

On 'Being' Possessed: A Re-Reading of G Aravindan's *Kummaty* Using Foucauldian Notions of Power, Knowledge, and Discourse

RADHIKA PADMANABHAN

Research Scholar
Department of English
School of Social Sciences and Humanities
Central University of Tamil Nadu, Thiruvavur

Dr. B. J. GEETHA

Associate Professor of English
School of Social Sciences and Humanities
Central University of Tamil Nadu, Thiruvavur

Abstract

In the contemporary era of chaotic uncertainties, the exigency to create personal identity emanating from the body, invested with an 'epistemological potential' to capture a wide range of spatio-temporal realities, is of paramount significance. The body is a physical entity that encompasses a plethora of meanings and identities that are constructed by socio-cultural contexts. Its binary nature is conditioned to perform a functional metaphor for reflecting the paradoxical dualities like nature/culture, self/other, etc. providing a platform for producing a creative tension with decentralized and radicalized outcomes. The experienced body thus forms a site of systematically mapped inquiries wrapped within the phases of its corporeal transformation as a 'correlation coefficient' needs to be intervened and cross-checked. The present paper attempts to analyze G Aravindan's classic Malayalam movie entitled Kummaty(1979), which addresses the complexities and dichotomies that are embedded in the marginalized transmogrified body. The study reflects on the trauma of such transfiguration of Chindan, the protagonist, who lost his 'self' ensnared within the body of a canine by the sorcery of a bogeyman, a representative of the sovereign society, forming the crux of the study. The critical intersection between the contradictory worlds of myth and science compels us to conduct an immediate reevaluation of the corporeal 'truths' that are with one's existence. To illuminate the bodily reality of sustenance in terms of power and oppression, Foucauldian theoretical concepts like "discourse", "power" and "knowledge" are recurrently utilized to detail the impossibility of distancing oneself from the realms of the dynamic 'plasticity' of the poststructuralist identity.

Keywords: body, power, knowledge, discourse, corporeal identity, post-structuralism

Introduction to Body Studies

Identity in this post-structuralist world could be considered as a process of 'becoming' of the self or the very 'being' in an unvoiced, contextually driven interaction that is transferable as per the requirements of a demanding discourse. A body is a physical entity that marks the spatio-temporal

realities an individual ventures through to experience the world and carves out his identity. What a body senses to produce knowledge is greatly dependent on the surrounding in which it is installed, executed with the aid of sense organs. It could both be associative as well as dissociative in its functionality on the grounds of numerous socio-political aspects

like race, gender, ethnicity, age, occupation, etc. The body could be experienced from two points of view: from the first-person point of view and the third-person point of view. Every moment is unreflexively apprehended on the body even without the knowledge of the senses, thus forming a site of 'objective referentiality'. In the present study, an effort is made to comprehend the inextricably intermingled relationship surviving between body and identity. Different themes like identification with the body, the significant role played by the body in identity formation, etc are analysed extensively. Identity is constantly in a state of 'flux' and is evolving with the addition of new experiences to the coherent unity of the body-self. However, with some life-altering events that could create considerable transformations in the body, a crisis of identity loss could emerge. This is more likely to happen in the youthful age, where an individual strives to form a unified identity. The psychological analysis of an individual could be compartmentalized into two perspectives: the inside-out perspective where the individual tries to consider the internal thoughts inside the body, and the social perspective which tries to consider the role of the body that has to be performed in a social milieu. The body could have undergone both positive as well as negative experiences while the evolution of identity was occurring. Though a considerable number of theories were proposed to enlighten the relationship between the body and identity, very less research studies were conducted on the effects of 'power' on the body in identity formation, thus underscoring the research gap of the study.

Until recent times due to the dynamically transforming nature, the body has been subdued as a marginal entity that solely rested in the philosophical, political, and cultural contexts. One of the most concerning dilemmas left unresolved was the relationship between mind-body dualism. Studies try

to place the mind in a hierarchically superior position due to its capacity to function as a monolithic entity that could substantially function as a repository of knowledge obtained through experiences. However, the noteworthy role played by the body in obtaining this knowledge was often left less noticed. When Heidegger, Descartes, and Kant tried examining the pivotal role in accumulating and structuring knowledge with the assistance provided by the body in a philosophical tone, Marx, Sandel, and Rawls reflected the existence of the body as a referential normativity, a socio-politically embodied entity with symbols and practices inscribed on it. The feminist critics on the other hand like Helen Cixous, Susan Bordo, Mary Douglas, Judith Butler, Simone De Beauvoir, Donna Haraway etc painted the concerns that are in association with a marginalized gendered body deprived of any rights of self-expression. But unlike their counterparts, Umberto Eco and Foucault took a semiotic approach with a consideration of the body as a site of meaning production and communication.

Movie Introduction

The paper to demonstrate the functionality of the body to perform as a repository of meanings considers a Malayalam state-award-winning film *Kummatty* (1979) directed by G Aravindan, a visionary cartoonist and producer known for his experimental and innovative style of storytelling in Malayalam parallel cinema. Several socio-political and philosophical concerns were projected through his celebrated works like *Uttarayanam* (1974), *Kanchana Sita* (1972), *Thampu* (1978), *Pokkuveyil* (1981), *Oridathu* (1986) which grabbed him state as well as national awards. *Kummatty* (1979), like his erstwhile movies, tries to contemplate a partial myth partially real story of a bogeyman, who converts the protagonist Chindan to a canine through his mystique

powers. The dilemma of existence he undergoes as a resultant effect of his ensnared identity forms the major concern of the story.

Methodology

To materialize this, the theoretical framework proposed by Foucault is utilized with special attention to notions like discourse, power, and knowledge. They illuminate how “subject” gets produced and disciplined through the concepts like power, discourse, and knowledge, unconsciously without any visible exertions. As an addendum to this, theoretical notions like Lacanian ‘mirror stage’, and Althusserian ‘ideology’ are also analysed.

Objectives

The main **objective** of the study is to demonstrate the operation of power, discourse, and knowledge/truth, theoretical notions proposed by Foucault in the administration and functioning of society. This shows how ideologies were ‘interpellated’ into the minds of an individual, to fashion him as an “active subject”, more receptive and understanding towards the “truth/knowledge” about the distinct discourse.

The present paper aims to report the potential role played by the body as a metaphor for representing different ideological power structures that are present within a society, using cinematic discourses. It also tries to reflect the unfeasible dream of attaining a coherently organized identity in the theoretically discrete post-structuralist world. While the primary metaphors try to cultivate the deeper figurative meanings within the narrative present in association with the content, plot, and character, the cinematic discourse on the other hand using transmogrified bodily metaphor tries to analyse the socio-cultural meanings that are enmeshed within the context of its formation. Through this, a kaleidoscopic understanding of the different hues of

meanings presents within the corporeal identity of a protagonist could be transparently observed.

The Plot of Kummatty

The film *Kummatty* could be considered an allegorical narrative of the individualism v/s society theme, where the man exists as an unchained watchdog of the ideological assumptions imposed by the normative society. It is centred around a school-going boy Chindan who undergoes a traumatic incident after an encounter with the titular character Kummatty or the bogeyman. The song in the opening scene of the film “the beginning” heralds the mythological world in which the story is going to be narrated. In the initial part of the story, Chindan is presented as a carefree mischievous boy, who relishes even the mundane occurrences of his life, like playing with his pet bird, chasing a stray dog, spending leisure time with friends singing and dancing through the extended savanna of a Malabar village, etc. Despite many forces like his mother, and village Granny trying to control him, he still leads the wayward life of a young lad with his friends. Though the village Granny tries to discipline him with her mythological stories of a bogeyman Kummatty, the children leave it out like a non-existential fairy-tale character, a strategy designed to tame them. However, breaching their beliefs, one-day Kummatty makes his grand appearance. Though he was initially viewed as an object of enigmatic concern, Kummatty with the progression of the story succeeds to establish a considerable influence over the children. On the day of departure, to showcase the potential dexterity of his wizardry power he metamorphosizes the children into different animals. Before being reconstituted back to his normal self the protagonist who is transformed into a canine, flees in search of the unknown lands that could assure him eternal liberty. He then reaches the dazzling world of a

metropolitan city, which sustains the technological investments of scientific revolutions. However, soon he realizes the implausibility of his new-found existence which chains and ostracizes him as a "country one". This further escalates the existential crisis of the protagonist which compels him to return to his mystical land. When he returns home, he is recognized by his caged bird who could now synchronize with the protagonist for his entrapped existence. Though the family tries to retrieve his long-lost identity through a series of invocations and practices, it turns out as a futile act. Chindan with a sense of helplessness and hopelessness waits, with an inability to lead his ordinary life.

Kummatty surfaces again after the span of a year with the arrival of springtime, which rejuvenates the land with lush greenery as well as the hope of a new 'beginning'. Chindan rushes to Kummatty with the exigency of the situation which taught him the chimera of attaining a coherent self, amidst the post-structuralist chaos of the fragmentary world. After having regained his ensnared identity, he emerges as a new individual with a more refined and developed idea of his worldly outlook. With the profound realization that nobody is excused from the grappling hold of the all-pervasive power, he liberates his pet bird to regain its identity in the unfathomable heights of the vast sky.

Theoretical References Influencing Foucault

Foucault was deeply influenced by the psychoanalytical concept of the mirror stage, propounded by Jacques Lacan in his 1949 paper, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I* as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". According to Lacan's observation, a human being advances through three stages of development- the real stage, the mirror stage, and the symbolic stage. Unlike the real stage which completely excludes an

individual's entrance into the world of the language order, the mirror stage tries to make him fantasize as a distinct entity that is alienated but could access the symbolic stage through language and narrative. This helps an individual to establish an "imaginary" relationship with the Name-of-the-Father who creates the rulebook that restricts and recognizes the desires and communication tolerable within the frontiers of society.

Another theoretical concept that profoundly modelled the theory of Foucault is the Althusserian notion of 'ideology'. Althusser borrows this Lacanian concept of the mirror stage which confirms the imaginary relationship that exists between the individual and the society through practices and performances that are prevalent within a society to possibly mould an individual to function as per its desires and expectations. Unlike the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) like the penal systems, asylums, etc, which opts to utilize coercive methods for disciplining and modifying individuals, the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) try to control the conduct of individuals in a gentler tone by "interpellating" their ideologies through social institutions like schools, religions, family, legal systems, politics, arts, sports, etc.

Evaluation of Aravindan's *Kummatty* using Foucauldian Discourse, Power, and Knowledge:

General introduction

The term discourse was meticulously employed by Foucault to reflect on how an epistemic reality is produced through the pre-determined ideologies approved by a contextually driven society, to confirm its 'subjects' to its expectations using disciplinary regimes that aren't coercive in nature. The present paper considers how Foucault's notions like "power", and "discourse" plays a noteworthy role in analyses of how a "subject" gets formed by non-coercive

power structures through institutions like schools, hospitals, factories, etc, that were erected to cement the pillars of the modern disciplinary regimes. The concept of panoptic surveillance proposed by 18th C architect Jeremy Bentham was borrowed by Foucault to demonstrate how with a mere “gaze”, a body could be regulated and exercised to perform the desired behaviours that are expected by society. Through this, the disciplinary regimes prevalent in society get internalized into the minds of the people even without exerting any external compulsions.

One of the primary characteristics of disciplinary power is to keep track of the individual's actions which insulates him from venturing into deviant behaviours by the mode of “examination”. In the film, different characters like the bogeyman, mother, the village Granny, the city girl, etc are pictured as the representatives of this institutionalized power, commissioned to effectively position the protagonist in conformity with the expected power structures of the proposed discourses. For instance, at the beginning, part of the film, there is a scene where Chindan tries to snatch a pot of water collected by Granny from the village pond. The greatly infuriated and agonized Granny warns Chindan “watch I'll return you to Kummatty”, signalling an impending danger. Though Chindan initially took it as a baseless statement as he considered him as a non-existent mythical character solely remaining in fairy tales, contradicting his expectations when Kummatty makes his grand entrance, Chindan is transformed into a ‘new’ individual more meek, humble and self-effacing. This is made visible by recreating a scene with the very act of Chindan who initially seized a pot of water from Granny, as a reformed individual supplying her with a pot of water, and making her call him “my son” for his compliant behaviour. It is not a vengeance that is concentrated on but instead a transformation process, where the individual comes

near the ‘truth’ or the unearthed meanings fabricating the ‘knowledge of power’, or ‘power of knowledge’ lying within the deeper realms of society. As Foucault says, “the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information...[t]he exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power” (Foucault, D&P, 52).

Power is always exercised on ‘free’ subjects. By the term free, Foucault tries to mention the individuals who are provided with a “field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions, and diverse comportments, may be realized”. Though both freedom and power are contemplated in unison, they are, however ‘intransitive’ and oppositional in nature. A carefully chosen ‘strategy’ is then implemented on this ‘free’ subject to exercise executive power. Because it is through these strategies that an institution ‘interpellates’ and reflects its ideas and ideologies to the subjects. A strategy according to Foucault thus forms “the totality of the means put into operation to implement power effectively or to maintain it”. For instance, in the film to influence Chindan, Granny employs the technique of narrating intimidating stories of mythological characters like Kummatty. Whereas Kummatty manipulates him by providing him with eatables and entertaining him with songs and dance. There is a spectrum of facets through which power derives its meaning like – the system of differentiations, the types of objectives, the means of bringing power relations into being, forms of institutionalization, degrees of rationalization, etc. This makes Power function as a hub of paradoxical uncertainties which generates a creative conflict of unbalanced power distribution between the adversaries with a “domination” of one over the other. The conclusion is none other than a

'resistance' of recalcitrant dichotomies existing cordially within the apparatus of "discipline", which according to Foucault succeeds to:

master all the forces that are formed from the very constitution of an organized multiplicity"[and also, could] "neutralize the effects of counter-power that spring from them and which form a resistance to the power that wishes to dominate it: agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, coalitions - anything that may establish horizontal conjunctions (Foucault, D&P, 219)

The paradoxical uncertainty of power on one hand permits the individuals to conduct an essentialized existence, with a sui- generis representation of their own. However, in complete contrast, these relations triumph to isolate the individual and then sever his societal ties to exercise complete authority over the body. The struggle that a subject carries out is against the privileges possessed by the knowledge, which in turn subjugates them as a commodified object through its secrecy, deformation as well as mystifying representations. Thus, it could be stated that power relations are not derived from the pragmatics of 'scientific' understanding, but instead through a series of struggles that interrogate the existence of a hierarchically stratified individual. After the transformation, though Chindan strives to survive the way he did initially, due to his transmogrified body of a canine, he gets secluded from the conformities and the boundaries of human civilization. Though Chindan tries to flee from this imprisonment of his new-found identity, in the scene in the city he undergoes double marginalization in the golden chain of domestication, for being a 'canine' as well as a "country one". This encounter with the knowledge of his actual subject position neglects to liberate him from the omnipresent clutches of 'power', thus forcing him to return to his land. As Foucault says: "Power is

everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere"(Foucault, Hof S, 93). This transcendental omni-potentiality of power lays the foundation of modern society, with an invisible observer who prevents the individual from attaining complete autonomy over himself. For instance, the film ends with a scene where Chindan, back to himself, is more refined and compassionate with his acquaintance with the truth that 'power is everywhere', and he is a victim as well as beholder of it. This realization is more emphasized by his very act of releasing his caged bird, whom he had great authority over, to the unfathomable heights of unbound freedom where its dream of identity could be actualized. As Foucault says, "The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual whom power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle" (Foucault, P/K, 98). The power could erupt and could be exercised on the body in manifold ways. One way of exerting power is by entertaining the free play of relationships between individuals. No relationship is inherently static in nature. With changing milieu, the power structures could also undergo considerable formulations. Another mechanism is through the process of communication which through the aid of language and practice produces and circulates meanings within the society, encompassing distinct objectives as well as consequences. Power does not imply the confiscation or the transference of the inherent rights and liberty of a section of society by another. It functions on the individuals with the consent of acceptance. For instance, there is a scene in the film where Chindan was called "my son" before undergoing the metamorphosis by the village Granny, as he helps her fetch some water as a loyal subservient subject who indisputably follows her as well as the ideologies of her 'mythical' discourses.

Whereas after the catastrophic event when he flees to the city for shelter and as well as an identity, the city girl who accommodates him asks him to be a “nice boy”, who is befitting to the ideological expectations of her ‘modern’ world. In both these occasions there arises ‘monologues’ of asymmetrical power distributions, where the protagonist is ordained to remain betrothed to the requirements and interests of both the ‘mythical’ as well as ‘modern’ discourses, concerning the changing scenario. Rather than directly influencing individuals through a regimental mechanism, power tries to modify the actions ‘conducted’ by the individuals. It echoes its claims throughout society in its ‘gentler’ tones as Foucault said:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production (Foucault, D&P, 194) Once the power gets bestowed on the human body it dissociates, isolates, examines, and then recasts the identity of the individual into a new configuration with a distinctly novel property of its own. One of the highlighting features of Foucault’s works is its dexterity to portray the identity formation in a subject, by power. Most of the subjects are the products of the ‘anarchist’ struggles that are ‘transversal’ in nature. Though it is the bogeyman who transforms the protagonist into a canine of a substantially mean existence, his identity is not subjugated in the hands of a ‘chief’ enemy, but ‘immediate’ enemies whom he encounters in innumerable forms like his mother, Granny, schoolmaster, city girl, etc.

Conclusion

The study has focused and has thus triumphantly reflected different ideological power structures existing within the cinematic discourse using the metaphor of body, as well as tries to educate the futile efforts to form a unified identity in a post-structuralist world. The dilemma of protagonist Chindan, who is coercively metamorphosed to a canine by the bogeyman, the titular character Kummatty of the film, and the trauma entailed by it due to his lost bodily identity forms the discussion of the paper. This functions as an allegory that narrates how ideologies of discourses produced from the foundation of power structures within a society ensnare the thoughts and fantasies and eventuates the functioning of the human bodies from that of an ‘individual subject’ to a ‘docile object’. The study then contemplates how for this a substantial ‘strategy’ gets chosen and is performed, considerably ‘gentler’ in tone, which could potentially coach an individual to perform the desired traits and conduct without resistance and ignorance. The strategies thus chosen could be through communication, language, social practices, performances, etc. unlike the coercive methods of punishments employed in the preceding times.

The study then gets elaborated on how the concept of “panoptic surveillance” or “gaze” proposed by Jeremy Bentham, which is borrowed by Foucault, effectively and efficiently internalizes the disciplinary norms within the minds of the subjects as they are constantly exposed to the fear of being evaluated or monitored. The resultant product of this transformative process is a newly refined, self-effacing matured individual who has reached proximity with the “knowledge/ meaning”, that could elucidate his position as well as the role desired by the discursive power structures of the society. According to the study, the director through his frames succeeds to illuminate this idea by showing

how the carefree, immature protagonist Chindan, undergoes a revolutionary transformation with a series of "episodic" encounters with the agents of power. This towards the climax of the story, moulds him as a more mature and responsible individual, hence reflecting the 'constructive' nature of power, unlike the oppressive Marxist angle in which it is frequently perceived.

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