

The Imperious World of *Jallikattu*

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Abstract: Portraying the relationship between man and his deep wild savage self is not an easy task. One of the best representations of this relationship was put forward by William Golding in his novel, *Lord of the Flies*. Recently, Malayalam cinema also made a contribution to this list, with the movie *Jallikattu*. This paper explores the popular Malayalam film *Jallikattu* directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery and explores the different messages proffered by the film. It examines the romanticized image of toxic masculinity deeply injected into the viewer's consciousness by popular mainstream cinema. The paper also probes into the theory of evolution by natural selection and how the theory becomes applicable in the movie. Being true to its role as a representative of Malayalam cinema in the Toronto International Film Festival, *Jallikattu* bashes the toxic masculinity rooted in our society and becomes a metaphor of the highly competitive world, where men are willing to kill each other for gaining what they want.

Keywords: Buffalo, Animal, Villagers, Civilized, Savage.

I. INTRODUCTION

After watching *Jallikattu* for a few minutes, a viewer may begin to wonder, 'how long are the people going to run behind a buffalo' or 'is this what they are going to do throughout the movie.' However as the movie progresses, it manages to capture the rapt attention of its viewers. When *Jallikattu* reaches its moment of apotheosis, there is a sudden epiphany. The viewers realize that whether the villagers manage to catch the buffalo is not the crux of the movie. What *Jallikattu* represents is something completely different from its title.

This paper carefully observes the movie *Jallikattu* and explores its different meanings. Cinema is now an imperative part of our society. It serves the functions of both entertaining and informing its audience. Having knowledge of cinema gives its viewers an understanding of the culture and people to which a movie belongs to. The purpose of this paper is to give the readers an insight of *Jallikattu*, which is considered as a path breaking movie in the history of Indian cinema. Most of the previous works about *Jallikattu* focus on the wild and manic nature of the movie, but this paper looks at the movie from a new point of view.

A. *The Frenzied Setting and Characters*

Jallikattu, directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery is a Malayalam drama. The plot of the movie is based on a short satire, *Maoist*. The movie was released in October 2019. Before its theatrical release in Kerala, the movie premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and became the recipient of positive reviews from a number of critics. At the International Film Festival of India, Lijo Jose Pellissery was honoured with the best director award. Recently *Jallikattu* added another feather in its cap when it got selected as India's official entry to the Oscars.

The title of the movie, *Jallikattu* is derived from a competitive bull taming sport in Tamil Nadu named Jallikattu, conducted during the harvest festival Pongal. During the festival, temple bulls are released into a crowd of people one by one. The participants attempt to hold on to the hump of the animal. They try to tame the raging animal by bringing it to a stop. The bulls that the people manage to tame are considered weak. They are used only for domestic purposes. Those that remain untamed are appraised strong and fit. In several villages in Tamil Nadu, only the bulls that people do not tame get chosen for breeding.

Mr. Pellissery, in an interview, made it clear that the film is very different from the festival. "We just picked the name because it involved an animal and a big crowd" (qtd.in Brzeski). But certain similarities cannot be unnoticed. Similar to

the sport of Jallikattu, the characters in the film are shown running behind a buffalo, trying desperately to tame it/kill it. Their attitude towards each other is similar to the one that Jallikattu participants have towards the bull. Men who are tameable (fragile and delicate) are meant only for domestic purposes. Only those who are untameable (robust and masculine) can be seen as strong and good enough to attract women.

Jallikattu is not a long story with twists and turns. It is centered on a single event. The pattern of Pellissery's film *Ee. Ma. Yau* is very much similar. Instead of presenting a long story, *Ee. Ma. Yau* revolves around the struggles a poor villager faces, in his attempt to provide a decent burial for his father. In *Jallikattu*, the butcher's buffalo escapes from the hands of its master and the entire village is out to catch it. Most parts of the film focus on the desperate and suicidal attempts of the villagers. In between, there are scenes from different events taking place parallelly like women cooking and gossiping, a father trying hard to arrange buffalo meat for his daughter's marriage, a policeman quarrelling with his wife and so on. But ultimately, all these characters, one way or another, get connected to the main event.

The world that the movie represents is one filled with chaos, created by eccentric and frenzy characters. The rural village that we see in this movie is a lot different from the ones we usually see in conventional mainstream cinema. It is not one endowed with natural beauty and gentle rural people. This one is harsh and real. *Jallikattu* begins with the sound of a clock ticking like a time bomb, indicating that something big is about to happen. In the next shot Kalan Varkey (Chemban Vinod Jose), the only butcher of the village is shown getting ready for his daily slaughter. The consecutive scene is a warning that the viewers need to get ready for a small exhibition of grotesque images. From the beginning itself, Lijo Jose Pellissery makes it clear that this village is not a place that anyone would want to visit during their nature enjoying vacations. The village is a metaphor for the harsh and rigid world that we live in. To survive here, people have no choice but to be stern and stony.

If we look deep into our contemporary times, it becomes clear that the world around us is rushing, boiling and churning. Man is now living in a fast pacing world where each one is constantly trying to outpace the others. The path one chooses may cross with that of another or may even become a hindrance to another. In such a scenario, the one more powerful wins. This is not a situation that one chooses to encounter. But this is something that no one can avoid. It applies to all creatures alike.

Jallikattu, in its initial stage, throws light on this idea. For Kalan Varkey, the only means of survival is selling buffalo meat. But the outcome of Varkey prospering is the buffalo perishing and vice versa. It is a fight for survival between the two. At the initial stage of the film, Kalan Varkey and his exuberant assistant Antony (Antony Varghese) try hard to slaughter the animal, but it escapes from their clutches. The animal shares a similar equation with the villagers too. Buffalo meat is a part of their everyday life. For the villagers to enjoy a luxurious meal or feast, the buffalo must die. This situation is similar to that of capitalism. In a capitalist society, one group of people enjoy a lavish or opulent lifestyle. But for them to live such a life, another group must go through a hard and poor lifestyle.

Initially, the only people running to capture the animal are Kalan Varkey and Antony. But as the movie progresses, more people join them. Youth, middle-aged men, teenage boys and even old people are keen to see the animal captured. The chances of the buffalo attacking the villagers are high. Hence, the concern on their part to see it tamed is natural. But soon, it becomes clear that these men are obsessed with it. It is not a result of their concern, but only due to the thrill behind it. Some have joined the mob, not because they are interested to see the animal captured. But they are present there only to keep up appearances. Their attitude is that 'the entire village looks interested in this (for some reason, god only knows). So, I too need to appear interested.' This is a general mentality that people share in society. A high five party is going on in town. The neighbour or a relative of the host is not interested in going. They are not even sure why the party is being held. But he or she will be present because all the important people, elders and friends are attending.

In one part of the film, a group of boys join the mob to hunt the lost buffalo. These boys are not part of the village, yet they have joined the hunt only for fun. However, the villagers are not happy with them joining the venture. The group claims that they will be the ones to catch the animal, but the villagers do not want to accept that they need an outsider's help to carry out the job. It is a matter of their prestige. Similarly, Antony is not happy that Varkey has decided to use the help of an old acquaintance Kuttachan (Sabumon Abdusamad). Both men detest each other to the core. Kuttachan used to work with Varkey as an assistant, similar to Antony. Both of them are interested in Varkey's sister Sophie (Santhy Balachandran). For both, watching the other catch the animal is a defeat. It is like accepting that the other is a better man compared to me. Hunting the animal is an opportunity for both to prove their masculinity to Sophie and the entire village.

Not just Antony and Kuttachan, but every man chasing the animal has the desire to be the one to tame it. It is a chance to present oneself as the alpha male. In *Jallikattu*, it is obvious that while Sophie rejects Antony, she has a soft spot for Kuttachan. But it is hard to confirm that Sophie is the reason for the hatred between the two men. She can also be an excuse for the ego clash already present between them.

B. The Portrayal of Masculinity in Jallikattu

Malayalam cinema has been a platform for hundreds of films that centres on the hero and his inconceivable masculinity. But some of the recently released films have done a great job in breaking this cliched portrayal of men. They focus on depicting the desire within men to prove themselves as the alpha male. Instead of presenting a hero who every time manages to feign superiority in all kinds of situations, Malayalam cinema has begun to point out how some men manage to make a mess of even the most trivial occasions in their attempt to assert superiority. *Maheshinte Prathikaram* and *Kumbalangi Nights* are some of the most recent examples.

Not just movies, but men fighting over silly issues is something people can see every day. These occasions include simple everyday incidents. Imagine a man standing in a bus for a long time. He finally notices a vacant seat. He is about to sit there, but someone else takes his place. Such a situation can lead to a major quarrel between the men. *Jallikattu* highlights the importance men give to their ego, and how it can drive them to do the most horrible acts.

In one part of the movie, Antony, tired of Sophie's rejections, forcibly kisses her in an aggressive and hysterical state. He attacks her like an animal while she pushes him away. This scene is similar to another one from a James Bond film. Created by Ian Fleming in 1953, James Bond is an iconic character in Hollywood. This is the case, even though the character has been accused several times of being a sexist. In the movie *Goldfinger*, Bond becomes interested in a girl named Pussy Galore. Bond tries to get close to her, but she snubs his advances, making it clear that she is not interested in him. Bond pushes her to the ground and forcibly kisses her, while she tries hard to push him away.

Antony acts the same way towards Sophie that the James Bond franchise and several other movies have propagated as manly. The difference in the way these actions are read is that James Bond is a sophisticated hero with classy outfits whereas Antony is a wild man with several grey shades. Even though Antony is one of the central characters, he is not a hero and nor his actions are justified. What Bond does to Pussy is romanticized, but Antony's actions are repulsive. It is hard to deny that there are hundreds of James Bonds in Indian cinema too, whom hitherto the audience have accepted passively. Through Antony, the makers of *Jallikattu* make it clear that toxic masculinity and misogyny are not something to be glorified.

C. Violence and Savagery in Jallikattu

Critics have compared *Jallikattu* to the novel *Lord of the Flies*, written by William Golding. In the novel, Golding tells the story of a group of boys who find themselves deserted on an Island. The new world the boys find themselves in is free from all the social constraints and rules. This new found environment with no one to keep control over them, brings out the basic instincts and savagery hidden deep within them. While Goldberg uses the deserted island as a tool to bring out the savage within men, Lijo Jose Pellissery uses an escaped buffalo which is food for the villagers. In *Jallikattu*, it is easy to notice the changes taking place in the village. The manner and attitudes of the villagers during the end are a lot different from how they were at the beginning. By the time the movie reaches its climax, they turn fully wild. The villagers appear as men who have not been anywhere near civilization.

This is the central idea of the movie. Human beings believe themselves to be the best. Carolus Linnaeus gave human beings the scientific name *Homo Sapiens*, which is the Latin term for 'wise man'. The adjective 'human' is like a reward that the *Homo Sapiens* have given themselves as they believe themselves to be mentally and physically civilized compared to their ancestors. But stories like *Jallikattu* and *Lord of the Flies* raise questions about the concept, 'civilized'. A man living in an urban city with a job, family and friends, may behave in a manner that we call 'civilized'. But will he remain the same when his environment changes? It is hardly even a question for a debate.

Lord of the Flies offers an answer to this question. The manners the boys exhibit in their hometown, then during their first few days on the deserted land and finally during the climax of the novel are very much different. When the boys first reach the island, they are civilized characters who set up democracy for themselves. By the time the novel reaches its apotheosis, the idea of democracy is long gone. The boys turn savage and hostile. They end up killing one another. What the boys do during their stay on the island is not different from the activities taking place in their homeland. In their

country, grown, educated and civilized men were killing each other, under the pretext of war. The only difference between the two situations is that the grown men from the homeland have modern weapons, bombs and army uniforms, but the boys do not have any of these. In reality, both the groups are savage inside.

When *Jallikattu* reaches its climax, it is clear that the humans have lost their humanity. There is nothing civilized or wise about them. All are busy running behind the animal in a delirious state. In a particular scene, Kuttachan, who until then was chasing the buffalo, starts attacking Antony. This scene is an important part of the movie. Antony and Kuttachan during their attempts at settling scores, start making growling noises like animals. For a moment, the men appear more dangerous than the animal at loose.

Scientists have revealed that the propensity towards violence is present inside human beings. Their primal ancestors have passed on this tendency to them. A research report from the journal *Nature* reveals that even the first human beings were as violent as their primate ancestors. An inclination towards violence exists in their genes, which can erupt at any time. But the author, Jose Maria Gomez states has a slightly different opinion about violence. He states that human beings have the ability to control the level of violence rooted deep within them.

However, the notion that human beings can control their interpersonal violence is questionable when compared to the above mentioned stories. In both of them, violence erupts and humans attack each other and it does not appear as if the people involved in it have any control over what they are doing. At the end of *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph, one of the boys is seen crying over the death of another boy Piggy. What happened on the Island is not what the boys intended to happen. Mr. Gomez believes that human beings have the capacity to build a society more peaceful than the present one if they wish to. This idea may be possible to a particular extent. But if they manage to build a better society, how long will they be able to hold on to it?

The villagers in *Jallikattu* did manage to maintain a peaceful life before the buffalo broke free. But when the situation goes out of hand, everything changes for them. In the climax, we see the villagers forming a human pyramid, climbing on each other. The buffalo is dead and is no longer part of the scene. But the men are still attacking one another for no particular reason. It is evident that they have no idea of what they are doing or who they are fighting.

The brilliance of Lijo Jose Pellissery as a director reveals here when he juxtaposes the image of the villagers with that of primate human ancestors. He compares the villagers to a group of uncivilized men from an ancient era. These men madly fight with each other for buffalo flesh. The actors who portray the role of the villagers also portray the characters of the primate men. The imagery is grotesque, but it provides us with the message that men may appear civilized, but deep inside, they are still savages, more beastly than animals.

A similar message is contained in *Lord of the Flies*. Simon, one of the boys from the group, imagines himself having a conversation with the Lord of the flies. During this conversation, the Lord reveals to him that the beast that he imagines is not real. The beast is not an external entity that they can hunt or kill. The beast they are looking for is within the boys themselves.

II. JALLIKATTU AND THE THEORY OF NATURAL SELECTION

Surviving in a village similar to the one created by Pellissery in *Jallikattu* is not easy. To pull through a mob of insane men, it is necessary for someone to be one of them. That person also needs to have the capacity to endure them. Only someone who has acquired these life skills can survive there. In the theory of evolution by natural selection, Charles Darwin talks about the different variations that arise in the genotype of an organism. These variations increase or decrease the organism's chances of survival. Those organisms with positive variations survive, while those with negative variations perish.

Changes in genotypes happen when there is a change in the organism's environment. When such a change occurs, the organisms that have the ability to adjust to their new environment, survive. In a particular type of environment, the species that are fitter compared to the rest, emerge as winners in the competition for survival. They will adapt and flourish better than the others. But this victory is not absolute. For example, during the ice age, the conditions on earth were suitable for the mammoths. They adapted and emerged winners. When the circumstances began to change, mammoths found it hard to adjust to the changing environment. The earth's climate started becoming warm. Consequently, mammoths faced extinction. A similar case of adaptability and survival is present in *Lord of the Flies*.

In the novel, the boys find themselves in an environment completely different from their hometown. This change in surroundings forces them to change. The boys are rough, sturdy and aggressive. But the character of Simon is different from that of the others. He is a calm and dreamy child. When the boys start imagining the existence of a beast on the island and start losing their sense of reality, Simon is the only one to take into consideration that his companions could be hallucinating. The imaginary conversation between Simon and the Lord of the Flies could be his consciousness telling him that the beast is unreal. He is generous and helpful, which sets him apart from the group. Unlike the rest of the boys, Simon values civilization. A boy like Simon may have successfully adapted to a civilized society like his homeland, but the island is not the place for him. To adjust with the rest of the boys, Simon needed to be rough and aggressive. He was not able to adapt to their methods, which resulted in his quick death.

Not just the natural conditions, but the social circumstances of our world too, changed a lot within the last few decades. Contemporary society is highly competitive and people are willing to go to any extent to get what they need. To become successful in any field, a person needs to have multiple talents. For example, to have a successful career in the film industry, being a good actor is not enough. He or she needs to have a beautiful body, dancing skills and a charming personality. And the people having all these talents far outnumber the requirement.

Take the case of government jobs in India. Thousands are competing for a limited number of jobs in government offices which they believe will guarantee a secure future. For a person to adapt to such a competitive and fast paced world, he or she needs to be highly skilled. Otherwise, get ready to be crushed by the rest. The buffalo from *Jallikattu* is a metaphor for the few valuable things available, behind which all men are rushing. Every person wants to be the one to tame the animal, as it can help them gain recognition in the village. But sadly, it is impossible for all to get the title. Once again, only the fittest will win here.

Today getting a luxurious car or a limited edition watch has become an oft adopted criterion for weighing a man. But men do not need a large bank balance or an expensive car for a contented life. But sadly, those who decide to stay simple are either judged or mocked. In *Jallikattu*, there is no need for all the men to run behind the animal. It is obvious that some of them do not have the physical strength to tame it. Yet they are behind it to prove their courage. Those who do not have the capacity to do so or do not feel the need to do so are mocked. This mentality becomes evident when one of the boys makes fun of a man for sitting at home instead of trying to catch the animal. It is easy to guess that adding one more man to the group will not make a major difference.

Many viewers felt that some of the images from the movie are highly repulsive. But to bring out the aggressiveness of the movie the presence of these images is necessary. Considering the way *Jallikattu* is directed, it is not surprising that the movie got selected for Oscar nominations. With its hysterical characters and insane environment, *Jallikattu* reminds its viewers that they are no different from the characters on screen.

III. CONCLUSION

Jallikattu is a subtle portrayal of the imperious world that we live in. Characters such as Antony, Kalan Varkey, Kuttachan and Sophie explain to the viewers that the world they belong to is not as civilized and democratic as they believe it to be. It consists of people who are no less barbaric and violent compared to their ancestors. The buffalo symbolises the power and status that all men and women crave for. Everyone wants it, but it's hard to get. This perpetual competition for valuable things has resulted in the creation of men who are egoistic and aggressive. People need to learn to adapt to this manic and competitive world, as otherwise can result in their perishment.

This paper will be helpful to those researchers who want to do more research on the movie. Those who are interested in analysing a film using a scientific theory can also read this paper. Since the number of works related to *Jallikattu* are less, the paper is based on the limited resources available. But, it provides a different outlook of the movie unexplored before.

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