



## **Nayattu: Fears and Anxieties**

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyses the Malayalam film Nayattu by examining the representation and creation of fear in the film from multiple perspectives. The article looks at two kinds of fears — the fear of losing dominance and the fear of losing dignity — as linked to the story of Nayattu. It argues that the film reflects the savarna fear of Dalit assertions.*

**Keywords:** *caste, fear, Dalit, representation, dignity, dominance*

Fear is a strange feeling. It is at once a defence mechanism and incapacitating. Along with understanding the biological pathways of fear and, more importantly, the socio-cultural scenario that creates fear needs to be explored. Usually, fear is considered as a person's inability to show courage in a situation. But courage overcomes fear when one is sure about one's powers. And the question of power is political. There are two ways in which the Malayalam film *Nayattu* is linked to this emotion. On the one hand, it feeds on and legitimises the fear of the oppressor who finds the awakened, organised oppressed in the society as a threat to their dominance. On the other, it creates fear in the oppressed, who are stereotyped as negative characters, increasing their vulnerability in society.

Many review articles read *Nayattu* as an anti-Dalit film and critique the message conveyed by the film that Dalits misuse the law which is meant to protect them. Praveen writes that even when the script seems to have good intentions, some of the scenes implies that the laws empowering Dalits are being misused, which is not true considering the number of cases of Dalit oppression

still being reported (Praveen, 2021). Arjun Anand notes that, on the one hand, *Nayattu* has been criticised for its anti-Dalit politics, on the other hand, it is seen as a step forward since the film engages with caste. He explicates how the narrative revolves around Dalit organisations, Dalit political parties and Dalit police officers and is anti-Dalit. He points out that Martin Prakkat is absolutely imperceptive to the social realism of Kerala and the fact that state machinery largely suppresses Dalit and Adivasi rights and movements using its police force. He considers the film as a classic example of an upper caste narrative which portray Dalits as enemies of Dalits. Like Praveen, he also writes that the film adds to the misinformation that the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act is widely misused (Anand, 2021). Krishna Raina critiques the view presented in the film that marginalised communities may misuse the laws meant to protect them (Raina, 2021). Arun T Vijayan's "Nayattum Karnanum Dalitane Adayalappeduthunna Vidham" (The Way Dalit is Marked by Nayattu and Karnan) discusses the different ways in which Dalits are portrayed in *Nayattu* and *Karnan*. In *Nayattu*, Dalit is presented as a troublemaker and the one who misuse power, whereas, in *Karnan*, we see him as the one with self-respect and the one who fights for the rights of the community. He says both films are based on the Dalit fear — anti-Dalitness in *Nayattu* is based on the fear that they would become powerful, whereas *Karnan* gives the message that Dalits will respond if the savarnas continue to oppress them (Vijayan, 2021). Justin P James, "Nayattu enthukundu oru dalit viruda cinimayalla" (Why *Nayattu* is Not an Anti-Dalit Film) argues that *Nayattu* is not an anti-Dalit film without substantiating it convincingly (James, 2021).

The film portrays several Dalit characters in the frame. However, following the stereotypical pattern of Malayalam cinema that the Dalit characters are accompanied by a savarna in the narrative playing gentleman, we find Praveen Michael's (Played

by Kunchako Boban) character getting introduced to us in the very beginning. He is seen participating in a sport event in which we identify him as someone who takes care of the one belonging to the opposite team. The narrative then moves to the scene at his home where he is seen hanging his mother's clothes, including her inner clothes, a very unfamiliar scene in Malayalam cinema. We also see him later in the film buying a sanitary pad for Sunitha (Nimisha Sajayan), another police officer and a Dalit woman. Maniyan's (Played by Joju George) Dalit identity is established in a scene at his home where pictures of Dr BR Ambedkar and Mahatma Ayyankali are shown. He is introduced as someone who misuses his power and uses the government vehicle for his personal purpose. Sunitha (Nimisha Sajayan) is introduced in a scene where she is stalked by her cousin Biju (Played by Dineesh), a Dalit auto driver, and she escapes from him by stopping the police vehicle. As Praveen has joined the office only recently, he does not recognise her and asks her to take another vehicle if she is going to the station to register a complaint. She tells him that she is a policewoman. She is also seen entering the station by touching the floor as if entering a temple. Her composed behaviour, low voice, and good manners set her as an unassertive woman who is quite the opposite of Biju, her relative who is after her. Later we see him at the station spitting on the wall that provokes Maniyan. He also threatens Praveen, who knowingly opens the door against him while they stand there listening to his superior officer's verbal abuse. However, the film seems to reinforce the stereotype of a misogynistic, uncivilised, and angry Dalit man. *Jayan, another Dalit man* – gets hit by Rahul, Maniyan's nephew who drove his car, and is declared dead by the doctor upon his arrival at the hospital. Rahul disappears from the scene, leaving his uncle and colleagues in trouble. None of the Dalit characters in the film seems to help or protect each other. It is only the men in the Dalit organisation who are concerned about each other, and they stand with him when Biju is locked up in the police station. This togetherness is what the savarnas fear.

The savarna fear is reflected in the film in various ways. As per the 2001 census, Dalits in Kerala are only about 9.8% of the total population. The majority of the film's audience is non-Dalit, and around half of the Kerala population are the savarnas. The discourses they bring with them when watching the film is mainly prejudiced against the Dalit. Therefore, no matter how intricately the film attempts to portray, if at all, the Dalit question, this audience would see only the stereotypical Dalit figure in it. All the Dalit characters in the film have some negative traits to them. Even the Dalit organisation in the film is not portrayed as sincere to their cause. The organisation's leader promises the minister that they would withdraw the agitation if they were sanctioned an Engineering college. Also, it is depicted as having an influential bargaining power in the elections, which is unrealistic.

The mere fact that Dalits are increasingly othered in Kerala society that is more and more ghettoised into community-based network groups is a matter of fear. Majoritarianism is a symptom of failing democracy. The character of Sunitha encapsulates the fear of a lower caste woman from a minority population in a region controlled by the numerically dominant savarna communities. Sunitha's fear is not to be understood as just personal and psychological. To a Dalit woman, Sunitha's fear represents her systemic as well as social insecurities and vulnerabilities. It springs from the awareness of her powerlessness. This fear of the Dalit woman is rarely portrayed in films that represent them as loud, street-smart women. In *Papilio Buddha*, this situation is represented in the scene where the Dalit woman autorickshaw driver is hunted down by the other autorickshaw drivers, beaten and raped. It also reminds one of the vulnerable circumstances in which Jisha, the Dalit woman who was raped and murdered in Kerala, lived and died.

The representation of three female police officers in the film clearly demarcates the difference in their caste location. Sunitha is portrayed as meek and not so confident. She doesn't speak the way the other police officer (the one who does the moral policing) in her own station does. She is also presented in stark contrast with SP Anuradha (Yama Gilgamesh). Caste is clearly visible in their body language as well.

Audre Lorde, an American writer who describes herself as "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet," says:

Thus, in a patriarchal power system where white skin privilege is a major prop, the entrapments used to neutralize Black women and white women are not the same. For example, it is easy for Black women to be used by the power structure against Black men, not because they are men, but because they are Black. Therefore, for Black women, it is necessary at all times to separate the needs of the oppressor from our own legitimate conflicts within our communities. This same problem does not exist for white women (117)

In the Indian and Kerala context, Dalit feminists have addressed this question of difference within the category of women and have also addressed patriarchy within the community. However, the film seems to portray the Dalit man as the troublemaker here. He is seen as pursuing his cousin. The Dalit policewoman Sunitha gives a complaint against him in the police station. As already noted, one sees her entering the station by touching the floor. It can be read as the belief and respect she has for the system. And most importantly, we see the absence of men at her home. She is living with her mother in a Dalit locality. And one sees that they don't have any support system. Hence, they have to depend on the law and system for a peaceful existence. The reality is that we hardly see the Dalit community being organised. Furthermore, it

is mainly limited to the party politics in the Kerala context. We have already noted how Biju's political organisation stands with him. Sunitha and Maniyan seem to be not part of the political organisation. The film wants to show us that this is one of the reasons behind their fear. This fear in turn rationalises their decision to run away.

Although, at first, it may seem that *Nayattu* "portrays the mercilessness of a faceless system", as Praveen S R writes, in its details the film reinstates the problematic Dalit representations of Malayalam cinema in a new frame. The powerless Dalit policewoman lacking courage and the rowdy cousin who threatens her convey the meaning that the real enemies of Dalits are within the community. It also indicates that savarna characters are helpless when it comes to rescuing the Dalit woman from her own community. The Dalit police officer Maniyan commits suicide. According to the film, the villains are the politically organised Dalits who are not only troublemakers but also hypocritical mercenaries. The film in its beginning scenes itself establishes Biju as a negative character using his heedless body language and by portraying him as an alcoholic and drug addict. It is him who becomes assertive when he gets into an argument with Praveen Michael by saying "the days of bowing are gone". By establishing in the beginning the Dalit character who is already aware of his rights and is assertive about it, as the root of all problems, the film takes away the sincerity of his words. This reflects the commonly held savarna sentiment that politically assertive Dalits are hypocrites.

Dalits in Kerala, as already noted earlier, is a minority demographically. Among them, there are many different castes and subcastes. They are also largely unorganised, and a majority of them live not as groups but as individual families, mainly in a locality of non-Dalit caste members. These circumstances make

them a socially vulnerable and politically powerless group. In any governmental or non-governmental institution such as educational institutions and workplaces, their number is meagre. Hence their opinions in any decision-making context are usually undermined. The educated few among them who speak up for their rights are predominantly seen as manipulators by the majority savarnas. It is in this context that we see in the film a Dalit auto driver asserting his rights in the police station, a place where system's power is palpable to the people. The film proceeds with the fear that the character's assertiveness may have the potential to unsettle the whole system.

Some of the recent Tamil films address the question of caste from a Dalit perspective. Several new generation film makers Pa. Ranjith (*Attakathi*, 2012; *Madras*, 2014; *Kabali*, 2014; and *Kaala*, 2018, ), Gopi Nainar (*Aramm*, 2017) and Mari Selvaraj ( *Pariyerum Perumal*, 2018; *Karnan*, 2021), Vetrimaran ( *Visaranai*, 2015; *Asuran*, 2019) came up with the positive portrayal of Dalits and we have also witnessed how these films depict the protests against caste system. It leaves hope for the coming generation to understand the discrimination and to some extent raise their voice against it. Unfortunately, Malayalam cinema is not able to come up with positive portrayal of Dalits and they are still entrapped in the reproduction of the stereotypical images of Dalits on the screen in the pretext of giving them representation. Although a number of articles are published critiquing it, Malayalam cinema could not meet the expectations of the Dalit audience especially those who watch Tamil cinema and are able to identify on screen, the issues faced by the Dalits. There are very few representations of Dalit issues in Malayalam cinema (*Papilio Budha*, 2013; *Ozhuvu Divasathe Kali*, 2015 etc. ) and they fall into the category of art cinema. The film *Kammattipadam* which claims the apt representation of Dalits have been heavily criticised by the film scholars in Kerala for its stereotypical representation of Dalits (Ajith

Kumar, 2016 & 2016; Ratheesh Kumar, 2016; Sreebitha, 2016). In this context a reading of *Nayattu* becomes imperative. The concept of fear is not adequately explored in academia in relation to the issues of caste and gender. This article has tried to explore the concept of fear from the perspectives of Dalit man, Dalit woman and Savarnas and argued that the film reflects the savarna fear of Dalit assertions.

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