Generational Continuity and Socio-economic Entrapment: Exploring Themes of Marginalization in Vijeesh Mani's Movies

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ABSTRACT

This study uses purposive sampling to analyze three Malayalam films by Vijeesh Mani—"Netaji" (2019), "MMMMM" (2021), and "Aadhivaasi" (2023)—focused on Attapadi's indigenous communities. The films were selected for their thematic exploration of socio-economic and environmental issues affecting these communities. Analysis revealed that: "MMMMM" addresses environmental degradation and socio-economic marginalization, using the decline in bee populations as a metaphor for ecological crises. It critiques technological advancements, ethical dilemmas, and cultural integrity while employing magical realism to discuss environmental consciousness. "Aadhivaasi" highlights socio-economic marginalization through the story of Attapadi Madhu, whose psychological distress reflects "Ecological Anxiety" due to environmental degradation. The film explores cultural guardianship and mental health issues while critiquing societal neglect and governmental failure. "Netaji" examines socio-economic challenges and efforts for economic empowerment and cultural preservation. It contrasts traditional lifestyles with modern pressures, advocating for the integration of indigenous knowledge into development frameworks. The study underscores Malayalam cinema's role in critiquing socio-economic and environmental injustices and advocating for marginalized communities and ecological sustainability.

Introduction

Malayalam cinema, a significant facet of India's regional film industry, has increasingly become a platform for portraying the lives and struggles of marginalized communities, including Dalits, Adivasis, women, and other socially disadvantaged groups. This trend toward inclusive storytelling is driven by several factors. Societal awareness and activism surrounding issues of social justice and equality in Kerala have prompted filmmakers to explore narratives that highlight the challenges faced by these communities. Additionally, the emergence of new voices in the industry, often from diverse backgrounds, has introduced fresh perspectives and a focus on socially relevant themes. These narratives have achieved both critical acclaim and commercial success, encouraging more filmmakers to tackle such content. The supportive audience response to films addressing complex social issues, including caste, gender, and environmental concerns, has further contributed to the growth of this genre in Malayalam cinema. A notable filmmaker in this context is Vijeesh Mani, who has made a mark through his commitment to depicting the issues faced by marginalized communities. Mani's career includes a range of films that address cultural, social, and environmental topics, often based on real-life events. His works, such as "Netaji," which examines the life of Indian nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose, and "Kayyattam," focusing on the lives of indigenous people in Kerala, reflect his dedication to these themes. Mani's film "Vishwaguru" is recognized by the Guinness World Records for being the fastest film ever made. His filmmaking approach is marked by realism, often using non-professional actors to enhance the authenticity of his stories. This method demonstrates his deep empathy for his subjects, aiming to amplify voices that are frequently

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overlooked in mainstream media.

In addition to his filmmaking, Vijeesh Mani actively participates in initiatives that utilize cinema as a means to drive social change. He advocates for the rights of marginalized communities and leverages his platform to raise awareness and promote action. Mani's contributions reflect a broader movement within Malayalam cinema that seeks to expand the industry's narrative scope, ensuring a wider range of voices and experiences are represented. This shift enriches the cultural landscape of Indian cinema and plays a significant role in promoting a more inclusive and socially aware society.The general objective of this research is to analyze the thematic exploration and narrative techniques used in films to address socio-environmental issues, particularly focusing on the impact of environmental degradation and modernization on marginalized communities. This includes examining how films represent the intersection of cultural integrity, socio-economic marginalization, ethical dilemmas, and resistance, and how they use narrative devices such as magical realism and character studies to advocate for environmental and social justice. The study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of cinema in raising awareness and promoting dialogue about critical issues facing indigenous and marginalized populations.

Review of literature

This collection of papers explores the representation of environmental and social issues in Indian cinema, particularly focusing on marginalized communities. "Oru Cheru Punchiri," "Aranyakam," and "Ennu Swantham Janakikutty" are Malayalam films that delve into themes of nature and ecology. "Oru Cheru Punchiri" advocates for environmental conservation, while "Aranyakam" and "Ennu Swantham Janakikutty" explore the intricate relationship between a young girl and her natural surroundings. "Aranyakam" portrays the natural environment as a sanctuary for the protagonist, protecting her from the corrupt outside world. In contrast, "Ennu Swantham Janakikutty" intertwines natural and supernatural elements, aiding the young protagonist in realizing her desires (Rameesban, 2022). The concept of "solastalgia" serves as a framework for analyzing the unjust geographies depicted in the Malayalam films "Kumbalangi Nights" and "Malik." These films examine the impact of lived space on individuals' lives and its intersection with social, political, and economic injustices. Cultural narratives such as films play a crucial role in representing and resisting unjust geographies through "rebellious re-imagination" (Meenakshi

& Shah, 2024). The film "Kantara" emphasizes the significance of indigenous knowledge systems, local customs, and the sacredness of the forest. It highlights the marginalization of these knowledge systems and the community's vulnerability to epistemic and environmental injustices. "Kantara" serves as a medium to disseminate the message of environmental activism to a broader audience (Karmakar & Pal, 2024).

Sahani's films are distinguished by an unwavering commitment to social realism, portraying the harsh realities of everyday life in India. In stark contrast to the escapist tendencies prevalent in much of Indian cinema, Sahani's works challenge audiences to confront the injustices and inequalities that pervade Indian society. Through meticulous and empathetic storytelling, his films amplify the voices of marginalized and underrepresented groups, offering them dignity and visibility. They also critically examine the power structures and hierarchies that perpetuate injustice (Das & Dassarma, 2024). The relationship between sustainability and issues of marginality and social justice, particularly concerning marginalized communities in India, is a critical area of study. This examination considers the impact of sustainability on the global political economy, national development, socio-political structures, and marginalized groups. It highlights the limitations of mainstream sustainability, including its anthropocentric biases, and explores emerging paradigms such as Eco-Ambedkarism, which integrates sustainability with anti-caste ideology. This framework proposes strategies to broaden the scope of sustainability by incorporating intersectional issues and promoting multi-stakeholder dialogues, particularly with marginalized communities (Ravikiran, 2023).

The film "Kaun Kitney Pani Mein" (2015) uses satire effectively to address the critical issue of water scarcity in rural India. Through its blend of humor and serious commentary, the film explores the complex dynamics of power, politics, and love within a community affected by limited water resources. It highlights the systematic inequities stemming from caste hierarchies and the unequal distribution of water, showcasing how these social structures worsen resource scarcity and inequality (Nandani, 2024). Climate change and environmental degradation are urgent global challenges that need to be addressed. The impacts of climate change, such as rising temperatures and melting glaciers, are significantly affecting both individuals and the environment. These changes disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, causing issues like floods, droughts, and displacement (Thomas, 2019).

Literature and film are effective mediums for raising awareness about environmental issues and the challenges of climate change. They can highlight the consequences of corporate greed and capitalism, particularly in the exploitation and oppression of indigenous communities and their natural resources. Indigenous communities are actively resisting these actions, working to protect their land and resources from corporate exploitation. Through their narratives, literature and film can bring attention to these struggles and promote a broader understanding of environmental justice (Arunadevi et al., 2023). The main findings of the study reveal that the two films analyzed function as modes of inquiry that illuminate ecological issues and reshape the understanding of the relationship between humans and the natural world. The study emphasizes the interdependence between humans and nature as a fundamental aspect of postcolonial discourse. It notes that the films document the enduring importance of nature in Indian culture, despite indigenous populations being influenced by Western cultural elements, which has led to a loss of their own cultural heritage (Dutta Dey & Singh, 2024). "Kantara" serves as a significant catalyst for ecological discourse and empowerment, encouraging viewers to become active participants in advocating for sustainable practices and cultural preservation. The film has ignited nationwide conversations about environmental conservation and indigenous rights, showcasing the critical role of cinema in fostering social change (Kumar, 2024). The dominant notion of development, which prioritizes capital accumulation and resource exploitation, is detrimental to the environment and marginalized communities in the global South. This development model, represented by the character Kumaran, disrupts the indigenous ecological structures and sustainable lifestyles of the Aathi community. The study underscores the need for development models that are environmentally and socially just, and sensitive to the needs and practices of marginalized communities in the global South (Pradhan & Kumar, 2023).

Methodology

For this study, a purposive sampling technique has been employed to select three films by the Malayalam filmmaker that focus on the region of Attapadi. The films chosen for analysis are: "Netaji" (2019) "MMMMM" (2021) "Aadhivaasi" (2023) Purposive sampling is a non-random technique where specific individuals or cases are selected based on particular characteristics or criteria that align with the research objectives. In this instance, the films were selected due to their thematic focus on

the socio-economic and environmental issues faced by the tribal communities in Attapadi. This approach ensures that the study includes films that are directly relevant to the research topic, thereby providing a comprehensive examination of the filmmaker's portrayal of indigenous struggles and environmental concerns. The content of the selected films has been systematically coded into sub-themes to facilitate detailed analysis. This coding process involves identifying and categorizing key themes and issues addressed in the films.

Results

Film 1 - MMMMM (2021)

Environmental Degradation and Socio-Economic Marginalization

The film "Mmmmm" explores the adverse effects of environmental degradation on marginalized tribal communities. The declining bee population, attributed to modern technological infrastructure such as high voltage power lines and mobile towers, serves as a metaphor for the broader ecological crisis. This sub-theme can be analyzed through the lens of environmental justice, highlighting the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on vulnerable populations. The narrative critiques the externalities of technological progress, which prioritize economic gains over ecological and social well-being, often at the expense of indigenous livelihoods.

Ethical Dilemmas and Cultural Integrity

The conflict between Maruthan and the honey trader introduces a critical examination of ethical dilemmas faced by economically disadvantaged communities. This sub-theme delves into the moral quandaries that arise when traditional practices and values are confronted with economic pressures and unethical business practices. The portrayal of Valli's resistance to adulterating honey emphasizes the importance of cultural integrity and the ethical challenges posed by external market forces. This aspect of the film can be related to theories of cultural hegemony and moral economy, which explore how dominant economic interests influence and often undermine traditional cultural practices.

Magical Realism and Environmental Consciousness

The character of the honey bee girl, embodying a blend of magical realism, serves as a narrative device to convey environmental consciousness and critique the anthropocentric destruction of nature. This sub-theme examines how elements of fantasy are used to articulate real-world ecological concerns, bridging the gap between fiction and environmental advocacy.

The use of magical realism allows the film to explore complex ideas about nature and conservation in a way that is accessible and emotionally resonant. Theoretical frameworks such as ecocriticism can be applied to analyze how the film uses narrative and visual strategies to promote a deeper understanding of the intrinsic value of biodiversity and the interconnectedness of all life forms.

Generational Continuity and Socio-Economic Entrapment

Maruthan's son's aspiration to follow in his father's footsteps highlights the theme of generational continuity and the socio-economic entrapment of tribal communities. This sub-theme reflects the limitations imposed on marginalized groups by societal expectations and economic necessity, which often perpetuate cycles of poverty and restrict social mobility. The portrayal of Maruthan's son illustrates the broader issue of how systemic inequalities and lack of opportunities can confine individuals to predefined socio-economic roles. This can be examined through the lens of social reproduction theory, which explores how existing social structures and inequalities are perpetuated across generations.

Resistance and Activism

The subplot involving Samaraa, the social activist, foregrounds the theme of resistance against socio-economic and environmental injustices. This sub-theme addresses the role of activism in advocating for the rights of marginalized communities and the systemic barriers faced by activists, including state repression and legal challenges. The depiction of Samaraa's struggles underscores the resilience of indigenous activism and the often-overlooked sacrifices made by those who champion social and environmental justice. Theoretical perspectives such as critical race theory and environmental activism can provide a framework for analyzing the dynamics of power, resistance, and agency depicted in the film.

The Impact of Modernization on Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The film also interrogates the impact of modernization on indigenous knowledge systems, particularly in the context of environmental stewardship and sustainable practices. The decline of traditional honey collection practices due to technological interventions symbolizes the erosion of indigenous knowledge and its replacement with unsustainable modern methods. This sub-theme can be explored using postcolonial theory, which critiques the dominance of Western epistemologies and the marginalization of indigenous ways of knowing. The

narrative suggests a need to preserve and integrate indigenous knowledge into broader environmental and developmental discourses.

Film 2 : ADIVASI (2023)
Marginalization and Social Injustice

The film centers on the tragic narrative of "Attapadi Madhu," a mentally unstable tribal youth portrayed by Sarath Kumar, who becomes a victim of mob violence. This storyline offers a poignant examination of the socio-economic marginalization experienced by tribal communities in Attapadi. Madhu's character symbolizes the broader challenges faced by indigenous peoples, who frequently encounter systemic discrimination and violence. His psychological condition, intensified by what the film refers to as "Ecological Anxiety," reflects his profound distress over the environmental degradation of his homeland. This theme highlights the alienation and social neglect experienced by these communities, drawing attention to the intersection of mental health issues and socio-economic disenfranchisement.

Cultural and Environmental Guardianship

The film explores the theme of cultural and environmental preservation through Madhu's deep connection to the forest. This relationship is metaphorically illustrated by his interactions with a malfunctioning transistor radio, from which he hears the imagined voice of Mother Nature. This narrative device emphasizes the indigenous worldview that perceives nature as a sentient and sacred entity deserving of respect and protection. Madhu's perceived duty to safeguard the forest underscores a critical aspect of indigenous cultural identity: the community's role as stewards of the environment. The film's depiction of deforestation and its impact on tribal communities underscores the devastating consequences of environmental degradation for both biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Character Study and Psychological Depth

The portrayal of Madhu provides a nuanced exploration of mental health within the context of environmental and social stressors. His character is shown to be deeply affected by the ecological destruction he witnesses, leading to a psychological retreat into the forest. The film uses the concept of "Ecological Anxiety" to frame Madhu's mental health struggles, illustrating how environmental degradation can profoundly impact individuals' psychological well-being. His delusions and hallucinations, depicted through his conversations with the voice of Mother Nature, serve as a critical commentary on the often-overlooked mental health

challenges faced by marginalized communities. This character study offers a compelling lens to examine the broader societal implications of environmental and social injustices.

Environmental Destruction and Indigenous Displacement

The narrative is grounded in the real-life event of Madhu's death in 2018, serving as a stark representation of the consequences of systemic social and economic marginalization. The film critiques the societal and governmental neglect that contributes to such tragedies, highlighting the vulnerability of tribal communities to violence and exploitation. Through scenes depicting deforestation, displacement of tribal peoples due to developmental projects, and pollution by outsiders, the film critiques the broader disregard for both environmental sustainability and indigenous rights. This thematic exploration underscores the complexities and tensions at the intersection of conservation efforts and resource exploitation. Set in Attapadi, the film's setting is crucial to its narrative, providing a realistic and contextually rich backdrop for exploring its themes. Attapadi, known for its tribal communities and significant environmental challenges, offers an authentic locale for the film's examination of cultural preservation, environmental degradation, and social justice. The use of local language and cultural references further enriches the film's depiction of the lived realities of tribal communities, making it a significant contribution to discussions on indigenous rights and environmental conservation.

Film 3: NETAJI (2019)
Socio-Economic Issues

The film delves into various socio-economic issues faced by the Attapadi tribal communities, highlighting the disparities and challenges they encounter. The narrative portrays the local tribes as marginalized and often misunderstood by outsiders. This is evident in scenes where tribal members discuss the lack of acceptance and the derogatory views held by outsiders, who treat them as commodities rather than fellow human beings. The character of Netaji Gopalakrishnan is instrumental in advocating for the rights and welfare of the tribal community, establishing initiatives like a tailoring business for tribal women. This subplot emphasizes the themes of economic empowerment and self-sufficiency, illustrating efforts to uplift the community and preserve their cultural identity amidst external pressures.

Cultural and Environmental Preservation

The theme of cultural preservation, contrasting the rich, traditional lifestyle of the Irula tribe with the urban, fast-paced life represented by Virat's parents. The depiction of the tribe's daily routines, rituals, and unique language underscores the value of cultural diversity and the importance of maintaining traditional practices. The natural environment of the Attapadi region is portrayed as an integral part of tribal life, serving as both a home and a source of sustenance. The film criticizes the often-destructive behavior of outsiders, such as a group of hikers who disturb the forest's ecosystem, highlighting the need for environmental conservation and respect for indigenous lands. Through the character of Sarayu, the film presents a nuanced perspective on the relationship between humans and nature. As a bird watcher and a visitor from the city, Sarayu bridges the gap between urban and tribal worlds. Her respect for the natural environment and interest in the local culture stand in stark contrast to the more exploitative attitudes of other city dwellers depicted in the film. This dichotomy underscores the film's message about the value of preserving natural and cultural heritage in the face of modernization. The thematic explorations in the film emphasize the interconnectedness of socio-economic, cultural, and environmental issues, advocating for a more respectful and inclusive approach to both people and nature. The narrative serves as a call to action for the audience to recognize and appreciate the unique contributions of indigenous communities and the need to protect their way of life.

The film offers a comparative analysis of the traditional lifestyle of the Irula tribe and the modernized lifestyles of external actors, elucidating the intrinsic value of traditional practices and their role in environmental stewardship. This examination serves as a critique of anthropocentric perspectives, which prioritize human interests and economic advancement often to the detriment of environmental and cultural sustainability. The film underscores how the traditional practices of the Irula tribe embody principles of sustainable living and harmonious coexistence with the environment, thereby challenging the exploitative tendencies of modernized societies. In alignment with theories of cultural preservation and sustainable development, the film advocates for the recognition and integration of indigenous knowledge and practices into contemporary development frameworks. Such theories posit that indigenous communities possess crucial insights into sustainable environmental management, which should be incorporated into broader policy and development strategies. By presenting the Irula tribe's practices as both culturally valuable and environmentally advantageous, the film

supports the argument that traditional knowledge can contribute to addressing contemporary challenges such as climate change and resource depletion. The film emphasizes the importance of respecting and preserving cultural and environmental heritage amidst the pressures of modernization and economic development. It argues that while societies advance, it is imperative to achieve a balance that honors and integrates traditional practices and knowledge. This balance is essential for ensuring that development efforts do not undermine cultural heritage or environmental sustainability but instead incorporate diverse modes of existence and understanding.

Summary & Conclusion

The analysis of the films "MMMMM" (2021), "Aadhivaasi" (2023), and "Netaji" (2019) reveals themes centered on the socio-economic and environmental challenges faced by the tribal communities in Attapadi. "MMMMM" underscores the adverse effects of environmental degradation on marginalized populations, using the decline in bee populations as a metaphor for the broader ecological crisis. It critiques the technological progress that prioritizes economic gains over the well-being of indigenous communities, highlighting issues of environmental justice and the erosion of traditional knowledge due to modernization. "Aadhivaasi" explores the intersection of socio-economic marginalization and mental health through the tragic narrative of Attapadi Madhu, whose distress over environmental destruction reflects the broader impact of ecological degradation on mental well-being. The film emphasizes the role of indigenous communities as guardians of both cultural and environmental heritage, critiquing systemic neglect and the consequences of displacement. "Netaji" addresses various socio-economic issues and the preservation of cultural and environmental values through its portrayal of the Attapadi tribal communities. The film contrasts traditional lifestyles with modern pressures, advocating for the integration of indigenous practices into contemporary development strategies. Together, these films offer a nuanced examination of how socio-economic and environmental issues intersect, highlighting the need for a balanced approach that respects and integrates indigenous knowledge and practices in the face of modernization and economic development.

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