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Marathi Cinema: A Study Of The Protagonist In 'Maymaouli' And 'Suryodaya' Films

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ABSTRACT

Regional films in Indian cinema reflect socio-cultural and political contexts. Marathi cinema has reached an international level due to its diverse themes and the portrayals of protagonists addressing different issues on screen. The portrayal of protagonists from marginalized communities has been depicted at various periods in the Marathi film industry, highlighting their diverse aspects. Over time, and with social change, the representation of these protagonists in Marathi cinema has evolved. In the caste narratives, the portrayal of marginalized protagonists intensely examines societal inequities and struggles against ingrained norms. However, when these narratives are brought to the screen, it is crucial to consider the perspectives of the directors and writers in presenting the protagonist. This research paper will examine the portrayal of protagonists in the films "Maymaouli" and "Suryodaya" using textual analysis as a research method.

Keywords: Regional films, Marginalized communities, Portrayal, Caste narratives, Protagonist.

INTRODUCTION

The Marathi film industry has significantly contributed to Indian cinema with its rich history and diverse narratives. Many themes are explored in Marathi films. "Marathi cinema is considered the precursor to all other Indian regional films. This is not only because it emerged before films in any other Indian language, but also because the entire concept of Indian cinema was initially developed and fostered by Marathi speakers in the Marathi-speaking regions on the country's west coast". (Narvekar, 2016, pp.11). The depiction of protagonists from marginalized communities has changed across different periods in Marathi cinema.

There are four distinct periods in the history of the Marathi film industry. The period from 1913 to 1930 is known as the silent era. Dadasaheb Phalke made the first silent film Raja Harishchandra. The journey of Marathi cinema began then. During this period, the film mainly depicts the mythology stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Following 1932, films entered the sound era. Stories about the lives of saints are represented during this period. Films based on tamasha were popular during the 1960s and 1970s. After 1972, color films emerged, and the 1980s introduced a surge of comedic narratives. The new wave of Marathi cinema that emerged in the year 2000 ushered in a new phase, marked by films exploring previously uncharted subjects. Maymaouli is a film that was released during the sound era, whereas Suryodaya was released in the era when color films became prevalent. Both of these films comment on the subject of caste. In Marathi cinema, the portrayal of protagonists from various castes is evident, with stories featuring Dalit protagonists appearing more frequently on screen. This paper will examine two protagonists: one from the Dalit caste and the other from the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DTNT)

community. These films provide a distinctive insight into character development, thematic elements, and the socio-cultural context in which the protagonists function.

OBJECTIVES

1. To Examine how protagonists are portrayed in the films "Mayamouli" and "Suryoday".
2. To analyze how the directorial approach influences the depiction of protagonists in these films.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the portrayal of protagonists from marginalized communities on screen, the Marathi films "Mayamouli" and "Suryoday" have been selected. Both films feature narratives centered around caste themes. Selected random sampling to collect film data from the sound era and the advent of color in the Marathi film industry. The study will investigate how the directors have represented these protagonists, employing textual analysis as a qualitative method. This methodology aims to understand the meanings of texts, how texts convey meaning, and "what its themes, messages, and explicit and implicit assumptions aim to accomplish" (Ouellette & Gray, 2017). The collected data has been analyzed through three themes. These are:

1. Depiction of the Protagonist's Caste Identity
2. Discrimination Faced by the Protagonist
3. Oppression Faced by the Protagonist

FILM ANALYSIS

1. Depiction of the Protagonist's Caste Identity: Maymaouli's film was released in 1971. India ratified the Constitution in 1950. In those days, untouchability was still considered in the villages despite the Constitution banning it. Gopya, the protagonist of the film, belongs to the Dalit caste. The beginning of the film shows Gopya and his family cleaning the village and cutting wood outside the house. Through this work, his caste identity can be identified. In those times, people of the Mahar caste had to clean and do other menial jobs in the village. "Historically, Dalit identity in India evolved dialogically at two levels; first in dialogue with the Hindu Brahmanical tradition as simultaneous inner and outer struggles to retain its core of identity and self. Second, it evolved through the unique historical experience of colonial modernity as a resource for anti-caste articulations such as through Enlightenment ideas and other tools of emancipation. Thus, the antennae of Dalit identity politics from colonial to postcolonial times constantly point to multiple roots and make confusing claims because of the legacy of historical rupture from which they are trying to recuperate hidden histories to rebuild an emancipator identity". (Jangam, 2015)



(The protagonist's hut indicates their caste identity based on their living conditions)

In the film Surodaya, the protagonist Pistulya burns all the huts in his community because he believes that if they burn their huts, the government will provide them with permanent houses. After the huts are burned, the police, journalists, and government officials come to investigate. They are asked about their caste during the questioning. Members of the community reveal their castes, with some being Phase Pardhi फासेपारधी while others are Vaidu³

वैदू and MatiWadar⁴ माती वडार all belonging to the DTNT community. Pistulya has to live a nomadic life. To ensure that his son does not have to live the same wandering life, he burns their huts, hoping that the government will provide them with permanent houses, allowing them to settle in one place.

2.Discrimination Faced by the Protagonist:



(one person gives water to the protagonist without touching him)

In the Maymaouli film, the people of the village treat the protagonist's family as untouchables. When Gopya is cutting wood, he becomes thirsty and asks for water. Water is served without touching him. After cleaning, Gopya's wife asks villagers for water to wash their hands. In response, she is told to wash her hands in the gutter. The daughter of Gopya is thirsty, but no one is willing to give her drinking water because she is a Dalit. After that, she jumps into the well to drink water. She touched the water in the well, causing it to deteriorate. The villagers pelted stones at their families in response. In the village, the protagonist faces discrimination because of his caste identity.

In the film Suryodaya, the protagonist belongs to a DTNT community. When he goes to the village to grind flour, he is beaten by the villagers. They tell him, "Pistulya, your caste is known for stealing, so you could steal anything." They warn him not to return to the village. When a theft occurs in the village, the police beat members of the DTNT community, demanding to know who committed the crime. Eventually, the police realized these individuals were not responsible for the robbery and left the area. DNTs (Denotified Tribes) were classified under the Criminal Tribes Act enacted by the British between 1871 and 1947. Although the Indian government reversed this act in 1952, people from DTNT community continue to be regarded as thieves by society. Due to their caste identity, they are labeled as thieves, even if they haven't committed any crime.

²Indian Caste system, Phase Pardhi is a Denotified and Nomadic Tribe.

³Indian Caste system, Vaidu is a Denotified and Nomadic Tribe

⁴Indian Caste system, MatiWadar is a Denotified and Nomadic Tribe

3.Oppression Faced by the Protagonist: In the film Maymaouli, the village leader tells the protagonist that the villagers are not maintaining the village's cleanliness properly, and thus, they must vacate the hut. The protagonist responds to the village head, "We have lived here since the time of our ancestors." Subsequently, the villagers burn their huts. The protagonist's family manages to escape with their lives but becomes separated in the chaos. The protagonist adopts a new caste identity and serves as a God's servant in the temple. Meanwhile, a Brahmin family raises the protagonist's daughter, and the protagonist's wife continues to live according to her original caste identity. In the film Suryodaya, when a robbery occurs in the village, the police arrive to search the huts of the DTNT community. They beat the protagonist severely, accusing him of the theft. At that moment, Pistulya realizes that burning their huts was a mistake. Pistulya's ancestors had wandered for generations. In an effort to prevent his family and community from continuing this nomadic existence, they demanded permanent houses from the government. However, this issue became politicized.

DISCUSSION

In the film *Mayamouli*, the protagonist's caste identity is not portrayed through his appearance or surname. Rather, it is depicted on screen through his involvement in cleaning tasks and the untouchability he faces in the village, indicating that he belongs to a Dalit caste. At the beginning of the film, the protagonist is shown experiencing caste discrimination. However, in the later parts of the film, the director alters his caste identity. As a result of this change, the protagonist is not depicted as fighting against the oppression he experienced. Instead, an upper-caste Brahmin character takes the initiative to help the protagonist achieve justice on screen. "The history of the oppressed is appropriated and manipulated, and they are ousted from their own story, reduced to being mere receivers of justice. However well-intentioned, it is the oppressor-protagonist (or writer) "saving" and bringing justice to the marginalized in our visual and literary imagination". (Maitreya,2020).

In the film *Suryoday*, the protagonist is shown coming from the DTNT community, which is depicted through the portrayal of his living conditions. He is seen residing in an open area outside the village, making temporary shelters. The protagonist and the members of his community are always discussing how to obtain permanent houses. This demonstrates that the film realistically portrays the lives of the DTNT community. The film's narrative depicts the life of the DTNT community and their struggle to obtain permanent housing. The protagonist is portrayed as their leader. The protagonist burns their temporary shelters in the hope that the government will provide them with permanent homes. In the film's narrative, no upper-caste characters are seen fighting to solve the protagonist's problems. The upper-caste characters are seen within the government system and among politicians. The protagonist's struggle for his rights is shown throughout the film until the end. "Whether in literature or cinema, we find that Dalit characters have rarely been center stage, even in stories about caste oppression. Whether a Dalit character is portrayed as a victim or a fighter, is a matter of politics and the sociopolitical reality of the storyteller. In Brahminical culture, which prohibits the literary aspirations of certain castes, the caste of the storyteller is bound to play a role in their story". (Maitreya,2020)

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the two selected films illuminates that the portrayal of the protagonist from the marginalized community is represented differently on screen from the director's perspective. In the Marathi film industry during the sound period, the portrayal of the protagonist in caste narratives does not emphasize their caste struggle. In the film *Mayamouli*, the Dalit protagonist is developed from the perspective of a Brahmin director. However, without the upper-caste director having personal experience or understanding of the protagonist's struggle, the portrayal in the film does not come across as strong or powerful. The protagonist does not appear to question his caste struggle. In the film, he has to conceal his identity and seek justice with the help of a Brahmin character who resolves his issue. "In Indian cinema Upper-caste characters in films are shown as heroes, vanguards, or philanthropists, and as the only people who can deliver justice in personal feuds and social problems or can demolish the criminal class". (Wankhede,2021).

After 1970, as Marathi cinema began incorporating color films, some movies emerged as part of a parallel cinema movement. Among these, *Suryoday*'s film addresses caste issues related to the DTNT community. In the movie, the protagonist articulates his community's problems. The protagonist cannot fight for his issues because they have been politicized. His primary problem, which is related to the DTNT community, still needs to be resolved within the government's system. Nevertheless, the protagonist's existential struggle is portrayed powerfully on screen. Since the director of this film comes from a marginalized community, the portrayal of the protagonist on screen appears to be developed from their own experiences. The protagonist's existence in the film reflects his real-life struggles. From the director's personal experiences, the narratives that emerge present the protagonist in a nuanced and intimate portrayal of struggles that challenge stereotypes.

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