



Subaltern Dreams: The Silencing of Marginalized Children in *Kavi* and *Ottaal*

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ABSTRACT

Literature and cinema are connected, as both use language and imagery to reflect reality. Films have always appealed the audience, it successfully represent the marginalized voices and histories. Movies like *Ottaal*, released in 2015, an Indian Malayalam film, directed by Jayaraj, an adaptation of the short story "Vanka" by Russian author Anton Chekhov. *Kavi* a short film released in 2009 is a Hindi film directed by Gregg Helvey, was also nominated at the Oscars for the best short film, live action. These films utilize subaltern perspective to depict the struggle of oppressed groups. This study explores the thematic and narrative parallels between the films, *Ottaal* and *Kavi* both of it delves into the socio-economic challenges faced by marginalized communities, emphasizing the harsh realities of child labour and systematic issues surrounding child exploitation. The study focuses on the experience of marginalized children who have lost their dream for education and play because of the inequality and societal exploitation.

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Introduction

Gregg Helvey, a filmmaker, playwright and producer, visualizes the life of subaltern section of the society, focusing on the modern day slavery. Films successfully brings out the voices of arginalized



and oppressed people. It has the power to raise awareness and inspire changes. In his film Gregg Helvey questions the modern day slavery which is constructed by the dominant power structure.

Kavi is a nineteen minutes' fictional short film released in 2009 nominated for Oscars for the best short film live action. The film depicts the life of a young boy who attempt to escape from the brick kiln where he is forced to work as a bonded labour slave along with his parents in India. Gregg Helvey's character challenges and resist the dominant discourses. The short film *Kavi* articulate the voices of the subaltern section of the society focusing on the truly oppressed. Growing up in a culturally rich environment like America he is aware about the global issues especially modern day slavery. His portrayal often emphasizes the struggles of the marginalized individual, blending emotional depth with stark realities in the societies. He has directed, produced and playwright several other films which include *Rising from Ashes* in 2012, *Overexposed* in 2018, *The Knife Grinders Tale* in 2007.

Jayarajan Rajasekharan Nair is a distinguished Indian filmmaker. He has won many awards, including Crystal Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival, several National Film Award and Kerala State Film Award. His films include *Paithrukam* 1997, *Desadanam* 1996, *Kaliyattam* 1997. Jayaraj has the ability to adapt complex themes into relatable stories, showcases his commitment to social issues resonates deeply with audiences. His narratives frequently relate with the harsh realities faced by the underprivileged, as seen in *Ottaal*, which addresses child exploitation through the lenses of a young orphan's life. *Ottaal (The Trap)*, released in 2015 both in theater and online platform, is an adaptation of the short story *Vanka* by Russian author Anton Chekhov. Jayaraj's fil is a blend of artsy and activism. His films are deeply rooted in the cultural and traditional land scape of Kerala.

Domination and exploitation of the subaltern classes continued throughout ages in different ways like from class division, colonialism, to modern day slavery. The subaltern lives became an easy prey of Cultural and economic exploitation and marginalization. The voices of subaltern section of the society are always muted. In the seminal essay "*Can the subaltern speak?*" Gayatri Spivak raises the question of the voices of subaltern lives where she argues that the subaltern cannot effectively voice their experiences. Subaltern studies focus on the plight of underprivileged section of the society. "the margins, (one can just as well as say the silent, silenced centers) (...) men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals the lowest strata of the urban sub proletariat" (1988, p.283). Likewise, in the movies *Kavi* and *Ottaal* the child characters are silenced in a way they couldn't express their real feelings, but amidst all of these bitter circumstances they tried to show their resilience. Both movies



Kavi and *Ottal* explores profound themes of childhood, loss of dreams and play. Both films explore the young boys navigating difficult circumstances, reflecting societal issues of their times.

Shattering of Dreams: The Subaltern Voice in *Kavi* and *Ottal*

Kavi

Kavi delves into the socio-economic challenges faced by marginalized communities specifically the voices of the children. Kavi and his family lives inside the brick kiln, he doesn't have any friends to play with, he plays with the small plant inside his room, talking to it and caring it made Kavi happy. Kavi a bounded labourer at the brick kiln, efficient in his work he is very fast in arranging the bricks. Kavi as a child longs for education and play, he does have big dreams but it is also bound inside the brick kiln. Kavi like any other marginalized children long for these dreams which are out of reach for them. Kavi watches those children after school playing cricket, they are very happy, Kavi wanted to be one of them, but he couldn't. His master at the brick kiln uses him as he please. He manipulates the little boy saying that he will let him play cricket inside the brick kiln with their own people, if he does his work as fast as he can. The cruel master always reminds the boy that he is one of the fastest of his worker, he tries to make Kavi trust in him and thus made him his lackey. He planted a sense of submissiveness and a sense of dependence in the boy. Kavi was an innocent boy he isn't aware about the tricks of the adults, he clears all the rejected bricks, tired and get wounded, no one to care, even if some have concern for him they couldn't get through their master. Kavi started to understand that his master is not a good man through the two young man who were secretly keeping an eye on the brick kiln which is an illegal place with enslaved bounded labourer, even the government is not aware of such a practice happening. The master in a way is an embodiment of colonial legacy where Kavi and other labours are being dominated.

Kavi desperately wanted to go to school, so he asks his parents when he will be able to go to school, for this his father answers, some kids go to school, and some to work. The idea of them being a submissive section and the idea that kids can go to work is been unconsciously implanted in the minds of children. Kavi goes on with his work. Kavi dreams to play cricket it is evident when he says, cricket is for everyone, for which his master calls him a dirty dog, Kavi isn't even considered as a human being. For these authorities they are just like enslaved animals for doing their works. When Kavi passes the cricket ball to the kids, he is unsure of his feelings, but a small 'thank you' from the other kid made Kavi smile. Then again his master doesn't want him to interact with others he completely controls Kavi's



freedom of movement. He was forcefully taken away and cuffed in chains and was locked in a room. When his parents try to protect him the authority beats them. When the two young men came with the police, Kavi reacts and confessed that his master had taken away the enslaved peoples, when he walked away from his master with the two young man, he walks over the unmade bricks and it get smashed, it symbolizes the breaking away from the slavery and child labour to hope and freedom. Kavi doesn't stay silent he acted against the cruel master and his people. Kavi's struggles and his resilience against the systematic barriers is evidently portrayed in the film. Kavi is in the clutches of enslavement and child labour that threatens his dreams which lead to the loss of hope, the dreams and the child's right to play. Kavi's dream represent the dreams of other children of subaltern group. It is not a fault to dream about going to school, playing these are all part of a child's dream, it's their basic right. But the children of the subaltern section of the society often had to go through hardship and struggles. Child labour is mentally, physically, and socially dangerous and harm to children. Kavi had to face both physical and mental torture while he was in the brick kiln. There are over billions of peoples, especially children who are enslaved throughout world, some of them tries to resist again this oppression, while other remain silent and oppressed. Kavi had to make his own decision, he is not sure whether his parents will be saved, still he show the courage to question the domineering authority. He walks to freedom and hope breaking the shackles of restriction through his resilience. Hoping for day where he can achieve his dreams. "The chains holding them are Invisible. To be free of the shackles of this modern day slavery is seemingly impossible for them. There seems to be no way out" (Khan, 2022).

Ottaal

The optimism of a young boy is seen through the movie *Ottaal (The Trap)*. Kuttappayi an orphan who was taken under the care of his grandfather, has to begin a new life along with his grandfather. Kuttappayi open ups to a new world which is so vast without any restriction. Even though Kuttappayi misses his parents, his grandfather's love and care made him ease his sadness. Kuttappayi as a free soul get to experience the beauty of Kuttanadu through his grandfather, where his story revolves around. Kuttappayi easily adapts to the way of the new place, he is a fast learner. Kuttappayi is a strong boy with his own identity, he is well aware of things around him and about himself, he is even aware about his own limitations as an orphaned boy, he is not a spoiled child. He earns for the love and affection of his parents, he wanted to go to school and educated, like Tinku, who in contrast to Kuttappayi is a boy with everything he needed, he has parents, money, and education. Tinku's parents doesn't want their kid to be with Kuttappayi because he is uneducated, and unclean, not to be added with people, they even through



the small meaningful gift that Kuttappayi given to Tinku, as for the rich these are meaningless random things, but for a poor childlike Kuttappayi these things hold value, a part of their happiness. Kuttappayi doesn't react to the behavior of these people he keeps silent, at times they appreciate Kuttappayi for his intelligence, also they don't want an orphan boy to influence their kid. Kuttappayi doesn't even know how to respond to these kind of treatment, here the identity of children like Kuttappayi is in chaos, he is marginalized for being a subaltern and of being an orphan. Jayarajan successfully portrays the life of a poor boy who has nowhere to go for a life. Jayarajan's film navigate through the untouched part of life especially about the lives of the subaltern. The characters like Tinku's father and mother belongs to a well and rich family, even though educated they still show the discrimination between the poor and rich. People put aside Kuttappayi saying that he smells bad, there is no one to look after him, he was once a little boy who get all the love and care of his family, but now there is no one to take care of him so he remains unattended.

Kuttappayi, the protagonist of *Ottal*, embodies resilience and innocence amidst adversity he faces. Kuttappayi loves to go to school but his grandfather couldn't send him, he along with his grandfather works in the poultry farm, collecting egg. He was educated till second standard; he wishes to learn more. Kuttappayi is a diligent and enthusiastic boy who can easily grasp things told to him, it is evident when he learns how to row the boat, and how he came to adjust to the new environment. Kuttappayi does home works for Tinku, whom he befriends. Giving him the larva of butterfly and tadpoles for Tinku's science class. Kuttappayi even makes a clay model of a fishing man for Tinku's science exhibition, giving it the name "Hope". Kuttappayi wanted to see Tinku's school by doing so he can at least feel at ease. Children's dreams are simple it is not complex like adults, Kuttappayi wanted little things in his life one of them is to invite Tinku to eat with them, but this dream was shattered by Tinku's parents where they restrict Tinku to go to Kuttappayi. Kuttappayi first encounter with reality of this world where he is just a mere living being, a subaltern. Kuttappayi cries out all his worries.

Kuttappayi cares for the parent less ducklings, because they in a way represent himself, parentless. When he asks to his grandfather about the plight of the parent less ducklings, his Vallyappachayi answers that the babies grow up on their own, they have beaks, so God will look after them. When his Vallyappachayi explains him about the migratory birds that the parents go back to other places with their newly hatched kids, Kuttappayi ask what will happen to the little birds without parents, his grandfather couldn't answer to this question. The little boy's question evokes a deep thinking in the



viewers, the question reflects his own mind, and it constantly reminds the viewers about the helplessness of the boy, who is so innocent.

The act of Kuttappayi presenting water lilies to his friend Tinku, shows the Innocence and purity of the boy's heart, there is no margins, no hypocrisy in the friendship between children. It is as pure as water lilies. When Kuttappayi makes the clay model of a fishing man his grandfather asks him where did he learn all these, for this he says, "does someone taught the cuckoo to sing, does the kingfisher attend school to learn how to catch fish" (Nair, 2015,1:28:15).

Mesthri another pivotal character can be seen as an antagonist of the movie. Mesthri compels Vallyappachayi to send Kuttappayi to work, so that he can earn money for himself and find stability. Mesthri embodies the societal pressure and stark reality of the period. Mesthri an odd job worker does anything and everything to earn money. He is the brain behind the whole plan of sending Kuttappayi to child labour in the guise of promising education to him. Vallyappachayi doesn't know what to do about his grandchild as he is about to die because of lung disease, so he too became an easy victim from all the brain washing of Mesthri. Vallyappachayi who is a part of Kuttappayi's world is taken away from him he was sent to work in a factory, where he is brutally beaten and starved. He was replaced from the world he loves to a world where he is tortured. Kuttappayi was plucked away from Kuttanadu, from Tinku his new friend and from his Vallyappachayi, from their story time. All these are the simple dreams of child from a poor family, going to school, spending time with their loved ones, to play with friends, etc... what most of poor subaltern lives can desire is to achieve education and thereby achieve an identity or a social standing for themselves. When all these are denied they became nothing a nothingness haunts them. Mesthri use these desire and dreams of Kuttappayi to send him to child labour. While Mesthri earns a good sum selling him far away Kuttappayi suffers. There is no one to look for him no parents no society...

Kuttappayi's resilience and hope can be seen when he writes letter to grandfather telling the situation he is in. Kuttappayi was sure that if this continues he may die. He asks his grandfather to rescue him from the hell. His letter was addressed to Vallyappachayi and Kuttanadu. Along with Kuttappayi there are several other children who are sold into slavery and child labour, they too suffer, the same plight as Kuttappayi but the difference is that they succumb into their plight, they don't fight their fate.



The letter of Kuttappayi was written on Christmas night, Kuttappayi like any other children wanted to celebrate the day with his grandfather and friends. These are all part of a kids dream which is taken away from him.

Subaltern classes are dominated and exploited. The one who suffer more is the children of the subaltern. What they face is different from the other, they are alienated and marginalized. Children like Kuttappayi lost their identity their dreams and hopes because of the social injustice. They are in a state where there is nothing left for them they have to keep themselves alive in order to survive in this complex world, this they become prey for the dominant power structure above them. Without knowing they falls into the clutches of child labour. Everyone should be equal in a modern world, there should not be any strata division.

Kuttappayi's letter to his grandfather is a sign for hope, at the same time it shows the hopelessness of his mind. A letter addressing to his grandfather and to Kuttanadu itself where there were no letters, to the place he belongs. He isn't sure about an escape from the clutches of the cruel people in the factory. Kuttappayi earns to go back to the place he belongs, so does other children. The plight of children who are trapped in the child labour is always worse than other children because they are ill-treated and their freedom is taken away by them by the authorities. Thus they became dreamless falling in the endless pit of child labour. Kuttappayi is a bright and brilliant boy, he shows a profound connection with nature, he maintaining hope and curiosity about life even amidst all the odds he has to face. He longs for education, and desperately wanted to pursue his dreams. This is shattered in a second by the dominant power structure thus showcases the brutal reality of child labour and subaltern lives.

As the title of the movie suggests *Ottaal*, meaning "The Trap", *Ottaal* is a kind of trap for fishes, which is predominantly used in Kerala. The fishes are entrapped just like how the boy is Entrapped in child labour. It also shows the trapped life of subaltern life without any escape.

"Like my flock of ducks, I feel disarrayed," the evocative poem of Kavalam Narayana Panikker flows in the backdrop, sealing the consternation of Kuttappayi's grandfather while he rows him across the waters promising a school and books, but quietly laying a trap" (Kannan, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, othering is a major issue faced by the people of marginalized where the people of subaltern section are restricted and easily victimized. In this othering children are the one who are more



affected this has a greater impact on the mental growth of the children. Mostly when this happens the dreams and hope of the children are been torn in the chaos. “Though the original subaltern studies group emerged out of historical and cultural studies, the concept of the subaltern has expanded in interpretation from the original configuration to apply to any population that is disenfranchised and unreachable due to hegemonic oppression” (Betik, 2020).

The study of *Kavi* and *Ottaal* brings light to the Issue of the marginalized dreams of the subaltern section of the society. Both films delve into the socio economic challenges faced, by marginalized community emphasizing the harsh reality of child labour and the issues surrounding it. No child is born in this world as a subaltern, as a Dalit or as marginalized it's the dominant power structure which make all these hierarchies. The people of fringes became a tool for the people in power.

“The declared aim of Subaltern Studies was to produce historical analyses in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subjects of history” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.15). *Kavi* and *Kuttappayi* are one among those children who are denied the right to dream just because they are from the subaltern section of the society. The inhuman behavior of the authority in power towards the subaltern children is seen in both movies. *Kavi*'s story took place in Northern part of India, where as *Kuttappayi*'s story take place in South India, it shows that anywhere and everywhere in Indian nation there are kids like *Kavi* and *Kuttappayi*, there will be subaltern groups which remain marginalized. Unlike *Kuttappayi*, *Kavi* has his parents, but still remains submissive and hopeless of his dream, because of their helplessness. It is only towards the end *Kavi* shows resistance against power structure. His resilience is from the dire need to save his parents from his cruel master. As *Kavi* starts to resist, his master enforced more restriction to the child. *Kuttappayi* was an orphan, his parents committed suicide. There is no one by his side for him to depend in the factory where he was enslaved to child labour. *Kuttappayi* was taken away from the care of his grandfather because of some circumstances. His resilience in a way is shown through the act of writing letter secretly to his Vallyappachayi. *Kuttappayi* hopes for a freedom from the hell he was in, but the question arises whether *Kuttappayi* or kids like him can be saved from the clutches of the brutal authorities which is in a way made by the socio economic and cultural background of a nation like India. In these chaos what happens is the loss of a sweet childhood which is more like a dream to many of the children of the subaltern section. Indian is a country which operate on unity in diversity, but as the diversity grows unity become a mist, it is at this point that these kind of ‘othering’ happen more frequently. *Kavi* and *Kuttappayi* are the prey of such a disunity. Their dreams are shattered in seconds. Both of them wanted to go to school. *Kavi* wanted to play cricket, he is also a fast runner, *Kuttappayi* on



the other hand has artistic talents, he makes clay models. The praises that Kuttappayi deserved goes to Tinku from a prominent class. The existence and identity of the both kids are questioned through the movies. Being marked as a subaltern and constantly marginalized, falling in the trap of child labour, depriving them of opportunities, cause psychological impact on children. What more troubling is that both kids are simple denied to dream more. The dreams of these boys represents the aspiration of many other kids with the same plight. Child labour deprives children of their dreams, their childhood, their dignity and potential. They had to face marginalization and economic hardships in a world of discrimination. The stories of their lives are also marginalized from dominant narratives and power structure. Children of these sections see education as a way to liberate from their poverty which they are denied. Their dreams often focus on basic needs such as food, shelter, and familial love. Children wish to enjoy their childhood they wanted to be free from the burdens of child labour, they long for play and freedom, they long to be a part of festivals and celebration, they long for education, all these showcase the innocent hearts of the children. These simple dreams show their resilience and hope in a dire situation, where they are not ready to submit to their fate which is written by the dominant power structure. Kavi and Ottaal explores different cultures and geographical area inside India, it happens in different time periods 2009 and 2015. In any time and space the subaltern lives and their plight remains the same, with no difference.

The two movies give a strong social message about the burgeoning child labour and the loss of dreams and play of children. “The original insight of Subaltern Studies – that subaltern community offers the most potent means to resist the empire of capital – is perhaps more relevant now than ever” (Banerjee, 2022).

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