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**Subaltern Resistance and Cinematic Representation:
Reading *Ajayante Randam Moshanam* Through
Postcolonial Theory**

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Abstract: This paper examines the representation of caste based marginalisation, inherited stigma and resistance in Jithin Laal's *Ajayante Randam Moshanam* (2024) through perspectives drawn from subaltern studies and postcolonial criticism. Centred on Kunjikelu, Maniyan and Ajayan, the film traces the persistence of social exclusion across three historical periods. The Chiyoyothi Vilakku serves as the central symbol through which questions of cultural authority, access and exclusion are explored. Kunjikelu's attempt to make the sacred lamp accessible to people of all castes, Maniyan's response to caste humiliation and Ajayan's continuing exclusion from the shrine reveal how social prejudice survives across generations. Through close attention to these moments, the paper considers the changing forms of resistance available to marginalised individuals. It also examines the limits of the film's political vision, particularly its dependence on individual heroism and its limited treatment of women's agency. Although the film remains within the conventions of mainstream fantasy and adventure cinema, it brings caste, memory and social exclusion into a popular narrative form. The paper considers both the possibilities and limitations of this representation of marginalised experience in contemporary Malayalam cinema.

Keywords: *Subalternity, Caste and Cinema, Malayalam Cinema, Postcolonial Theory, Ajayante Randam Moshanam, Cultural Hegemony, Resistance*

The concept of the subaltern has become an important part of postcolonial criticism because it draws attention to those who remain outside dominant structures of political, cultural and historical representation. Antonio Gramsci used the term in relation to subordinate social groups. It later acquired a distinctive place in South Asian historiography through the work of the Subaltern Studies collective. Ranajit Guha and other scholars associated with the project questioned colonial and nationalist histories that focused largely on elite political actors while giving limited attention to peasants and other marginalised groups (Guha). Subaltern studies sought to reconsider history from the perspective of those whose experiences had been neglected or excluded. The question was not simply who appeared in historical accounts, but also what kinds of actions and knowledge were considered historically significant. Oral traditions, collective memory, local struggles and everyday forms of resistance therefore became important for understanding histories that did not survive in official records.

In India, discussions of subalternity have particular relevance because social marginalisation has been shaped by the historical operation of caste. Caste affects access to social institutions, cultural spaces and material resources. Although caste and subalternity cannot be treated as identical categories, caste based exclusion remains an important context for examining questions of representation, agency and historical silencing. Cinema has played a complicated role in this process. Mainstream Indian cinema has often avoided caste or reduced structural inequality to individual melodrama. More recent films have engaged more directly with caste, gender, class and social marginalisation. Malayalam cinema has also participated in these developments through films that examine domestic hierarchy, masculinity, social exclusion and inherited privilege.

Within this context, Jithin Laal's *Ajayante Randam Moshanam* occupies an interesting position. Released in 2024, the film combines folklore, fantasy and adventure with questions of caste and social exclusion. Tovino Thomas plays Kunjikelu, Maniyan and Ajayan, three characters connected through ancestry and the Chiyoythi Vilakku. The movement of the lamp across generations is closely connected with the persistence of social hierarchy and the attempts of the protagonists to resist it. The film uses popular fantasy cinema to explore inherited marginalisation and resistance. Kunjikelu, Maniyan and Ajayan do not encounter oppression in the same way. Kunjikelu attempts to challenge exclusion through an egalitarian vision. Maniyan responds to humiliation through transgression. Ajayan confronts inherited stigma within a society that claims to have entered a modern constitutional order. Together, their stories suggest that social structures can survive historical change even when their outward forms are altered. The film also has clear limitations. Its emphasis on exceptional male heroes can turn structural resistance into individual heroism. Women's experiences receive less attention, and

the conventions of mainstream spectacle occasionally soften the force of its critique. These tensions are central to an understanding of the film's engagement with caste and marginalisation.

The theoretical background of this paper lies in subaltern studies and postcolonial criticism. Gramsci's discussion of subordinate groups and cultural hegemony provides an important starting point for understanding how domination is maintained not only through force but also through cultural institutions and social practices (Gramsci). The Subaltern Studies collective later adapted these concerns to the study of South Asian history. Guha challenged elite centred historical narratives by drawing attention to forms of political consciousness and resistance that had received little attention in colonial and nationalist historiography (Guha). Later scholars extended these discussions by examining nationalism, modernity, historical consciousness and the relationship between dominant and marginalised forms of knowledge.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" raised a significant challenge for any attempt to represent marginalised experience. Spivak questioned the assumption that intellectuals could simply recover and present an authentic subaltern voice. Her argument remains relevant to cinema because filmic representation is shaped by institutions of production, authorship and spectatorship (Spivak). This question is especially important in relation to caste and mainstream cinema. A film may address caste based marginalisation while remaining part of cultural structures in which marginalised communities do not necessarily control representation. The presence of caste within a narrative is therefore not sufficient by itself to establish a politically radical representation. The manner in which characters are given agency, the organisation of the narrative and the resolution of conflict also require attention.

Ajayante Randam Moshanam has attracted critical attention for bringing caste related concerns into a fantasy adventure narrative. The Chiyoythi Vilakku connects the three protagonists and their relationship with social hierarchy. Kunjikelu seeks to make the sacred object accessible across caste divisions. Maniyan's story is shaped by caste humiliation, while Ajayan continues to experience exclusion generations later. The film also remains shaped by the conventions of mainstream hero centred cinema. Its political concerns are therefore mediated through action, fantasy and spectacle. This tension between social critique and popular entertainment makes the film particularly useful for examining the possibilities and limits of representing marginalised experience in contemporary Malayalam cinema.

This paper uses qualitative textual analysis to examine *Ajayante Randam Moshanam* through subaltern studies, postcolonial criticism and film analysis. The film is the primary text, while critical reviews and theoretical works provide the wider framework for interpretation. The discussion concentrates on four

areas. The first concerns Kunjikelu, Maniyan and Ajayan and their different encounters with social exclusion. The second examines the Chiyyothi Vilakku as a symbol of access, cultural authority and caste hierarchy. The third considers particular scenes involving exclusion, criminalisation, inherited stigma and resistance. The final section considers the limits of the film's representation.

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, Guha's approach to subaltern historiography and Spivak's critique of representation provide the main theoretical points of reference. These perspectives make it possible to examine the film as more than a story of individual heroes. They draw attention to the ways in which power, memory and exclusion are transmitted across generations. The discussion is based on close attention to narrative events, character interactions and symbolic elements in the film. The aim is not to treat the film as an unmediated account of marginalised experience, but to consider how such experience is represented within a mainstream cinematic form.

The Chiyyothi Vilakku provides the central symbolic link between the three narratives. The lamp is not simply a magical or sacred object. Its importance lies in the question of who has access to it and who has the authority to determine its meaning. Kunjikelu's relationship with the lamp establishes this question. After assisting the king, he asks for the Chiyyothi Vilakku as his reward and intends to establish it in a place where people of all castes can worship. The possibility of shared access is later defeated when the sacred object and the space associated with it become restricted by dominant social groups (Laal).

This sequence is important because the issue is not limited to ownership. The lamp is connected with cultural authority and social belonging. Once access is restricted, it becomes part of a system that determines who is permitted to participate in a shared cultural space. The lamp therefore brings together material and symbolic forms of power. Kunjikelu's failure also shows that the transfer of an object does not automatically produce social equality. The existing social order can absorb and transform institutions that were intended to challenge exclusion.

Kunjikelu represents the earliest form of resistance within the film's historical structure. His response to power is based on the idea of shared access. Rather than seeking wealth for himself, he asks for the Chiyyothi Vilakku and imagines a place of worship open to people across caste divisions (Laal). The scene presents an important contradiction. Kunjikelu succeeds in obtaining the lamp from royal authority, yet he cannot permanently alter the social structures surrounding it. His experience suggests that access to power does not necessarily transform the conditions through which power is maintained. Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony is useful here. Social dominance is maintained not only through direct force but also through customs, institutions and accepted cultural practices. Kunjikelu can challenge authority through personal action, but his intervention cannot by itself change the social

order. His resistance nevertheless establishes a memory that survives beyond his lifetime. The failure of his attempt to create an inclusive space does not erase the possibility that he imagined. The Chiyoythi Vilakku continues to carry the memory of that unrealised vision, which later becomes important to Maniyan and Ajayan.

Maniyan's story presents another form of marginalisation. He is known as a thief and is treated with fear and suspicion. The film complicates this identity by placing his actions within a context of humiliation and social exclusion. The temple related humiliation experienced by Maniyan's wife becomes particularly important. Maniyan's relationship with the Chiyoythi Vilakku cannot therefore be understood simply as an act of ordinary theft. The lamp becomes connected with dignity, exclusion and retaliation. This raises questions about the relationship between criminality and social power. When marginalised individuals challenge institutions that deny them dignity, their actions may be described as criminal while the structures that produced their exclusion remain unquestioned. Maniyan's identity as a thief is therefore shaped by the social world that judges him. The film does not entirely romanticise Maniyan's actions. However, it does not allow the audience to accept the judgement of the dominant community without considering the conditions in which his actions take place. The social order that condemns him also participates in the humiliation and exclusion of his family.

Maniyan's story therefore brings legality and justice into tension. The dominant community has the authority to define his actions as criminal, while its own practices of exclusion appear as ordinary aspects of social life. The contrast exposes the unequal standards through which respectability and criminality are defined.

Ajayan's story shows that historical change does not necessarily remove inherited prejudice. Living in the 1990s, he works as an electrician and attempts to establish a respectable life. Nevertheless, the history associated with his grandfather continues to shape the way the village sees him. Whenever theft takes place, suspicion turns towards Ajayan. He is not judged only by his own conduct. Instead, the memory of Maniyan becomes a social identity imposed upon the grandson. His efforts to live differently cannot entirely free him from this inherited stigma.

The scenes involving the shrine make the connection between caste and exclusion clearer. Ajayan and his mother remain outside a sacred space generations after Maniyan's death. Although the explanation for their exclusion refers to the family's history, the social logic of the scene also reveals the continuing force of caste hierarchy (Laal). This is one of the strongest examples of historical continuity in the film. The period has changed, but the mechanisms of exclusion remain familiar. Modernity has altered the surface of society without automatically removing inherited prejudice.

Ajayan's relationship with the modern world is also shaped by his engagement with education and constitutional rights. The portraits of B. R. Ambedkar and Ayyankali in his home place his personal story within a wider history of struggles against caste oppression. The scenes in which Ajayan teaches children about constitutional rights are especially significant because they introduce education and legal knowledge as forms of agency (Laal). His character is therefore associated not only with physical courage but also with an awareness of equality as a constitutional principle. This marks an important difference between the three generations. Kunjikelu relies on direct intervention and the redistribution of a symbolic object. Maniyan's resistance takes the form of transgression. Ajayan is also associated with education and constitutional knowledge.

The film therefore presents resistance as changing with historical circumstances. Marginalised agency does not remain fixed in a single form. It appears through physical resistance, transgression, memory and knowledge. At the same time, the film shows the limits of constitutional modernity. Ajayan can know his rights and teach them to others while continuing to experience discrimination. Legal equality does not automatically remove social prejudice. The difference between constitutional ideals and everyday social practice remains an important part of his story.

Sudev Varma represents another aspect of the film's engagement with social hierarchy. He appears within the modern narrative and presents himself as someone who has moved beyond an explicit caste identity. Yet his behaviour reveals that the rejection of caste markers does not necessarily mean the rejection of caste privilege. The character illustrates the difference between appearing modern and challenging the social structures that continue to produce inequality. A person may distance himself from the visible signs of caste identity while continuing to benefit from its historical privileges. This contradiction gives the modern narrative an important dimension. Caste does not survive only through openly declared discrimination. It can also continue through forms of privilege that remain invisible to those who possess them.

The narrative structure of the movie depends upon the transmission of stories across generations. The past survives not only through official history but also through family memory, oral narration and folklore. This is particularly relevant to discussions of subaltern history. Marginalised communities do not always appear in official archives. Their histories may instead survive through stories, memories and local traditions. Ajayan's understanding of his family's past is shaped by narratives associated with Kunjikelu and Maniyan. The past remains active because it continues to determine how the present is understood. Memory therefore has two different effects. Ajayan inherits the stigma attached to Maniyan, but he also inherits the stories that help him understand the history of his family. The

Chiyoythi Vilakku becomes the material object around which these memories are organised. Its history cannot be separated from the different social meanings attached to it across generations.

The movie presents caste based marginalisation as a historical condition that changes in form without disappearing. Kunjikelu, Maniyan and Ajayan each encounter different forms of exclusion, but their stories remain connected through the persistence of social hierarchy. Kunjikelu attempts to challenge exclusion by imagining shared access to the sacred lamp. Maniyan confronts a social order that treats him as criminal while failing to recognise the conditions of humiliation surrounding his life. Ajayan experiences inherited stigma within a society that formally recognises equality but continues to practise exclusion. The three narratives therefore form a history of recurring marginalisation. Social conditions change, but caste prejudice adapts to those changes. This continuity gives the film much of its relevance to discussions of subalternity.

At the same time, the film cannot be treated as a direct recovery of a subaltern voice. Spivak's concerns about representation remain relevant because the film is a mainstream representation of marginalisation. Its characters and conflicts are shaped by a commercial system that depends upon spectacle, action and hero centred storytelling. The strongest limitation lies in the film's dependence on exceptional individuals. Kunjikelu, Maniyan and Ajayan possess abilities that distinguish them from the wider community. Their resistance is therefore closely connected with extraordinary masculine heroism. This can weaken the structural implications of the film's caste politics. Collective resistance receives less attention than individual acts of courage. The resolution of conflict is consequently linked to the achievements of exceptional protagonists rather than to sustained social change.

The treatment of women presents another limitation. Women experience caste based humiliation and exclusion within the narrative, particularly in relation to Maniyan's family. However, their agency is not developed to the same extent as that of the male protagonists. The film therefore recognises the relationship between caste and gender without examining it fully. A broader representation of marginalised experience would require greater attention to women's independent struggles and forms of resistance.

These limitations do not remove the importance of what the film attempts to do. The movie places caste based exclusion within a mainstream fantasy adventure narrative and makes it central to the relationship between its three generations of protagonists. The film does not entirely escape the conventions of commercial cinema, but it does not ignore caste either. Instead, it brings social exclusion into a popular form that depends on action, fantasy and spectacle. This tension between critique and entertainment is one of the defining features of the film.

Ajayante Randam Moshanam brings questions of caste, exclusion and historical memory into a popular Malayalam cinematic form. Through Kunjikelu, Maniyan and Ajayan, the film traces the persistence of social marginalisation across different periods. The Chiyoythi Vilakku is central to this history. Kunjikelu's attempt to make it accessible across caste divisions represents the possibility of a more inclusive social order. The later restriction of access reveals the strength of existing cultural hierarchies. Maniyan's relationship with the lamp connects caste humiliation with criminalisation, while Ajayan's story shows how inherited stigma can survive within a society shaped by constitutional democracy. The forms of resistance change across the three generations. Physical intervention, transgression, oral memory and constitutional knowledge appear as different ways of responding to exclusion.

The film also has clear limitations. Its dependence on individual heroism and its limited treatment of women's agency prevent it from offering a complete representation of marginalised experience. The conventions of mainstream fantasy cinema occasionally transform structural conflict into personal adventure. Nevertheless, the film makes caste based exclusion visible within a form of cinema that reaches a broad audience. Its three connected narratives suggest that social prejudice cannot be understood simply as a problem of the past. The memory of caste, criminality and exclusion continues to shape the lives of later generations. The importance of the movie lies not in its ability to provide a complete account of subaltern experience but in the questions it raises about access, memory and representation. The history of the Chiyoythi Vilakku is also a history of who is permitted to enter cultural and social spaces and who is kept outside them. Further work could compare the film with other Malayalam films that engage with caste and social marginalisation. Comparisons with films created from explicitly Dalit perspectives may also provide a clearer understanding of the differences between representing marginalised experience and speaking from within marginalised communities.

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