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Kammattipadam, a Mini-narrative of Ernakulam City, Kerala, India

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to analyze Kammattipadam, a 2016 Malayalam movie directed by Rajeev Ravi as a mini-narrative of Ernakulam city. This movie is a brave attempt to present the life of the marginalized and oppressed Dalits at Kammatti Padam. Violence is the peculiarity of the movie while depicting the horrible life of slum dwellers and it breaks the stereotypical notions of hero/heroine and replaces it with the gunda gangs.

Keywords: Mini-narrative, Dalit, Sthalapurana, Violence

Narrative is story telling. The sequence doesn't have to be strictly chronological, though it can be; it can include digressions and flashbacks and foreshadowings. Jean-François Lyotard in his book, *The Postmodern Condition* argues that “grand narratives” are the means by which a culture tells itself about practices and beliefs. Every belief system has a grand narrative and all aspects of modern society depend on these grand narratives. But the postmodern critique of grand narratives analyses that grand narratives rejected mini-narratives that explain small practices, local events, rather than large scale universal or global concepts. Lyotard defines “postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives . . .” (xxiv-xxv). Mini-narratives are always situational, provisional, contingent, temporary and make no claim to universality, truth, reason or stability. This paper analyses *Kammattipadam* as a mini-narrative of Cochi and Ernakulam.

Kammattipadam, a movie with a difference, directed by Rajeev Ravi, is a blow to the stereotypes in Malayalam commercial cinema. Through a history of blood and violence Dulquer Salmaan, along with a group of actors like Vinayagan, Manikandan and Shaun Romy act out the transformation of Ernakulam (Kochi), as a metro city full of skyscrapers, from its green past of paddy fields. Kammatti Padam depicts Ernakulam's past; a water rich agricultural land was destroyed to make way for a 'Smart' City.

Ernakulam was a small town during the 1950s. The first communist government allotted small tracts of farm land to the landless Dalit community. But following the economic liberalisation of 1991, Kochi boomed into a metro city. The then government started Cochin Development Authority, which helped the real estate boom. C Achyutha Menon's *Cochin State Manuel* portrays the socioeconomic, political and cultural life of the erstwhile State of Cochin (237-318) and pinpoints the above mentioned peculiarities of the region at that time.

In *Kammattipadam*, the director shows how the Dalits were forced to sell out their lands by their own brethren to upper caste real estate mafias. In the narrative space of the film, the land mafia uses dark skinned Dalit gangs mainly from the Pulaya community to usurp real estate. The film explores how the *gunda* gangs or underworld activities had begun in Kochi. At first these groups were formed and controlled by rich businessmen in Kochi when Kochi had grown as the center of business. Later these gangs had gained their own identity and address there and they had become a side by side set up in Kochi.

Criminals are made, not born. Both society and family play an important role in it. Children who are systematically subjected to abuse and deprived of loving care are become criminals in their future life because of hyper-agitation, impulsive behaviour and an inability to assess situations appropriately. They know how to kick because they have been kicked, they know how to stab because they have been stabbed. This is truly shown in the film through the childhood days of Balan, Krishnan and Ganga.

The use of complexion in the movie shatters the false image of beauty and fairness and proclaims that unfair is beautiful. Shaun Romy as Anitha is bold in acting though she is dark in complexion. Amalda Liz as Saaramma is the boldest one who entered her husband's house by just throwing out her mother-in-law and tries to shatter the concept of a “good wife”. Anitha seeks a lively hood by working in a petrol pump and looks after her old father and crosses the boundary of traditional marriage life, though she had an affinity towards Krishnan in her adolescence.

Malayalam commercial cinema has always been dominated by superstars. But in this movie, there is no super stars, only energetic performers and their actions. Vinayakan and Manikandan electrify the performance. The movie cannot be considered as a single hero oriented movie because the contribution from everyone is unique. Though the movie is considered as a Dulquer movie the contributions from others make him just one among the heroes. Dulquer Salmaan's Krishnan, Vinayakan's Ganga and Manikandan's Balan are three lads from Kammattipadam who consider and also have domain over everyone and they just rule the town with their power. Comparatively Balan is the strongest of all who leads the gang. As the years pass the change occurs both for the place and the minds. Some loses their lives, some loses their lands and some loses their identity.

Veeyen of nowrunning.com observes that *Kammattipadam* is a many-sided film that deftly captures a few overlapping lives in a thriving new city and it tells that the tallest skyscrapers that arrogantly loom large against the city skylines is built on the crushed lives of several beings with crusted and dried blood lines running all over them.

The term "Kammatti Padam" might be a familiar one for old residents of Ernakulam. It was an area situated in the heart of the city and all the incidents that take place around that part of the city influences the lives of multiple characters in the narrative space of the film *Kammattipadam*. The film shows the stark reality of life that thrives in the under belly of Cochin.

The concept of a city is relative. It is related to space and time. Every instance of urbanization is unique in its own way. Urbanization is a complex process with ecological, economic, social, political and psychological bearings. Land conflicts often have extensive negative effects on economic, social, spatial and ecological development. This is especially true in developing countries and countries in transition, where land market institutions are weak, opportunities for economic gain by illegal action are widespread and many poor people lack access to land. The most difficult type of land conflict to resolve involves a powerful person against one or more poor people. In the film *Kammattipadam*, Surendran, a rich businessman captured the land from the Poor people by threatening them with the help of a group of 'gundas' brought up by him from the poorer community to achieve his business goals. When Balan, the leader of the gundas realized lately the fact that they were cheated by the rich businessmen and tried to raise his voice, he is scored out from the list by his enemy. Balan's grandfather died out of the immense distress he faced while seeing his people landless and benumbed.

As mentioned above, the story takes off with a flashback narration automatically making it a non-linear one. It is quite a challenge to handle this type of narration without confusing the viewer and writer.

Surendran, the former teashop owner, discovers and nurtures Balan, Ganga, and Krishnan's violent instincts. Till the very end, even as his wealth grows substantially, he remains the ever-smiling manipulator. Finally, he kills Ganga with the very same smile of a profitable trader.

Vinayakan sings the song of his ancestors at a wedding function. He may not know what the lyrics mean, but he's enchanted by the tune. There is a moving sense of irony in the scene. The Kammatti Padam described in the song is long dead, and on that land stands a city that has no place for his people. All that he has left, is the song.

Krishna narrates the story from three points of view. One is his past and how he became a criminal, the next is the recent events that led up to him being stabbed and third is his present where he is writhing in pain. The film unfolds with a visibly injured Krishnan boarding a bus and narrates as to how fate has brought him to this situation.

Man, by nature, is a fighting animal, and force alone is the controlling factor. For Foucault, power and knowledge are not seen as independent entities, but are inextricably related—knowledge is always an exercise of power and power always a function of knowledge (*Power/Knowledge* 95-98). In the narrative space of the movie *Kammattipadam*, power/knowledge not only limits what we can do but also opens up new ways of acting and thinking about ourselves. P.P. Ajayakumar's review of *Kammattipadam* in *Litcrit* that emphasizes the fact that the movie is a kind of *sthalapurana* and is a realistic portrayal of the horrible life of slum dwellers and it captures the narrow lanes, grimy street corners and the dark interiors of slums exposing the shady interiors of Kammatti Padam unheard of by the spectators of mainstream Malayalam films (133-134).

While earlier Malayalam films celebrate Cochin port as the busiest international commercial sea route and depict the alluring cityscape of Kochi, *Kammattipadam* focuses on the land and what happened to the chiefly agrarian land of the lower strata of society during the process of urban development and infrastructure management. No doubt, the film is a mini-narrative of Kochi and Ernakulam.

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