the same time, the sense of security and the scale of wage is higher in the urban spaces. The domestic labourers in urban spaces are more aware of their rights and entitlements which make them vocal compared to the non-resisting behavior of servants in general. More importantly they are in a more privileged position to show their protest or discontent on the face of the master. Even though the old servile cliché has undergone a major shift in contemporary movies corresponding to the changing nature of the class divide in India, the specters of caste and other identity marker makes significant presence in defining the master servant relationship.

Memsahibs and their Servants: The Construction of Colonial Domesticity in Nineteenth Century India

Indian Servants were an integral part of the construction of colonial domesticity in the nineteenth century India. They were the only the group of Indians with whom memsahibs

had considerable correspondence with and many of the memsahib's children cherished close attachments with their Indian Ayahs. As an extension of memsahib's contact and dependence on servants, memsahibs wrote extensively about Indian servants in their correspondence with their family and friends. "Since the Indian servants were the main links between memsahib's India and Indian's India, it seems inevitable that memsahibs' relationship with their domestics would shape their attitude towards the Indian's in general" (Chaudhuri 550).

The narratives of memsahibs regarding their anxieties over their children's contact with Indian ayahs greatly influenced the western projections of India as an exotic land of superstitions. The fear of acculturation made sending British children to England to learn English culture and mannerism a customary practice during the time. Indian male domestics were looked at, interpreted and depicted through the colonial gaze of western woman as effeminate and doubly inferior through engendering labour. Memsahibs regarded the male domestics inferior to British male servants since domestic jobs were regarded in Britain as women's work. The landless laborers from the outlying areas of Bengal, Madras and Bombay presidencies who were employed as domestics were considered as effeminate by the memsahibs. "The inability of these indigenous men to extricate themselves from menial household work marked them as inferior to British male servants and placed them on a level with British female servants" (Chaudhuri 553).

Other major stereotypes around servants were shaped by the notion that servants are internal foes and a category that is not fit into the sacred domestic spaces. It was heavily influenced by the British manuals which depicted domestics in Britain as "criminals who stole and carried diseases to the employer's homes". Similar to the perceptions on servants in Britain it was believed that Indian servants took bribes and cheated their employers. "The

idea of Indian servants taking *dostoor* or bribes, in their dealings with tradesmen on behalf of their mistresses also surfaced in the accounts of the memsahibs” (Chaudhuri 554).

Nupur Chaudhuri in her work *Memsahibs and their Servants in Nineteenth-Century India* talks about how the narratives of memsahibs like “the poor, the ‘Great unwashed’, smelled bad” reinforced the colonial project of othering the colonized nation against the colonizers. Ascribing filthiness to a nation and referring its people as unclean thus reiterated the colonial burden of cleaning and civilizing the “filthy”. Also, the disciplinary practices of servants by memsahibs were justified in evident paternalizing rhetoric similar to the British advice to regard the annoying acts of servants like their children. Use of physical violence like flogging or beating against servants in India were thus normalized and justified. Even the responses against the use of corporal punishments were imagined within clear utilitarian frameworks.

It is quite interesting to look at how writing about the domestic sphere benefitted memsahibs by giving them certain power and sense of superiority that were otherwise playing a secondary role in the growth of the empire. Power over the production and dissemination of knowledge about the natives and domestic sphere helped them in identifying with the “Great Empire” despite their invisibility in the official documents or records and lack of legal voice and political or economic power.

Caste slavery and the Landscapes of Labour Servitude in Kerala

Caste Slavery is instrumental in legitimizing labour servitude in Kerala. It was originally linked to the caste social order and the term is used mostly to refer to a system that legitimizes the social control of the subordinated untouchable slaves in Kerala. Caste slavery has been foremost in the making of Kerala’s social fabric since pre-colonial times. This system of control and ownership of the *Adima* (slave) which was prevalent in Kerala

was generally known as *Adiyama/Adimathvam*. Agrarian slavery was crucial in the making of caste structure in Kerala since ancient times and the slaves were viewed merely as instruments of toil by the dominant castes. They were deprived of access to land, employment and modern education and it was with the advent of colonial modernity slave castes achieved social transformation.

In Kerala society, untouchable communities such as pulayas and parayas were spaced within the structures of power and dominance that was determined by the peculiar caste formation. They occupied the lowest stratum of society, performing socially necessary labour, outside the realm of ritual purity and significance. In the colonial accounts, including missionary documents, the pulayas, the parayas and similar castes are referred to as slave casts and they were bought and sold along with land. They are referred to as agrestic or chattel slaves, and their social mobility and life were determined by their status as slaves. They did not have, in most cases, a stable family life that would have been disrupted in the course of the imminent sale of women, men and children. (Adam 122-129).

The slave castes were subjected to severe exploitation as their everyday lives were marked by multiple forms of violence unleashed by the landed gentry. Land was exclusively controlled and operated by upper caste groups and temple corporations in pre-colonial Kerala and the only provision available for slave castes was to remain as employees in the process of production. Majority of the land was possessed by the *Jenmis* (landlords) who belonged to Nambudiri and Nair castes in Kerala. Hence, the landed aristocracy of Kerala is made up exclusively by the Upper caste Hindus. Correspondingly the popular notion that,

landlordism in Kerala is not a caste-based entity rather it is a class-based system, is contested by various Dalit intellectuals and historians.

Writer and Dalit intellectual Pradeepan Pambirikkunnu writes:

Like democracy, caste too is practiced secretly and in private as well as in the open. What is more, as far as India is concerned, caste is not a super structure. It is a self-sufficient structure that includes economic process too. Landlordism was not the economic base on which caste developed. On the contrary it was on caste-based production relationships that landlordism was built. In Kerala, it functioned with the following structure: pulayar, parayar (agricultural slave laborers) – Nair (managers, overseers) – Brahmin, Namboothiri (landlords) (558).

In pre-colonial Travancore, most of the land was under the ownership of the state and it remained as the property of the families of landlords and property of temples. Later a new “middle stratum peasantry” emerged mainly from the upper castes, including a considerable number of Ezahavas following the Pandarappatom Proclamation of 1865. Despite the proclamation advocated provisions to distribute ownership rights to the tenants and disseminate the ownership among all caste groups who are engaged in agricultural labour, marginal effects on the untouchable slave castes were made.

Sanal Mohan writes: “In a caste society such as Kerala, dominance and subordination were effectively worked out by the legitimizing principles of Hinduism. It was this religious ideology that sustained the particular form of hierarchical society that developed in Kerala.” (16). The situation of the slave castes that were regarded as the agrestic slavery underwent marked changes under colonialism particularly after the abolition of slavery. It was with the entry of missionaries in Kerala the idea of equality of slave castes came into the public

imaginings and articulations. Nevertheless, the role and centrality of slave labour remained deliberately absent in most of the Marxist histories of Kerala.

Substantial changes were made possible in land relations and relations of productions in the latter half of the nineteenth century as commercial agriculture became prominent and new opportunities for labour were opened up with the development of plantations. The demand for agricultural laborers was increased with the introduction of plantation and commercial agriculture which enhanced the agricultural laborers to achieve a relatively free existence out of the “feudal obligation of wetland agriculture mediated by the traditional relations of production” (Mohan 22).

Despite the reorganizations in the agricultural production in the nineteenth century the relations of production didn't undergo remarkable changes and most of the land used to be controlled by the upper castes while the slave caste laborers carried out the actual cultivation. As a result, the untouchable slaves continued to remain in the same structural position for a very long time even after the abolition of slavery in 1855 in the Travancore region of Kerala.

Despite the fact that the abolition of slavery in 1855 was a landmark, free wage labour became major form of labour appropriation. Majority of the scholars argue that the missionaries stood with the cause of abolition in order to make free wage laborers available in the plantations (Kurup 187-97). But it has to be noted that their spatial mobility in any substantial scale was observed only from the second decade of the twentieth century. The missionaries justified their acts claiming that saving the slave castes from their sufferings was an emancipatory project as they regarded it as liberating them from inhuman existence.

Following the changes, new subjectivities defined by colonial modernity emerged in parallel to the transformations in the traditional social structure of Kerala following the

institutional interventions like western education, schooling medicine etc. by the missionaries. The spread of literacy also made significant changes in the lives of slave castes since the newly opened slave schools made far reaching effects and introduced them to the culture of writing and word and thus to the world of modernity. This has been followed by violent clashes between Dalits and upper castes as many slave schools set up by the missionaries and with the help of Dalits were set on fire by the upper castes.

The missionaries also introduced certain institutional forms to fulfil their disciplining projects which was legitimized by their conception that “Dalits who were undisciplined by nature had to be disciplined and incorporated in the cultures of the word and writing through the new learning institutions. The imparting of Christian religious ideas resulted in some of the Dalits becoming communicants of the religion and some of them starting interpreting the scriptures and articulating in their own ways” (Mohan 31).

Most importantly colonial intervention led to the creation of new subjectivities and social agencies among slave castes in Kerala. The new subjectivities of slave castes that were shaped by the project of colonial modernity contained strands of missionary Christianity, modern education and the ideas and practices of social reform. The agency of slave castes in the context of the new institutional sites under colonialism negotiated for new social space. 19th century witnessed the strengthening of anti-caste and anti-feudal responses in Kerala. It was stirred by the communist movements and subsequent agitations for land reforms. The land reform bill brought in by the world’s first elected communist government under E.M.S. Nampoothirippad brought about marked changes in the social fabric of Kerala. It led to the “middle class-iation” of Kerala challenging the foundations of feudal systems and bringing about small social units

Although the Land Reform Bill put a partial end to landlordism and widely held as a development ‘model’, it could not ensure social justice to the lower sections of the society. The highly acclaimed Kerala model of development and its so called “progressiveness” and enlightenment has been widely critiqued from both caste and gender perspectives. The Dalits of Kerala challenge the development paradigm pointing out how caste hierarchies were not eradicated in Kerala with the proposed land reforms. Also, Dalit women and women of other minority communities questioned the much-celebrated idea of social justice pointing out how their lived realities were absent in the statistics of education, health etc. and challenged the highest rate of women empowerment, one of the highly claimed indexes of Kerala model. Ronald J. Herring writes:

The major beneficiaries of the abolition of landlordism have been rich peasants, not poor peasants or agricultural laborers. The major reasons for this result lie in the conceptualization, rather than lapses in implementation, of the reform measures, most importantly the uniform treatment of all tenant-landlord relations as ‘feudal’ rather than a recognition of tenancy as a privileged property form on most of the leased area in the state and the treatment of the problems of agricultural laborers as those of a rural proletariat rather than as those of an aspiring peasantry-to-be” (qtd.in Mohan 59).

T.M. Yesudasan, a Dalit thinker, in his article “Towards a Prologue to Dalit Studies”, writes: “Land reforms in Kerala gave farming land only to tenants, all of whom were upper castes. Dalits were barred from becoming tenants since they were slaves. The land reforms of Kerala, by refusing to give farming land to Dalits, reduced them to the condition of Choman” (615).

Following these changes and transitions, the major motive of mainstream Malayalam cinema during the time was to present Kerala as a “progressive” state and Malayalam cinema functioned as a “cultural tool that aids the interpellation of Malayali spectators as the subjects of progressive state of Kerala” (Rowena 24). The relationship of servitude which was more prevalent as an enterprise between peasants and landlords in feudal set up began turning into new forms with the supposed end of feudalism following the reallocation of land. The subjugation of peasants in agricultural lands or plantations also shifted into other domains and domestic laborers or servants became a very common category.

Although the dynamics of servitude did not alter much in the experiences of domestic laborers following the political or social shifts, the service anticipated from the helps became more diverse and varied.

Servitude in Malayalam Cinema: Servants on and Off the Silver Screen

The sense of servitude and exclusionary practices are not merely the on-screen phenomena of Malayalam cinema. The first Malayalam feature film *Vigathakumaran* (J.C. Daniel, 1928) is historically rooted in castiest violence that has been unleashed against P.K. Rosy, a Dalit Christian woman who is the first heroine of the Malayalam film industry. Rosy was denied entry to Malayalam cinema and subsequently to the public sphere by the casteist patriarchy of Kerala for her lower caste and gender identities.

Rosy’s pioneering step was met with instant violence from Nair caste lords. On the very first day on which her film was released, men from the upper caste Nair community tore the screen and broke up the show, unable to bear the sight of a Dalit woman in the role of a Nair woman acting out love scenes with another man. (Rowena).

Rowena also notes how “the film, *Vigathakumaran* itself was shelved and J.C. Daniel, its lower caste Nadar Christian film maker who was trying to recreate himself as a Nair through his film, was thwarted in his move and he too had to leave the film field incurring huge losses and plunging him into poverty”(Rowena).

It is in the movie *Adimakal* (1969), based on the novel of the same title by Pamman⁴, a maid servant became a heroine in Malayalam cinema for the first time. *Adimakal*, directed by K.S. Sethu Madhavan is the story of Ponnamma, a maid who is sexually exploited and abandoned by a rich employer. The entry of servant characters into cinema was largely part of the realist movement in Malayalam cinema. Nonetheless, Malayalam cinema remained very exclusive to maintain its aesthetic superiority and its focus on realism. Realism has been celebrated as the standard technique of cinematic representation in India situating itself in bourgeoisie modernity.

Servants were an integral part of feudal social structure of Kerala in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The master servant relationship was defined largely by the ownership of land and control over peasants who were always subservient to the land-owning feudal lords. The narratives of Malayalam cinema till the 70s was largely evolving around middle-class family life and their socio-cultural relations. The period which saw the popularity of various realistic films, exclusively portraying the life of middle-class Hindu heroes, also witnessed the coming of various protagonists from lower socio-cultural locations by the 70s into the cinematic space. This has been presented through varied senses of servitude through films set in feudal backdrop and more specifically in films celebrating male friendships. The servant characters of these cinemas were mostly used as tropes to present the feudal,

⁴Pamman, born R. Parameswara Menon, was a prolific Malayalam novelist who is best known for his novels which grapple with the sensual imagery of the human psyche.

aggressive temperament of the feudal lord or the ultra-masculinity of feudal male Hindu heroes.

Most of these movies were directly or indirectly inspired by feudal social relations that were prevalent during the time. The land relations and taxations under the British government ended up as semi-feudal agrarian system with the ownership of land concentrated in the hands of landlords after the independence. Even after the much-celebrated land reforms, land was concentrated in the Nair families who have been historically holding the land. Lower caste people were predominantly the servants who work either in the cultivation of the landlords or doing the manual labour in their households. The Nair '*Tharavads*' of the time possessed number of lower caste women as domestic servants who work in and around the Nair households.

Servant characters began to appear popularly in the cinemas after 70s. Apart from the wave of realist movement in cinema this trend was possible partly because of the success of laughter films in Malayalam. The 80s witnessed a crisis in Malayalam cinema world with decreased audience, fading stars and the compulsion to function on a much lower budget etc. This was followed by the entry of various new film makers and actors and movies made on lower budgets. Jenny Rowena observes how comedy films took over the field during the time which till then "confined laughter to the "comedy track" or the "comedy parts" of its otherwise serious cinematic form".

Discarding a grand narrative and a singular, "moral" Hindu hero and the preoccupation of Malayalam cinema with the heterosexual relations, these films mostly dealt with a bunch of fraudulent, unemployed men and their aspirations for wealth and success. Rowena finds the development and popularity of these laughter films as an extension of the attempts to remasculinize Malayalam cinema/culture. The artists like Jagadish, Sidheeq,

Kalabhavn Mani etc. who were in the periphery of the cinematic world became the heroes with the success of these films during the time. Also, in many of the laughter films came out in the 80s, the small-scale artists like Jagadish, Kalabhavan Mani were continuous presence as the attendees of the Hindu male heroes. In *God Father* (1991), one of the box-office hit laughter films directed by Siddique-Lal, Jagadish plays the character of Mayinkuttti, a Muslim college student. He is the attendee of his classmate Ramabhadran, a caste Hindu from a feudal joint family and throughout the cinema Mayinkutti is presented as an idle figure who becomes a laughingstock for the audience against the hegemonic masculinity of Ramabhadran.

Even in many movies set in the 70s, especially in the backdrop of the gulf boom and the economic prosperity of Kerala, artists like Jagathi Sreekumar, Kalabhavan Mani, Sidheeq, Sainudheen, etc. were playing the characters as the attendees of the newly rich heroes who accompany them either praising their new class status or helping them in fulfilling their romantic relationship. Despite the fact that these films were part of the larger remasculinization project of the Malayalam cinema, these characters from inferior social positions had to remain subservient to the hegemonic masculinities of the male Hindu heroes.

Also, in many movies came up in the 80s celebrating male friendships, the artists from lower caste and class locations were the ‘others’ of the Hindu hegemonic masculine figures. They were either the source of humour or the foil to elevate the caste Hindu or dominant Christian heroes. *Ezhupunna Tharakan* (1999), directed by P.G. Viswambhaaran which features Mammooty in the lead role of Sunny Tharakan celebrates the glory of Ezhupunna Tharakan family, a prominent Christian family in Kerala. The character of Muhammadali, played by Jagadish is the friend of Sunny Tharakan and an attendee of Tharakan brothers. Muhammadali is an apologetic Muslim who is willing to compromise

his religious identity and even ready to identify himself as a “*sathya kristhyani*” at various points. He is presented as a comic character that goes against the Masculine seriousness of Sunny and as a strong admirer of the desirable masculinity of Sunny Tharakan and his female fandom.

One of the clichéd themes of the low budget “soft-films” of the time was the secret sexual relationships and fantasies between the employer and the maid servant. The maid servants were often presented as “internal foes” who are morally loose and sexually promiscuous. They were imagined as a category that do not fit into the sacred family spaces as they pollute the purity of the conjugal family relationships by seducing the employer.

Similarly, family retainers were a regular feature of the feudal Hindu family movies set in the 80s and 90s which celebrated the ultra-masculinity of Hindu male heroes. Innocent who played the character of Varrier in *Devasuram* (1993) and *Narasimham* (2000) was the source of wisdom and wit that cuts across ages for Mangalasheri Neelakandan played by Mohan Lal. Unlike other artists from lower caste locations who play the role of servants or the attendees of the male hero, Varrier is emblematic of feudal class status of the Mangalasheri Tharavadu and Varrier is thus not the ‘other’ of the hegemonic masculinity of Neelakandan or his father or someone who invokes laughter by his mere presence.

Despite the new movies representing the changing master servant relationships in terms of class status, changes in the nomenclature, social mobility etc., the established behavioural patterns set for the servant characters have not undergone much changes. Domestic labourers are still continued to be used as comedy tracks in most of the popular cinemas even now. Although there have been some changes in the generalized naming of servants as helps or ayahs, the casteism in addressing their socio-cultural locations remains stronger and vivid.

The Malayalam film and serial actress Molly Joseph Kannamaly, who hails from a fishing gap (fishing harbour) in Kannamaly of Ernakulam district, is popularly known as Chala⁵ Mary after she played the character of Chala Mary in a television serial in Asianet TV. She played the role of a newly rich woman who leads a luxurious leisure life after her children become well off but is known for her past identity as a poor fish merchant who sold fish in the market. Molly has been a comic source in the serial for her high vocal power, glossy dresses, heavy ornaments she wears and so on. Molly Joseph, being popularly called as Chala Mary even outside the screen denotes the casteist sensibilities against socio-economic mobility of people of lower castes. It has its historical roots in the popular practice of presenting the maid servants, often played by Kalpana or Philomena, as noisy and quarrelsome women invoking the “*kadappuram*” or “colony” culture. They were also presented as people who do not lose any chance to backbite the employer or deceive his family by stealing or pilfering or maligning the master’s good repute through gossips and so on. They were often used as comic tracks in the melodramatic middle-class family movies of the 70s and 80s.

The intersectional identities of caste, class, space, gender etc. remain to play a very crucial role in legitimizing servitude in Malayalam cinema. The movie *Rappakal* (2005) starred by Mammooty sets forth a clear example of how cultural imaginaries and stereotypes around helps remain the same even in the contemporary movies. The film is about the unconditional bond of Krishnan, an unmarried male help who is a god like figure through his motherly affection to the elderly woman whom he looks after. He becomes shelter to his employer against the claims of biological determinism even after she is left as

⁵ *Chala* is a fish popular across Kerala. Because of its relatively lower cost, *chala* is widely consumed among lower class and caste groups. Molly Joseph Kannamaly, a Malayalam cine artist is popularly called as Chala Mary after she played the character of Chala Mary in a Malayalam TV serial resonating her lower caste background.

destitute by her own children. The movie was well received by the audience as they identified the relationship as the humanist face of “enlightened Kerala social life” and the “Keralite soul of family”.

The movie *Kasthooriman* (2009) directed by Lohithadas depicted the changing networks of servant- employer relationships through the story of a lower caste Hindu girl, Priyamvada played by Meera Jasmin, who earns the expenses for her own education by working as a domestic help and mostly with the consent of her employers. Nonetheless, it is only through her union with a newly rich upper caste Christian male hero, whose social status is reclaimed through his identity as a civil servant, Priyamvada’s struggles are presented as successful and fulfilled.

Thus, the popular cultural imaginaries of the sense of servitude around domestic labourers have still not come out of the fixations around either a loyal family retainer or male help who sacrifices his own life to save the employer and the ‘honour of the thravad’ or the noisy, sexually promiscuous maid servants who is an enemy within the house. It is quite crucial to think about how servants are presented as a static, homogenous category despite their economic mobility as devoid of any political or economic agencies and completely disinformed of the political transformations of the time. It is important to understand how producing such a category serves to maintain the official transcript of the dominant elites through fixing servility of the subordinates as an extension of the grandeur of the master and as a legitimate ground to enact the domination.

The next chapter of the dissertation contests the nuances in master-servant relationships in three Malayalam movies: *Neelathamara* (The Blue Lotus, 1979), *Vidheyam* (The Servile, 1993) and *Ponthanmada* (1994) looking at how public transcripts provide the

dominant groups with a self-flattering image that sustains the dominance and relationship of hierarchy.

CHAPTER TWO

PUBLIC TRANSCRIPTS AND THE HEGEMONIC ASPIRATIONS: CONTESTING SERVILITY AND COMPLIANCE

Most of the normative theoretical formulations have drawn power and domination as intrinsically negative and often carried a moral criterion along with the term. This is largely a result of the dominant convention of fixing subordinate subjects, particularly peasants and manual laborers, as lacking any hold over power and as devoid of agency or capacity to develop a political consciousness of their own.

This dominant understanding of power and domination as synonymous is moulded to a greater extent by the normative assumption that power and domination need to be morally disapproved on the ground of conflict of interests between the power holder and the power subject. In the second edition of *Power: A Radical View*, Steven Lukes engages with the relations between domination and power and recognizes that some exercises of power can play in favour of the interests of the subjects, or at least do not damage them, for example as in the cases of mothering or teaching (2005).

Friedrich Hegel, the German philosopher and an important figure of German idealism, looks at the dynamics of relationship between master and slave in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* through the framework of Master-Slave (*Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*) dialectic. Talking about the recognition of the subordinate subject with the master, Hegel points out how the two self-consciousnesses are constituted, in being each recognized as self-conscious, by the other. According to him, the master's consciousness is defined "only in mutual relation to the slave's consciousness- a process of mediation and mutual interdependence" and "the consciousness for the master is a dependent consciousness" (Graves 1997).

Using a materialist interpretation of social development, the Marxian school looks at domination and relationships of power on the grounds of means of production. According to Karl Marx, class conflict is a result of contradictions between the material interests of the exploited proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Marx believed in the emancipatory possibilities of productive forces and potential of owning productive forces in lessening the alienation of the working class (*The Communist Manifesto* 1848).

While Gramscian idea of hegemony looks at how power is constituted and expressed through consent rather than force, Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser provides an account of how apparatuses of the state both repressive and ideological perform the dual functions of violence and ideology. Whereas the “Master-Slave” dialectic of Hegel, which focuses more on Servant’s recognition or the complicity with the master, has been critiqued by Frantz Fanon for its more compelling sympathies towards the master than their immediate sympathies. This complicity has also been criticized on the grounds of how it undermines colonial violence and they can be understood as an extension of disciplinary practices in order to create docile bodies (Graves 1997).

In *Black Skin White Masks* (1967), Fanon revises the dialectic to suggest how it underrates the degree of white master’s dominance over black slaves in Africa and Europe. “I hope I have shown that here the master differs basically from the master described by Hegel. For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work” (220). Fanon says that while Hegel’s master seeks recognition from the slave the colonial master seeks only work.

Notwithstanding many theoretical formulations on power, Michael Foucault’s engagements with the question of power is a radical rewrite of the previous modes of conceiving power. According to him, “power is diffused rather than concentrated-embodied

and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents than being deployed by them” (Gaventa 3). Challenging the idea that “power is wielded by way of sovereign or episodic acts of domination” (Gaventa 3), he looks at power as dispersed and pervasive. For him power is a meta power that is everywhere and comes from everywhere. Foucault is one of the few social theorists who finds power as not just a negative or essentially coercive or repressive. He believes that power can also be productive and positive.

Regardless of the diverse influence that the above-mentioned theoretical stands might have on my research, the major theoretical paradigm that would help my analysis is the engagements of James C. Scott, an American political scientist and anthropologist who gives an account of how peasants and slave societies respond to various forms of domination through their every day practices and non-observable acts of rebellion⁶. My attempt here is to look at how domestic servants, as laborers who keep close proximity to employers, engage with domination which is much more nuanced than other forms of domination which are more contested. My larger interest here is to locate their acts, behaviours and dynamics of servitude/resistances beyond the binary oppositions of transgression or servility.

The fugitive political conduct of subordinate groups is often looked at as an act of subversion and essentially as acts of transgression. Due to the historical conditioning of domestic servants as people in service of the employer, resistance of the domestic laborers is necessarily regarded as circumspect. This hierarchical power relation between the employer and the servant has extensively influenced in the making of the protests of the subordinate groups, particularly of domestic laborers, as lacking any space for open rebellion or public protest. Rather the safe courses of anonymous attacks were often the strategies of

⁶James Scott: *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance and Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*.

protest or resistance which avoided any irrevocable acts of public defiance for the subordinate groups.

This sense of absence of agential positions in resistance for the servants in public is generally taken as servility denying scope for any sense of opposition from the side of the servants. This chapter tries to contest the dominant imaginary of servility that denotes unconditional submission of the subordinate subject which is often taken as voluntary. My attempt here is to look at how this rhetoric of servility is in fact manifestation or display of the public transcript of the dominant groups through which they imagine the subordinates to act on drawing a clear picture of their supposed behavioural patterns. It is important to look at how public transcript is constructed, maintained and what is the purpose it serves than fixing domestic laborers as a category that is essentially submissive.

James Scott notes that “public transcript is the self portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen. It is designed to be impressive in order to affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites and it is often used to conceal or euphemize the dirty linen of their rule” (18). According to him it is often a flattering self-portrait. He says that “dominant elites attempt to portray social action in the public transcript as metaphorically, a parade, thus denying, by omission, the possibility of autonomous social action by subordinates” (Scott 45). My broader aim in this chapter is to read the servility or unconditional submissive behavioural patterns that the servant characters in the selected movies exhibit as an extension of the flattering self-portraits of their masters and as a manifestation of the public transcript that their employers have constructed and maintained as a theatre to the audience.

Since relations of dominations cannot be read in isolation and they are often relations of resistance as well, it is relevant to look at the multiple ways through which power is enacted and sustained. The power or hierarchy is maintained through “continuous efforts at

reinforcement, maintenance and adjustment and through symbolization of domination by demonstrations and enactments of power” (Scott 45). “Every visible, outward use of power—each command, each act of deference, each ceremonial order, each public punishment, each use of an honorific or as term of derogation—is a symbolic gesture of domination that serve to manifest or reinforce a hierarchical order” (Scott 1990). According to him, the official description of any forms of visible power relations whether feudalism, slavery, caste system is all based on a “network of dyadic reciprocities which is often manifested vertically” (61). Scott points out that how this highly partisan-official transcript on hierarchy creates an impression that is contrary to the actual realities.

Vidheyan (The Servile 1993), a Malayalam drama film written and directed by Adoor Gopala Krishnan achieved much critical attention for the servility of its protagonist Thommy, a migrant labourer to his tyrant master and the local landlord Bhaskara Pattelar. Thommy who has been constantly abused and humiliated by Pattelar becomes his most faithful servant and is unable to come out of subservience even after the master is stripped of his power. One of the most referred scenes in the film that indicates the degree of Thommy’s servility, is his reaction on knowing Pattelar has raped his wife. In one of the scenes he says “*Omane⁷ vanunu vannu ninakippo pattelarude sentinte manamaa ... enikkishta ee manam. ennalum omana entethu mathraaa. oru divasam njan ninakkee sent vaangichu thrum*” (Omana! You smell like Pattelar ... I like this smell. But you are only mine. One day I will get this scent for you).

It is crucial to understand Thommy’s unconditional submission, beyond the diction of servility, as extensions of the behavioural patterns that Pattelar has conceived through the

⁷ Omana is a common name popular among the Hindu Communities in Kerala. While Omana is used as a noun here, Omana can also be an endearment. Thommy calls Omana here to address his wife by her name and initiate a conversation.

unwritten but well-maintained public transcripts, according to which Thommy has to act on. The transcript of Pattelar in the movie *Vidheyan* is mostly woven through the self-flattering image that Pattelar presents himself in terms of his postures, gestures, language and other behavioural forms. In most of the scenes Pattelar occupies his position in the local town near by the toddy shop establishing his unquestionable authority over the local people. His gaze, posture of sitting, the way he holds the gun, being surrounded by attendees etc. become the enactments of power in multiple ways and act as powerful discursive affirmations of his dominance. The shot which closely focuses the head of a dead buffalo on the wall of Pattelar's house and him sitting under the same signifies the feudal order and violence that the system represents.

There are various symbolic gestures of domination through which the hierarchical order between the master and the servant is reinforced. Pattelar's dominance over Thommy is demonstrated mostly through the language with which he addresses Thommy.

He is often called as *patti* (dog), *batti makane* (son of a dog), *chette*⁸(a derogatory term used to abuse someone) or as *viddi* (fool). Calling Thommy "dog" or "son of a bitch" legitimizes Pattelar's authority as master over Thommy.

It is important to look at how this public transcript is constructed through language in which Pattelar wants to identify himself. Thommy calls Pattelar as *yajamanar*, meaning the masters, commonly used as a plural noun to indicate more than one person instead of calling *Yajamanan* (the master) throughout the movie. The first word Thommy utters is "*yajamanare daya kaanikkane*" (please show some mercy, master) essentializing the master slave relationship.

⁸*Chette* is a derogatory term used to abuse someone. The term refers to the house of Dalits or lower caste people. The term *chetta* sounds identically with *chetta* which means brother in Malayalam. *Chetta* is widely used as an endearment beyond biological determinism.

The attendees of Pattelar, a group of lower caste men who accompany him and often behave like Thommy in many ways, act as important agents in legitimizing the domination of Pattelar through constant affirmation of his power. They also don't cover their upper bodies and most of the times keep hands on their chest exhibiting their subservience to Pattelar and the shot which casts how they look towards the same direction as Pattelar does unveils their docility as attendees. Unlike Thommy they are privileged to laugh along with Pattelar as a gesture of support while he mocks at someone. The voice of their laughter in the background becomes powerful means of affirming Pattelar's power and they remain in support of Pattelar in his crimes either justifying the act or provoking him by asking "*Pattelar chodichath kettille*" (Didn't you listen to what Pattelar has asked?). They keep on reiterating the authority of Pattelar asking "*bahumanikkendavare kandal ninakk bahumanikkan arinjooode*" (Don't you know to be respectful while seeing respectable people.) The narratives of the locals, which connotes that it is the support and servility of his helps that made Pattelar as bad as this, reflects how far the transcript of the master is received by the subordinates.

Thus, the appalling effects of servility that Thommy exhibits as a rootless, insecure labourer under the authority of Pattelar validate the public transcript that is in circulation. It is important to understand Thommy's vulnerability to his master even after he is stripped of power marks how "symbols of power, providing that their potency was once experienced, may continue to exert influence after they may have lost most or all of their effective power" (Scott 48).

Use of honorific or terms of derogation, punishments and violence in public act as not just symbolic gesture of domination but also public spectacles not only for Thommy but for the entire village community who are audience to this display. It inherently informs a suggestive threat that any sense of protest or retaliation might cause a public punishment.

Despite the fact that spectacle as a punishment historically demands an act of transgression, these rituals of power necessarily need not transgression as the premise to inflict violence or punishment. In the same way it is also important to look at how public apology performs dual functions for both the groups. While for the subordinate, the public apology is a means of dissociating himself from the offence, for the master the apology done in the public is all about maintaining his public transcript.

Erving Goffman examines the purposes of public apologies in his *The Nature of Deference and Demeanor* analysing the social micro order". "Public apology for the subordinate, who has publicly violated the norms of domination, is a way of dissociating himself from the offense through reaffirming the rule in question. He publicly accepts, in other words, the judgment of his superior that this is an offense and thus, implicitly, the censure or punishment that follows from it. The point has little to do with the sincerity of the retraction and disavowal, since what the apology repairs is the public transcript of apparent compliance" (Goffman 26).

Unlike *Vidheyan (The Servile)*, domination in *Neelathamara* (The Blue Lotus, 1979) works in more nuanced ways. The movie *Neelathamara*, directed by Yusuf Ali Kechery and written by M.T. Vasudevan Nair, deals with the romance between a lower caste housemaid Kunjiimalu and the employer's son. The movie produced by a low budget of five lakhs was a commercial hit during the 80s and well received by the audience. It was remade in 2009 by Lal Jose.

Malootty Amma, the Nair house owner of the Kizhakkumpatt Tharavadu is presented as a benevolent Nair Hindu woman who is emblematic of Nair domesticity. She is quite vocal about her anticipations on the sense of servitude that domestic servants are supposed to show. It is interesting to look at how she imagines servitude not just from her

domestics, but also from the community debasing their least acts of resistance or unwillingness. The public transcript that presents the Nair Hindu employer as the epitome of goodness is made euphemizing the well evident caste prejudices and her deliberate attempts to maintain the caste and power hierarchies along with ‘invisibilizing’ various exclusionary practices which are clearly rooted in caste system.

In a scene in which she is in conversation with the family retainer Achuthan Nair wherein she narrates an incident in which her educated, liberal progressive son Haridasan takes his friends to his house, euphemism has been used as an effective strategy to enhance a public transcript hiding the caste overtones. Nair’s comment, who is quite shocked to know that one of the friends who came with Haridasan and stayed in the house was a ‘Moplah’⁹, that “one cannot recognize that he was not a Hindu if not spoken out rightly” equivocates the cobwebs of caste system and its allocation of spaces in bright euphemisms. One of the instances in which even the ‘progressive’ male hero becomes vocal about an officer who is a Nambiar who joined his office on transfer, in a letter sent to his mother refers something bad or offensive as caste in softer or vague terms.

Thus, bright euphemisms and platitudes become powerful weapons to create effective public transcripts that conceals the dark sides of the power of the employer and presents a self-flattering image in front of the world. Euphemism is generally used to obscure something that is negatively valued or would cause an embarrassment if declared more forthrightly. Scott says that “the imposition of euphemisms on the public transcript plays a similar role in masking the many nasty facts of domination and giving them a harmless or sanitized aspect. In particular, they are designed to obscure the use of coercion” (53). He points out: “euphemisms in the broad sense I am using the term-the self-interested

⁹*Moplah* is used here to indicate a Muslim.

tailoring of descriptions and appearances by dominant powerholders-is not conformed to language. It may be seen in gestures, architecture, ritual actions, public ceremonies, any other actions in which the powerful may portray their domination as they wish. Taken together they represent the dominant elite's flattering self-portrait" (54).

It is interesting to look at how the benevolent Nair mother becomes a strict master, who constantly reminds the servant of her inferior social position and caste status, right after knowing about her son's sexual relationship with the housemaid. Kunjimalu soon becomes a spectral presence for her, who has been constantly trying to identify her as an upper caste housemaid. She says: "Veluthedathi¹⁰ is an omen while one leaves out of the house" echoing clear sense of untouchability which gets legitimized as a platitude or cliché. Her knowledge about sexual relationship of the housemaid with her son and the sense of pollution makes the presence of Kunjimalu more vulnerable and she is soon identified as a docile body that can be sent back any time.

Quite different from the outward display or affirmation of domination in *Vidheyan*, the constant reference of an ideal servant through the vilification of the earlier servant who is presented as corrupt and a transgressor, becomes the discursive affirmation of power in *Neelathamara*. Although coercion is not openly used, these rituals of power effectively convey "the impression of actual power and the will to use it, and economize the actual use of violence" (48).

Similarly, paternalistic care works in both the movies as legitimate means to perform domination. In *Vidheyan* Pattelar's calling of Thommy as "*eda*", although outwardly denotes a sense of companionship, is systematically used as a way to deny his autonomy in the name of paternalistic care. The flattering transcript of the master is constructed through deliberate

¹⁰ Veluthedathi is a sub caste who belongs to the Other Backward Communities. They were mostly washer women for Nair households.

strategies of paternal care wherein the tyrannical master becomes a benevolent, father figure for the entire locals. This is well established in the movie through the ways in which the locals approach Pattelar to settle their issues, to get back their *pattayam* (document of ownership) and so on.

In such a context, it is crucial to think about why public performances of deference and loyalty remain so crucial in power relations and who constitutes the audience for this symbolic display? It is important to understand the ability of the dominant to “naturalize” their power in this way. And more significantly the audience for their displays are not only subordinates but those who enjoy the superior power as well.

At the same time, it is also important to understand how public transcripts are an effective mechanism of spectacle not only for the dominant elites but also for state as an institution of power. The formal ceremonies that either the dominant elites or the state organize to celebrate and dramatize their rule become the most beneficial strategies of public transcript. The parade is the most obvious example and public parades become powerful displays of cohesion and power. Scott notes: “parades, inaugurations, processions, coronations, funerals provide ruling groups with the occasion to make a spectacle of themselves in a manner largely of their own choosing. The examination of the structure of such ceremonies is something of a privileged pathway to the ‘official mind’” (58).

The last film I engage with in order to understand the nuances of master servant relationship is *Ponthanmada* (1994), written and directed by T.V. Chandran, has been celebrated for its portrayal of an uncanny relationship between a lower caste servant and his colonial landlord. The film starring Mammooty and Naseerudheen Shah in the lead roles is based on two short stories *Ponthan Mada* and *Sheema Thampuran* by C.V. Sreeraman. Set

in the 1940s British India the movie has been marked as a filmic enterprise that challenged various boundaries between a Dalit servant and a colonial landlord.

It is quite important to look at how this uncanny relationship enables a transcript for the colonial landlord Sheemathampuran through the unconditional servility of Mada, that completely negates the newly achieved political literacy and social and economic agencies of Dalits during the time. The body language, expressions, postures, gestures and language of Mada are more of a slave than a servant. Mada has been presented as someone showing the features of cattle and in some of the scenes Mada is shown as floating in the river along with cattle.

The name as Ponthan (fool) Mada is endorsed through his body language of servility. Mada's bodily identification as a slave and his unconditional subservience is presented as something that makes him ignorant of the radical changes among the farmers as well as his own community during his youth. Similar to his posture keeping both his hands on his chest, leaning his body forward and opening up his eyes towards the landlord, the way Mada walks etc. reflect his estrangement in the land and more particularly his lack of ownership over the land.

Despite having a hegemonic body than Sheemathampuran, Mada is not able to come out of his identity as a slave in terms of his language and his bodily expressions which are embedded in servility. Rather he ends up being inferior even to Karthu, his own wife and other women who work along with him in the fields. In such a premise it is crucial to understand how Mada's servility is imagined and maintained in order to keep the hegemonic upper caste aspirations of the time deliberately erasing the socio-political and economic agential positions. The valorization of the relationship between Mada and the landlord is also used as a legitimate ground to set the self-flattering image of the master.

This uncanny relationship, that arguably subverts many boundaries, is built upon the sense of security of the master that Mada is no way able to challenge the power relations that he is located in. The celebration of the uncanny relation between Mada and Thampuran, the informal, intimate relationship, mostly within the private spheres, is because of the sense of security that the monopoly or authority of the master is not publicly contested at any point. For Thampuran there is no risks to maintain a close relationship with Mada so long as his monopoly as master is not publicly contested.

It is important to look at how the public transcript within the locus of the movie is constructed and maintained far removed from the Dalit lived experiences of the time and how Mada is denied any social or political agencies. Even in the youth of Mada, his mental exchanges, language, expressions are not defined by the political upsurges for social justice particularly the political ambiance following the uprisings for freedom of movement and education under the anti-caste leaders like Ayyankali.

Mada is presented as someone who doesn't have any political literacy or awareness on the rights and entitlements at any point. He is presented as someone who is blissfully servile to his landlord and the society around him while he is deprived of the power that is available even to the women who in many ways resist the assaults directed against them. The romanization of Mada's servility and innocence and the subsequent celebration of their relationship in fact negate the failures of the state policies, laws and other welfare mechanisms particularly the land reforms bill which left many people like Mada landless. It is crucial to understand how leaving Mada as happy about his serfdom and with no discontents, the movie is undermining the structural inequalities that the Dalits and the marginalized communities of the time were subjected to and the significant social transformation that the time has been witnessing.

It is quite predictable the way the transcript serves through the behavioural patterns of Mada despite Dalits of 1940s achieving better political literacy and becoming more conscious about their rights on land ownership. It has to be noted that Dalits of the time started leading an independent life coming out of their slave consciousness and thus keeping a distance from landlord. Similarly, Mada saying “Even if any land is not registered on my name in kacheri...all these lands are mine and I can hear the land crying” is also used as a clever mechanism to not address how the much-celebrated land distribution schemes failed Dalits and slave castes.

In a nutshell, public transcript becomes a legitimate means of self-presentation for the dominant elites through various dramaturgies of domination that monopolize the transcripts. Transcripts thus become a theatre to maintain the interests of the dominants and ends up being their self-identification. Affirmation, concealment and euphemizing, stigmatization, the appearance of unanimity etc. become the effective strategies to legitimize the use, enactment and sustenance of power very effectively.

CHAPTER THREE

BEYOND THE WILL FOR CHANGE: MAPPING QUOTIDIAN RESISTANCE

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part of the chapter looks at the dominant imaginations on the idea and practice of resistance contesting the parameters that are taken to qualify an act as resistance. The second part explores how the servant characters in the selected movies contest the cultural imaginaries of servility and compliance mapping their unorganized, invisible acts of resistance on everyday basis that lay outside the dominant imaginations.

1

With renewed academic interests on the question of agency, the idea and practice of resistance underwent marked changes across disciplines in the recent past. Despite the common meaning as refusal to accept or comply with something, resistance is a complex social phenomenon with diverse mechanisms of behaviours and actions. The term resistance is thus defined variously as “acting autonomously in (one’s) own interests” (Gregg 172), “active efforts to oppose, fight and refuse to co-operate with or submit to abusive behaviour and control etc.” (Profitt 25)

Resistance in dominant imaginations is commonly perceived to be visible, collective and ‘political’ actions or engagements against varied structures of power and its socio-economic relations. That being the case, certain parameters are perceived to be qualifying an act as resistance. Hence, as an idea it presupposes a sense of action that demands an active behaviour from the subject whether verbal, cognitive or physical. Subsequently resistance

is widely defined as either “expressive behaviour that inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or prevents alternatives to cultural codes” (Pitts, 71) or “actions involving consciousness, collective action and directly challenges the structures of power” (Rubin, 245).

A sense of opposition is also considered as an inevitable element of resistance as it is often imagined as a deliberate or conscious action in opposition to someone or something. As a result, it is commonly defined using the vocabularies like to counter, contradict, reject, challenge, oppose, subvert or damage and/or disrupt. In *Everyday Struggles at the Workplace: The Nature and Implications of Routine Resistance in Contemporary Organizations*, Prasad and Prasad notes how resistance is either any kind of organized; collective opposition or any subversive action directly intended to damage and/or disrupt the functioning of an organization (225-257).

Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner explores various behaviours and settings that form resistance in sociological literature based on a review of several books and articles which takes up resistance as a central theoretical or empirical topic. The study points out how the dominant modes of evaluating resistance are preoccupied with either material or physical acts involving the resisters’ use of their bodies or other material objects.

Resistance is often imagined as a movement that would result in social change. As a result, resistance refers to social movements or the even broader categories of “protest” (Jasper 1997). Hence, many activities conventionally attached to social movements such as marches, picketing, and the formation of organization include in this category. Thus, possibilities for structural changes have been always the desired results of any sort of protests or resistance. As a result, resistance is commonly imagined as very visible, collective struggles which are supposed to damage or rupture the existing power structures and bring out new possibilities.

It is imperative to ask if consciousness and intent are necessary in resistance. I intend to look at can the acts or behaviours that challenge the authorities not directly by the consciousness of the peasants be considered as resistance. Since will to change has been presented as the corner stone of resistance how can we categorize the indirect and unconscious acts which engage with power on a day to day basis probably not with the intent of change?

While the alternative subaltern historical narratives tried to capture the agential roles of peasants in anti-colonial struggles particularly focusing on their consciousness and will to change, there has not been any accounts that represent the informal, indirect and unconscious acts of resistance happening at a level beneath the consciousness of an actor. It is significant to challenge the dominant idea that the actor necessarily needs to be aware that she or he is resisting the exercises of power with a clear intention to do so in order to qualify an act as resistance.

This can be contested more with the narratives of peasants who counter the actions of landowners to appropriate labour, rent, food, profits and taxes. It does not necessarily be visible or expressive but any kinds of refusal to comply with power either conscious or unconscious in work or service can be counted as resistance. Keeping this idea in mind, it is important to look at how the engagements of various subjects, particularly the acts of resistance waged by subjects in subordinate positions, are viewed outside the framework of resistance. One of the instances can be how the engagements of women during the nationalist struggles in India against varied structures of power, mostly managed within the private spaces, were not considered as resistance.

Similar to this, the spiritual engagements and practices of religious subjects against structures of power and hierarchies, mostly within the private spaces, are not being regarded

as resistance. Prayers, religious customs, beliefs in the power of god to change the prevailing conditions etc. both by the individual and the community are thus not imagined as part of resistance. This separation has largely been drawn by the secular retreat of politics from religion. The secular logic of modern polity in distancing religion from public or politics through the binary of spirituality and materiality has largely contributed to the negation of faith in public life. This has directly and indirectly caused to dismiss the spiritual engagements of subjects under oppression as resistance through denying the fact that a community cannot survive without any spiritual affiliations. Consequently, the resistance projects of religious minorities which evolve more through a spiritual and communitarian approach were easily dismissed. As a result, various theo-political leaders' engagements and resistant practices were not counted legitimate enough to acknowledge as resistance.

Unveiling how western liberal feminist discourses have perceived the faith practices of Muslim women as forms of passivity, docility, marginalization, and subjectification and constricted them to so called "traditional" and conservative social and religious settings, Saba Mahmood explores the agential positions of Muslim women's faith practices in Egypt beyond the binary of resistance and marginalization. Through challenging the liberal notions such as freedom, agency and resistance, she places them in their historical and cultural contingency. She proposes a model of critique that is more self-reflective, rather than a form of dismantling each opposing argument. Critique, in her view "is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be remade in the process of engaging another's world view" and when we "turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be remade through an encounter with the other" (Mahmood, 36-37).

The question of whether resistance requires recognition by others has been the subject of considerable contentions. For many scholars, a behaviour must be recognized by others along with oppositions in order to count it as resistance unlike James Scott who argues

resistance needs not to be recognized by others. Recognition is central for many whom the term resistance should be reserved for visible, collective acts that result social change, and not every day acts “that chip away at power in almost imperceptible ways” (Rubin1996).

Talking about the tomboy resistance and agency in ‘deviant’ gender identities, C. Lynn Carr depicts both “active resistance” of girls who engage in tomboy behaviours “despite opposition against behaviours deemed as inappropriate for girls” and the seemingly non-resistant actions of those who engaged in “the same or similar behaviours but did not report opposition”. Drawing on the life history narratives of fourteen women who identified themselves as tomboys, Carr presents how some tom boys had strong female role models and they took “a more muted approach to both femininity and masculinity” unlike strong opposition to everything that identifies with femininity (Carr 553).

Is visibility necessary for resistance is also a question of much significance. The conventional understandings of resistance were largely focusing on the highly visible acts of resistance like protest movements or revolutions in which people directly and openly confront the targets. Hence, visibility has been easily identified as a necessary feature of resistance. Visibility thus becomes a necessary prerequisite for the recognition of a resistance. While some acts of resistance are explicitly visible, others deliberately remain invisible to authorities. Scott’s (1990) concept of “hidden transcripts” argues that oppressed people may be conscious of oppression and may intend to resist it, but this resistance may occur privately since public resistance is too dangerous for them.

Apart from the physical and material struggles, resistance has been realized through various symbolic behaviours as well. While speech is a prominent form of resistance, silence is also a very powerful strategy of resistance. Silva points out the resistance of Hawaiian

women through publishing their stories in newspapers, speaking their native language, practicing dance etc. against the seizure of Hawaii (Silva 2-15).

Breaking the silence has been a very powerful form of resistance for rape victims as breaking silence around rape is targeted not merely on the culprit but also on the larger structural violence of which rape is a brutal manifestation. The narratives of rape victims out rightly challenge the taboos around rape where rape remains a stigma and rape victims are subjected to constant humiliation, trauma and ostracization. An image of twelve Manipuri mother's naked protest in front of the Kangala fort in Imphal with a banner that read 'Indian Army Rape Us' marked a historic picture of resistance against rape by Indian Army. The protest against the murder and rape of Thangjam Manorama, a militant of the banned people's Liberation Army by the Assam Rifles also marked strongest symbolic form of resistance against the impunity enjoyed by the armed forces in conflict zones under the banner of Armed Force Special Power Act (AFSPA) in conflict zones.

It is quite interesting to look at while visibility is regarded as a crucial factor in counting an act as resistance how certain actions or collective endeavours brought out to bring into the consciousness of the state are systematically ignored. The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) found in 1994 by Parweena Ahangar campaigns against enforced/involuntary disappearances in Jammu and Kashmir. Conducting monthly sit-in programs wherein victims' family members meet to protest against state indifference, APDP embodies the memory and resistance of common people of Kashmir especially the mothers of enforced disappearance. Demanding justice and accountability and to end impunity, the mothers of Kashmir who are multiply marginalized in the national consciousness directly confront with Indian State asking to replace impunity by accountability.

The scale of resistance at the same time is being determined by the level of coordination by the resisters as well as the extent to which they work together. While some acts are individual, others are collective and coordinated by many people. Often acts or retaliations by large number of people are being considered as resistance ignoring the individual acts.

Resisting the expected or attributed identity can also be resistance despite resistance is being generally understood to be a political action. Howe's (1998) discussion of the discursive strategies employed by men in Belfast to resist, being labelled as "scroungers" or "cheats", points out how not merely resisting the political or social conditions become resistance but refusing the expected or attributed identity is also resistance.

Identity based resistance has been part of minority movements throughout history particularly for feminist movements. The fixed gender roles and identities have been contested by feminists challenging the private and public dichotomy, gendering of spaces and so on. They have vehemently opposed the normative assumptions which legitimize gender roles that rooted in power hierarchies. Similarly, queer movements critique the normative heterosexual gender binaries and behavioural patterns that negate alternative gender identities.

Identically, Subcultures as cultural groups within a larger culture oppose the dominant culture finding it as hegemonic and one that enforces conformity. The act of resisting and living in a way that contradicts the dominant culture and normative is so crucial in the discursive practices of subcultures. Exposing how popular "culture" or aesthetics is always the embodiment of dominant culture, the norms and values of a culture that impose ideological and coercive control over subcultures have been contested. Through their

resistance, subcultures undermine the hegemonic social meanings and power relationships that influence our actions in many ways.

It is also interesting to look at how resistance is perceived differently by different revolutionary writers. While Gandhi's passive and nonviolent campaign became the model of political and ethical struggles in the anti-colonial projects in India, Ambedkar's idea of resistance has largely been known for envisioning possibilities to resist the caste-based subjection of Dalits and backward communities. Gandhi's ideal of ahimsa has mostly been circulated as the ethic of resistance and it has been subjected to various criticisms over its discursive and practical limits.

Leela Gandhi in an article titled as "Concerning Violence: The Limits and Circulations of Gandhian Ahimsa or Passive Resistance" talks about how Gandhian idea of Ahimsa has been caught up within the problematic of the fragility of goodness. "In other words, its limitations and in some contexts, its energies arise from its inability to concede the ethical value of human vulnerability" (Gandhi 3). Drawing on the renunciation idea of ascetic- projects, ahimsa as a defense against the external forces is envisioned as an ethico-political activity that restrain both the human and national passivity to external happenings.

At the same time refusing caste occupations based on strict division of labour has been a powerful strategy of Dalit emancipatory discourses in India for B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's demand to end practicing manual scavenging to Mahad community in order to uphold self-respect and dignity is thus highly crucial. Resisting or refusing the expected or attributed identity and behavioural patterns have been crucial in the liberation of various Dalit and marginalized communities.

Whereas Malcom X who is known for his categorical opposition to racism stood up for the idea and practice of global resistance. The importance of struggle was central to his

idea of resistance and he advocated the need to struggle, the need for action and unity. According to him “It is incorrect to classify the revolt of the Negro as simply a radical conflict of black against white or as a purely American problem. Rather, we are today seeing a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter” (Dalton176). Rather than struggles being domesticated he calls for internationalism.

While Gandhian idea of Ahimsa was drawn mostly against the ethicality of nonviolence, Frantz Fanon points out the cathartic and self-actualizing affect that violence has on a colonial subject. Talking about how colonial rule brings violence, Fanon says violence is the ‘natural state’ of colonial rule. Fanon finds violence as a strategy of resistance for colonial subjects. According to him: “violence frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect” (94). Finding violence as a medium of resistance, Fanon suggests revolutionary violence as a means to recreate themselves and restore the identity prior to colonialism for the colonial subject. Thus, violence is a cleansing force for Fanon while being aware about the negative effects of physical and mental harms of violence. For Fanon, violence can be liberatory and cathartic in some historical contexts.

11

In such a premise, this chapter looks at the acts of resistance that are not in par with the above-mentioned parameters to qualify as resistance in dominant imaginations but still form very powerful everyday forms of defiance. Analysing diverse acts of resistance wherein agency and subjectivity are not solely aimed at producing counter subjectivities, the chapter tries to look at the invisible, everyday forms of resistance that the servant characters

in three selected Malayalam films wage against the experiences of oppression that they undergo.

Despite large-scale protests acquiring excessive attention, peasant rebellion, particularly the strategies of resistance by domestic labourers were never regarded as potential enough to pose any threat to the existing social order. The service or labour that domestic servants provide or domestic labourers as a category are not given enough prominence or regarded as crucial in the larger material production as their roles and services are mostly relegated into the domestic spheres. As a result, they remained as anonymous numbers and statistics contributing to labour migration, land holding, taxes, conscription and other records of services.

In such a context how can we understand the defiance or resistance of domestic labourers? Under which category can we define their retaliations? This chapter tries to look at the varied forms of resistance that the domestic labourers wage against the everyday forms of oppression and exploitation which do not form the concern of large-scale rebellions.

Servility is a term that is often used to describe domestic servants in dominant discourses, and they are presented as willingly servile to the experiences of oppression. Most of the works came out on peasantry have been focusing exclusively on rebellion and revolution at large scale. As a result, the focus is always given to organized and large-scale protest movements that pose a threat either to the statuesque or the state. While there is an excessive importance given to revolutionary peasant insurrections, the very informal, unorganized and everyday forms of protest waged by domestic labourers are never taken care of. They go very much unnoticed and are seen as not potential enough to threaten the power relations?

In such a backdrop, I want to think further about the possible protests that domestic laborers wage within the ambit of their master's control. Since they are closer to the sight of their masters than the peasants who work in agricultural lands, who might not necessarily be within the immediacy of the master, how can we map the vulnerability of domestic laborers towards punishment? Being extremely subordinate class, they could very rarely afford the luxury of open, organized, political activity. Being that the case how would they manifest their protest? Can they remain servile across time and space as being presented in the dominant narratives? As open and organized protests are highly dangerous and even suicidal for domestic servants, how would they mark their anger and what would be the mechanism of their retaliations.

Domestic servants are in a position unable to do an outright confrontation with the authorities. The only possible ways for them is foot dragging, deception, noncompliance etc. My attempt here is to look at how such low-profile techniques are actually enabling domestic labourers to wage their protest within their social structure. How would these individual acts of resistance shake the structure as quiet and anonymous action from the resisters.

This chapter tries to look at the master slave dialectics portrayed in three Malayalam films that evolve around domestic labourers as central protagonists. *Neelathamara* (1979) is a Malayalam romantic film directed by Yusuf Ali Kechery based on the script of M.T. Vasudevan Nair. The film produced under the banner of Charisma Films with a minimal budget of five lakhs was widely received by the family audience of Kerala during the time and became a cult film.

The movie revolves around the romance between a lower caste housemaid Kunjimalu and Haridasan, son of her employer and the conflicts followed by Kunjimalu comes to Kizhakkumpaatt tharavadu as a domestic help as the age old Malootty Amma, the

employer cannot manage the household chores herself. Malootty Amma who is very proud of her upper caste status is quite vocal about her demand for a servant who should be either a Nair or Nambiar, although she is ready to manage with someone who looks clean and hygienic enough. Visibly stating her caste prejudices and notion of purity and pollution, she is in constant struggles to convince herself that Kunjimalu doesn't appear or look like a 'veluthedathikkutti'¹¹. Her comments like "*veluthedathikkutti aanu enn kanda thonnathilya*" (Kunjimalu does not look like a veluthedathi woman), "*nalla shreethwam ulla koottathilaa*" (she is graceful despite her caste status) etc., resonate her deliberate attempts to erase the lower caste identity of the servant in terms of appearance, behaviour and so on.

The master servant relationship within Nair households were clearly defined by caste dynamics and maintained by the strict notion of purity and pollution. Kizhakkumpattu *tharavad* is one among the many Nair *tharavads* of the time that lost its feudal power with the reallocation of land but remains affluent with the income from the cultivation and agricultural farming. Although the family has lost its feudal glory, the legacy is maintained through various markers of social status like the omnipresence of a family retainer, sufficient number of domestic servants etc.

The master servant relationship in the movie is clearly built on caste practices wherein the access of servants into the inner spaces of the *tharavad* is varied according to one's relative inferior social status as Dalits and various intersectional identities. While Kali, who evidently looks like Dalit, is asked to do the works outside the house, Kunjimalu is privileged to enter into the domestic spaces and do the needful for her employer. Her light skin tone and so-called Nair look enhances clean and hygienic appearance which helps the master to forget her caste identity and cultural roots.

¹¹ *Veluthedathikkutti* is used here to refer to a woman belonging to the veluthedathi caste.

Neelathamara has been instrumental in setting up the standards of behavioural patterns for domestic helps especially in terms of their romantic as well as sexual relationship with the employer. Kunjimalu is someone who is denied of any voice or agency even if she comes to know that she was sexually exploited and deceived by the employer and subsequently thrown out of the house. Her unconditional submission to the sexual demands of the employer has been the manifestation of how servitude gets internalized in different ways. The movie also reflects the cultural imaginaries around the body of domestic servants as they are viewed as easily available sexual objects. The sexual advancements of the male heroes towards maids and its clichéd representation have been seminal in constructing the knowledge that domestic servants are sexually frustrated.

At the same time, it is important to look at how the portrayal of Kunjimalu's servitude, in fact negates the changing dynamics of servitude among various lower caste communities of the time. This is well evident from the lack of availability of domestic laborers for upper caste families of the time which leads to Malootty Amma's compromise to let a lower caste housemaid into the interiors of the *tharavad*. In one instance, Malootty Amma states her discontent on the decision of a lower caste community to not send the women of their community as domestic servants despite the fact that they are in poverty. The upper caste frustrations of not availing a domestic servant at their service at the earliest is stated through their contempt against the decision of Vadakkumuri Devaki Amma who is not willing to send her daughters as domestic labourers although they are not able to find their livelihood on their own.

I would like to read how this decision to not send the lower caste members to do domestic labour as an act of noncompliance which effectively challenges the power and authority of the upper caste groups. Although this act of noncompliance does not form a visible or organized protest against the exploitation of lower caste domestics, the act shakes

the sense of power and monopoly of the upper caste Hindu landlords over the lower caste groups. Although this cannot be read as a potential act of rebellion, it is important to look at the possible discomfort this might have made to the caste order which legitimized labour servitude during the time.

It is also important to look at how this particular act in fact resist the expected or attributed identity of a lower caste community as people at the service of the upper castes. This resistance or disobedience need to be read in the context of the newly achieved political literacy as well as sense of dignity during the 70s in Kerala. It is also important to understand this act on the broader level wherein consciousness need not necessarily be the essential feature of resistance.

The requirement for a maid in the movie is stated through the dissatisfaction about the former help who was sent away for stealing from the *tharavad*. It is interesting to look at how low profile or the so-called unethical acts such as stealing or pilfering become important for Kali whose roles and mobility are clearly defined by her caste status. As someone who is denied of any agential positions, stealing becomes powerful forms of resistance for Kali and this act that she performs in the backstage challenges the power hierarchy. These low-profile techniques are important for Kali or other servants as they cannot afford an open defiance as that can be suicidal for them.

Similarly, the disgust of the Nair house owner of the former servant who expresses her sense of anger and discontent on her face (*mughavum moonchim veerppikkal*) is presented as her arrogance which on the other hand is an extension of Kali's non submission to the power and act of her public defiance. It is crucial to understand how Kali's bold disobedience or expression of anger challenges the dominant idea that anger is a legitimate expression of the master while denying it to the subjects in the subordinate positions.

Vidheyam (The Servile), a Malayalam drama film directed and written by Adoor Balakrishnan is set in the early 60s. The film which is a cinematic adaptation of the novella *Bhaskara Pattellarum Ente Jeevithavum* by Zacharia revolves around the complex bond between Thommy, a migrant labourer in Karnataka with his tyrannical landlord Bhaskara Pattelar. Thommy is a Christian migrant cultivator from Wayanad like many Malayali migrants who encroached into the forests in Karnataka during the 40s. The film presents the nuances in the relationship between power and servility through Thommy who is unconditionally willing to serve and please his master Pattelar.

Thommy has been viewed as a servile who no way challenges the dominance of Pattelar or his violence and thus received huge critical attention across literary circles. A close analysis of his minute yet powerful acts or behaviours and hidden transcripts, mostly held in the backstage, would help contesting the dominant narrative on Thommy's servility. Thommy's conversations within his private and family spaces particularly his conversations with his wife like "*Omane, namukkengottengilum poyalo*" (Omana, shall we leave this place and go somewhere else?) explores how Thommy seeks possibilities outside the power structure. His guilt about his inability to protect his wife's chastity is evident from he repeatedly saying that "I shouldn't have got married" as Omana wouldn't have been abused by Pattelar otherwise.

Although Thommy remains a helpless sympathetic who does not openly challenge the authority of Pattelar, he asks "*yajamaanare enthinaanu aadyam kaanunna oraaline ingane*" (why are you doing this to a person whom you see for the first time) openly questioning Pattelar. Also, in many instances, Thommy tries to resist the dominance of Pattelar through lies, innuendos, indirect physical hurting etc. In one of the scenes, Thommy deliberately hurts Pattelar while rubbing his body and Pattelar says "*novunnadaa pathukke*" (Do gently. It hurts.)

It is through a gradual process that Thommy becomes a slave to Pattelar although at some point he himself becomes part of the abuse directed against him. In one of the scenes, Thommy also joins the group who laughs at him. And in another scene, Thommy agrees to bring liquor and is willing to get water for Pattelar who molests his wife. It is important to understand this sense of subservience that Thommy shows as a manifestation of his recognition of himself only through his relationship with the master and how a subjective position is not possible for him without his recognition with the master. It becomes evident when he says “*yajamnare kollano. pinne enikkarund*”? (Who will be there for me if you kill my master) to those who approach him for his help to kill Pattelar.

Although Thommy is unable to stop Pattelar from killing his wife he informs his discontent and strongly resists Pattelar. His attempts to step back from the plan fail and he ends up helping Pattelar in hanging his wife’s dead body. Thommy even runs out of the jeep openly conveying his disinterest in Killing Saroja. Also, while Pattelar asks Thommy whether Saroja knows the truth that he has killed her while touching her hand after she is dead, Thommy replies “*Aarkkariyam Yajamanare*” (who knows my lord) instilling the sense of insecurity of Pattelar. In another scene, Thommy openly mocks at Pattelar making fun of his inability to shoot even a single bird during a hunting in the forest.

Thommy is presented as a happy slave who follows Pattelar as a faithful servant and pleased to help his master even after he is despised of power. Thommy cries near Pattelar’s dead body lamenting for his master even after he is shot dead. It is only after he realizes that Pattelar is dead, Thommy finds his freedom. He runs towards Omana saying that Pattelar has died. His act of throwing Pattelar’s gun into the waterfall is the symbolic act of his freedom from his servility.

On similar grounds, *Ponthanmada* (1994), a Malayalam feature film written and directed by T.V. Chandran is celebrated for its uncanny relationship between a lower caste servant and an upper caste landlord and its supposed subversion of hierarchies in the master slave relationship. The film has been a subject of much critical discussions over the romanticizing of servility of a lower caste servant on the premise of how Mada's excessive liability towards Sheema Thampuran in many ways invalidate the newly achieved socio-economic agencies of Dalits during the time. Mada in the film is someone who has benefitted in no ways by the land distribution scheme during the 70s and remains a totally landless slave.

The nature of resistance in a labour environment is mostly defined by the existing forms of labour control, beliefs or fear about the severity of the retaliation etc. Most often it is the possible consequences, like the permanent dismissal or jailing etc. that determine and define the nature of the act. Unlike in the other films, Mada has an intimate relationship with Thampuran in *Ponthanmada* which does not necessarily demand him to oppose the dominance. Rather than looking at the minute forms of defiance, it is important to look how the very act of being a servile and a very obedient servant itself enhances this uncanny relationship for Mada. Despite the corporeal superiority or hegemonic masculinity that Mammooty who plays the role of Mada possesses, how cattle like existence enables Mada to fit into a land where he comes as a lower caste (Mulayan) labourer and a foreigner. More than opposing the hierarchy, the immediate interest or intent for Mada here is his survival although he does not have to negotiate much with Thampuran.

Irrespective of the fact that most of the criticisms that the film has received is in terms of the lack of agential positions for Mada. There are instances in the film in which he claims his protest although not outrightly. His decision to marry Karthu despite the threats

from the caste group Chomar¹² is one of such. Also, in some instances, silence becomes a carrier of his anger and vengeance as in an instance where Kaimal, a native of Mada's village, tries to molest his wife. Similarly, Mada's expression of his guilt and anguish over sending his wife to a local landlord's house as an attendee which causes her to be sexually vulnerable to him and his disgust over him talking in sexually promiscuous ways etc. can be understood as contesting the subjective formation of Mada as unconditionally servile.

Also, similar to the Freudian idea of dreams manifesting the ego's repressed desires, an unconscious, hallucinated state after drinking symbolically enables Mada to vend his anger and kills him (through stabbing him using a knife). This state thus becomes a disguised fulfilment of repressed material wishes to resist the power and domination. In another scene, Mada rejects Karthu's demand to go to the plantation in Nelliambathi hills as a revenge following his sense of rejection from Karthu who also finds him inferior. The scene which shows Mada whipping the cattle in front of Karthu manifests his rage and anguish although he is not very conscious of the motives behind behaving so. It is important to understand how this lack of consciousness or awareness of the intent wherein he admits "I still don't know why I behaved so the other day", that disqualifies an act as resistance, enhances Mada to communicate his resentment. The symbolic behaviour of Mada thus demonstrates his sense of anger on her conversion to Christianity or disinterestedness in migrating to the hills.

Mada develops a close affinity with Thampuran and he is happy about the least provisions that he has been given. He is happy about sleeping with the cattle and his love for Thampuran extends even to the next generation. Despite the celebration of this uncanny relationship, like many Dalits of the time Mada is someone who has not benefitted from the Land Reform Bill and remained totally landless. While most of the land was distributed

¹²Chomar is a sub caste of Ezhava community in Kerala.

amongst the tenants and already privileged caste groups the lower caste groups who were working in the paddy lands and farms were the least beneficiaries.

Thus, in all these films, these forms of covert acts of resistance are crucial to domestic labourers as open defiance is not a legitimate possibility for them. They are often rituals of resistance which are more prosaic in nature which provide them with avenues to manifest their discontents despite the lack of scope for violent public confrontations. These informal, often covert and mostly immediate acts of resistance become powerful means of insubordination. They neither fit into the dominant idea of defiance nor do contest the formal definitions of hierarchy and power and not provoke rapid or ferocious responses.

Lifelong indentured servants most characteristically expressed discontent about their relationship with their master by performing their work carelessly and inefficiently. They could intentionally unconsciously feign illness, ignorance or incompetence, driving their masters to distraction. Even though the master could retaliate by refusing to give his servant the extra fringe benefits, he was still obliged to maintain him at a subsistence level if he did not want to lose his investment completely (Harper 48-49).

These kinds of passive resistance are much more viable and safer for the subordinate subjects as they remain unbeatable or largely unrecognized since the identities of the resisters are not visible. Ann Laura Stoler in her work *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt* brings out an advice that one of the wage laborers in a plantation in Indonesia is given by his parent: "youngsters, remember! you are selling your labour and the one who buys it wants to see that he gets something for it, so work when he is around, then you can relax when he goes away, but make sure you always *look like* you are working when the inspectors are there"(Stoler 184).

On the same line, cheating, double face, acting etc. are crucial in the making of a public transcript of “good reputation of the help” in the face of the employer. In such a premise, I would like to read the dominant imaginations on servility or subordination looking at how they become powerful acts of public compliance as they are completely dependent on the master. The pervasive nature of the pressure for compliance impels the servants to conform to the rules of the master. Hence, it is very crucial to understand how the thesis of servility that all the servant characters in these three films exhibit as an element of self-protecting compliance while avoiding the unnecessary risks which is a major intent.

Most of these forms of resistance are also done with little or no coordination or planning. Rather it is done through implicit understandings and informal networks which get represented in the form of individual self-help. This is often done without the direct or symbolic confrontation with the authority. Despite the fact that these resistances are often discarded as not potential threats, it is important to understand them as quite effective in the long run. Marc Bloch notes that in the case of French Rural History that the great millennial movements were “flashes in the pan” compared to the “patient, silent struggles stubbornly carried on by rural communities” to avoid claims on their surplus and to assert their rights to the means of production. (170).

Also, most of these resistances are done without the consciousness wherein they are not aware of the intent or motive behind the acts of protest unlike the large-scale rebellions or revolutions wherein a clear political consciousness is the driving force. Unlike the organized resistance including social movements, protests and so on wherein social change is the desired result, these acts are driven by their immediate, subjective intent motivating these acts are more closed to their experiential realities and with very little prospects of change in their status. Most of the time change in the social status or the existing order is

not a motivation of their actions. Hence, they constitute acts which are outside the vocabularies of political nullity or nativity of middle-class protest movements.

Identically, in all these resistances discussed above and generally speaking anonymity or covertness are highly crucial. As an extension, there are virtually no publicly announced resisters or troublemakers in any of these rituals of resistance especially in acts of theft, sabotage and vandalism. In similar ways, it is important to look at how symbolic resistance including gossip, character assassination, nicknames, rumours etc. work effectively as routines of resistance. Most of these forms of symbolic resistance are followed by a similar pattern wherein the author or the source remains anonymous. The anonymous and unknown nature of these resistances make it difficult for the antagonists or the master to blame or find the culprits. As a result, in most of these acts of resistance A protective disguise is maintained in their relationship with the powerful.

James Scott in *Weapons of the Weak* notes that:

Much of the gossip and character assassination that are relevant to class relations in Sedaka are an appeal by the poor to norms of tenancy, generosity, charity, employment, and feats that were taken for granted before double cropping. At the same time that a reputation is slandered by gossip, a rule that was once generally accepted is being affirmed and promoted. Gossip is never disinterested: it is a partisan effort (by class, faction and family) to advance its claims and interests against those of others. But this manipulation of the rules can only be successful to the extent that an appeal is made to standards of conduct that are generally accepted. Gossip thus accomplishes its malicious work as an admittedly weak social sanction by remaining more or less within the

established normative framework. In this respect the use of gossip by the poor also manifests a kind of prudence and respect, however manipulative, of its own. (Scott 282)

Thus, gossip, a term with which often a moral criterion is attached and is often understood as a low-profile technique, becomes a democratic “voice” for a group of people for whom waging open disrespect or maligning can bring too dangerous responses. While the rich or the master are privileged to openly show their contempt, gossip becomes a mode of expression of opinion, contempt and disapproval while minimalizing the risks of identification and punishment for the subordinates. Similarly backbiting, character assassination, rude nicknames, gestures and silences of contempt which are often done in the backstage also become strong forms of symbolic resistance which ruins the public image of the employer. We can see how these low-profile modes of resistance become one of the few apparatuses available to the subordinate class to hide practice of resistance with the disguise of open defiance. It is easy to identify how they work in the same way as anonymous theft and stealing function weakening the honour and reputation of the master in the same way theft or stealing take away the property and wealth of the master.

While the servant characters in these films are largely criticized on the grounds of their deference or unconditional conformity to the master, there has been very little attempts to look at how a protective disguise has been important both in their conformity as well as resistance. Thommy’s conformity in *Vidheyan* is measured on the ground of his unconditional willingness to please his master. This can be challenged looking at how conformity cannot be judged merely in terms of his public language and public interaction with the master. Rather, thinking around a continuum of situations opens up wider possibilities to understand the nuances of the backstage transcript which is completely different from the centre transcript. The backstage transcript of Thommy enables him to

vend his anger in the privacy of his home on knowing that his wife is being raped by the master. Thommy even says “*avante kudal njan edukkum*” (I will kill him).

CONCLUSION

A complete transcript of the master-servant relationship cannot be drawn merely from the public interaction or performance of the subordinate subjects although that forms the dominant imaginaries on peasantry as essentially 'passive' and 'non-resisting'. Rather a close analysis of the hidden transcript that the subordinate subjects develop as a critique of domination and the dominant elite's public transcript that he/she maintains as discursive affirmations of power would give us a completely different picture.

In such a premise, the hidden transcript of the domestic labourers that lies beneath or beyond their evident public behavior is highly crucial in remapping their subjective formation as docile subjects who are compliant to power. Hence, hidden transcripts are significant in understanding the discourses on domestic labourers as dissimulation is a powerful strategy for most of the subordinate classes. Thus, various passive and invisible strategies that include disguise, language tricks, innuendos, gossips, anonymity, sabotage, arson, vandalism etc. that the domestic labourers adopt as strategies of their everyday resistance constitutes a ritualized part of their social life.

In order to understand the agential positions of domestic labourers in negotiating domination and resisting the hierarchy, it is also important to look at the public transcript that the dominant elites deliberately construct and maintain. The public transcript acts as a legitimate means of self-presentation for the dominant elites through various dramaturgies of domination that monopolize the transcripts and it becomes a theatre to maintain the interests of the dominant and ends up being their self-identification. Similar to a performance meant for the public stage and as official accounts, public transcripts either hide or appropriate whatever might diminish the grandeur and authority of the master

Conformity, disguise and a self-protecting public compliance have always been self-conscious strategies of domestic helps as they were well aware of the fact that the poor should dissemble in the face of power. Hence, the dominant idea of servility and conformity should be understood between what is said backstage and what may be safely declared openly since public mask of deference and compliance are highly crucial for subordinate subjects.

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