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The Representation of Aghora in an Indian movie: A Thematic Content Analysis of Bala's Naan Kadavul

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Abstract

This paper investigates the representation of Aghora culture in 'Naan Kadavul' movie. The movie 'Naan Kadavul' which means 'I am God' directed by Bala in 2009 explains the transition of a young boy who went through his childhood as an Aghori. In general, the Aghori sect comprises men who are considered to follow the lineage of Lord Shiva. Although the existence of the Aghora culture has been around since the 7th century, as to date, no in-depth study has been directed to analyse this culture. Hence, some Indian movies are taken from a well written scriptures and epics whereas some derive from a real life situations that help us to understand certain cultures. In this research paper, the author is looking at the cinematic representation of Aghora culture portrayed by the hero (Rudran) in Naan Kadavul movie. The author employed a thematic content analysis method by watching the whole movie. Upon watching the movie, three themes were developed to explain the representation of Aghora culture in Naan Kadavul. The themes are powerful, dangerous, and values. The author carefully picked scenes that explain the three themes prior to analysing them by using Cultivation Theory by George Gerbner. This theory explains that our perceptions of day to day norms and reality are heavily influenced by television that has the power to shape the viewers' perception. The major findings revealed Aghora as a positive energy to the surroundings where the Aghori observes the truth of life by stopping violence and cruelty against mankind. Although the approach by the Aghori in this movie has the element of wildness, but the society who lived around him accepted him as life savior. This paper concludes Aghora as a positive representation in the movie.

Keywords: Aghora, Naan Kadavul, Representation, Thematic Content Analysis

1. Introduction and Background of Study

Hinduism, also labeled as 'Sanatana Dharma' and 'Vaidika Dharma,' grounds itself in the foundational scriptures called Vedas. This unique religion promotes absolute freedom to engage in intellectual thought. The religious practice does not aim to restrain the freedom to reason, nor does it aim to restrain emotional engagement and activity. The practice of Hinduism exposes its adroitness most strongly in its inclusion of numerous sects and cults, which together embody, and become representational of, an allied but differing nature. Hinduism also comprises various schools, including Vedanta, Saivism, Saktism, and Vaishnavism. Hinduism also comprises ascetic practices such as Aghora. Aghora represents three aspects of ascetism. Firstly, Aghora represents the Hindu god Bhairava, an embodiment of Shiva. Secondly, Aghora represents a school for Tantra, or more precisely, a particular school of Hindu Tantra. Thirdly, Aghora represents a sect, and hence a subset of the Aghora lineage.

Although Aghora culture and sects have existed for close to 13 centuries, no significant study has analysed the various perspectives of the Aghoris (insiders) and the non-Aghoris (outsiders) on Aghora culture. Generally, most existing studies on the Aghora culture have discussed the basic concepts of the Aghora, but have not investigated and examined factors influencing worship practices.

The study seeks to discuss the third of the above types of Aghora; the sect belonging to the Aghora lineage. To do so, the study specifically refers to Sanatana Dharma Hinduism, a discussion for which the focus becomes ways in which media portrays this Hinduism. The research attempts to reconceptualise the Aghora culture, as well as a wider spectrum of perspectives on this culture, held by both insiders and outsiders. The study seeks to expose ways in which people in media enact the various identities which delineate the practices of Hinduism, and hence, ways in which they can effectively become representations of the spiritual precepts. The study therefore displays the socio spiritual performativity of people within this sect of Hinduism, and the various dialogic religious identities in Sanatana Dharma Hinduism that represent conceptions of Aghora and ways in which it materializes so to inspire and increase religious and ascetic activity and agency, in the Vygotskian sense. The study draws from various sources to facilitate this, including the movie, *Naan Kadavul*, which the study then presents an analysis of, supported by a literature review.

Hence, the following are the research questions developed: What are the depictions of Aghora culture in *Naan Kadavul* movie? How do the representations build perceptions on Aghora culture?

The purpose of this research being developed is to achieve the research objective that will help to answer the research questions:

1. To identify the media representations on Aghora culture in 'Naan Kadavul' movie

Along with examining the media representations of Aghora culture in *Naan Kadavul* movie, the research objective is achieved by identifying the portrayal of Aghora culture based on the themes developed. The themes are powerful, values, and dangerous. This looks into the specific sets of characteristics that are shown in the movie which can directly be related to what the representations of Aghora are.

Through the findings, the study provides an analysis and discussion of various representations of the Aghori character in the film, as the main medium to forming perceptions and beliefs.

2. What is 'Aghora'?

According to Suri (2010) and Pitchford (2010), the word "Aghora" implies several meanings. These include deeper than deep, illumined, and the absence of darkness. Aghora constitutes the transformation of darkness into light, which is further understood as the self-realisation of the untruth and the real truth. Northern Indian Kapalika sects instigated the movement toward the practice of Aghori (Barret 2002). These religious groups appeared between the 7th and 12th centuries, and the ascetic practice has thus developed through its continuously intensified performativities. The cultural, spiritual, and religious Northern Indian city of Banares became the birthplace and home of the Aghori sect (Pitchford 2010). The Aghoris, that is, practitioners of the Aghora culture, worship Shiva as Lord Bhairava. Therefore, the Aghori sect comprises men who are considered to follow the lineage of Lord Shiva – the de-generator, also known as the destroyer of the universe. Women are however rarely consecrated into the sect.

Most of the practices and rituals of the Aghoris often associate with satanic worshipping or extreme sadism, with minimal attention to the religious or spiritual components of the Aghori precepts. However, Gupta (1993) describes the Aghoris as conventional in their appearance and manner, being well groomed and mild mannered by local standards. Significant becomes that the Aghoris have developed and employ rituals as a means of embracing death, with a ferocious desire to transcend the world of illusion (Svoboda 1986). These ritual practices, although seemingly bizarre, symbolize the Aghoris non-dualistic beliefs. For instance, the corpse upon which the Aghori meditates symbolizes his own body. The corpse devouring ritual is a symbol of the transcendence of the lower self, and a realisation of the greater, all pervading self. Cannibalism also closely associates with Aghori rituals. Members of Aghori sects also practice eating human flesh, a cannibalism that acts as a reminder to members of the Aghori, and beyond, that there exists no difference between good and bad, or between human and animal flesh.

This follows on to a discussion of the Kāpālīka. The Kāpālīka tradition was a non-Puranic, tantric form of Shaivism in India (Flood 1996), whose members wrote the Bhairava Tantras, including the subdivision called the Kaula Tantras (Flood 1996, 2003). These groups are generally known as Kāpālīkas, the "skull-men," so called because, like the Lākula Pāsupata, they carried a skull-topped staff (khatvanga) and cranium begging bowl. Unlike the respectable Brahmin householder of the Shaiva Siddhanta, the Kāpālīka ascetic imitated his ferocious deity, and covered himself in the ashes from the cremation ground, and propitiated his gods with the impure substances of blood, meat, alcohol, and sexual fluids from intercourse unconstrained by caste restrictions. The Kāpālīkas thus flaunted impurity rules and went against Vedic injunctions. The aim was power through evoking deities, especially goddesses (Flood 1996, 2003).

However, the positive aspects of the Aghoris emerge in the Darma ideology. While the term Vaidika Dharma suggests a true religion, as well as the religion of the Vedas, Sanatana Dharma symbolizes an eternal religion, and an Ancient Law, thus denoting the "eternal" or absolute

duties or religiously ordained practices incumbent upon all Hindus, regardless of class, caste, or sect. Different texts stipulate different lists of the duties, but in general, sanatana dharma consists of virtues such as honesty, refraining from injuring living beings, purity, goodwill, mercy, patience, forbearance, self-restraint, generosity, and asceticism. Sanatana dharma is contrasted with svadharma, one's 'own duty' or the particular duties enjoined upon an individual according to his or her class or caste and stage of life.

It is fascinating that the Aghoris have developed and employ rituals as a means of embracing death, with the ferocious desire to transcend the world of illusion (Svoboda, 1986). The ritual practices although seemingly bizarre, are symbols of the Aghoris non-dualistic beliefs. For instance, the corpse upon which the Aghori meditates is a symbol of his own body and the corpse devouring ritual is a symbol of the transcendence of his lower self and a realisation of the greater, all pervading Self. Cannibalism is also closely associated with Aghori rituals. Eating human flesh is yet another reminder to the Aghori that there exists no difference between good or bad, human or animal flesh.

Although the existence of the Aghora culture has been around since the 7th century, as to date, no in-depth study has been directed to analyse the various perspectives from among the Aghoris (insider) and the non-Aghoris (outsider) on Aghora culture. Generally, most studies which showed interest on the Aghora culture discussed the basic concepts of the Aghora but not into investigating and examining the reasons for worshipping this culture. As the researcher categorise this study as a pilot study, the intended research hopes to provide a more comprehensive picture of the Aghora culture from an Indian movie entitled 'Naan Kadavul' which depicts the culture from among the insiders and the outsiders.

3. Cultivation Theory

Cultivation Theory (cf. Gerbner 1977) states that television has the power to influence the realities of viewers, and becomes primarily responsible for the perceptions of viewers of day-to-day norms and reality (Infante et al., 1997). The theory suggests that television significantly influences, shapes, and cultivates viewer notions or conceptions of social reality. Furthermore, the theory informs us that the visuals and actions transmitted through television cultivate the formation of public opinions and the distribution of pros and cons of particular issues, themes, or messages. It follows that the concept of 'social reality' becomes a cultivation of the human conception, emerging through true happenings in the real world.

Cultivation theorists describe that the emerging and converging, yet gradual effect of dense content, subsequent to exposure to television, subtly shapes the perception of social reality for individuals and, ultimately, for culture. Gerbner (1977) argues that mass media cultivate the attitudes and values already present in culture: the media maintain and propagate these values amongst members of a culture, thus binding it together. Furthermore, cultivation theorists differentiate between 'first order' effects, that is, general conceptions of the world, such as the prevalence of violence, and 'second order' effects, which mainly emphasise specific attitudes, such as to law and order or to personal safety. These orders can be also described and distinguished based on the types of viewers: the heavy viewers and the light viewers.

Cultivation theory focuses on ‘heavy viewers,’ as people who have extended exposure to television likely become more influenced by the ways in which the world is framed by television programs, than individuals who have little exposure to television. This becomes more emphasized with regards to fields in which the viewer has little first-hand experience. This research paper looks at the perceptions which television brings out to viewers about Aghora culture.

The conceptual model illustrates the relationship and the reliance between television viewing and information interpretation process and social reality. Cultivation analysis is usually done from content analysis (identifying prevailing images and text on television) with survey data from audience research (to assess any influence of such images on the attitudes of viewers). Upon obtaining data or feedback from the respondents (audience), answers or responses will then be analysed and interpreted as reflecting either the world of television or that of everyday life.

4. Thematic Content Analysis

This research employed a qualitative method in order to analyse the findings of the research hence to achieve the research objectives. It uses this method because qualitative research gives more space for description of data done by non-numerical form. The study includes the thematic content analysis of the movie, Naan Kadavul. Thematic analysis is categorised under the qualitative research method. According to Clarke and Braun 2006, thematic analysis is a “method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (p.6). The researcher identified the common themes from the content of the movie which explains the Aghora culture. What can be counted as a theme in this analysis? A theme must capture important elements from the movie, Naan Kadavul that will relate to the research questions. The themes are powerful, dangerous, and values.

The tool the researcher used to analyse the movie is content analysis. Content analysis has been defined as a “research technique for the objective systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Peng, 2004). The researcher analysed the content of an Indian movie which has the elements of Aghora culture and the movie is ‘Naan Kadavul’ by Bala. Thematic analysis was employed to examine and analyze the content of the movie. Categorising strategy for qualitative data is thematic analysis which is done by researchers by reviewing research data, taking notes and sorting data into categories. This research technique which is a data analytic strategy would help researchers move their analysis from a broad reading of the data towards discovering patterns and developing themes. In this research, themes were developed based on the content from the movie to identify the characteristics of the Aghori, and the representation of Aghora culture. The content of the movie was analysed based on the similarities and the differences hence three themes were developed i.e. dangerous, powerful, and values.

The thematic analysis was done by transcribing all the different scenes that can be extracted from the movie, Naan Kadavul into a text written data. These data were coded into categories

that have connections to the research objective. After gathering the different codes and connecting them together, the researcher developed several potential themes. Even after the themes were developed, the researcher analysed them again to make sure that the themes are relevant to the objective. This was done by developing initial coding and then to a focused coding. This is where the social cultivation theory was used to determine whether the themes are providing the media representations. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), some themes might not really be a theme as there might not be enough data to support it. Hence, the researcher needed to make sure that the themes developed are consistently portrayed in the movie. The purpose of this analysis done is to find out whether there are consistent evidences of the suggested themes: powerful, values, and dangerous. These themes derived from few categories which are, (a) the character's actions in the story - e.g. aggressive & violent, submissive & helpless, etc.; (b) the situation - danger or threat, etc.; and (c) the type of story- e.g. comedy, romance, police drama, thriller, horror, culture, etc.

5. Synopsis of Naan Kadavul

'Naan Kadavul', a movie which has been in the making for a long period of time, is one of the most ambitious projects, not just of Bala, but of the lead actor Arya too. Both Bala and Arya have reportedly taken much pain to see this movie made. Set in the holy town of Benares, 'Naan Kadavul' tells the story of a person named Rudran. He had to leave his native village in Tamil Nadu after his father drove him away from home. The story reportedly is presented as a repentant father's sojourn in Benares in quest of his son. Rudran, who had wandered about, finally settles down among the sanyasis belonging to the Aghori sect. They lead an isolated and tough life and are even said to be practicing cannibalistic rituals. The film also has as a key character Amsavally, a blind girl, who comes into the life of Rudran and brings about a change.

6. Demystifying Rudran in Naan Kadavul Themes (Powerful, Dangerous, Values)

The content of the movie was analyzed and broken into three main themes which are 'powerful', 'dangerous', and 'values'. The theme powerful is highly related to Rudran (Aghori in the movie) Naan Kadavul. He is viewed as a physically very powerful character that fought against violence. Rudran who represented the Aghori sect is powerful due to the years of worshipping Aghora. With the years of observing Aghora culture, Rudran justified the truth of life by stopping violence and cruelty against mankind, hence positive energy is seen although the general community in the movie didn't seem to understand Rudran well. Rudran being a very quiet character in the movie during his stay with the Aghori community, acted very aggressive to anybody who caused disharmony within the society. There were many attempts by the antagonists characters tried to topple him down but they failed. This was due to the physical strength that Rudran has within himself. From the researcher's point of view, Rudran's character as the Aghori is the Unit Selling Point of the film. Rudran did not call or claim himself a sanyasi (Hindu monk). The resemblance of him as an Aghori ascetic did not emerge religion as the main platform of his practices in the film. It is all about the power Rudran as the Aghori character possesses. He has the power of God but he does not say 'I am God' or 'Naan Kadavul'.

The characterisation is so powerful which gives the impression that he has great powers mentally and physically.

The theme dangerous is also very associated with Rudran in this movie. Rudran is categorized as the protagonist character in the movie. His presence in the society was very minimal until he appeared to save lives but by being very dangerous and harmful against those who went against the norm. Rudran is labelled as a life saviour for the beggars. Based on Hindu texts, Shiva is the lord of elimination, and the Aghoris who are zealous follower of Shiva believes in elimination of the evil or also known as 'Dushta nigraha'. In this film, the actor (Arya) has done fair justice to the role as an Aghori by exploiting himself in his looks and acting potentials. Cold blooded action and shocking pragmatism may disturb the audience but that actions represented a clearer idea of what does it mean by Aghori. On another note, there was a question in the researcher's mind on whether an Aghori actually has threatening portrayal. Noticing the fact that Rudran attacked and killed the villains who abused the beggars seemed to be dangerous but an acceptable act of justice to the under privileged society. No doubt violent imagery is objectionable to minors and women in general perspective, but the movie is well told, and questions the true nature of Kadavul- the God and repeating statements made by Rudran-'Aham brahmasmi' surely keeps us thinking.

The final theme which is values are very well presented in Naan Kadavul as the movie itself is an honest attempt at showcasing 'ezham ulagam' - the 'Dark World' of beggars and Aghori sadhus. The difference Aghoris make as compared to beggars in the movie is that the Aghoris have destiny in life which is to attain God. Putting aside the difference between them, Rudran in Naan Kadavul has a big heart to help if not curbing, at least to minimise the fraudulent mishaps done by the greedy community against the under privileged minorities, the beggars. Although Rudran does not involve much conversations and interactions with the local community, yet he played the role as a guardian to the local community. In most of the scenes after he came out from the temple where he grew up, he was a guard for the community hence Rudran holds a lot of responsibility. Rudran also sacrificed himself to make sure violence against the local villagers does not take place anymore.

7. Conclusion

Aghora in Naan Kadavul is represented as a positive influence in the eyes of the researcher although there were some scenes in the movie which were quite unacceptable by the viewers. Nevertheless, Naan Kadavul has given quite a large spectrum of the Aghora culture practices as to seed us some understandings of this community.

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