
NARRATIVES OF SUBVERSION, AND CINEMA: A CRITICAL STUDY OF ANGAMALY DIARIES

ROSHAN B KARIMPANIYIL

School of Management, National Institute of Technology Karnataka,
SurathkalE mail:karimpani727@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

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Angamaly Diaries is a Malayalam movie which is a gangster genre narrative, and portrays the story of Vincent Pepe, a boisterous young man who aspires to become a don in his native town of Angamaly. The story is set in Angamaly, a peculiar town in the South Indian state of Kerala. The film lays bare each and every aspect of the people of Angamaly and their culture. It is the story of a people who celebrate their typical geographical space and food culture and how they relate these to their daily lives. The movie can be analysed with reference to the theories in Cultural Studies especially Popular Culture and Carnavalesque. In this paper, the researcher attempts to prove how the traditional conventions and notions of great importance are subverted in this modern era of cultural transition. Furthermore, the paper sheds light on the intermingling of people from oppositional cultures (high and low) without any sense of distinction between the 'self' and the 'other' (heterogeneity) which is a conspicuous feature of the postcolonial societies.

The advancement of post structural theories has brought about a radical change in the contemplation of culture. Marxist cultural theorist Raymond Williams posits the concept of subversion of the ideologies instilled by the dominant structures of the society. This paradigm shift in the perception of culture eventually has led to the emergence of new cultural trends which have been instrumental in subverting the existing dominant ideologies. Popular Culture and Carnavalesque are such manifestations. Taking the instance of Malayalam movie Angamaly Diaries, this research paper is an attempt to disclose how these cultural forms are reflected in art forms like cinema.

Angamaly Diaries is a Malayalam movie, a gangster genre narrative, which portrays the story of Vincent Pepe, a boisterous young man who aspires to become a don in his native town of Angamaly. The story is set in Angamaly, a peculiar town in the South Indian state of Kerala. The film lays bare each and every aspect of the people of Angamaly and their culture. It is the story of a people who celebrate their typical geographical space and food culture. Abounding and multitudinous indications of popular culture and carnivalesque can be found in Angamaly Diaries. Emphasising upon the pleasure aspect of popular culture, Simon During writes: “Popular culture is committed to immediate pleasure, it wraps its seriousness in entertainment” (193). In the film, the characters and the people are found to have an Epicurean attitude towards life. They eat, drink and make merry here and there in the Angamaly town. They engage in all kinds of ecstasies and do not bother about acquiring a job and securing their future. Their only motive is merriment and leisure. The enmity between the protagonist and his gang and, the rival gang is one of the predominant features of the plot. It is conspicuous that the members of both these gangs do not have adequate educational qualification. Pepe, the protagonist, for instance could not achieve success in the graduation course that he persevered. He and his friends loiter around accomplishing nothing serious or important. Making a connection between the level of education and the resultant behavioural tendencies, During further claims, “A great deal of popular culture emerges from, and is addressed to, those who have no post-compulsory education” (During 194).

The instance of Lichi’s marriage with Pepe is a stand-out example for the disclosure of the notions of the popular culture and carnivalesque in the film. Lichi was the elder sister of Pepe’s childhood friend Linu. Lichi’s original name was Lilly and he used to call her “Lichi”- an amalgam of “Lilly” and “chechi.” He considered and treated her as his own sister. But, later what happens in the film is Pepe’s marriage with Lichi who is older than Pepe. Usually, the bridegroom is expected to be older than the bride according to existing convictions of the society. Moreover, one marrying someone whom he considered as his sister could not even be imagined. Here, the existing cultural construct regarding marriage is counter-posed. This can be inferred as a trait of carnivalesque which “is also taken to provide a positive alternative vision” (Robinson n.pag.). The presentation of such a marriage propounds an alternative dimension to the established concept of marriage. The existing one is deconstructed and a new and more efficacious perception that gives more importance to love and liberty is foregrounded.

Another demonstration of popular culture in the film is when Sakhi’s (with whom Pepe engages in a relationship) father complies for their marriage even though he comes to know that Pepe is indulged in pork business. In the quondam period, this was a sort of unaccepted profession. But in the film, the father shows the rationality and wisdom in accepting the profession of his daughter’s fiancé. This can be inferred as another mark of popular culture which facilitates the acceptance of things that were seen as mean earlier. The most excellent

affirmation of the carnivalesque is found in the climax scene of *Angamaly Diaries*. The scene features an uncut, eleven minute long take, featuring around thousand artists. The scene depicts the festal celebration of Angamaly church and the procession associated with it. People belonging to various sects eat, drink, and dance together epitomising the carnivalesque whose “defining feature is festivity – life lived as festive” (Robinson, n.pag.). The manifestation of popular culture is also found in the presentation of food culture in the film. Food is not only an instrument to serve hunger. It has certain other functions and dimensions that are seldom noticed. As mentioned earlier, food serves both alimentary and cultural perspectives. Food is a powerful cultural signifier and serves the purpose akin to that of language in a society. Culture is formed and manifested through language. Food also has a similar and inevitable role in constructing and representing the cultural facets of a given society.

Angamaly Diaries portrays the life, people and culture of the small urban town named Angamaly in the Ernakulam district of Kerala. The food culture in Angamaly shapes and sheds light on the culture and people there. It has to be mentioned that the people of Angamaly follows the Epicurean philosophy “eat, drink and make merry”. While going through the film, it is found that food is an integral part in the lives of the people in Angamaly. Food is an omnipresent element throughout the film. Anything and everything is associated with or compared to food. In the beginning of the film, a song depicting the different dishes and varieties of food in Angamaly is featured. This song could be considered as a prelude to the movie. It discusses not only food, but also depicts the socio-political affairs including demonetization. Moreover, each and every significant event or discussion in the film is placed together with the act of eating or drinking liquor. A character named “10 ml Thomas” in the film has the habit of having a ten ml of alcohol every now and then. He usually tells his friends “Eda, oru 10 ml eduthe” which means to take a ten ml. It may also be noted that people’s nicknames are connected to the names of animals and food items. “Pork Varkey” and “10 ml Thomas” are examples.

In the movie, food is related to the theme as well as many situations in the film. As Barthes says, food is a sign here. “To eat is a behaviour that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up and signaling other behaviours, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign” (33). In the pop culture, every activity and situations get expressed through food signs, and it is precisely what happened in the love affairs of Pepe. For instance, the love affair between Vincent Pepe (who is the protagonist), and Seema is compared to the combination of Tapioca and Egg curry (KappayumMuttayum). In his dialogue, Pepe says that, they (Seema and Pepe) were like “Kappa and Mutta” which was the hit combination of food in Kunchu’s hotel. Later, their relationship breaks and Seema goes to Singapore marrying another person. Pepe describes this in a rather funny way. He says that, as Kunchu realised, Seema also realised that Tapioca and Pork (Kappa and Pork) is a better combination than Tapioca and Egg (Kappa and Mutta). Another similar kind of comparison

is brought about by Pepe regarding his relationship with Sakhi. He says that Green Peas and Egg is a better combination and looks forward to foster a relationship with her. This is what Barthes christened as “polysemia” (semiotic and interpretative) of food (33), which is a characteristic feature of the modernity.

ever persistent in most of the scenes and contexts, whether it is physical or abstract. Pig or Swine is an animal which is very violent, ferocious and impulsive in nature. This is same with the people of Angamaly. They are very impulsive, towards both the good and the bad. This thoughtless, animal instinct of the people of Angamaly can be juxtaposed with the nature and behaviour of the swine. The people there have a “go for anything” attitude regardless of its impact or outcome. Here food is a signifier. To quote Barthes at this juncture, a “veritable grammar of foods” is found in this film (30). The whole sociology of the film revolves around the innate impulsive attitudes and behaviour of the youth. Their use of the language could also be associated with this. They are driven by emotions rather than the intellect and rationality as in the case of animals. When exploring about the food culture of Angamaly, Pork is the most celebrated one. Pork is like the pig. They often raise their voice when they are furious even in public, heedless of the circumstances. They call people names in anger and frustration.

Consumption of pork could be looked at from an anthropological perspective. Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* speaks about the biblical taboo on pigs with reference to the text Leviticus. “These you shall not eat, apart from those that chew the cud and have (cloven) hooves: ... the pig, for it has hooves which are cloven, but it does not chew the cud - it is unclean for you” (NRSV Bible, Lev. 11. 4-7). This taboo could be read in line with a larger cultural process. “Defilement is never an isolated event. . . . For the only way in which pollution ideas make sense is in reference to a total structure of thought” (Douglas 41). This particular ideology is subverted in the movie, where pig/pork meat is depicted as the most celebrated delicacy which is equally revered by the rich and the poor, high and low, irrespective of class, caste and creed. *Angamaly Diaries* celebrates food, as a sign and signifier, as an icon that closely binds people, relationships, and as a phenomenon that nourishes the people. Food acts as a unifying bond or a common factor that draws together different communities in popular culture. Eating and drinking - a spirit of carnival, is the central feature of this folk culture. It is through this dimension that the pop culture facilitates heterogeneity or the intermingling of people from disparate backgrounds under a single roof.

Another important feature is how this film deals with the concept of gender. The film raises certain questions regarding the portrayal of women. Traditionally in films, what is usually found is “male gaze” propounded by Laura Mulvey. In feminist theory, male gaze is the act of depicting the world and women in visual arts and literature from a masculine and heterosexual point of view, presenting women as objects of male pleasure. But in *Angamaly*

Diaries what is seen is a different trend. The female characters in the film are unconventional rather than being traditional. In most of the Malayalam films, female characters are usually subordinated or subjugated in action. On the contrary, the female characters in this film are bold and independent. There is no conspicuous instance of women being subordinated in the film. They enjoy a sense of liberty. The mother of Vincent Pepe is an independent woman who takes care of the family and children after her husband had left for business in Karnataka. The character “Lichi” whom Pepe marries towards the end of the film is a bold one. She is a typical Angamaly girl who is not afraid of drinking alcohol and is used to such habits on special occasions. This is also the same with other female characters. Lichi also acts against the traditional notions when revealing her love for Pepe. After all, she is elder than Pepe and it is she who proposes Pepe rather than Pepe proposing her. This could be considered as a breaking of the conventional male hegemonic act of wooing a girl and proposing her. Moreover, Lichi knows Pepe’s previous relationship with Sakhi. It is also worthy to be noted that she had spoken as a mediator in his relationship with Sakhi. These are not dragging Lichi from confessing her love to Pepe. She is not at all aghast and boldly unveils it. All these make her a new and independent sort of a woman character different from as portrayed in the mainstream Malayalam films. Here, the director focuses on the relevance of breaking a path by portraying a bold and carefree heroine. A similar depiction could be found in the film Amen where the heroine does nothing different to this. In that film too, the heroine initiates the proposal slapping on the convictions of the society. This ordinary or the normal nature of culture is what manifested here. It is high time now to think about and portray such heroines in celluloid as they are more realistic and also not yielding to the traditional constructs regarding the topic.

Gender is socially constructed. The notions of masculinity and femininity are social constructs. Pop culture is not homogenized and includes resistive or counter representations. And, usually in popular culture what are seen are alternative representations of gender and family. Hence, it is the same that is found in the film - alternative or unconventional representation of women or defining them from a hitherto unseen perspective. Popular culture which subverts the traditional concepts and gives way to novel ones is productively reflected in the film Angamaly Diaries. It has been presented from many different perspectives and dimensions. Furthermore, it has become unequivocal that popular culture has a great role in shaping the point of views and ideologies of people today and it touches each and every aspect of the society and its people. In the film, popular culture is presented as a platform for the common people to retaliate against the dominant structures. And it is very noteworthy to say, that the film is presented in such a way that popular culture has served its purpose exemplarily in the lives of the people of Angamaly.

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