

PANTHIBHOJANAM: A Story of Adaptation

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“Art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories”

Adaptation, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, has a plurality of meanings and applications, but mostly alludes to the process of changing to suit an alternative purpose, function, or environment; i.e., the alteration of one thing to suit another. Adaptations are not new to our times. Shakespeare transferred the history of his culture from page to stage. Aeschylus, Racine, Goethe are all known to have done the same, retelling the old familiar stories to a new audience, using a new medium. Adaptations are a big part of the Western culture that they seem to affirm Walter Benjamin’s saying that “storytelling is always the art of retelling stories”.

Here, I am attempting a reading of *Panthibhojanam*, a Malayalam short story by Santhosh Aechikanam, from the collection *Komala*, first published in 2006, and later adapted into a short film of the same title, by Sreebala K Menon. The story takes us through the mindscape of five young advocates (four women and a man).

In *Panthibhojanam*, our story, what begins as banter among three friends veers into a verbal battering of the Public Prosecutor, a Dalit. On one side is the trio of Christian, Nair and Nambudiri girls, upper caste in their own words- Susan (LakshmiPriya), Ramya Nair (Jyothy Rajesh), Sangeetha Nambudiri (Manjusha)- whose innuendos and snide comments point to the potential threat from the Dalit advocate Rugmini (Krishna Viswakarma). There is also the competition offered to the Nambudiri girl by the Dalit advocate by way of the attention received from the young Varma colleague-Sathish Varma (Rajeev Shankar), an eligible bachelor. The story opens right into the tension of the hearing of Sangeetha Nambudiri’s first independent case; she is the lawyer of the defendant C P Gopala Menon, who is accused of calling Kappakutty, a Dalit, by his caste name (which is prohibited by the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1999), and attempt of murder. He is a distant relative of Rugmini, the public prosecutor. Around a lunch table at the bar, Sangeetha and friends had once talked about the caste and hereditary of food, and she had pointed out the classlessness of Rugmini’s food – the nauseating smell of “chettu meen” (fish from muddy waters). Rugmini, who came to know of this has not even looked at Sangeetha since. The trio of friends decide that Sangeetha’s only chance of winning the case is a compromise with Rugmini, which they orchestrate through Sathish Varma, Rugmini’s partner. The compromise talk happens at yet another dining table, filled with dishes from the Christian, Nambudiri and Nair kitchens. Rugmini brings her fish curry too. The meal does bring out the desired victory for C P Gopala Menon. Rugmini leaves contended having gained three friends, the trio is seen gathered around a wash basin where Sangeetha Nambudiri is vomiting out the “chettu meen”.

The word panthibhojanam means community feast. And this can be traced back to *Parayi petta panthirukulam*, a famous legend of ancient Kerala. The title translates to twelve kulams born of a parayi. The 'Kulams' refer to vocation based hierarchical ethnic groups. According to this legend, Vararuchi, one of the nine wise men of Emperor Chandragupta Vikramaditya’s (375 – 415 AD) court married Panchami, a girl belonging to Paraya, a lower caste. When he realises the caste of his wife, he leaves court and sets out on a long pilgrimage with his wife. On the way, they were blessed with 12 children. Upon each delivery, Vararuchi enquired whether the baby had a mouth. If the wife said “yes”, he would say, “God will appease the one with mouth” and would ask the wife to abandon the baby then and there and proceed. Eleven children were thus deserted. These children were adopted and brought up by eleven different families, varying from the aristocratic upper caste to very low caste. However, the twelfth child was born without a mouth. Vararuchi consecrated this child on a hill. This hill is near Kadampazhipuram in Palakkad district of Kerala, and he is now known as “Vaayillaakkunnillappan” (Hill Lord without mouth). These are the other eleven children: Mezhatol Agnihothri (Brahmin), Pakkanar (Parayan), Rajakan (Washerman), Naranathu Bhranthan (Elayathu, a lower class Brahmin), Karakkal Matha (high caste Nair, only girl born to the couple), Akavoor Chathan (Vaishya, farmer), Vaduthala Nair (Nair Soldier), Vallon (Pulaya, dalits, lower caste), Uppukottan (Muslim), Pananar (Panan, country musician) and Perumthachan (Carpenter). The eleven children later found each other and they met every year at the house of Mezhatol Agnihothri, the

eldest, on the day of their father's sraadham, death anniversary. The meal they shared together forms the first panthibhojanam known to us.

The term also has another socio political importance in Kerala, the first state in India to officially allow Dalits entry into temples in 1936. Even before this, Sree Narayana Guru and many of his disciples had worked diligently against untouchability. Guru's famous catchphrase was Oru Jati, Oru Matham, Oru Deivam Manushyanu, (One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man). One of his disciples, Sahodaran Ayyappan, a militant atheist, re-wrote Guru's catchphrase as Jati Venda, Matham Venda, Daivam Venda Manushyanu (No Caste, No Religion, No God for Man). He launched what is called Panthibhojanam participating people belonging to various castes and communities.

I chose *Panthibhojanam* as a study of adaptation, because I feel that it talks of more than a media adaptation, which it becomes in its journey from page to screen, from Aechikanam's pen to Sreebala's camera. It also tells the story of cultural adaptation, not in the migratory perspective but the subtle shifts that evolves within a locale, even in a small cultural group. It conveys the elemental contradictions we harbour in our psyches and trigger some disturbing thoughts in the viewers, who would rather vehemently deny harbouring any such discrimination.

Scope of Adaptations

Humans have a long history of adapting texts into other forms. Historical events and spoken legends had been the inspiration for paintings, sculptures, plays, written tales, and stained glass windows. But with time, they became stories in the form of the novel. Cinematic adaptations of literary and theatrical texts are as old as the medium of cinema itself, and the tension between literature and film have existed as long as screen adaptations. Adaptation is concerned with the transport of form and/or content from a source to a result in a media context. For Linda Hutcheon and theorists like her, the term adaptation has a multi-layered application. It refers simultaneously to the entity which is the result of transposing a particular source, the process through which the entity was created, and the process of reception through which "we experience adaptations as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition and variation".

Traditionally, with the adaptation theory's focus being on the notion of fidelity, and the perpetuation of a hierarchy, the literary text has been held as primary, and the adaptation as a weaker, derivative text. According to Robert Stam, class prejudice, iconophobia, logophilia, and anti-corporeality (distaste for the ways in which the medium of cinema engages with the body of the spectator) are all several factors which have informed the traditional privileging of literature over film (and other media forms). However, adaptation theory has today moved away from the dichotomy of film and literature. The focus is on the multidirectional flows, concentrating less on what has been lost by a text during the process of adaptation, and more on what the text has gained by taking on a new form or variation. With theories of Intertextuality, the adapted text is compared not only with the original, but other adaptations and similar texts as well.

Adaptation is subject to a variety of forces and factors dictated by the nature of the source text, the reason for adapting the text, medium, market, and culture into which it is adapted. A good adaptation is one which achieves repetition without replication, – it is not just a replica which sheds its Benjaminian aura, the adaptation both evokes and is amplified by a user's experience of the original, while also taking on distinct qualities of its own. According to Mark Brokenshire a good adaptation balances "the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty". It carries the aura with it, and contributes to its continual expansion as well. Balazs further argues that even though an adaptation takes the subject of another work, the adaptation is an entirely new entity. Further, Balazs, in his book *Theory of the Film* says: "a film script writer adapting the play may use the existing work of art merely as raw material, regard it from the specific angle of his own art form as it were raw reality, and pay no attention to the form once already given to the material" (263).

Kracauer introduced the concept of 'cinematic and uncinematic'. For him, film adaptations make sense only when the content of the novel is firmly rooted in objective reality, not in mental and spiritual experience. On the other hand, a novel whose primary movement occurs in the character, is uncinematic. According to Rene Clair a successful film adaptation is neither a replication nor a substitute; it is re-experience in another medium.

From Page to Screen: The Traces

In the short film adaptation that Sreebala K Menon undertakes of the short story, we see some expansion of plot as is the norm for short story adaptations unlike large novel adaptations where we see a compression in the plot to fit it into the timeframe. There is a general shift in the linearity of the plot development and dialogues. Also, she has mixed up the characters delivering the dialogues. In the film we see more characters as well. The story opens at the lunch table at the bar whereas film opens in Susan's kitchen, where we see Ammachi (her grandmother) packing lunch for her. Ammachi and the servant girl are two of the new characters. Other characters are Saajitha, Shaji, and judge. We also do get faces for Kappakutty and C P Gopala Menon. In Aechikanam's story, Susan is a senior by two years, whereas in the film they seem to be classmates.

Sreebala says she took up the story for her short film because it did not recede from memory ever since she read it. It kept recurring in her thoughts. Equally important was the fact that the story never came up for discussion anywhere despite the Dalit issues simmering in our literary and public debates. Among the trio of friends Susan is called the mobile restaurant and her dishes are always in demand. In the short story on the first day the special dish Susan brings is pork whereas in the film it is beef. Sreebala admits that she did not want to keep it subtle, but wanted to make sure that the same thing be said in as many ways so that the message reaches the viewer. The verbosity in the film ensured that none could skim over the issue. The subtle shift from pork to beef, brings food from the opening scene to the centre of a socio-political debate in the Indian context, where pork consumption is very low and limited mostly to the Christian circles. However, beef consumers amount to more than 30% of the population of India and has been a topic of ongoing debates for decades. And today with beef bans and killings it is has become ever more relevant.

The 'Panthibhojanam' in the story takes place at the bar, a democratic space common to the creamy upper caste and the Dalit equally. But in Sreebala's script, the 'Panthibhojanam' is arranged around Susan's dining table. This is yet another loud question to the Kerala's seemingly secular society which puts on the fake show that the caste system is an issue the state has already solved. Susan's house becomes the feasting ground because a Dalit is still not considered a table partner at the Nair and Nambudiri households. Susan, being a Christian is an outsider to the caste hierarchies. Yet she parties herself with the upper caste throughout the film. The use of lyrics "Thanthoyam thanthoyam, thanthoyam maale, nammakum kshethratil pokam, daivathe thottu thozhave", in Kuttappan's voice works as a reminder of the epochal Temple Entry Proclamation. And the accompanying music has a tribal beat to it. This does not leave any question as to the angle of focus the director aims at. Sreebala's script ends with Rugmini's question "When will 'they' come to our home for a meal?".

Adaptation, A Cultural Feast

Culture is a group of taught responses of different people to variable stimulus. Behaviours, beliefs, ways of organization, dominant ideology all adds to it. The inherited cultural values represents explanatory features of identity like: individualism, materialism, moral or religious beliefs etc. Culture lies in the individual consciousness, and individuals learn culture through socialization and adjust to a new culture. It becomes essential and useful for society and individual because the daily tasks are simplified by the unwritten laws of involvement in social interactions.

The 'they' in the last dialogue of the film is relevant. It is the process of othering that generates and sustains this 'they', the caste hierarchies and the differences. Othering is prompted by

what Freud refers to as ‘narcissism of minor differences’ – the person or group that ‘is othered’ is the one in closest physical and symbolic proximity, and it is seen to present a major threat to one’s identity and pride. The dichotomies of otherness are set up as being natural and often is presumed to be natural. But social identities are *not* natural – they represent an established social order – a hierarchy where certain groups are established as being superior to other groups. Individuals have the choice (or agency) to create their identities according to their own beliefs about the world. Yet the negotiation of identity equally depends upon the negotiation of power relations. According to Andrew Okolie power is implicated in these relational social identities, and because groups do not have equal powers to define both self and the other, the consequences reflect these power differentials. Often notions of superiority and inferiority are embedded in particular identities.

M N Srinivas’ idea of Sanskritization, which he introduced in his book *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of India*, finds place in the plot as well. He uses the term to describe the cultural mobility in the traditional caste structure of the Indian society. His study proves that the lower castes were trying to raise their status in their caste hierarchy by adopting certain cultural ideals from the Brahmins and other locally dominant groups. Ramya Nair, who often mixes politics and history in her dialogues, once talks about this. She also at another time, talks about Yogakshema Sabha and V T Bhattathirippad. Decades after their revolution, Rugmini’s final comment is still significant in the light that all ‘panthibhojanams’ recorded in history has the lower class having the food normally eaten by the upper caste. Even a revolutionary Nambudiri who relishes the beef fry from a Christian kitchen is unable to stomach the fish curry from the Dalit home.

All these cultural differences, in a sense cause cultural adaptation. Globalization has induced a source of standardization. This is usually discussed in terms of consumerism and economy but the effects of standardization remains diffused. Food is very sensitive to local tastes and habits. A careful study of the semantics of food indicates to what extent culture determines an individual's perception of what constitutes food which gives great satisfaction. Adoption of ideas, concepts, clothes, food and even ideology may be affected as much by how it complies with the concept of norms, values and behavioural patterns as well.

The post communist Kerala, is believed to have a common space which includes the differences. The tea shops ate away the castes, or so was thought. But in the light of modern theories and post modern socio-political scenarios, these have to be reread. Now it is Jathi chodikaruthu, parayaruthu. Anubhavichu ariyanam (Ask not caste, speak not caste, it has to be endured). *Panthibhojanam*, is a poignant reminder that despite all its cultural and social advancements, Kerala society still retains part of the age old caste system.

Aechikanam’s pen shows its strength in the story. Being an intensely dialogue-centric story it called for a re-working in the visual medium. Lester Asheim, a film theorist contends that the film oversimplifies, exaggerates, overstates, romanticises and dramatises the theme of the novel. His basic assumption is that the film trivialises its original. Sreebala’s film, has no sign of oversimplification or romanticising, but perhaps, she can be called out for overstating her point.

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