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Regulated Appetites and Disposable Lives: Food, Varna, and Hierarchy in *Mickey 17*

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Abstract: *Mickey 17* is a dystopian science fiction film that follows the life of Mickey, a crew member aboard a spacecraft on a mission to colonise a distant planet. Within the ship, passengers are strictly classified according to their occupational roles, and access to resources, particularly food, is regulated in accordance with the hierarchy. Mickey, due to his economic hardships, signs up for the position of an “expendable,” the lowest rung in this social order, whose existence is defined by calculated caloric intake and repeated exposure to tasks deemed too dangerous for others. Each time Mickey dies in the course of these life-threatening missions, a new version of him is “reprinted”, marked by a higher number.

This stratified system closely mirrors the logic of the ancient Indian four-tier social hierarchy known as the Varna system, wherein labour, bodily value, and access to sustenance are unevenly distributed and culturally justified. Using qualitative methods of analysis, this paper examines how food operates as a crucial instrument in sustaining hierarchical power structures within the film. It further explores how the marginalised subject negotiates oppression through subtle acts of resistance and the formation of alternative cultural practices.

By placing the film’s depiction of disposability, rationing, and bodily control in dialogue with the Varna system, the paper highlights the persistence of hierarchical ideologies across temporal and cultural contexts. Ultimately, the study argues that *Mickey 17* reveals how systems of domination are reproduced through everyday cultural practices such as food regulation, while also gesturing toward the possibilities of resistance within dystopian frameworks.

Keywords: *Mickey 17*, Varna system, Food politics, Hierarchy and power, Disposability

1. Introduction

Science fiction films are a film genre that explore futuristic themes to portray human condition in the future world. The history of science fiction films can be traced back to the silent film era, usually combining comic elements with technological themes in 1-2 minute short films. With time, this genre has evolved to incorporate various other themes including themes related to social injustice. At this very intersection, Bong Joon Ho's dystopian science fiction film *Mickey 17* finds itself located. The film could not manage to see financial success when compared to Bong's other films like *Parasite*, but the experiment Bong did in the film was not a complete failure. The experiment was combining science fiction with dystopian themes. Although Bong is famous for his constructive habit of incorporating social problems in his films, this particular film was different because it depicts life away from the earth on a spacecraft. The film follows the life of Mickey Barnes, a young man, who, in a desperate attempt to run away from loan sharks, signs up for the role of an expendable on a spacecraft. Mickey is accompanied by his friend and accomplice Timo. The spacecraft was on a mission to colonise a distant frozen planet Niflheim in order to establish a colony to be ruled by an egomaniacal failed senator Kenneth Marshall, therefore Kenneth is the leader of this mission. Mickey's economic condition forces him to sign up for the ignominious role of an expendable, which was the least desired job on the ship. As an expendable, Mickey had to perform life threatening jobs on the ship which often lead to his actual death, but he was reprinted through a machine which was banned on the earth. Each time Mickey was reprinted, his memories were reinstalled and he would be attributed with a greater number than before. Therefore, what started off with just Mickey (Mickey1), by the end of the film, reached Mickey 18. But as the film title suggests, Mickey 17 is the main character in the film. The life of Mickey in the spacecraft is characterised by controlled caloric intake to performing dangerous tasks. The ship follows a hierarchical stratification with Kenneth Marshall and his wife Ylfa sitting at the top while Mickey is at the bottom. This stratification mirrors the fourfold Indian caste system known as the Varna System. The Varna system is a division of society or social classification in the traditional Hindu society. The term "Varna" originates from the Sanskrit word meaning "to classify," "to cover," or "colour." It may appear that the classification was based on colour but the categorisation was originally based on the roles, duties and societal functions of the individuals. "The term Varna is used definitely in the sense of Caste without reference to colour, in the Rig Vedic age. Guilds of Workers tended to crystallize into castes, as occupations became more or less hereditary examples, Chariot-makers, the smiths, the leather-workers and the carpenters. The role and importance of each division became hereditary during the later Vedic period."(Chandel 358)

The four main categories under the Varna System are, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The earliest reference to this system can be found in the Purusha Sukta in Rig Veda which claimed that the Varnas originated from the body of the cosmic person (Purusha). Brahmins originating from the

mouth are the priests, scholars, and teachers responsible for preserving knowledge and for spiritual guidance. Kshatriyas are the warriors and rulers originating from the arm, Vaishyas are the traders and agriculturists originating from the thighs. At the bottom of this classification is Shudra, originating from the feet, they are labourers who help the all other Varnas. Initially this system was fluid and flexible, based on one's karma and merit. Social mobility was possible, allowing individuals to change their Varna based on their conduct, skills, and achievements. But in the later Vedic period, this system became more rigid and hereditary rather than merit based. Further texts like Manusmriti codified the Varna system, reinforcing caste-based discrimination and outlining specific duties for each varna. Vedic texts associated higher varnas with purity and lower varnas with pollution, influencing social interactions. Dalits were considered Avarna meaning outside of Varna and often referred to as Panchama or Antyaja. This classification of dalits as being outside the hierarchical order is similar to the classification of expendable on the ship.

The paper argues that *Mickey 17* is not merely a science fiction film depicting life in the future but also a film that depicts how people sitting at the top of hierarchy decide and regulate the lives of the people below. They do so without depending solely on overt violence, instead the domination and control is normalised through everyday routine practices such as food, labour allocation and introduction of rules. Hierarchical systems sustain themselves through these subtle regulations of food and bodily value. Food is used as an instrument of control and governance functioning as disciplinary technology. The paper also claims that this system of domination and control parallels the ancient Indian caste system known as the Varna System, exposing the persistence of caste-like disposability within dystopian modernity.

This study employs a qualitative interpretative methodology based on close textual analysis of the film. By doing a thematic analysis of the film, the paper tries to situate food, bodily value and labour stratification within the narrative as tools of domination and control echoing the Varna System. The paper also determines the ways in which oppressed characters in the film negotiate their identity and resist the system. The study aims to analyse the role of food as a tool of governance, how disposability is constructed, to draw parallels with the varna system and to examine forms of resistance within the film.

2. Analysis

Mickey 17 is a dystopian science fiction film based on the novel *Mickey 7*. The film was not considered a hit because in terms of financial success it did not meet the expectations. The film received mixed reactions from the reviewers but praise for its social message remained constant in most of the reviews, as IMDb summarises the reviews noting, “reviewers say 'Mickey 17' delves into identity, colonialism, and corporate greed with satirical political commentary. Robert Pattinson's performance and dark

humor receive praise, while pacing issues and underdeveloped characters draw criticism. Some find the film too lengthy and lacking thematic depth. Mixed opinions exist on political satire and villain portrayals. Despite these critiques, many find the film engaging and thought-provoking, appreciating its unique sci-fi and social commentary blend.” Famous film critic Simon Dillon writes in his review, “It isn’t as good as that singular masterpiece. Nor is it comparable on a genre level. But it touches on many of his socio-political preoccupations concerning rich-poor divides and inequalities.” The film’s similarity with the Varna System appeals to a larger audience because just like the film, Varna system also remains one of the contemporaries manifesting itself in various cultural practices as well as daily routine practices.

2.1 Hierarchical Logics Across Time: Varna and the Stratified Order of *Mickey 17*

The Varna System first appeared in the late phase of the early vedic period, roughly around 1500-1000 BCE. “Varna or Color was the original basis of the caste system. It is difficult to say that at what time and in what manner the caste system originated. So The Brahmanas attribute a divine origin to caste system(2), They base their views on the tenth Mandal(3) of the Rigveda called the Purusha Sukta.” (Alanzi 152)

Even after more than a thousand years, it still remains relevant in the modern world although its manifestation has taken various forms. One such form is its presence in the films and other art forms either directly or masqueraded in referential forms. The film *Mickey 17* is a film in which Varna System can be identified masqueraded in the form of strict occupation based hierarchical stratification. One of the striking features of this stratification is that it is enforced not through overt violence but through rules that appear to be technical and procedural. Varna system was initially karma and merit based but with time it became hereditary and based only on birth. The flexibility and fluidity that the system once offered was no longer there as it was inconvenient for those in power because then they would have to share their position with more people. The idea that one is born into a certain category is also seen in the film. The spacecraft in the film is on a mission due to which it flies away from the earth. In this process, the ship becomes a completely new world in itself where the members are identified based on the role they have been assigned and they are treated accordingly. Life on the ship almost becomes a new birth for the members and just like the Varna System they were assigned a category at their metaphorical birth, that is, at the beginning of the mission when members arrived on the ship. In the Varna System, Brahmans are at the top of the hierarchy who are responsible to uphold religious sanctity as well as guide all other Varnas. Kenneth Marshall and his wife Ylfa in the film, hold a position in the hierarchy that is similar to that of Brahmans in the Varna classification. Kenneth and Ylfa practically rule the ship, creating rules and running the order in the ship. They decide whose life matters and whose doesn’t. Their authority is justified through the idea that survival requires strict occupational classification, therefore accepting the set norms on the ship is not an option but a

prerequisite for survival. The authority of Brahmans is justified as being part of the larger cosmological or moral order, where each group performs a designated role that sustains the whole. Just like the Kshatriya and Vaishayas, the scientists, cooks, and guards each perform their role in order to sustain the equilibrium in the ship. But most importantly, the work related to cleaning and maintaining the ship's hygiene is assigned to people like Timo who are like the Shudras in the ship. However, just like how Dalits are considered Avarna, that is outside of the system, Mickey was also considered outside of the system. The kind of jobs he had to do and the ways in which he died was very inhuman yet normalised on the ship. The term expendable in itself suggests a category that is of relatively less significance. Mickey's death was considered routine and the act of updating his memory in each new reprint was traumatic for him as the memory of dying before would also restore. Power in both the systems functions through control and regulation that govern practices and interactions. The members are conditioned in such a way that these rules become internalised and appear to be necessary within the framework of the system. Mickey's designation as an expendable is not seen as cruelty but as an administrative necessity.

By placing these two systems in dialogue, the film's dystopian setting reveals how hierarchical logics can travel across time and context. What appears futuristic in Mickey 17 echoes older modes of social organisation in which human value is decided through structured division.

2.2 Regulating Appetite: Food as an Instrument of Power and Social Control

Food in *Mickey 17* is not merely a form of nutrition but it is a tool that is used for control and regulation. In the film, food functions as a visible marker of hierarchy as the distribution of meals on the spacecraft is uneven, based on the hierarchical position of an individual on the ship. Rationing of food in the film is controlled by fixing a calorie intake of each member. In one scene, Mickey attempts to add a small piece of food to his plate but an alarm goes off at that very moment, announcing that Mickey 17 had exceeded his allotted calorie intake for the day. Even the food that is provided to the members of the ship who are on the lower side of the hierarchy, does not look like food that is fit for human consumption, there is no taste or appearance in the food, instead it is just like a block of concrete and a grey coloured semi solid liquid served by a gun like device. In comparison, Kenneth and his wife Ylfa enjoy a lavish lifestyle characterised by food that is part of their luxurious life. Every shot of them having a meal shows a table full of different kinds of dishes served in opulent plates and cutlery. Ylfa has a particular liking for sauces of different kinds and keeps experimenting. In one instance she demands the babies of the aliens on the planet Niflheim to make sauce from their tail. Her demand is fulfilled as one of the babies is captured and offered to her. She cuts its tail and creates a sauce which she enjoys eating. While Mickey and others get food that does not even look like something edible, Ylfa not only enjoys unlimited access to resources like food, but also her food is, in looks and taste way better than what is served to other members. This contrast between regulated

sustenance and relative abundance reinforces stratification without requiring explicit declarations of inequality. Hierarchy therefore, becomes part of diet, manifesting control over both the body and actions. This logic resonates with the caste based systems in which food historically operates as a marker of purity and significance. Brahmins follow a strict vegetarian diet which is considered pure, while other Varnas are allowed to eat non vegetarian in order to perform their tasks. Similarly on the spacecraft, Mickey and his colleagues are provided with food that is not pure enough to be eaten by Ylfa and Kenneth. Also the regulation of appetite is very psychologically affecting as hunger and rationing generate awareness of one's place in the system. The expendable's awareness of his disposability is reinforced through the control on calorie intake, and also acts as a tool to condition the expendable into accepting his place in the system. The film does not dramatize food regulation and appetite becomes a site where governance and biology intersect. By transforming nourishment into a tool of calculation and control, *Mickey 17* demonstrates how power can operate most effectively through the management of everyday bodily needs, embedding hierarchy into the rhythms of daily life.

2.3 Disposable Bodies and Differential Human Value: Caste and the Expendable Subject

Disposability refers to the quality of something being such that it is intended to be used for a short time or single time and after that it may be disposed of. Moreover, the use is convenience driven and is characterised by easy replacement. In the film *Mickey 17*, Mickey is an expendable whose body is treated as disposable. Every time Mickey dies in the course of doing some life threatening job either inside or outside the spacecraft, his dead body is thrown into the furnace. The respect and reverence that a dead body is treated with is absent in Mickey's case because he is expendable. His bodily value is measured on the basis of his position in the hierarchical system on the spacecraft. Therefore, Mickey's status as an expendable renders the idea that certain individuals are structurally impaled to die for the sustenance of the order in the system. His repeated deaths do not destabilise the system, instead they confirm its logic. Mickey's identity is determined by the number he is assigned after each new version of him is reprinted, therefore his individuality is not acknowledged. His body becomes a renewable resource, valued only for its utility. In the movie, Kenneth announces that through a draw system, one lucky member will be given the chance to dine with Kenneth and Ylfa. That lucky member happened to be the expendable in the spacecraft, Mickey. He arrives at the dinner table to see the table full with delicacies and since he had not seen or eaten food of that kind since he boarded the ship, he profusely gobbles up all he could from the table. But soon after, he starts to feel terrible, it turns out that the food was contaminated with a virus on purpose and Mickey was just being used to ascertain the consequences of the virus and effectiveness of its cure. Hence, the invite was only to use Mickey as a guinea pig. This was not the only time Mickey was exposed to novel viruses, in another instance, Mickey was sent outside and asked to remove his gear to let the virus attack him. Once he returned, he was kept in seclusion and his symptoms were studied while he kept suffering under the effects of the

virus. Mickey's bodily value was reduced that of a lab rat. This treatment is also seen in the Varna System where purity is decided on the basis of hierarchical position. Labour and status are historically inherited and entire communities are relegated to forms of work deemed impure, dangerous and degrading. The system is such that some bodies are shielded from risk while others are routinely exposed to it. In India, people from certain marginalised communities are tasked to clean manholes manually which is also known as manual scavenging. "Waste picking is a caste-based profession, and waste pickers today continue to come from marginal castes. Their existence on the peripheries of our cities and urban planning practices and policy frameworks is, we argue, refracted through social logics of older agrarian formations. Caste identity not only structures who can participate in, or prosper from, the processes of urbanisation, it is also refashioned and recycled in new ways, in the precarious informal economy."(Singh and Shalaka) This shows how caste based stratification is deeply rooted in practices of daily life. The film hints at how such hierarchical elements transcend time and space as the film depicts life in 2054 and that too not on earth but on an alien planet.

2.4 Negotiating Hierarchy: Subtle Acts of Resistance Within Regulated Systems

Mickey 17 is a film that constructs a world within the spacecraft governed by regulation, hierarchy and strict rules but it also gives space for subtle acts of resistance within the system. At first these acts do not appear grand or revolutionary but their importance is understood by seeing these individual acts as a cumulative whole. In a system designed to proctor every move of every member, such small acts of resistance acquire political weight. A researcher rightly notes that, "Mickey 17 depicts a dystopian future in which human cloning is institutionalized as a labor mechanism. The protagonist, Mickey, is an "expendable" worker repeatedly cloned and sacrificed to complete hazardous missions for a powerful interstellar corporation. While the film's visual and narrative elements foreground technological advancement, its dialogue reveals the deeper ideological operations of power and resistance."(Bhoko 13155)

One such moment occurs when Mickey eats from Nasha's plate. This happens just after Mickey is asked to put down the extra piece of food he had put on his plate because it exceeded his allotted limit of daily calorie intake. This act was intimate yet it disrupted the order on multiple levels, first it defied the calorie intake rule and second it blurred the boundary separating Mickey from the higher placed individuals like Nasha.

In another instance, which is the rising action in the film, Mickey 17 is believed to be dead and left outside in the ice but the aliens help him survive. Since the people in the spacecraft were unaware of Mickey's survival, they reprint a new version of Mickey and name him Mickey 18. The simultaneous existence of the two Mickeys was against the rules of the spacecraft as doubles were strictly

prohibited. Despite the difference in behaviour, both Mickeys join hands to fight against the leaders of the spacecraft. This act becomes a key catalyst in the downfall of the egomaniac Kenneth.

Mickey's relationship with Nasha further complicates hierarchical boundaries. Individuals on the ship are not allowed to have intimate relationships with one another but Nasha and Mickey defy this rule. This act destabilises the order on the ship and also exposes the facade of control as no action is taken against such acts. Sexuality here becomes a form of resistance as it affirms singularity.

The most prominent act of resistance occurs when Mickey chooses to save the aliens acting against the wish of Kenneth Marshall who wanted to exterminate all the aliens on the planet. These acts finally culminate into the assassination of Kenneth Marshall and sacrifice of Mickey 18. The destruction of the reprint machine was the final nail in the coffin as it affirmed the singularity of Mickey. These instances of resistance illustrate that even in closed regulated systems, there is always space for resistance.

3. Conclusion

Mickey 17 is a dystopian science fiction film that shows life in the future world. Despite being technologically advanced, it appears to be socially archaic in its logic of hierarchy. Behind the illustrious technological advancements and imperial ideas, lies the hierarchical stratification that mirrors the ancient Indian Varna System. The spacecraft functions as a controlled social organism where labour, food and bodily value is decided on the basis of rank. Through this stratified arrangement, the narrative exposes how power can be rationalised, normalised and embedded into routine practices. By placing the film in dialogue with the Varna system, this study has demonstrated that hierarchy persists through regulation rather than constant over force. Both the systems of hierarchy justify stratification as necessary, functional and natural. While the Varna system classifies individuals on the basis of birth, the members on the spacecraft are classified based on their roles on the ship. Access to resources are unevenly distributed in both cases. Food becomes an important tool of both control and resistance. While the spacecraft has fixed calorie intake rules, Mickey defies it by eating from Nasha's plate which becomes the first act of resistance on the spacecraft and Mickey's first step towards reclaiming his individual identity. The film also highlights how disposability can control and distort the identity of an individual. Mickey's repeated deaths is an example of how his bodily value is regulated by those in power. The reprinting machine reproduces a human in the most inhuman manner. Memory is transferred into the newly printed body as if it were an electronic device without a human soul. The film also reveals that power operates through everyday practices and that resistance does not necessarily need to be revolutionary. Even small acts of resistance hold value and acquire importance when done consistently. The exploration of human condition in the film is understood under the light of the ancient caste system in this paper. This relational study revealed several unexplored intersections that require more scholarly attention.

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