

Why Feminism Should not be a Joke: Character Analysis of Vanaja in Bangalore Days by Anjali Menon

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Abstract – Feminism is an often-misconstrued term. People often associate the term with man hating and female over bearing while the third wave especially of feminism concentrates on social, political, economic and cultural equality of the sexes. The more dangerous interpretation of the term is when people disguise elements like classism, ageism and sexism as comedy in movies that are marketed as feminist flicks. French post-structuralist critic Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia is used to analyse how the films exhibit tendencies of sexism especially pointing at older women disguised as humour by taking into consideration the movie *Bangalore Days* by Anjali Menon. The paper intends to show why it is imperative that films that are marketed as feminist-films should take it upon themselves to make sure that they adhere more to the responsibility of portraying women in positive formats and not be enslaved to the cliches that often cater to the male gaze.

Index Terms: Bangalore Days, Feminism, Foucault, Humour, Menon

I. INTRODUCTION

In the current scenario, the society is sceptical of the term feminism. People often misunderstand the term and associate it with anti-male sentiments. This sudden raise in the mistrust of a movement that contributed to social, political and economic equality of the sexes had a lot to do with the current political scenario where the aforementioned fear of anti-men or matriarchal system being reignited. The reasons can be many but the reality of its resurfacing can bring the movement back decades. The slow progress that women worked hard for can be dislodged due to this very trend.

Movies have a significant role in the opinion formation of an average individual as the audio-visual format can impact the psyche of the viewer especially when there is humour involved. Movies advertised as feminist flicks or women centred cinema because of this reason has to be very careful regarding the portrayal of women; if not the point put across will be of negative effect. As it happens with the most of mainstream films, the ideology the viewer associates with the actors or directors can impact their opinions. The situation is no different in the Malayalam film industry.

The movie *Bangalore Days* is a 2014 Malayalam film belonging to the romantic comedy genre. It is written and directed by Anjali Menon who is known among the Malayalam speaking audience for her strong feminist opinions and stand points. The movie is produced by Anwar Rasheed Entertainments and has three prominent Malayalam actors namely Dulquer Salmaan, Nivin Pauley and Nazria Nazeem doing the lead roles.

The plot revolves around the lives of three cousins who comes from three different backgrounds but share a deep-rooted friendship and care for one another. The three of them move to the city of Bangalore for diverse reasons and find themselves in difficult circumstances of varying degrees together. The story ends with a happy ending where they all find life partners that ground them to reality and boost them at the same time.

The paper though focuses on Vanaja, the mother of one of the cousins Kuttan. Played by an incredible Kalpana, Vanaja, even though portrayed as a villain in the film is a deeply layered and feministic character. Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia can be deployed to prove the same. Paul-Michel Foucault is a French Philosopher and theoretician whose works can be categorised in the post-structuralism era. Foucault explains the impact of the spaces through his Theory of Heterotopia in a lecture given in 1967. He converted to a paper titled "Des Espace Autres" and published it in the journal *Architecture/ Movement/ Continuïte*. It was translated to English by Jay Miskowiec in 1986 and titled "Of Other Spaces". Etymologically, the word Heterotopia came from the Greek terms 'hetero' meaning other and 'topia' meaning space. The word Heterotopia thus means 'other space' and thus the title of Foucault's paper. Heterotopias are spaces where norms of human behaviour remain suspended. They have undesirable factors which prevent them from becoming a utopia making them mere approximations of the same. He explains it by identifying six types of heterotopias. Every space, physical or emotional, comes under one or more of these categories depending on the point of view of the performers of the aforementioned spaces. The spaces in turn can affect the emotions, decision making and power structure of the individuals as well.

The first of the six heterotopias is the heterotopia of crisis. This is a space occupied by individuals who are in a state of, mostly emotional, crisis. The performers end up occupying these spaces mainly due to the physical or psychological growth that has happened to them as they mature over time. Menstruation homes, honeymoon quarters, and hostel rooms are good examples of heterotopia of crisis. Heterotopia of deviation refers to the spaces occupied by individuals whose behaviour has deviated from the usual cultural or socio-political norms of the society. Examples of heterotopia of deviation include jails, terrorist camps and

psychiatric wards. There is heterotopia of juxtaposition where several spaces get brought together or juxtaposed in one specific area. Examples of heterotopia of juxtaposition include a conference hall where delegates from several countries have gathered or a garden where species of plants from various parts of the world are raised. Heterotopia of time is a space which captures a slice of time; where time stands still. Examples of heterotopia of time include architectural museums, renaissance painting exhibitions and libraries. Heterotopia of ritual or purification are spaces that may look easily accessible but actually require the performance of a ritual or a purification process to enter. An example of heterotopia of ritual or purification is a temple where one has to wash his or her feet before entering or a public urinal where one has to undergo the ritual of paying a small amount as an entrance fee. Sometimes people are forced almost ritualistically into these spaces like the barracks during war time. The final heterotopia performs the function of illusion and compensation. Heterotopia of illusion provides for the people who are put in this space a sense of illusion, tampering with their actual state of mind. Brothels where prostitutes fake love or theme park rides which inflict fake danger are examples of the same. In these spaces, performers are merely hoodwinked into believing the illusion. These spaces also reveal the reality hidden under the illusion when observed closely. Heterotopia of compensation creates an alternate space as if to compensate or commemorate the absence of the original space. The isolated colonies where outcast people live and memorials for the dead are examples of this type of heterotopia. Foucault also mentions an additional heterotopia which he calls 'the ship'. This space boasts of equality like a ship kept afloat by an equal number of oarsmen rowing on both sides. These spaces will be devoid of powerplay making them quite rare. The room shared between a couple in love who are equal partners in their relationship is an example of this type of heterotopia.

Foucault while discussing the relevance of heterotopic spaces in the psyche of human beings in his work *The Order of Things* says that "We do not live in a homogenous and empty space. . . . The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space" (3). This is why a single space could come under any of the six Heterotopic spaces depending on the people as it varies according to culture, geographical area and emotional state of a person.

II. ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION

The film *Bangalore Days* treats Vanaja as a pushy woman who suffocates and smothers the men around her so much that they develop Dyspnoea. Her reality though is deeper than that. She was told that her spouse was an engineer who lived in the city at the time of marriage but he turned out to be a farmer in the village who would not even get cable television. The heterotopia of ritual and purification that should have been her marital home turned out to be a heterotopia of deviation as she got forced into a life of menial hard labour at the ancestral home while her relatives happily revelled in the modernity of the cities that she craved for.

Vanaja managed to get out of the hardships of the ancestral home only after her husband left her. Vanaja insists that the move to Bangalore with her son after her husband left her. The movie paints her in a negative shade with a background score to match for her because of this reason while the husband's decision to move to Goa to lead a hedonistic life is treated with affection and good understanding. The places the couple migrate to separately becomes different heterotopias as one is treated as a decision of selfishness and the other an act of freedom from the suffocating wife while the situation when one looks deeply into it is exactly the opposite. Moving to Bangalore with her son away from the ancestral home that had tied her down for the most of her life makes the space a heterotopia of crisis for her; a space where there is progress and a scope for more. She deserves a more empathetic gaze than her husband who abandoned his family to smoke weed and have fun in Goa.

Vanaja in the ancestral home did not have friends; merely relatives. The movie makes fun of her progress in the fact that she becomes a social butterfly having parties at her home for her friends and taking care of her health doing laughter yoga. She expects her grown up son to take care of himself as she sometimes gets on with her life and refuses to pick up after him as he had expected. For her the house becomes a heterotopia of compensation for the life that she had craved for since she was married. It should have been a heterotopia of Foucauldian ship where she and her son accept each other as grown adults with social and private lives but her son detests her freedom and social circles. These acts of social growth is looked at in a negative light and the aforementioned background music underlining the joke returns as the director insists that a middle-aged woman should confine to the home and the hearth to avoid being a laughing stock or a burden despite her sacrificing her whole life taking care of her home, husband and children.

The efficient Vanaja eventually moves to America to live with her daughter. It is shown that her daughter is supportive of her and is aware of the difficulties she had faced unlike the son who is chained by feelings of his own terrible nostalgia. She had insisted that her mother get a bigger share at the property division as she had worked hard her entire life to maintain the ancestral home and cultivate the land surrounding it. She also acknowledges the fact that her mother deserves a better and cushioned life in America with her. She is also heard to be missing the presence of her mother while her brother often mumbles rudely about their mother beneath her breath and unabashedly judges her. He even bestowed the blame of his father leaving them on the lady who decided to stay back for her children. America becomes a perfect heterotopia of the Foucauldian ship for Vanaja where there is a daughter welcoming her to her life unlike the judgy son and good for nothing cousins who constantly keep teasing and making fun of her. This act of unparalleled feminism where the woman supports another woman for her progress and betterment in life is also portrayed in a sexist and ageist undertone where the director with the notorious background music makes fun of the older woman daring to break out of her circumstances.

III. CONCLUSION

The director's idea of making the older woman and her progress in life, a scrape-goat for her jokes was a bad decision upfront. The otherwise good movie dipped in quality as Anjali Menon took the executive decision to cater to the underlying ageism and sexism of the Malayalam speaking audience for the sake of a few jokes. She thereby tried to reduce a character so

layered and profound to a laughing stock, a mere chuckle. This brings the tag of feminism that she attaches with herself and her films to a bad light even though it is not the movement that is problematic but the treatment of the characters themselves.

This is the reason the paper insists that the treatment of the supporting characters of movies that are marketed as feminist films should be done with care and precision. The study paves way for future readings on cultural studies and feminist criticism on the chosen film. It also opens up the wide array of contemporary Malayalam romantic comedies for critical analysis and discussion.

IV. REFERENCES

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