JOUISSANCE DISAVOWED: A LACANIAN READING OF RANJITH'S *LEELA*

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ABSTRACT

Leela, a Malayalam movie released in 2016 and directed by Ranjith, is disturbingly subversive in its concentrated focus on the crime of incest. The present study is an attempt to show how Leela stands out as a trenchant critique of the institution of family and of the disavowal that legitimizes the hegemony of the socio-ideological presuppositions around which the social space is structured. Leela, the movie, invites the spectators to enter into 'the womb of the Real,' and perhaps the most vital dimension of the movie opens out in the form of penetrating this oblique space of the Lacanian Real.

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KEYWORDS: Disavowed Subject, Play, Jouissance, Trauma, Lacanian Real & Žižek

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INTRODUCTION

"In order to understand today's world, we need cinema, literally. It's only in cinema that we get that crucial dimension we are not ready to confront in our reality. If you are looking for what is in reality more real than reality itself, look into the cinematic fiction" (Slavoj Žižek).

A cursory glance at some of the recent Malayalam movies would demonstrate a disturbing fascination with the theme of sexual transgression in its most traumatic forms. Ranjith's *Leela*, Hanif Adeni's *Great Father* and Nadhirash's *Amar Akbar Antony* are the most obvious examples. While *Great Father* and *Amar Akbar Antony* became big hits, Ranjith's *Leela* bombed at the box office. While *Great Father* and *Amar Akbar Antony* used the theme of child abuse and pedophilia as covert attempts to recuperate and even glorify certain dominant ideological constellations, *Leela*, a Malayalam movie released in 2016 and directed by Ranjith, is disturbingly subversive in its concentrated focus on the crime of incest. The present study is an attempt to show how *Leela* stands out as a trenchant critique of the institution of family and of the disavowal that legitimizes the hegemony of the socio-ideological presuppositions around which the social space is structured.

In *Leela*, the term "leela" is rich with a range of complex significations. It does not merely mean 'play'. It is definitely play, but play of a radically different kind. The term carries within itself an excessive core. From a Lacanian perspective, *Leela*, the character, is a "barred" subject in the sense that a series of primal wounds, primarily incest in the instant case, has permanently barred her entry into the Symbolic order. The exit from the Symbolic can only be an entry into what Žižek calls "the desert of the Real." *Leela*, the movie, invites the spectators to enter into 'the womb of the Real,' and perhaps the most vital dimension of the movie opens out in the form of

penetrating this oblique space of the Lacanian Real.

We are not oblivious of the incisive critiques of Lacanian modes of film analysis and interpretation which have probably reached its apogee in the works of David Bordwell and Noel Carroll. The contemporary academic community invests much in the slow, but steady advancement of a post-theoretical regime of film studies which “increasingly (re)turn[s] to a more humanist ethos and what are regarded as more politically or instrumentally ‘useful’ modes of research and analysis,” as opposed to the supposedly ‘unproductive’ enterprise of ‘high-theory.’ Bordwell and Carroll, most notably in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, attempted to challenge the dominant mode of Lacanian analysis and problematize the scope and relevance of attempting a Lacanian reading of films. (Hall 1)

In his groundbreaking book on film studies, *The Fright of Real Tears*, Slavoj Žižek directly engages the works of Bordwell and Carroll who in their Introduction to *Post-Theory* had argued that the emphasis of film studies was badly in need of a shift from the non-empirical, “mythical entities like the Gaze” to things which are tangible and observable, which amounted, to Žižek’s mind, to saying that the fundamental agenda of *Post-Theory* is to initiate a search for the “possibility of scholarship that is not reliant upon the psychoanalytic framework that dominates film academia” (Bordwell xvi). Žižek goes on to argue that every empirical mode of analysis (what he refers to as ‘problem solution model’) will ultimately involve the subjective consciousness of an observer and that the position of enunciation gets overlooked in the post-theoretical analytical framework introduced by the likes of Bordwell and Carroll. What remains essentially unavoidable in any empirical analysis is the ideological context in which a film is grounded. As Žižek argues: “while the problem-solution model ... can undoubtedly lead to a lot of precise and enlightening insights, one should nonetheless insist that the procedures of posing problems and finding solutions to them always and, by definition, occur within a certain ideological context that determines which problems are crucial and which solutions acceptable.” (21)

Žižek concludes his critique of Carroll and Bordwell by saying that their dream of an absolutely objective analysis is a theoretical and practical impossibility. The present reading of *Leela* attempts to map the film’s hidden ideological presuppositions and the traumatic core that, by its very nature, resists integration into the network of symbolic significations through a process of violent disavowal, which is, in effect, a disavowal of *jouissance*.

Leela captures in a series of continuous becomings the subterranean movement from *Bindu* (point), the name of the first woman Kuttiappan encounters within the diegetic space of the film, to *Leela* (play), the name Kuttiappan gives to, apparently, the last woman of his life. It presents to the Malayali audience a hitherto unthought-of cinematic experience, inviting both voluminous accolades and vitriolic criticism. Most of the discussion on the film that appeared on social and print media centered on the male protagonist Kuttiappan and his apparently unorthodox life and opinions. Such discussions, primarily based as they are on traditional notions of sexual morality, end up as failed attempts to sustain the ideological institutions such as family and leads to a disavowal of the traumatic kernel that destabilizes the very symbolic fabric of the movie. The character Leela lingers around not only as an unaccommodated “stain” whose ‘gaze’ spares no one, but also as a non-symbolizable traumatic wound which we struggle desperately to disavow so as to maintain the integrity of the symbolic framework. The paradigmatic figure of this kind of disavowal in the movie is the mother who advises the incestuous father to ‘save the honour’ of the family by consulting a gynec. The well-meaning advice is followed and the symbolic order is restored. In an absolutely sarcastic and suggestive way, the movie strikes at the very heart of the hollow rhetoric that sustains the symbolic efficiency of the family system, Kerala’s most elementary kinship structure.

Leela represents a radical departure from the stereotypes that revolve around the superhuman hero who takes it unto himself to save the struggling heroine and the rest of the community and eventually brings about peace and stability. The movie introduces a playboy, an aging bachelor named Kuttiappan who could never be anything more than an erotomaniacal anti-hero and, by the end of the movie, literally transforms himself into a deeply disturbing figure of great depth and magnitude.

Though one could probably argue that the famed character Mangalessry Neelankandan, a product of Ranjith's budding genius, represented a brilliant portrayal of the playboy figure in the 1993 film *Devasuram*, *Leela* distinguishes itself as a movie that stands by a class of its own and which, far from being integrated into the normative standards of filmic discourse in Kerala, opens a veritable can of worms in both thematic and technical terms. While Ranjith retains the ideological presuppositions intact at the end of *Devasuram* by transforming the playboy into the figure of the repentant recluse madly in love with the subversive heroine whose dignity he once violated, in *Leela* Ranjith destabilizes the paradigmatic structure of the most intimate spaces of family relationship.

Leela is thus an impossible movie. The final shot of Kuttiappan expressing his desire to marry Leela functions as an immanently explosive cinematic manifestation of the Lacanian unconscious, in the sense that "it is an image that retroactively erases the narrative framework within which we attempt to decipher the meaning of the film" (Vighi 7). The decision to willingly restrain oneself within a trenchant system of marriage is not just oxymoronic in nature, but goes against the de-centered playfulness implied by the term "leela" which could also mean *jouissance* in the Žižekian sense. It could thus be argued that 'lack' is the constitutive principle of the subject and the consequent subject is radically decentered because consciousness is the result of a misrecognition of its place—its "position of enunciation"—within the Symbolic. Cogito, according to Lacan, results from a forced choice of being. Lacan contends that the subject is forced to choose between thought and being. In order to exist within the confines of the Symbolic, a person becomes a subject by way of this forced choice of being, which relegates thought to the place of the unconscious. As Žižek puts it, the unconscious is precisely the "thing which thinks" and is, in this way, inaccessible to the subject. Žižek explains that Descartes's error was the assumption that the choice of thought secured for the subject a piece of being, thus attaining the certainty of "I" as a "thinking substance" (*res cogitans*). It is not the conscious subject that thinks (not, "I think therefore I am"); it is, rather, the unconscious fantasy that "thinks" ("I am, therefore 'it' thinks"). It is in the choice of being that the subject's ideal ego is then formed in the Imaginary. Kuttiappan is a manifestation of this Lacanian unconscious that thinks. His motto, which he repeats at the beginning of all his "eccentric" adventures and strange escapades, stands testimony to his uncanny ability to circumvent the grip of the Big other: "It is not only safe, but also a change" is one of Kuttiappan's favorite refrains. This "Safe and Subversive"—subversion in safety and safety in subversion—becomes a kind of formula that enables Kuttiappan to stay afloat and always ride the crest of life while effectively exiting the Symbolic matrix of life. This 'safe-subversive' tone is set right from the beginning when Kuttiappan rides on a horse, wearing a cowboy hat, after consuming alcohol. He rides past a police picket to stop drunk-driving, and mocks them by saying that a drunkard cannot be arrested for riding a horse. He subverts the law, but stays safe.

In the next scene, Kuttiappan is shown sitting in a smutty, scarcely furnished room. Dasappaappi, a pimp who regularly visits temples and wears only white shirt and white dhoti and thereby dismantles the segmentary logic of common sense that a pimp can never be god fearing and gentle, procures a prostitute, who is apparently new in the "field," in to Kuttiappan's room. Kuttiappan lights an oil lamp and lies down before it with a white cloth wrapped around his head.

He asks the young woman to imagine that he is her father. On another occasion, he insists that his servant should not take the usual staircase to bring him tea in the morning, but wants her to climb a ladder positioned outside the house and near the window to his room. The elderly housemaid ends up breaking her back in a bad fall. Kuttiappan invites 'retired' prostitutes and honors them in public for being 'true socialists', for accepting everyone irrespective of religion, class, caste, or creed. The declaration of marriage and his willingness to be part of a structured life, in effect, retroactively erase all eccentricities from his earlier action, and reduce it to a mere search for a perfect woman to marry. The narrative not only comes to a stalemate, but implodes and throws the viewers of the movie to "this could not have happened" mode.

What the movie throws up in the end is a void. The final close-up shot of the elephant sitting on Leela "signals the definitive failure of interpretation, the limit dimension where truth and void overlap" (Vighi 8). But, as Lacan maintains, the success of any act of interpretation resides in its encounter with the non-symbolizable cinematic unconscious. It would seem that in *Leela*, Ranjith successfully establishes a figurative link with the unconscious, for the unusual climax sequence where, unlike the usual Malayalam family drama, the hero, incapable of rescuing the damsel in distress, "visualize[s] the surreal spectacle of the unconscious" (Vighi 8).

What needs to be underlined here is the resurfacing of the central and constantly disavowed element of the narrative. Disavowal is a psychological notion which can be roughly translated as: "I know what you are saying is true, but I am trying to live my life as if it is not." Put differently, one knows what is crucially wrong with the system, but at the same time, prefers to defer the possibility of confronting it. One is tempted to adopt the less challenging option of toeing the social line and living as if the problem does not exist. The climax sequence of the film is the ultimate traumatic act of disavowal, not because it kills the physical body of Leela, but it unabashedly disavows Leela's traumatic sexual encounter with her own father and proposes to accommodate her as Kuttiappan's wife. This is the easiest way to maintain normalcy for one does not have to deal with the trauma. It is a radical attempt to disavow the traumatic subject Leela who represents a scandal that disrupts the normative logic of sexuality, and to accommodate her into the symbolic network of marriage. The traces of the unconscious of the film could be identified, "in the traumatic encounter with the disavowed core of cinematic representation." (qtd. in Vighi 8) *Leela*, in this sense, is a minor movie. Minor, in the Deleuzian sense, does not mean of lesser quality, it means marginalized, disavowed by the hegemonic ideology or dealing with a "lower, less dignified topic" (Žižek). Putting the work within the minoritarian framework of reading would help to bring out the text's "unthought," its disavowed presuppositions and consequences.

What propels the narrative forward is Kuttiappan's limitless desire or search for what Lacan calls *jouissance*. *Jouissance* is "beyond the pleasure principle" in the sense that it denies any intercourse with the reality principle, in the sense that it nullifies the equilibrium of the drives desired by the ego.

"That's not it' is the very cry by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from the *jouissance* expected....The 'jouissance expected' is an illusory, mythicized 'full satisfaction,'... the decisive, final quelling of the incessant clamoring of the drives. However, what the subject always gets (i.e., the 'jouissance obtained') is, at best, a pleasure that falls short of the idealized standard....Full satisfaction implies a kind of 'psychical death,' an evacuation of the tension of dissatisfaction that perpetually drives the libidinal economy. One consequently arrives at a paradoxical point in Lacanian theory: *jouissance* is an enjoyment that is enjoyable only insofar as it doesn't get what it's allegedly after." (Johnston 7)

For our purposes, the distinction between pleasure and enjoyment is important. Pleasure is of the order of the Symbolic: it is attached to the little jolts of enjoyment that are allowed to seep through the cracks of the Symbolic, to which the subject remains passionately attached. Through the reproduction of desire, the subject holds onto and stays attached to its particular subjective position. In the process, the subject also reproduces the objective conditions that guarantee this subjective position. Enjoyment, in contrast, is of the order of the impossible—Real. As Žižek puts it in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, “jouissance does not exist, it is impossible, but it produces a number of traumatic effects” (164).

In Zizekian terms, the Real is desirable only when it is at a certain distance and covered by the veneer of fantasy. In order for the desire to remain desire, the object of desire has to be in a perpetual inaccessible mode of existence. “Any subsequent lifting of the veil reveals not the expected sublime ‘Thing’ nostalgically prized by the drives, but, as Lacan puts it, an ugly ‘gift of shit’” (qtd.in Johnston 8). In Lacan, desire is always sustained by a secret liaison with void, whose unexpected manifestation is coterminous with what we might call a “truth-effect.” What is evident in the climactic sequence of the elephant killing Leela and the deformed angel with one wing holding the dead Leela in a posture that reminds one of *Pieta* is the shocking encounter with the empty kernel of Kuttiappan’s desire. Had Kuttiappan been successful in his venture, this film would not then have been ‘leela’. It is precisely the impossibility of fulfilling *jouissance/leela* that makes the movie an embodiment of the Lacanian theory of desire, of *the objet petit a*. It is important to note that Kuttiappan gets disappointed and sheds tears at the end of every one of his “unorthodox” ventures which are aimed at satisfying his *jouissance*. It is at this point where the film ceases to be a film that narrates the struggles and experiments of an uncanny character called Kuttiappan and become theory. It is Kuttiappan who names the female protagonist as Leela—the object of play. At the end of the film, Leela, the desired object of play, turns out to be the Real object of play: she escapes him.

What is truly traumatic in the subject’s encounter with the Real is the realization that full enjoyment is ontologically impossible. However, the way to avoid an encounter with this impossibility is to assume that its inaccessibility is due not to its status as impossible Real, but as social prohibition. This, we argue, is how power/authority is productive of desire, and this is how subjects are interpellated by ideology. This underside, the fantasy object, conceals the fact that the Symbolic order is structured around some traumatic impossibility that cannot be symbolized, the Real of enjoyment.

One of the reasons why a film or a work of art like *Leela* never ceases to be the focal point of endless discussion and recreation is that a work of art “always-already gives way to its own unconscious destabilizing desire, which seeps through the narrative and stains it profoundly” (Vighi 18). An attempt to arrive at the “truth” of a work of art, as Lacan maintains, can only be performed by understanding the process of identifying the traces of unconscious desire, “cinematic signifiers that speak the film’s ‘discourse of the Other’” (Vighi 18). As Derrida maintains, one can never stop the possibility of “someone’s still arriving... someone absolutely indeterminate” (31). *Leela*, the film, and Leela, the character, will continue to generate discussions of myriad dimensions.

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