



Ala Vaikunthapurramuloo: A Discussion

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Sowmya Dechamma C. C
Professor, University of Hyderabad

This paper was written for an informal discussion forum “Film Talk” organized by people in the Department of Film Studies, EFLU. It was first suggested that I could think of a Kodava/Tulu/ or a film in languages that do not have a big film industry. These being covid times, we had to have a film that was available online and had to have subtitles. But I was not sure if Kodava / Tulu films were available online with English subtitles. All Kodava films I have watched were watched in the theatres. I know of no Kodava film that was released during covid times.

This said, people have been discussing about how the digital media has actually aided languages that have thus far lived in expressive forms other than writing, other than in films – that require an industry, industries of network. There have been songs, videos, oral performances, comedy shows, parodies, mixed genre videos, and many innovative expressions that have come up on digital media with minimum budget and without much requirement for networks of human capital, influence. This and their impact on languages and their circulation needs more thought and research, and so I thought we could discuss a film in a language that I was familiar with, even without the English subtitles. What OTT platforms, subtitling, have done to various languages is also an interesting issue for me but again, for now, it is *Ala Vaikunthapurramuloo*.

After I put aside Kodava/Tulu and then my first choice was *c/o Kancherapalem*(2018), I also thought of the Kannada films *Gantumoot*(2019), *KGF* (2018). Although *KGF* is not an off-beat film, *Gantumoot* and *c/o Kancherapalem* are almost off-beat. These to my mind, along with many other films I have watched in the last one year or so, belong to a somewhat new genre that appeal to various categories of film-watching people, that attempt to blur the previously neat divisions of art vs popular films. Much has been written about popular films these days, albeit Telugu films despite their popularity, has received less critical attention. It is then I thought we could discuss *Ala Vaikunthapurramuloo*, a film I really enjoyed watching first in March 2020. Both my children love it so much that I have ended up watching it with them at least three times and I watched it again while writing this paper. This also made me wonder how children despite parents watching along with them — with a critical, oppositional gaze, develop or have already developed notions of fun, humor, laced with caste, gender and class ideologies. I also wondered if we need to move beyond the binary of a gaze that complies vs. an oppositional gaze? Whether these are much more fluid than we usually think, especially so since I had fun watching it the fourth time despite viewing it with all my critical tools sharpened. But to this later.

Written and directed by Trivikram Srinivas, the Telugu film *Ala Vaikunthapurramuloo*(2020) is one of the highest grossing films from India, also biggest grossers among Telugu films in the US. It is also one of the most watched films, among the top ten most watched films in India. It was also remade into Malayalam as *Angu Vaikuntapurathu*. I knew Allu Arjun was popular with

Malayalam cinema goers, but only after this I came to know that he was called Mallu Arjun in Kerala. The songs, their composition, and the singer Sid Sriram have now become much more famous among audience of different language backgrounds. Not to mention Allu Arjun's dance moves which are quite addictive.

Relatively young, director Trivikram has several films to his credits that are hits — including *Manmathudu* (2002), *Athadu* (2004), *Jalsa* (2008), *s/o Sathyamurthy* (2015) and so on. I have thus far watched *Manmathudu*, and *s/o Sathyamurthy*. I do not remember much about *Manmathudu*, a *Nagarjuna* starrer but *s/o Sathyamurthy* can pretty much be read in a similar vein as *Ala Vaikunthapurramuloo*. *s/o Sathyamurthy* again has Allu Arjun, and Samantha in the lead roles.

Some critics have pointed out how many of Trivikram's films are built around the epic Ramayana. Not just Ramayana, there are aspects from Hindu god Vishnu / Krishna's stories as well, woven into *Ala Vaikunthapurramuloo*.

The plotline of the story revolves around babies who are exchanged by one of the baby's fathers, how except for this father Valmiki (played by Murari Sharma) and the nurse who Valmiki accidentally pushes into a comma, no else is aware of the exchange. Allu Arjun, the actual son, the heir to a business empire spends 25 years in Valmiki's house as his son while Raj (biological son of Valmiki) has all the riches Valmiki aspires for in Radhakrishna's (aka ARK) house. How Allu Arjun gets to know of the truth of this and how he resolves this and how he gets to marry his love Amulya

(played by Pooja Hegde) and integrate her business into his/ARK's by not hurting both his mothers, how people and things fall into their rightful places in the scheme of Hindu-caste and contemporary class order forms the storyline.

Contemporary Hinduism

The reference to Hindu religious symbols of course begins with the title of the film: *Ala Vaikunthapurramuloo*. It is the abode of Vishnu, and the abode of Radhakrishna (ARK); it is sacrosanct despite the jabs Valmiki makes sarcastically at how it is a temple and how the couple who inhabit it are gods. The mansion which we get a glimpse of once in a while, is physically impeccable. A huge bungalow that sustains a whole extended family, is purity embodied in its whiteness. Its gate, ideal, impregnable – to which only the rightful can gain entry made perfectly clear in the music that plays as Allu Arjun enters the gate for the first time in 25 years. In one of the scenes played in the song as he enters Vaikuntapuram, Allu Arjun wields a CD, turning it in his finger like Vishnu turns his chakra, symbolizing that everything will now be put in its rightful place — the theme of the film itself. It is a place where not only human-gods go through a whole lot of conflicts but one that also can party, indulge, be generous, and forgive. The only aberration there in the house seems to be the character of the north-east looking cook, who ended up cooking the pumpkin not knowing that pumpkins are meant to ward off evil-eyed spirits that haunt believing Hindus.

And this connection is only made stronger in the names of its male characters: ARK: Radhakrishna; Ramachandra ARK's son-

in-law; Yashu/Yashodhara: played by Tabu. So we have Allu Arjun's biological parents named after Hindu god Rama and Yashodhara, the adoptive mother of Hindu god Krishna. Of course Bantu the character of Allu Arjun, is a reference to Hanuman as Rama's devotee/friend/man-Friday...made clear while naming Bantu as Bantu. And there are Srinivas, Sitaram, Prajapathi and so on... The only character that stands out is Amulya played by Pooja Hedge. It is not very clear as to why she was given a "secular" name. Perhaps she embodies mortal capitalist preciousness that is required of women today. She is indeed a new woman, much like Tabu. Amulya who does not signify any avatar of a goddess (I am not sure if Hindu goddesses take other forms like their spouses do), she is new, mortal, but knows her place in the scheme of things. In fact, both Tabu's and Amulya's characters seem to be limiting to consolidate business through marriage, despite them being very enterprising in the business they own.

It is also interesting to note that Radhakrishna's wife is absent, we do not know what happened to her (Here is a Krishna without one or many Radhas). Ramachandra, the god-king known to be true to only one wife, flounders and has an affair that causes some rift which of course our Bantu, Hanuman will set right, clearly referring to Hanuman's role in uniting the epic's Rama and Sita. More than the above mentioned characters, it is Valmiki's name/character and its symbolism that catches our attention. Valmiki, the one who scripted the epic Ramayana from its many oral forms, is the one who literally scripts *Ala Vaikunthapurramuloo*. He is the one who attempts to rewrite the story of Ramchandra and Bantu, and of course fails. In his attempt to retell/rewrite the story and the

fate of the characters, his mouth gets distorted, and his leg does not function in an ableist way. He is literally disabled through his act of re-writing. Disability becomes a curse for Valmiki. The other character who almost is a mimic of Valmiki is Appal Naidu, whose distorted facial actions are attributed to tobacco but aids his villainy. But what confounds me is the name Valmiki. Why give this name to a ‘villain’ of sorts? Is it because it is gods themselves who decide and write fates? Valmiki, variously known as a brahmin, a tribesman a hunter, a thief...has no right whatsoever to write or rewrite the story of godly, business-owning, previously land-owning martial caste??

Film Caste

Everything should be in its rightful place as we know is indeed a very nice way to say that every caste has its rightful place. This is the Dharma that the god-king Rama helped reinforce, that Bantu helps his biological father Ramachandra and grandfather Radhakrishna in re-establishing. This is the Dharma of ramarajya. Valmiki’s rewriting, can only sustain for 25 years, not more. Note that there is no reference whatsoever to anyone’s caste in any utterance. But it is present throughout, in imageries, in actions, in its ideology and in its very visible reference to class. The film depicts the new business class that has built its capital from its feudal, land-holding caste capital. This is a caste group that “rightfully” controls capital to which others have no access unless until it benevolently gives it away, like in the end of the film. But in Yashodahara you have a foster mother, the mother who brought up Krishna despite knowing he is Devaki’s son. Yashu in the film never gets to know the biological secret of Raj and Bantu but similar

to Yashodhara sacrifices many a thing for both her foster son and biological son; and forgives her erring husband. One of the few graces of the film is the notion that motherhood need not be biological – but this runs contradictory to the film’s bottom line – that caste and capital is beget only by birth, only biological, it is one’s birthright.

The film is replete with scenes that suggest that it is one’s birth that decides a Hindu’s caste-ridden fate. Apart from the Hindu religious references mentioned above, from the very first scene itself where the difference between the first floor of the hospital from its second floor is established, from the manner in which the benz car is juxtaposed against Valmiki’s chetak scooter, from its references to the intelligence of high-born people; from its ideas around middle-class people, from Allu Arjun’s remark that the white Rolls Royce he drives in does not suit the dark-skinned Appal Naidu, from dialogues that ask one to correct our grammar, and from the punch line that is repeated throughout – “Konni Jaatakaaluanthe: very bad” (some fates are just that: very bad) – we have caste written into the life and experiences of everyone in the film. Apart from the factor of love, caste and class combined makes it impossible for Raj marrying Amulya. But yes, Raj’s love interest is Nandini/Nandu who belongs to the same family as ARK but then we do not see the fruition of that love by the time the film ends with Bantu and Amulya literally flying high in the heavens and Raj is where he belongs, whiling away in drink and smoke and Nandini nowhere in sight.

Some other thoughts in conclusion

So it is birth that determines one's fate. Birth-right is the caste right. While this is quite an easy reading of the film, I do not have such an easy reading gender and castes patriarchy that the film represents. The notion of motherhood for example, the sort of assertiveness of Amulya stands for, her business acumen; Allu Arjun's dialogue: "when a woman says no, it is no"; complicate the narrative of the film which otherwise also has very sexist utterances, normalizing the male desire from Amulya's dress to Allu Arjun's sister's chunni scene and ARK's remark that Bantu can watch girls on the internet until whatever time to umpteen references to extra-marital relationships of men in the film.

So then, with all these that give us enough ground for an oppositional gaze, why do we hum "SamajavanaKavana", "RamuloRamula..." and feel like shaking a leg when we watch Allu Arjun dance?? Coincidentally, I was teaching bell hooks' oppositional gaze when I wrote this and we agree with hooks that there are many ways to watch a film that includes pleasure, resistance, opposition, identification, interrogation, and so on.

As I mentioned in the beginning, is a critical, oppositional gaze devoid of pleasure? And what exactly is pleasure? Even if we keep academicians at bay, who are inconsequential to the success of a film, the success of any film like this one obviously does not depend only on upper-caste male or female viewership. Why does the majority accept this hegemonic representation and even indulge in pleasure, while simultaneously being critical of caste and gender in their lives outside the screen? Can we then begin to think that

the binary between pleasure and critique as not really fixed, like that of any representation? Or is there a complacency in dominant representation that does not disturb, that indeed pleases many? How do we then juxtapose other films, let us say Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* (2018) or *Kabaali* (2016) that equally critiques and pleases?

Filmography

Ala Vaikunthapurramuloo. Directed by Trivikram Srinivas, 2020.

Angu Vaikuntapurrrathu. Directed by Trivikram Srinivas, 2020.

Athadu. Directed by Trivikram Srinivas, 2004.

c/o Kancherapalem. Directed by Venkatesh Maha, 2018.

Gantumootu. Directed by Roopa Rao, 2019.

Jalsa. Directed by Trivikram Srinivas, 2008.

KGF. Directed by Prasanth Neel, 2018.

Manmathudu. Directed by Trivikram Srinivas, 2002.

s/o Sathyamurthy. Directed by Trivikram Srinivas, 2015.

Works Consulted

hooks, bell. "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, South End Press, 1992, pp. 115-131.