



# REVISITING THE SUBALTERN ETHOS OF V.A SHRIKUMAR'S *ODIYAN*

Gouripriya Ramachandran

Assistan professor,

Adi Shankara Institute of Engineering and Technology, Kalady, Ernakulam, India

**ABSTRACT:** In postcolonial studies the term subaltern identifies and describes the man, the women or the member of a specific social group, who is socially politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure. The idea of subaltern studies originated in England towards the end of 1970. And Ranajit Guha, a renowned historian, with his contributions perfected this school of thought. As a result of which, today we see a very different and developed version of subaltern studies in India. The paper titled, **Revisiting the Subaltern Ethos of V.A Shrikumar's *Odiyan***, attempts to explore the textual subconscious of the movie *Odiyan*. A subaltern reading of the movie brings to light a man's attempt to reclaim his legitimate space in a caste ridden society when he realises that his true identity is not the one of slavishness. In this movie our protagonist Manikyan is ostracised by the villagers of Thenkurissi due to the stigma associated with his clan and with its legendary practice of Odividhya. The movie explores at length the diverse possibilities of the use of black-white dichotomy. The protagonist of the movie, Odiyan Manikyan, who is believed to be the incarnation of evil by the villagers, feared by all but who is also good at heart, has a light skin tone when compared to the antagonist Ravunni Nair. Ravunni Nair the representative of the upper class, better known to the world as Karimban Nair is ridiculed by the society for his dark skin tone. And the colour of his skin is believed to be representing the malice he bears inside. This means, it is possible to argue that the movie emphasises the idea that, white is good and black is bad further undermining Derrida's rejection of binary opposition. In a way the movie seems to be claiming that, the subaltern in his light skin is able to fight the evil of casteism prevailing in the society which is represented by the evil practices of a dark skinned man. This can be seen as a subversion of the casteist notion of skin tones.

**Index Terms** - Subaltern, Odiyan, black-white Dichotomy, Binary Opposition.

## INTRODUCTION

In academia, if postcolonial criticism is taken as an offshoot of post modernism, subaltern studies derives its force from Marxism, post structuralism and thus becomes the part of postcolonial criticism. Subaltern classes may include peasants workers and other marginalised social groups, who are denied access to hegemonic power structure. Subaltern literature reflects diverse themes such as oppression, marginalization, subjugation of lower and working classes, gender discrimination, disregarded women, deprived classes, racial and caste discrimination etc. It is one among the many subdivisions of postcolonial criticism.. *Odiyan* is a 2018 Indian, Malayalam language fantasy drama directed by V.A Shrikumar Menon. The movie is his feature film debut. The film scripted by Harikrishnan, is roughly based on the legend of the Odiyan clan who according to the folklores prevailing in Kerala, are men who are believed to posses shape shifting abilities. It is believed that Odiyans can assume animal forms of their choice so as to scare people in the darkness of the night. Odiyans are said to have inhabited the Malabar region of Kerala before

the widespread use of electricity. The movie begins with an aged Odiyan Manikyan, the protagonist of the story, returning to his village in Thenkurissi after a self imposed exile of 15 years. He reviled and even derided for returning and soon he is forced to take up a challenge to scare a youngster using the tricks of his tribe. The film then traces Manikyan's journey through flashbacks and introduces the audience to his childhood friends Prabha and Ravunni. The rivalry between Manikyan and Ravunni simmers till two deaths in Prabha's family pushes Manikyan to leave the village. How this return affects those in the village forms the rest of the plot.

## SUBALTERN ETHOS AND CLASS CONFLICTS

What marks the Indian society even before the arrival of the colonisers, is the idea of casteism. The Indian society is divided into various factions as per the Varna system. And its populace is primarily divided into two sections, the upper caste and lower caste. The Odiyan community thus comes under lower caste faction, belonging to a specific group called 'paraya'. As they are believed to be covert assassins, the legend has it that they were used as a weapon by the higher communities to exterminate the rivals. The legend says that they have many supernatural abilities like the ability to run on four limbs, jump real high, climb trees real quick, inhuman stamina and of course the ability to shape shift.

The protagonist of the movie Manikyan belongs to the Odiyan clan and he uses his power termed Odividhya, the most evil form of black magic, to scare people. Basically the people of the clan are considered to be hired assassins who would act as per the whims and fancies of the upper caste men. When an Odiyan is asked to kill a person, he prepares to perform the Odividhya of which an inevitable ingredient is the oil contained in the amniotic sack of a pregnant woman. The Odiyan is in public a normal paraya, a lower caste in Indian context, who works at the residence of a upper caste family. When the masters assign a job to kill or injure anyone in particular, the hired Odiyan would do the same by the use of the skilful move offered by their craft. By creating an element of surprise, the Odiyan jumps on to the victim and either kill or injures him. Sometimes the victim dies from sheer fright. The Odiyan myth indeed exposes the dirty underbelly of the caste system that still extends its vague ugly hands into the present day India.

Unlike the myth that surrounds the Odiyan clan, our protagonist is a person who keeps away from practising anything evil for that matter. Though occasionally, he manages to scare people for the sheer fun of it without any intention to harm the victim. As an economically and socially deprived caste the protagonist lives in a shabby hut along with his mentor and grandfather Moothamanikyan. Manikyan works at Kelakath Tharavadu as a janitor during the day. At the Tharavadu he is more a friend to the inmates Prabha and Meenakshi. They grew up together and hence are very comfortable in each other's company. Neither Prabha nor Meenakshi treats him as an outcast. Instead they consider him as a member of the family more like a protector. Prabha has a soft spot for Manikyan which she reveals to him but he hesitates owing to his social position of that of a lower caste member. This forces Prabha to enter in to a loveless marriage with Prakashan.

On the other hand we have Ravunni, Prabha's cousin who has genuine feelings for her which she is aware of. But Prabha hesitates to return his feelings. She rejects him for his complexion which she believes represents the darker side of his psyche. And throughout the film, he is referred to as Karimban Nair, meaning the black, the villain. Since Manikyan belongs to a lower caste he is not given an opportunity to express his true self or reveal his love for Prabha. Instead he is forced to lead a lonely life bearing the brunt of being the king of the darkness. He is mistreated by the society at large, ostracised for being born to a clan looked down upon by the society. Though he is not like the other members of his clan he is tagged as evil and hence nothing good is expected to come out of him.

This social trauma inflicted on him becomes the perfect cover for the crimes committed by Karimban Nair. He uses the Odiyan identity to fulfill his personal vengeance and frames Manikyan for his crimes. Later the evil intentions in Karimban Nair comes out when he kills Prakashan who is Prabha's husband. Prakashan is killed at night, in the dark in what looks like a motor accident. But the post-mortem reveals that he died of a heart attack. This prompts the villagers to suspect Manikyan. Precisely what Ravunni wants. He thus puts the blame on Manikyan to keep him away from Prabha. The natives of Thenkurushi believes that Manikyan killed Prakashan in order to have her all for himself. And none of them stands on his side, not even Prabha. Only the blind sister Meenakshi understands Manikyan's innocence.

It shatters him when he comes to know that even Prabha fails to understand him. Heartbroken he plans to leave the village and his loved ones. And hence the real culprit is not revealed. It is only towards the end that the truth is brought to light by Thankamani Varasyar. It is common knowledge that Prakashan died when he saw a sudden bull in front of him, running towards him at night on his way back home. This helps the real culprit to hid in plain sight. The next crime which Karimban Nair performs is killing Ravi, Meenakshi's husband. This literally throws kelakathu tharavadu into darkness and soon it becomes the house of two widows. After Ravi's murder things got worse for Manikyan. People starts to blame him for killing Ravi while protecting his pregnant wife as they believed Manikyan wanted the fetus to prepare the special oil which an Odiyan uses for shape-shifting. This forces the native people to burn Manikyan's hut in order to purify the village from his evilness.

At the fourteenth day after Ravi's death Meenakshi comes out of her room and confronts Manikyan for answers. She asks him whether he is indeed after her fetus for his rituals. Manikyan cannot do anything to prove his innocence as he is under the community's pressure, he is an Odiyan. In addition Prabha also addresses him as, 'iruttu'. By referring to the darkness that he being an Odiyan is forced to live with since she suspects him to be the one responsible for spoiling the brightness of her sister's life by killing her better half. (Sreekumar 1:45:64). Heartbroken Manikyan leaves Thenkurissi. Here being a subaltern he is denied his right to speak. He is not given an opportunity to prove that he is not guilty of the crimes that he is charged with. Everybody blames his caste for his actions and even the people he trust the most fails to see him as a human and not as a representative of a particular clan. He is forced to live with the burden of the sins that his forefathers have committed at the command of the elite class.

After this instance the plot of the movie takes a quick leap to the present day and Manikyan's return to his native land. He has returned determined to take revenge on Ravunni by learning all the truth from Thankamani Varasyar, who is addressed as Ravunni's mistress throughout the film. She knows about Ravunni's secrets and it is she who tells Manikyan the truth about the two murders that happened in Thenkurissi. Hence Manikyan returns with the full knowledge of Ravunni's wickedness and his crooked plans. This gives Manikyan a sense of power, the power that comes from the knowledge of truth. This power gives him the strength to break the barriers of caste and make his voice heard by the society. He is determined not to confine himself to the restrictions offered by the society owing to his caste. And so he uses his power to bring the truth to light. He comes with a plan to destroy Ravunni and his sense of superiority. In order to lure Ravunni into his plan, Manikyan challenges Ravunni's nephew that he would use his power to scare the youngman the next night. The plan works. Ravunni shows up at night with his hired assassin whom he used to kill Prakashan and Ravi. Ravunni boasts about the way how he used the assassin to kill the two men. Enlightened by the truth Manikyan uses his skills to chase down the assassin and Ravunni.

At this point, it is interesting to note the way how the movie attempts to prove that anything black is evil and white is good. Black in Indian context has connotations with lack of desirability, evil, negativity, and inertia. It represents anger and darkness and is associated with the absence of energy, barrenness, and death. On the other hand white is believed to represent purity, cleanliness, peace and knowledge. In Indian tradition, it symbolises energy. Thus the conflict between these colours shows the conflict between the concept of good and evil. Caste system in India considers the untouchables as blacks and hence evil. Considering the text our protagonist Manikyan is white in complexion. Standing under the stigma of his clan he is believed to be the villain.

On the other hand Ravunni who is the real culprit, enjoys the privileges offered by his caste and avoids all possible suspicions from the part of the natives. Even then he is often looked down upon owing to his skin complexion, as he is darker in tone when compared to the other members of his caste. Ravunni Nair is often seen to be criticised for his complexion, for others believed that it reflects his inner self. Hence he chooses to remain at the dark side throughout his life, doing evil which can be considered his way of coping with the segregation he has to face as a result of his complexion.

The closing scene of the movie is more like a conflict between good and evil, between the hero and the villain and hence between the colours black and white. In a social context it is Manikyan who represents the lower caste, the untouchables hence the dark and evil. On the contrary he has a fair complexion which in turn reflects his inner self. He is portrayed to be a good soul who is devoid of any intention to hurt people. He uses his magic only as a tool for justice as he uses it to mostly punish the wrong doers of

Thenkurissi. His karimbadam stands as the token of his absolute power to scare people. It is a cover that provides darkness which is inevitable in performing his art of Odividya. Hence there is a stigma associated with the Karimbadam as it symbolises absolute evil. On the other hand we have Ravunni who represents the upper caste and hence privileged in every sense. What he considers his eternal flaw is his complexion, which is black and hence he is taken for an evil person whose complexion reflects the inner darkness. From early childhood he had to bare the brunt of being a child who does not have a fair complexion and hence is ridiculed for the same. The evil streak in him can be seen as a rebellion from his part to claim some kind of superiority over the others who are fortunate enough to be fair. A means to prove his manliness. The darkness inside him grows with him as he found solace in performing evil that gives him the feeling of being superior to others.

Hence by breaking the caste stereotypes the movie puts forth a new formula, where a person's complexion becomes the reflection of his inner psyche and hence again the conflict between good and evil. Poetic justice is thus served when the good gets rewarded and the evil gets punished. In the last scene we have the protagonist Manikyan defeating the antagonist along with a group of other Odiyans hired by Ravunni to defeat and kill Manikyan. At the end of the fight, that happens to take place at a paddy field at night we have the protagonist burning a hay stack in his attempt to burn alive Ravunni and the other Odiyan(2:40:31). Here light indicated by fire is used to perform something like a cleansing ritual to eliminate darkness both in the literal and metaphorical sense.

That is to say that literally Manikyan uses fire to burn the wrong doers alive indicating the purgation of there sins. In a metaphorical sense the same fight lifts darkness, illuminates the life of not just the protagonist but also of that of the villagers of Thenkurussi by eliminating the real perpetrators of evil who have been controlling the village, by instilling fear in them. Thus fire becomes liberating and indicates purification. At the very instance we can see Manikyan burning his Karimbadam (2:45:56)claiming that this last vestige of his mastery over his craft should also burn with everything that is evil and all he needs for the rest of his life is a white cloth that would liberate him from the stereotypes surrounding his caste.

## CONCLUSION

Thus a Subaltern reading of the text brings forth the concept of an awakened Dalit consciousness. Also the reading helps to have a better understanding of the use of colour stereotypes in literature. It further helps to realise the way how these binaries are used in a literary text to bring to light certain virtues and morals that are traditionally associated with them. Which surprisingly are still prevailing in the society.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Abrams, H M., Geoffrey Galt Harpham."Subaltern."A Glossary of Literary Terms.10thed.CengageLearning,2012.
- [2] Barry, Peter."Post Colonialism. "Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory.3rd ed.Manchester University Press,2015.
- [3] Mambrol,Nasrullah."Subaltern."Literary Theory and Criticism, literariness,8
- [4] April.2016,<https://literariness.org/2016/04/08/subaltern-postcolonialism>.
- [5] Odiyan,. Directed by VA Shrikumar, Performances by Mohanlal and Manju Varrier,Ashirvad cinemas, Max creation release, 2018.
- [6] Ravi,Prasad."Odiyan: The Myth. "Art of Story, wordpress
- [7] 20April 2018, <https://artofstorylitfictionalterreality.wordpress.com>