

Problematising the Subject: A Foucauldian Reading of the Film “Vanaprastham”

¹Navya Raveendran

Abstract

One of the most widely used theoretical terminologies to refer to the individual is the term ‘Subject.’ One is hailed as a subject after processing him or her through the normalization procedure of existing discourse. Discourse may assign a number of identities to a person and his/her subjectivity is composed of all these identities along with one’s own limited apprehension of the identity ascribed to him/her. Foucault delineates that a person’s subjectivity is the product of the existing discourse and the individual is interpellated into a subject on par with the existing knowledge and power. The proposed paper, with specific reference to the film Vanaprastham, is an attempt to understand the various discursive means by which an individual forms a sense of subjectivity. Vanaprastham delineates the life of Kunjuttan, a Kathakali artist and Subadra, an aristocratic lady. They fell in love with each other and engage in a physical relationship but later Kunjuttan came to realise that Subadra was in love with his ‘puranic’ (epic) role, Arjuna. As the film progresses their subjectivities seem to be shifting and their activities are, more often, a puzzle for the spectator. The proposed study attempts to enumerate the notion of Foucauldian subjectivity with special reference to the characters of Kunjuttan and Subadra.

Keywords: Subject, Subjectivity, Identity, Discourse, Foucault.

I. Introduction

Subjectivity and Identity are two important terms in cultural and literary theory and their meaning varies depending on different theoretical approaches. They are often used interchangeably but they do have slight differences. Donald E Hall in his book *Subjectivity* expresses, “one’s identity can be thought of as that particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that, in short-or long-term ways, gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being” (96). It is commonly seen as flat, unidimensional social concept. On the other hand, subjectivity, according to Hall “invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control” (98). It is a dimension of introspection and self-consciousness about the identity which is ascribed on a person. It is multi-faceted- social as well as personal- which exists in negotiation with social constructs and one’s own values. Discourse may assign a number of identities to a person and his/her subjectivity is composed of all these identities

¹M.Phil. Scholar, DSE Palayad, Kannur University Campus. navyarnambiar@gmail.com

along with one's own limited apprehension of the very being itself. It is Rene Descartes, 17th century philosopher, who initiated the discourse on subjectivity. In "Discourse on Method of the Cogito", he delineates that there is a unified subject, unified cogito- "I think therefore I am" (231). He advocated the dualism of mind and body- 'I' exist through my thought. This was problematized and eventually deconstructed in the postmodern thought. One ought to say "it thinks" instead of the usual "I think". Individuals are a multiplicity which imagines that it is a unity. Jacques Lacan substituted Descartes formula by "I don't think therefore I am" (456). 'I', basically is a split subject. There is this biological 'I' and symbolic 'I'. Biological 'I' cease to exist when 'I' enter in to the symbolic world. Michel Foucault conceptualized subjectivity in a different manner.

Michel Foucault continues to be one of the most important figures in critical theory; who has been concerned largely with the concepts of power, knowledge and discourse. Most of his work delineates the relation between social structures and institutions and the individual. The notion of the individual is ticklish for Foucault despite that power operation is clearly evident in the relationship between the individual and the institution. Foucault in one of his lectures said, 'human beings are made subjects'. An individual becomes a subject only when he/she comes under a power. None is an alibi of the forces of power. Power is something which circulates and functions in the form of a chain. It is exercised through a net-like organization. Individuals are the vehicles of power. Power operates within everyday relations between people and institutions. Foucault puts it in the following way in Power/Knowledge: 'Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain....Power is employed and exercised through a net like organization...Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application' (Foucault 98). He is of the view that individuals are not merely the recipients of power but they are the 'place' where power is enacted and simultaneously the place where it is resisted. He sees power as productive which carries through forms of behavior and events in lieu simply denying freedom and confining individuals. In Volume 1 of The History of Sexuality, Foucault states that "where there is power, there is resistance" (256). There should be someone to resist power; otherwise there won't be a power relation. So 'resistance' is 'written in' to the exercise of power. For Foucault, subjectivity is "being or becoming" a subject. Throughout his writing, he addresses "Subject". In his early work, The Order of Things, he examines how people become objects of knowledge in particular historical moments. In his last two volumes of The History of Sexuality, he investigates how people compose themselves as discursive entities amidst the limits of time, place, and regimes of power imposed on them. As a result, subject adopts different forms in different historical periods. Tony Schirato, in Understanding Foucault, expresses, "no individual should be understood to be inherently or intrinsically him or herself"(98). There is no essence in one's subjectivity. One is made a subject as an aftermath of the various labyrinths of relationships and discourses in which one is grown and brought up. It is not the individual who emerges first and followed by power rather it is the manifestation of power through discourses of truth and knowledge that makes one what he/she is. Subject gets emanated by the performances of the discourses, categories and procedures of power. For the subject to be visible, he/she must be sensible and legible within the grill of perceptibility and this makes possible a subject "to have, gain, claim or be assigned an identity" (Schirato 112) and thus his/her status is an "identity-in-waiting" (Schirato 112). The formulation of subjectivity is accomplished when the subject's body becomes comprehensible

within socio-cultural and scientific discursive categories. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler says, "...for Foucault, the subject who is produced through subjection is not produced at an instant in its totality. Instead it is in the process of being produced, it is repeatedly produced" (93). Subjectivity becomes the product of society and culture in which one lives. It changes with shifts in discourse, in which one is constituted. It is sometimes variable and various and is neither "diachronically static nor synchronically one-dimensional" (Hall 130).

Vanaprastham (1999), directed by Shaji N Karun, which won many awards and received worldwide recognition, is one of the milestones in Malayalam Film Industry. Movie delineates the life of Kunjuttan and Subadra performed by Mohanlal and Suhasini respectively. Both these characters seem to be a riddle which demands further probing. The proposed study attempts to enumerate the notion of Foucauldian subjectivity with special reference to the characters of Kunjuttan and Subadra. It is interesting to point out that the movie *Vanaprastham*, if being offered a Foucauldian analysis, will give a different frame of meaning, loaded with abundance of power play. The story is set in Travancore of the 1940s. Kunjuttan has to live his life within a social system of class oppression that leaves him few options for exercising choice over his enactment of selfhood. The existing discourse identifies him as an illegitimate child, of a "Dasi pennu" (maid).

To quote from the movie: "idu eada ee asreekaram. Idu kunjootan anu. Adu venda illathe kuttuyolu vere, ee asreekaram vere. Engana namaskarikannu thane idinonm nishchayayilla. Ara idine oke srishtichadu" (Who is this ugly creature? This is Kunjootan. He shouldn't be here with children of illam. He doesn't even know how to bow down properly. Who might have created him? - My translation). This is a situation where Kunjuttan's biological father himself questions his identity as a worthy human and denies fatherhood and considers him as an embodiment of impurity. Foucault in his lecture 'Discourse on Language', asserts that 'in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, and organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality' (Foucault 52). This Brahmanic society produces a discourse which denies emancipation for the people except Brahmins. As Donald E Hall states, 'Lacan's concept of 'symbolic order' is analogous to Foucault's term 'discourse'. The symbolic order consist of language, beliefs, ideologies, and all other means of cultural valuation and meaning making, which an infant encounters very early in life and through which she or he is acculturated and given a social identity and value system' (Hall 134). Here Kunjuttan is a socially castrated individual, symbolically inefficient. Unknown fatherhood, mother belonging to a lower caste, poor financial condition and unsatisfied marital life denies him efficiency in the symbolic order. He tries to drink away his personal problems through alcohol and tries to escape or get into another world beyond this castrated society, with the help of an external agency – Kathakali, an elite art form, which balances his insufficiency in an aristocratic discourse. Art or artistic medium like Kathakali has a cultural capital and cultural potential. Cultural legitimacy would have been out of his reach if he was practicing some other art form like "theyyam" (a folk artform). The same discourse which attributed the identity of "asreekaram" (ugly creature) to Kunjuttan eventually identified him as "Kathakali ashan" (master of Kathakali) and he comes to existence only through Kathakali. Even though his subjectivity as a Kathakali artist is well accepted in the society, his family never appreciates him instead expresses disgust towards his subjectivity of an irresponsible family head. Kunjuttan could

not attain any kind of affection as he fails to fulfill the duties of a husband. He breathes and lives in the domain of Kathakali.

Once Kunjuttan was invited to perform Kathakali before King's demise; Subadra, the niece of "Divan" (Minister) was mesmerized by his performance. She appreciates his performance as Arjuna and also shares her passionate love for legendary Arjuna and Subadra. Their first encounter laid a deep impression on Subadra in the mind of Kunjuttan as she suggests change in the rhythm of Kathakali "padam"(song) which he totally agreed. In their second meeting she negotiated her unfinished "aattakhadha"(story) with him which is accompanied with the background song "kandu njan thozhi en kamaanuroopane", which means I have found my cupid and conversed through Kathakali mudras. This is a great recognition for Kunjuttan as it is the first time he engages in an in-depth discussion on Kathakali. Her roots began to clutch in his mind as she treated him as a potential vibrant Kathakali artist, simultaneously roots of Kunjuttan in the persona of 'Arjuna' began to branch out in her as well.

For Kunjuttan accepting the will of someone who denied paternal love and recognition is like committing suicide. Kunjuttan was never in the mad pursuit of wealth, instead his intense desire was to acquire a legitimate lineage and pedigree to establish or rather demarcates his position in the society. So, he burns the will and receives hatred even from his daughter. This was a reaction against the existing discourse which plunged him in a state of identity as well as subjectivity crisis and gave him a tormented life. When Kunjuttan opposes the actions taken by those in power, he finds it miserable to live in such a discourse and suffocates. Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, argues that "it is always possible one could speak the truth in a void; one would only be "in the true" however if one obeyed the rules of some discursive "police" which would have to be reactivated every time one spoke" (Foucault 224). One's statement will only be taken in to account as 'true', if it is in congruity with other authorized statements within the society.

He strongly believes that after his father's death, the soul could never reject the fatherhood, and it is for certain that he would accept him as his son, to quote from the movie "marichukazhinja shareerathinte aathmaavine makane ennu vilikkaathirikkan kazhiyilla", (the soul of a dead man cannot resist himself from accepting his son- My translation.) because one can only escape from the discourse through his death. He unconsciously develops an alliance with Subadra as a mode of resistance against this discourse.

After one of his performances, Subadra again meets Kunjuttan and converses to him as if he was legendary Arjuna. He tries to remind her that he is not Arjuna. She looks at him with a blank expression and finds it hard to accept the subjectivity of Kunjuttan because by then she has shifted from the subjectivity of niece of Divan to legendary Subadra which was a product of her literary discourse. This exemplifies the Foucauldian notion of subjectivity as a product of discourses, ideologies and institutional practices. She replies, "Krishnan thannodenna vannam samsaaricha ore oru purusha chaithanyamaanu Arjunan. Aa Arjunanae aanu njan kaanunnathu", which means she sees only the persona of Arjuna, whom Lord Krishna considered equal. She is enthralled in to another world, socially distanced from reality and the way she laughs looks as if she is lost in the discourse of her pen and paper. Somewhere Kunjuttan gets the feeling that she is addressing legendary Arjuna not him, so he tries again to

drag her to the reality but fails; she clung to her world of illusions. She submits her “aattakatha” (story) to him and pleaded him to be her Arjuna and to make her his Subadra through which she can achieve the ecstasy of pleasure, which was an unattainable desire for her. While Kunjuttan performs she identifies herself with Subadra on stage particularly when “sringara bhava”(romance) is performed and it results in their physical union. Even after Kunjuttan’s departure, she remains in her fantasy world and hesitates to wash away the paints which are the remnants of her union with Arjuna, her beloved. When she realizes that she is pregnant, she sits on an “aattuthottil” (swing bed) and her feet are shown as not touching the floor, which symbolizes that she was floating in her air castle. She was not yet able to return to her subjectivity of niece of the Divan. This is being emphasized when she waits till Kunjuttan wears crown of Arjuna to inform him that she is carrying “Abhimanyu” (son of legendary Arjuna). Thereafter she broke all sorts of communication with Kunjuttan and refused to meet him. This rejection for Kunjuttan in the words of Rumi was the kiss of death because it was the most deplorable realization he ever had which traumatized him. It is clear through his soliloquy, “chuttiyilla, veshamilla, verum manushyanaayi ivide vannathu kunjuttante bhuddhiyillayma” (it is my stupidity to come here as mere human without makeup and costumes – My translation), that he finally came to realize that she was never aware of the existence of Kunjuttan but Arjuna alone.

His kinship with Subadra aided him with the love, respect and recognition he craved from his family, friends and society. For him she was a medium of escape from the shackles of discourse, which bequeathed him peace for a while. As he failed to appropriate the identity of Arjuna which Subadra attributed to him, her abandonment pushed him mercilessly down to the discourse which agonized his entire life and he could not rise from the fall as it psychologically paralysed him. Kunjuttan’s very question, “ee mounam arjunante puthrane swanthamaakkiyathinulla ahankaaramaano...atho ente makane enne nishedhikkunnathile aahlaadamaano?” (Is this silence a symbol of pride for owning the son of Arjuna or the pleasure in denying me my son? - My translation.), makes it clear that it is a matter of pride to own Arjuna’s son. On the other hand, this won’t be there when possessing Kunjuttan’s son because he is a castrated individual in the society.

Subadra comes for the final meeting with Arjuna. She states that this would be the first and last time she sees her son and his father together. She rejects the fatherhood of Kunjuttan and claims legendary Arjuna to be the father. Since she is a widow, she has to assume the identity of a widow in all sense and restrain herself for the benefits of her son as well as in order not to be castrated from the discourse. Thus, Subadra completely shed of the subjectivity of the legendary Subadra. This intensified his pain and he openly declares that he is a persona, no more a human, “njan manushyanalla. Njan verum veshamaanu”.

Thus, he abandons the crown of Arjuna and all “swathika bhavas” (virtuous roles), which made people admire and accept him. This was a reaction to the realization that all the people including Subadra has seen or taken into consideration only the roles he played, and kept aside Kunjuttan as the shadow of those roles. Even though he wishes to escape from the shackles of this persona, he couldn’t because leaving Kathakali means putting an end to his life.

It is the discourse which produces statements and this discourse even denied the right to perform funeral offerings for his father because Kunjuttan belongs to another caste. This puts him in a puzzled state where he emphasized that he is the son of a man and father of a child. No one can deny this. But why the discourse is denying the right to be a son and a father. He makes clear that for him Kathakali is his life and in Kathakali there are only “mudras”(signs) for son, father, daughter which has no caste distinction, only holiness. He goes on asking to the discourse who created a father who is not in want of a son? – “makane aavashyamillatha achane ethu papa karmamaanu srishttichathu?” (Which sin might have created the father who does not want his son?- My translation). As Sara Mills in Michel Foucault shows that “discourse should be seen as a system which structures the way that we perceive reality” (Mills 55), the same system has made his life meaningless and miserable since he failed to locate himself there. Foucault states how power is used to control and define knowledge. He proposed that right and wrong, truth and falsehood were illusionary, and were simply the creations of language and the will to dominate. Kunjuttan asserts that his pain and agony cannot be explained through language because this language itself is alien to him, merely a product of discourse. Ever since his childhood he has been tolerating everything, he has enshrouded his whole pain in his mind. The excessive pain he endured has led him to numbness. As Tony Davies notes in Humanism, “I do not think, I am thought. You do not speak, you are spoken.” (Davies 63). Instead of understanding Kunjuttan’s thoughts, feelings and circumstances others did it for him, thus eventually he sighs. “ippol verum shoonyada” which means it is emptiness everywhere.

At last Kunjuttan found out that Kathakali is the only medium through which he can communicate his pain to Subadra, and thus decides to perform her *attakadha* with his daughter. He has chosen Kathakali to express his resistance only because he has no other agency. He was aware that society would curse him but he took it as revenge. He announced it as his last performance and he was well aware of the fact that Subadra cannot resist herself from laying eyes on her Arjuna. The performance made Subadra to write a letter to Kunjuttan. She gives Kunjuttan the identity of father for the first time and she places herself as a mother. This was interrupted when a servant came and reported of a visitor. She assumes it to be Kunjuttan and began to prepare herself to be presented in front of him. The ‘paper plane’ flown by her son crashes at the very moment when she came to know that Kunjukuttan is dead. The crash was the symbol of collapsing of the subjectivity of Subadra as the wife of Kunjuttan. The paper plane was the final letter Kunjuttan has sent to her. He summarizes his life in two sentences – as a son who begged for his father and a father who begged for his son. In this letter, he confesses his act of performing “Sringara” with his daughter as a resistance towards this discourse which denies him the identity of a son and father which was his intense desire; as Mills says “discourse is both means of oppressing and the means of resistance” (54). By performing “Sringara” (romance) with his daughter he was giving up the identity of a father given by the discourse because this was an act indigestible for them. While performing, he was in tears, that very tears are enough to prove he was not Arjuna but Kunjuttan himself. The completion of this performance is the end of his life as a Kathakali artist and Kunjukuttan as an individual.

Subjectivity gets evolved through one’s daily interactions with the living society. Kunjuttan, throughout his life is in a dilemma of what subject position he has to assume- “asreekaram”, “ashan”, or “legendary arjuna”. He is in

need of a subject position of a son and a father. But discourse never perceives him in both ways. So at last he does funeral rites for his father, and for himself being his son and end his life by playing “Sringara”(romance) with his daughter and knowingly get castrated from the symbolic order. In the case of Subadra she shifts her subjectivity from niece of Divan to legendary Subadra, to a widow and finally to the wife of Kunjuttan. To conclude, one could perceive that both Kunjuttan and Subadra are the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity. Changing discourses attributes different subject positions for them which are mutually incompatible and contradictory. Their subjectivities change both temporally and spatially through the exercise of power relations leaving them in an abyss of shifting subjectivities.

References

1. Danaher Geoff, Schirato Tony and Webb Jen. Understanding Foucault. Sage Publications, 2012.
Davies, Tony. Humanism. Routledge,1997.
2. Foucault, Michel. The Archeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language,
trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. Pantheon Book,.1972.
3. --- . The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley, Vintage, 1990.
Hall, E Donald. Subjectivity. Routledge, 2004.
4. Mills, Sara. Michel Foucault. Routledge, 2003.
5. Vanaprastham. Dir. Shaji N. Karun. Euro American Films and Pranavam Arts, 1999.