



Decoding the Subaltern: Self-Fashioning and Christian Otherness in *Vidheyan*

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Abstract:

This paper examines *Vidheyan* (1994), Adoor Gopalakrishnan's adaptation of Paul Zacharia's *Bhaskarapatelarum Ente Jeevithavum*, as a critical site for interrogating Christian subalternity, muted masculinities and the politics of representation in Malayalam cinema. Moving away from the dominant screen constructions of the assertive, land-owning Syrian Christian male of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the film positions Thommi—a migrant farmhand in South Karnataka—as a radically atypical Christian protagonist marked by fear, submission, and psychological immobility. Through Thommi's subject-position, the narrative foregrounds the socio-historical experiences of Christian settlers whose identities are shaped by economic precarity, feudal violence, and internalised servitude.

The theoretical framework in the analysis includes subaltern studies theory and the politics of representation to argue that the film decodes the subaltern Christian self not through heroic assertion but through a complex affective economy of domination, masochism and muted resistance.

By reading Thommi's relationship with Pattelar through frameworks of hegemonic masculinity, Lacanian subject formation, and subaltern theory, the paper demonstrates how the film destabilises triumphalist settler narratives characteristic of Syrian Christian cultural memory. Additionally, the analysis situates *Vidheyan* within a wider genealogy of Christian representation in Malayalam cinema—tracing contrasts with contemporary depictions in *Sangham*, *Kottayam Kunjachan*, and later counter-hegemonic films such as *Dany*, *Achanurangatha Veedu*, *Ee.Ma.Yau.*, and *O Baby*. These comparisons reveal how marginal Christian identities—Latin, Dalit, Anglo-Indian, and migrant—complicate monolithic constructions of Christian masculinity. *Vidheyan* offers a significant alternative imaginary, where the Christian male emerges not as hegemon but as the “settler other,” enabling a rethinking of power, agency, and community within the cinematic public sphere of Kerala.

Keywords: Subalternity, Christian Masculinities, Malayalam Cinema, Settler Narratives, Hegemonic Masculinity, Politics of Representation, Affective Servitude

There always exists a reciprocal relationship between the mythification of events and the social construction of identities. Historically, the myths and legends that shaped a social group were transmitted from one generation to the next primarily through oral narratives and vocal performances. In the contemporary era, visual narratives and written accounts like family and community history, fashion the identity of various communities. Cultural studies analyses not only how and why the discourses of the dominant hegemonic community assume significance in the world, but also how the marginalised communities and their representatives are inscribed in the mainstream media and cinema discourses.

Kerala has the presence of three notable categories of Christian identifications: Syrian Christians, Latin Christians and New Christians (Harikrishnan 64). The status of Syrian Christians as the equivalent of hegemonic Hindu groups due to Namboodiri lineage exalted them in caste hierarchy. This cultural capital, coupled with the socio-economic capital in the form of educational institutions and rich rubber/spices plantations, ensured community power and the community is represented as dominant in literature and cinema (Johny B. 18). Harikrishnan lists out the genealogy and features of the two marginal groups in Kerala Christianity as:

The second group, Latin Christians, largely converted from erstwhile fishing castes along the coastal belt ... underwent conversion after the arrival of the Portuguese and as a result of their missionary endeavours. The last group—New Christians—were mostly oppressed caste-Hindus converted by missionary activities led mainly by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the London Missionary Society (LMS) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (64)

The consistent practice in Malayalam cinema is to record the Christian hero as incarnation of the hegemonic ideals was analysed. Christianity, being a community known for its hegemony through mythifications is written on screen as mainstream in genres such as action films, romances, investigative thrillers, family movies and others. For instance, Blais Johny's article "Vellithirayil Vazhunnavarum Veezhunnavarum" (Those Who Rule and Those Who Fall on the Silver Screen), published in 2019, evaluates the sense of caste in Christianity. Analysing the popular characters like Aadu Thoma (*Spadikam*, 1995), Aanakkattil Chakochi (*Lelam*, 1997), Thoppil Joppan (*Thoppil Joppan*, 2016) and so on, the article investigates how Malayalam cinema celebrates savarna elitism in Christianity and ignores subaltern factions in the community. Resisting the attempt to homogenise the Christian experience, the article demonstrates how caste functions as an ideologically embedded mechanism in Malayalam cinema. The invisibility of castes among Syrian Christians is contested with regard to the feudal tropes in Malayalam cinema, and three historical reasons are observed in the process. The cultural capital through educational institutions, the anti-Left political legacy since the liberation struggle and the continuing access to the state political power are identified as the primary reasons for the hegemonic superiority of Syrian Christians (18). The celebrated masculine personas of the Christian community, Johny observes, have emerged from the landowning feudal aristocracy among the Syrian Christians. However, this paper fills the gap left by the aforementioned studies and analyses the narrativisation of non-hegemonic communities in the

cinematic imagination and how they add a different layer of signification in the construction of masculinity.

These narratives of communal hegemony were mostly set in the High ranges and in agriculture centric feudal landscapes of central Travancore and consequently displayed the chivalrous toxic masculinity of the Syrian Christian heroes. Though, there was an attempt to homogenise most narratives centred around the Christian identity into the structure of dominance, there have been a few counter narratives focusing on the lives of the marginalised within the community. The representation of various minorities such as Dalit Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Latin Christians who defied and subverted the macho stereotypes of the Christian heroes, is analysed in the process. Instead of glorifying the Christian hero, such narratives represent heroes whose feet are firmly placed in the soil both figuratively and literally.

The hero centric Malayalam cinema offers a paradigm of social progression on the surface. Although the heroes appear on the side of progressive social values, the analysis of the deep structure demonstrates a regressive social perspective as the texts finally uphold the emergence of a champion of the oppressed who solves the narrative tension in a flash. K. P. Jayakumar observes the general formation of the idea of reality in Malayalam cinema: "Instead of portraying the land in all its ethnic diversity, the cine narratives focus on certain cultural identities, and ethnic/linguistic communities. This imaginary space permeates and envisions itself as Kerala's cultural public consciousness. As a result, the inequalities and alienations in society continue to be alienations in the film as well" (42).

This construction of heroism is analysed in the context of Robert Stam and Louis Spence's "Colonialism, Racism and Representation: An Introduction" (1985) which problematises the construction of non-western cultures and people as primitive and mysterious, positioning Western protagonists as heroic saviours. The erroneous representation of the conditions of the third world in cinema happened as a result of the imperial gaze against the third world other, with regard to their language and social conditions. Accordingly, "hundreds of Hollywood westerns turned history on its head by making the Native Americans appear to be intruders on what was originally their land, and provided a paradigmatic perspective through which to view the whole of the nonwhite world" (6). The possibility of counter hegemonic and elitist narratives emerges in Malayalam cinema, as a corollary to the way Stam and Spence problematised the politics of representation.

One of the concepts indispensable in studying the subjectivity construction of a group, in association with the problematic politics of representation is that of the subaltern. Antonio Gramsci used the term to describe marginalised social groups excluded from hegemonic power structures. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci argues that subaltern classes "by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States" (53). Having systematically been denied political representation and intellectual agency, they lack autonomous political initiative and are often subject to the ideological domination of the ruling class. Kylie Smith defines the Gramscian subalterns as "those groups in society who are lacking autonomous political power" (39). Gramscian analysis laid the

groundwork for later scholars who examined how history is written from the perspective of the elite, erasing the voices of the oppressed. Founded by Ranajit Guha in the 1980s and comprising scholars such as Shahid Amin, Gyanendra Pandey, David Arnold, and Partha Chatterjee, the Subaltern Studies Collective drew on Gramsci to challenge colonial and elite nationalist historiographies, arguing that dominant narratives had persistently obscured subaltern agency, resistance, and modes of self-expression.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critically expanded the idea of the subaltern in her 1988 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in which she explores how colonial and postcolonial power structures silence marginalised groups, particularly subaltern women. Dismissing even well-intentioned intellectuals like Michel Foucault and Giles Deleuze who often speak for the subaltern rather than allowing them to articulate their own experiences, Spivak brings in some Gramscian notions to critique the silencing of the marginalised.

Let us now move to consider the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat. ... On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, can the subaltern speak? (283)

Finding the stance of the Western academic institutions and nationalist movements problematic for failing to recognise the complexity of subaltern subjectivity, she asserts that “the subaltern cannot speak” (Spivak 308). Mainstream cinema as a site of representation, it is argued, continues to mute the subaltern not only by instances of misrepresentation but also by the appropriation of their voice.

The subjectivity of the non-hegemonic characters in Malayalam cinema is formed and consolidated according to a sense of public consciousness that is continuously disseminated through popular narratives and social formations. Uma Chakravorty observes how the subaltern bodies are inscribed in literature: The first is a power structure based on ritualistic purity in which the Brahmins are placed on top as the norm and the untouchables on the outside. The second is the power structure based on the landowning elite class constituting the surface and the landless poor situated on the peripheries (24). In fact, as a representation system, the inclusions and exclusions of the marginalised existences constitute the significations.

The reading of the Anglo- Indian, Latin, Dalit and other subaltern versions of Christianity assumes great significance in the light of contemporary attitudes regarding equality and justice. In the line of the theory of the subaltern in cinema, questions are raised about access and representation within Malayalam cinema focussing on the Christian hero. Addressing issues of power, privilege, and inequality, the analysis highlights the scope of inclusivity in both the creation and consumption of films.

The Syrian Christian identity has produced time and again innumerable number of settler narratives ceremoniously dealing with the combination of hegemonic masculinity and elitist feudal ideologies. The persona of a muted subaltern, lacking agency among the settlers, was hardly represented on screen in Malayalam cinema. *Vidheyan* (1994), the national award winning masterpiece by Adoor

Gopalakrishnan based on the story *Bhaskarapatelarum Ente Jeevthavum* (*Bhaskarapatelar and My Life*, 1986) by Paul Zachariah is one such narrative that portrays its Christian settler hero as subjugated and subordinated. The film narrates the fraught relationship between Thommy, a migrant labourer from Wayanad, and his feudal master, Pattelar, in the socio-cultural landscape of South Karnataka. Driven by economic precarity, Thommy enters Pattelar's domain only to encounter a regime of absolute domination. Pattelar, depicted as a violent patriarch with a long history of sexual predation, exercises unrestrained power over the bodies and lives of those around him. Upon learning about Thommy's wife, he violates her as well, subsequently binding Thommy to him through gestures of patronage that mask deeper structures of servitude. Thommy's subjugation intensifies as Pattelar continues his assaults—including the rape of Kuttapara's daughter—and perpetrates brutal acts such as the gratuitous beating of a wealthy townsman, Yusuf. Pattelar's wife emerges as a moral counterpoint, displaying compassion towards Thommy and urging her husband to reform. Her ethical stance, however, provokes Pattelar's hostility, culminating in his plot to stage her murder as an accident, during which Thommy is accidentally injured. Although she saves Thommy's life, Pattelar later succeeds in killing her and coercing Thommy into assisting with the fabricated suicide narrative. The community, aware of Pattelar's escalating violence, conspires with Thommy to eliminate him. As Pattelar flees into the forest with Thommy after being attacked by his wife's family, he is ultimately killed by his brothers-in-law. Thommy initially mourns the death of the man who oppressed him, revealing the depth of his internalised subservience, but eventually recognises his release from Pattelar's domination.

Vidheyan investigates the history of settlement of the Christians in the hilly terrains of Karnataka, though it is apparently about the psychology of servitude. As an example of an early settler narrative, *Vidheyan* is analysed to uncover how the Christian (hero) is represented as a muted submissive settler known for his helplessness and servility resulting from socio-political and psychological reasons. Such an analysis demonstrates the myriad ways in which the film is constituted through a complex web of material – master versus settler 'encounters' in which Thommi and Patelar are constructed as figures rooted in history.

When examined from the point of view in which Thommi (Gopakumar) is seen as the protagonist of *Vidheyan*, how the narrative has placed the migration of Christians is important in the cultural analysis of the film. Of course, Thommi is an atypical Christian hero to the audience of the 1990s when the Syrian Christian male was constructed as the aggressive, possessive, all pervasive alpha male in *Sangham* (1988) and *Kottayam Kunjachan* (1990). In other words, most Christian heroes of the phase resembled Patelar, the feudal land owner rather than Thommi. The only instance Patelar calls his serf by name is towards the end when they wander through the forests of Kodagu, escaping their prospective murderers (01:45:05-07). From this angle, Thommi is symbolic of those without a name, marginalised by the structures of power in both society and literature. Hence, Thommi as a servile is examined with reference to the construction of the Christian hero.

Thommi designates a dimension of the marginalised masculinity that never dominates his wife or any other woman or man in the narrative. He is the titular servile who can never display any kind of

hegemony. Here, the construction of herohood contradicts the numerous versions of the settlers acting on their own will as rugged individuals, celebrating a metanarrative of success. Additionally, Thommi is characterised by fear and lack of confidence. The only instance where he is jubilant comes at the end when he throws his master's gun into the river (01:50:30-46). At the end, the text demonstrates the symbolic and literal demonstration of Thommi's freedom in the absence of the master. He exclaims in wild happiness as he runs through the forest, bathed in sunlight: "Omana, Patelar is dead" (01:51:22-28). The ending of the film offers a perspective on

the life of the servile narrator who lives his life to quench his master's ruthless thirst for violence and deprivation. In spite of his introspective awareness about serving the devil, the narrator cannot act as a conscientious individual until the master is murdered, which leaves the servile man rather perplexed by the newly gained freedom. (Joshi and Venkiteswaran 24)

Two reasons necessitate Thommi's migration to settlement in Ichilampady in Karnataka – one, personal and the other, social. After his marriage with a beautiful and much younger Omana (Sabitha Anand) who was a poor orphan, he was forced to leave Wayanad. After having sold everything he has owned in Wayanad, he buys five acres of land in the new place and thus he becomes destined to bind himself with Patelar who starts humiliating him right from the first meeting. Patelar uses the word 'encroached' instead of 'purchased' or 'bought' designating Thommi's illegal ownership of land (00:05:09-10). The protagonist is introduced in the narrative as syntagmatically opposite to the symbols of the chair and the gun, the master owns. He is portrayed as an individual, a settler who is physically and mentally dominated by the hegemonic structures of power. According to Gautaman Bhaskaran, the story of *Vidheyan* takes place in the 1960s. Food scarcity and unemployment rampant in his native land are the social reasons which force Thommi's escape in search of a promised land in Southern Karnataka (Bhaskaran 185). Quite uncharacteristic of most Christian heroes, Thommi signifies fear and submission before the authority of Patelar. From the opening scene to the end, Thommi is presented as a persona devoid of agency within the narrative which is underscored by his posture – a bent back with a scared look towards Patelar begging for sympathy. The first sight of Patelar in the narrative is the one where he humiliates the hapless servile by verbal and physical aggression.

Patelar-Thommi relationship is not merely a master-slave one. It is marked by a kind of love-hate relationship on both the ends. Thommi wants to kill Patelar once he knows that the master has raped his wife, but instead, he gets conditioned/resigned to the routine as a matter of pride. While sleeping with his wife, Thommi says: "Now, your body smells only of Patelar's scent. I like this smell. Still, you are mine alone" (my trans.; 01:07:51-08:04). What follows next underscores the settler spirit: "One day I'll buy this scent for you" (my trans.; 01:08:07-11). Thommi's ego ideal is not the ugly, powerless self that he is, but the dominating Patelar who rapes, kills, hunts, fishes and owns everything. Patelar's toxic masculinity suggested via his gun, chair and jeep works as an obsessive haunting tool in establishing the perfect servility of Thommi. When Patelar's sadistic instincts are combined with Thommi's masochistic instincts the psychology of servitude is established. The psychological split in his personality, a kind of dualistic divide as obsessive love and contemplative hatred actually makes him immobile and powerless without

assuming the role of the doer as the subject. He is constructed in the mould of the heroine of most mainstream Malayalam movies – a perfect image of submission. In Adoor's adaptation of Zachariah's story, unlike in the original, Patelar's wife Saroja (Tanvir Azmi) is suffocated to death as she occasionally attempts to control his ego. Where Saroja fails to fit in, Thommi easily does. Patelar demands unqualified submissiveness from his servile and when Thommi bows before Yusuf, he is kicked for this breach. This abject submissiveness is what makes Thommi a muted subaltern.

The process of objectification in *Vidheyan* is through Thommi's point of view. In the movie, the spectator is placed in Thommi's position and sees what he sees. Patelars were historically the last remnants of British colonialism as people appointed to enforce law and order among the natives and to collect taxes from them (Bhaskaran 185-6). Presented as the dominating ideal ego in a Lacanian perspective, his power arises from the colonial rule of aggression and forced submission. And, it is from Thommi's point of view that the spectator sees Patelar's arm chair which symbolises his bygone feudal and bureaucratic power and the phallic gun with which he asserts his authority now (Bhaskaran 188). The imagery of the chair and the gun works to confirm the masculine adventurous affair in the narrative happening in an almost exclusively male world.

Thommi is positioned as an outcaste in terms of his relationship with the Church. When the priest asks him to confess, he leaves without giving an answer at the very sound of Patelar's jeep. Though the mise-en-scene of Thommi's house presents the image of Jesus and a Bible, he does not seem to be a part of the community. Thommi's predicament, as reviewed by GF, is spiritually equated in a Biblical allusion: "Cast out from the garden (presumably their native Kerala) and into the hands of a vicious being with no regard for human life, Thommi and his wife are a kind of Adam and Eve seduced and destroyed by Patelar's devil." A close examination of the liberation of Thommi at the climax of the narrative can explain the domain of religion more. Though he throws the gun – the symbol of his servitude – into the river from the side of Patelar's body, the concluding visuals are those of the rich areca palm plantations through which the liberated servile keeps running to the sound of church bells. In Bhaskaran's study of the film, he differentiates the climax with the beginning where the church bells ring in the tone of a Christian funeral (188). The element of the Church and characters associated with it adding to the construction of the settler's subjectivity is the director's addition not found in the original novella.

Thommi's construction as a character with no agency, when subjected to the light of subjectivity construction of women in the film, assumes great meaning. He never manifests libidinal desire towards any woman including his wife in the narrative. Moreover, his relationship with Saroja, his master's wife is one of submission. On the contrary, Patelar emerges as a towering figure of authority in his perspective, suggested by the use of point-of-view close-up shots. The moment Thommi is abused sadistically by Patelar, the settler becomes a site of masochist enjoyment. The most notable scene in this regard is the one in which Thommi faces his sobbing wife who was raped by Patelar. In the article "When Mammooty Played the Tyrant: Revisiting Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Vidheyan*", Neelima Menon analyses the impact of psychological tyranny in the character:

Thommi is greeted by his wife's weeping on reaching home. In the next scene they show Patelar crossing the river. She has been raped by Patelar. And all Thommi does is sit in front of his hut and vent his anger as his wife looks on. Soon after, the same Thommi looks on powerlessly as Patelar selects a sari for Omana and states that she is beautiful. He offers him a job and Thommi lets out a grateful smile. That's when we know Thommi has already yielded to Patelar's tyranny. The Christian male's construction as the incapacitated mute witness to violence is supplemented by his guarding of Patelar who forcibly grabs a farmer woman carrying firewood and goes over the rocks to rape her. Though Thommi has Patelar's gun with him, he is unable to act like heroes in movies.

Thommi's distinctiveness from similar suffering Christian heroes can be established by comparing him with the Christian hero Puttu Urumees in Viji Thampi's *Soorya Manasam* (1992). Set in the then contemporary Kerala, the film presents how its hero of subnormal mental growth, is forced to migrate from Kuttanadu to Nilgiris in search of land. However, his construction as a hero differs from that of Thommi in the sense that Urumees is situated as the alterego of the spectator and, therefore, instead of succumbing to the authority of the villain, Manager Sivan, he does the hero function of killing the tyrant. Nor is Sivan a Patelar, because unlike the latter, he is constructed as a usurper who never repents.

The submissive and subordinated masculinity formation in Thommi is placed diametrically opposite to that in mainstream Malayalam cinema. Unlike Thommi's subjugated settler, the titular character in *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014), the converted Christian, appropriates the language of power through the economic capital of colonialism. Iyob thus assumes the identity of an elitist Syrian Christian at the dawn of independence. Thommi, however is self-alienated from religion, despite the attempt of the priest to make him attend church and confess (00:29:41-30:48). The settler is psychologically subordinated more by the dominance of Patelar than that of the Church. This makes his identity construction as something placed outside the domain of religion than inside.

Though the Syrian Christian other is rare in Malayalam cinema's visual domain, other identity groups like the Latin Christians and Anglo Indians suggest a different spectrum of identification. The Latin Christians maintain a lifestyle and culture different from that of the Syrian Christians of Kerala. The aggressive agricultural commitment of the Syrian Christians towards land and the ensuing narratives of family feuds are mostly replaced with stories set on the seashores. While the Syrian Christian tradition is mostly Antiochean and Asian in the spiritual realm, the Latin culture is more Portuguese and hence European. Similarly, the Anglo-Indian culture which is the antonym of most Christian traditions is stereotyped by westernised drinking, partying and loose living. Dalit Christians who belong to the Protestant churches or the Syrian church itself pose a serious threat once the politics of representation is examined. These cultural differences, when narrativised as cinematic discourses seek a form distinctive from the action packed hyper masculine narratives. In the context of *Dany* (2001), *Achanurangatha Veedu* (2006), *Ee. Ma. Yau.* (2018) and *O. Baby* (2023), the politics of narration of non-Syrian Christian identities as the other to the hegemonic, dominant structures is further visible. These counter discourses of the new millennium, with a renewed sense of cinematic realism focussing on the lived experience of the 'other'

Christians, set on level plainlands, seashores and the high ranges, represent the heroes as subordinate masculinities.

The close scrutiny of the timid, uncouth, insecure, sexually inferior, victimised and permanently servile protagonist of *Vidheyan* has given the image of ‘the settler other’ as a counterpoint to the glorification of the category in the hegemonic imaginary. Expanding the horizon of identity political analysis in the context of Subaltern studies, it is demonstrated that these non-elitist masculinities, while connoting marginal Christian identities, destabilise the homogenous hegemonic stereotype.

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