

# Unjustifiable Justice: Caste, Oppression, and Violent Retaliation in Selected Malayalam Cinema

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## **Abstract**

Film is a reflection of cultural, political and ethical ideologies of society. But we always see bias towards the representation of particular gender and caste in movies which thereby create a distorted stereotypes in the audience. Dalit heroes and heroines are by themselves a rarity in the Malayalam cinemas. When they are represented, they are represented as a passive submissive subject. They always had upper-caste heroes as their saviours. Violence is always used by the privileged caste as an apparatus to humiliate a person and community belonging to the lower caste thereby implicating dalits are incapable of protecting themselves and their family. Caste and class become a possible source of abetment of violence. Movies show us that caste-based violence against dalits are always socially tolerated and excused. This article explores how movies utilize violence as a voice for the unheard, analysing narratives like Ayyappanum Koshiyum, Kala, and "Pra. Thoo. Mu.", through the lens of Franz Fanon's potentialities of violence. Fanon theorises that violence enables the colonised to restructure their country politically and also, recreate themselves and resume a self-determining existence. The major characters in the movies aforementioned come from contrasting social background, one is the representative of the exploited and the other, a beneficiary of centuries of exploitation. Hence, we see violence embeds in itself a strong capacity for renewal and new life. This paper contends that while violence is not condoned, resistance is emphatically justified. Moreover, it delves into how upper castes employ violence to perpetuate dominance and discrimination, while Dalits deploy the same tool to assert their identity and hold oppressors accountable.

**Keywords:** Violence, Revenge, Dalits, Malayalam Dalit Cinema, Franz Fanon.

## **Introduction:**

"Violence is a man recreating himself" (Fanon, 19)

Movies are often crafted to satisfy audience preferences, reflecting both the creators' and viewers' collective mentality. While the casteist undertones in films are rarely explicit, a closer examination reveals the presence of subtle caste-based dialogues and approaches. An age-old tradition in filmmaking has been the portrayal of dark-skinned characters, often from marginalized communities, in subordinate roles to upper-caste or fair-skinned protagonists. This pattern served to amplify the power, intelligence, and heroism of the dominant character while relegating the dark-skinned character to secondary roles such as friends, assistants, or servants. These characters were frequently subjected to humiliation, ridicule, or violence, which often reinforced stereotypes related to their caste and skin colour.

The representation of Dalit women in cinema is even more problematic and exacerbates existing stereotypes. Female Dalit characters are predominantly depicted as servants, prostitutes, or thieves, further marginalizing them within the narrative. They are often hypersexualized through the male gaze and subjected to acts of violence, such as rape, particularly when they demand their rights or challenge societal norms. These portrayals perpetuate harmful narratives and deny Dalit women agency, reducing them to objects of oppression and exploitation.

Films have also portrayed violence on Dalits and by Dalits, but these representations are highly skewed. When violence is enacted against Dalits by upper-caste characters, Dalits are shown as helpless victims, unaware of their rights and unable to resist. Such narratives often introduce upper-caste saviour figures, typically male, who come to their rescue, reinforcing the notion that Dalits lack the agency to defend themselves. On the other hand, when violence is depicted as originating from Dalits, they are often portrayed as anti-social elements, such as goons or criminals, thriving on unlawful activities. This duality perpetuates a narrative that denies Dalits dignity and autonomy, either as victims or as aggressors.

Recent years, however, have witnessed changes in the portrayal of caste and Dalit characters in cinema. Several studies on Malayalam films have explored the violence perpetrated against Dalits and how they are often rendered powerless victims. Building on this discourse, this paper examines an alternative dimension i.e., the portrayal of violence by subaltern characters as a form of retaliation and resistance. It investigates how Dalits, particularly male characters, employ the same methods of violence historically used to oppress their communities to challenge the dominance of upper-caste individuals. By mirroring these tactics, Dalit characters in these films reclaim agency and challenge the entrenched hierarchies of caste-based power.

However, the scope of this study is limited to male Dalit resistance in Malayalam films, as the selected sources predominantly showcase this perspective. The lack of adequate representation of Dalit women employing similar forms of resistance highlights a significant gap in the cinematic and academic discourse. This limitation underlines the need for further studies that explore the intersections of gender and caste in the context of resistance and retaliation in film narratives.

### **Fanon on Violence and Liberation**

In Fanon's philosophy, particularly in works like *The Wretched of the Earth*, violence becomes a means of breaking free from the dehumanization imposed by colonial or oppressive systems. It is not glorified but is seen as a process through which the oppressed redefine themselves as individuals and communities, asserting their existence and dignity in the face of systemic subjugation. In the preface Jean-Paul Sartre notes "They would do well to read Fanon; for he shows clearly that this irrepressible violence is neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment: it is man recreating himself" (Fanon 19). "violence is the key instrument of underlying or enforcing social exclusions" (Hagemann-White and Lenz 81). Hagemann-White and Lenz note that in European countries, men identified as outsiders, such as Black people, Arabs, Turks, refugees, or the homeless, who can be targeted, beaten, or even killed. This highlights how the powerless are treated violently worldwide, a pattern also seen in India.

Frantz Fanon's revolutionary theory of violence is central to his philosophy of decolonization, where he advocates the necessity of violent struggle in the context of anti-colonial resistance. Fanon argues that colonialism is inherently violent, and only greater violence can dismantle it. He asserts that true decolonization involves a complete and forceful rupture from colonial structures, guaranteeing authentic

liberation. For Fanon, violence is not merely a means to an end but a transformative process that reclaims the humanity of the colonized and creates a new self-aware identity.

Fanon asserts that, for the colonized, morality is not an abstract concept but rather a tangible force aimed at countering the oppressor's dominance. The primary goal is to dismantle the settler's oppressive violence and reclaim autonomy. As he states, "as far the native is concerned, morality is very concrete; it is to silence the settler's defiance, to break his flaunting violence – in a word, to put him out of the picture. The well-known principle that all men are equal will be illustrated in the colonies from the moment that the native claims he is equal of the settler" (Fanon 43). In this context, Fanon underscores that violence becomes an essential tool for the colonized to overthrow the dehumanizing structures of colonialism and restore their humanity, self-worth, and sense of identity.

Fanon argues that violence has a transformative impact on the psyche of the colonized. He emphasizes its cathartic and purging qualities, which help cleanse the accumulated psychological traumas inflicted by colonial oppression, including systemic brutality, racial discrimination, and psychological abuses. According to Fanon, "At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (Fanon 93). For him, the psychological liberation of the native is intrinsically tied to the removal of oppressors and the violent restructuring of political and socio-economic systems.

Freedom has historically been a privilege denied to Dalits, severely restricting their ability to express themselves fully. When their bodies and identities are subjected to violent control by the upper castes, it is not merely an act of oppression but a denial of their very existence and fundamental rights. The violence depicted in these films can be understood as a form of retaliation, a deliberate defiance against this systematic control. Through their resistance, Dalits seek to dismantle the oppressive ego and entitlement of the oppressor, as well as to challenge the culturally sanctioned violence and authority imposed upon them. This retaliation is not just an act of rebellion but a fight for dignity and justice.

### *Kala*

Directed by Rohith V.S., the film is a gripping exploration of ego, caste, and class dynamics set in the late 1990s Kerala monsoons. Shaji, the entitled son of a domineering landlord Raveendran, struggles under the weight of familial expectations and his own failures. His father's disdain and control over the pepper plantation compound Shaji's frustration. To ease his debts, Shaji hires Tamil labourers, unaware that these workers once owned the very land his family now claims.

Among them is a boy, an unnamed Tamil migrant worker, a subaltern figure representing the oppressed, whose ancestral land was usurped by Raveendran. The boy seeks vengeance not only for the land but also for Shaji's careless killing of his beloved dog, Bau—a country breed undervalued by Shaji. This incident reflects the stark contrast between their worlds: for Shaji, his Cane Corso Blackie is a symbol of status and dominance, while for Moor, his dog was a companion and equal.

The narrative crescendos into a brutal clash, where Shaji's 'jenmi' entitlement and toxic masculinity are systematically dismantled. The boy doesn't seek to kill Blackie; instead, he asserts his dominance by taking the dog as his own. This act symbolizes the reclamation of agency and dignity, subverting Shaji's caste and class privilege.

The film juxtaposes human brutality and the love for animals, using dogs as metaphors for caste and class. Shaji's privileged identity is rooted in unearned status passed through generations of exploitation. In contrast, the boy embodies resilience, reclaiming not just land but the narrative itself. *Kala* transcends the home-invasion thriller, offering a visceral critique of caste dynamics and redefining the Malayalam cinema

protagonist. It masterfully shifts perspectives, challenging the audience to question inherited power structures and their implications.

“Pra. Thoo. Mu.”

“Pra. Thoo. Mu” is a short film that is part of the 2022 Indian Malayalam-language anthology film *Freedom Fight*. The anthology was directed by a team of directors, including Jeo Baby, Kunjila Mascillamani, Jithin Issac Thomas, Akhil Anilkumar, and Francies Louis. The title is an abbreviation for ‘Prajapatihik Thooran Mutti’, which translates to “The Emperor Has an Urge to Shit”. The film is directed by Jithin Issac Thomas and offers a gripping narrative from the perspective of the marginalized, who consistently bear the brunt of society's rigid power hierarchies. The film revolves around the rebellion of a septic tank worker against a despot, culminating in acts of fiery retribution. It vividly portrays a day in the life of septic tank and manhole cleaners, a subject so rarely depicted in cinema that such portrayals can be counted on one hand.

The story begins with the workers cleaning a septic tank, warning the household not to use the toilet during the process. However, the resident politician disregards this, using the toilet anyway. When confronted, he reacts with contempt for their work, unapologetically undermining their dignity. This leads to an infuriated worker, who, undeterred by the minister's position, retaliates with physical violence.

Early in the film, a worker advises another, “Lakshmana, collect the cash promptly after the job. Don’t stand like a beggar just because it’s a minister’s home” (“Pra. Thoo. Mu.” 02:07:25). This dialogue encapsulates the entrenched exploitation faced by these workers. It underscores how generations of systemic oppression have conditioned them to beg for what is rightfully theirs—portraying their hard-earned wages not as entitlements but as acts of mercy or generosity from their oppressors. This powerful depiction sheds light on the indignities endured by these workers and their fight for respect and justice.

While cleaning a septic tank, the worker instructed others not to use the toilet, but the minister disregarded this and defecated, causing waste to fall on the worker. When questioned, the minister dismissed it, saying, “Oh that? You let it go, okay? Moreover, mine is special, right?” (02:09:13). This response reveals his blatant disregard for the worker’s dignity and an entitlement rooted in casteist privilege. This incident encapsulates the entrenched casteism, entitlement, and dehumanization prevalent in hierarchical societies. The act of the minister using the toilet despite explicit instructions not to do so and his dismissive comment, exemplify the arrogance of power and a deep disregard for human dignity.

The minister's actions reflect a sense of superiority that allows him to trivialize the worker’s labour and suffering. By referring to his waste as “special”, he mocks not only the worker's profession but also their humanity, reducing the individual to a mere functional role within the societal hierarchy. This statement carries an implicit message: the worker’s dignity is secondary to the minister’s whims, a sentiment rooted in casteist ideologies that normalize such demeaning interactions.

The flippant tone of the minister also highlights how oppression is often cloaked in humour or casual dismissiveness, reinforcing power imbalances while making resistance appear futile. The normalization of such behaviour reflects a systemic issue where marginalized labourers are conditioned to endure humiliation without protest. The minister’s entitlement and disregard for accountability stem from his privileged position within a power structure that consistently devalues the contributions and rights of the oppressed.

Moreover, the incident underscores how caste-based hierarchies view labour, particularly sanitation work, as inherently degrading and suitable only for those deemed lower in the social order. The minister’s

statement mocks the value of the worker's job, perpetuating the narrative that essential yet stigmatized labour is unworthy of respect.

The minister's remark conveyed a sense of superiority, implying that the worker had no right to dirty the floor, which he sarcastically referred to as "your father's dung-covered floor" (02:09:49). He further ordered that the worker wouldn't be allowed to leave until the area was properly cleaned, all while using offensive language. The worker's violent reaction, a kick to the minister's chest, serves as a powerful retaliation to the deep humiliation inflicted upon him, marking a moment of defiance against the entrenched power imbalance and caste-based oppression. This act of violence is not simply an outburst but a reclaiming of agency and dignity from a history of exploitation.

### *Ayyappanum Koshiyum*

Like its title suggests, Sachy's 2020 Malayalam action thriller *Ayyappanum Koshiyum* revolves around the clash between two men—Ayyappan Nair (Biju Menon) and Koshy Kurien (Prithviraj), who come from vastly different backgrounds and life experiences. What unites these characters in this nearly three-hour-long narrative is their unrelenting egos and their need to assert superiority over each other. The film goes beyond the superficiality of male ego, delving into themes of caste, class, and the socio-political dynamics of power.

Ayyappan Nair's surname, though associated with a dominant caste in Kerala, is subverted as a protest by his mother against the caste system. C.I. Satheesh Nair narrates to Koshy Ayyappan Nair's transformation and the socio-political background that shaped him.

" long back, landlords(jenmis) used to bring tamil labourers in kummatti attire to finish off the harijan comrades who were union workers opposing them. two kummatties were gone, many comeraes were dead. but for the next kummatti, 13 of those tamil labourers were dead. police never found who did it, but the party did. A 25 years old boy was brought in the kummatti attire in front of MLA chathan master. master told him-'what you did is not wrong. its a survival. but whatever you do hereafter law should be on your side. saying that he was forcefully joined in police'. his name is ayyappan nair. he also got a nickname- Mundoor Madan"(Ayyappanum Koshiyum 01:24:43- 27:23)

Ayyappan's violent retaliation against the injustice of historical oppression of union workers, and their murders by landlords, marked his emergence as a force of resistance, making him 'Mundoor Madan'. His energy was redirected into a structural framework of law by inducting him into police force. The uniform, symbolic of law and restraint, became a tool to tame his rage and align his sense of justice within societal norms. However, Koshy's actions strip Ayyappan of this uniform, metaphorically removing the restraint and structure that the law imposed on him. This sets the stage for Ayyappan to reclaim his unbridled, raw form of justice, untethered by legal boundaries. The statement foreshadows the consequences of provoking Ayyappan, implying that Koshy may face the full brunt of his unleashed fury, reminiscent of the relentless 'Mundoor Madan'. It's a compelling critique of how institutional frameworks often suppress individual power, especially for those fighting systemic injustice. However, when these frameworks favour the privileged, as they do for Koshy due to his upper-caste and class status, they can push others, like Ayyappan, to abandon restraint and confront oppression in its rawest form. Ayyappan systematically dismantles Koshy's armour of privilege, rendering him powerless to exploit his connections.

Ayyappan's wife, Kannamma, belongs to a tribal community and is portrayed as a strong, self-aware woman who understands her rights and identity. Unlike stereotypical depictions of tribal women as sexualized objects or symbols of victimhood, Kannamma is a fiercely independent individual who challenges institutional power. In one striking scene, she slaps a government official for failing to fulfil

his duties toward her community. Ayyappan, in a pivotal moment, recounts the story of his marriage to Kannamma: “When a tribal girl from Attappadi with a sharp tongue pointed out the atrocities done by many big shots, I got a call from the top to declare her as a rebel and arrest her. I married her the very next day” (01:16:17). Through this statement, Ayyappan highlights the systemic injustice embedded in society, where laws are often manipulated to serve the interests of the powerful. His marriage to Kannamma becomes a symbolic act of defiance against the corrupt system that seeks to silence dissenting voices, particularly those from marginalized communities. This moment underscores how the voices of the oppressed are routinely stifled, and any attempt to resist exploitation is branded as rebellion, further marginalizing the deserving individuals who fight for their rights. Similarly, Jessy, another tribal woman, breaks stereotypes and represents resilience and leadership. When Jessy says, "Only after wearing this uniform could I stand upright in my life, sir,"(00:49:42) she is acknowledging the transformative power of her role as a police officer. The uniform symbolizes empowerment, dignity, and equality, enabling her to break free from any prior experiences of oppression, marginalization, or lack of agency. While systemic roles like the police uniform can provide a platform for dignity and respect, they are often undermined when those in positions of privilege perceive a threat to their ego or authority. Jessy's and Ayyappan Nair's suspension serves as a poignant commentary on how caste and class dynamics continue to dominate, stripping individuals like her of their hard-earned identity and respect when it suits the interests of the powerful.

The film refrains from indulging in traditional one-upmanship, showing both Ayyappan and Koshy as equals in strength and influence despite their differing social positions. While Koshy's power is inherited through privilege, Ayyappan's is earned through grit and integrity. The narrative subtly critiques and celebrates masculinity, focusing on the intersection of character, caste, and socioeconomic status, without resorting to clichés or cringe-worthy moments. At its core, *Ayyappanum Koshiyum* challenges power structures while presenting a nuanced portrayal of caste dynamics, tribal rights, and the complexities of masculinity, making it a significant contribution to Malayalam cinema.

## Conclusion

In cinema, violence is often depicted as a tool for justice and retaliation, reflecting the language of oppression used by those in power. Drawing from Frantz Fanon's perspective, violence becomes an inevitable response when the oppressed, denied agency, and justice within existing frameworks, choose to resist. Movies like *Ayyappanum Koshiyum*, *Kala*, and “Pra. Thoo. Mu.” explore this dynamic, where violence is not merely a product of savagery but a reaction to systemic inequalities. Just as Fanon argued, the violence of the oppressed is both a means of reclaiming their dignity and a way to challenge the structures that perpetuate their subjugation. Thus, violence in such films is not glorified but is used as a powerful critique of power structures, highlighting the complexities of retaliation and justice in a world where the oppressed often have little recourse but to fight back in the language of their oppressors.

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