

**“MAY BE THERE IS A BEAST....MAY BE IT IS ONLY US.”
LIJO JOSE PELLISSERY’S *JELLIKETTU* (2019): A JOURNEY INTO
THE CHAOTIC HUMAN PSYCHE**

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Abstract

The IFFI 2019 ‘Best Director Award’ was conferred to **Lijo Jose Pellissery** for his Malayalam film ‘*Jellikettu*’. The movie *Jellikettu* rips right through pre-conceived notions of what constitutes cinema and leaves the viewer psychologically and philosophically jolted. It reminds the audience of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* which dissects the darkness and violence embedded in human nature. This paper attempts to analyze the depiction of the basal excitement that rises in man when he witnesses violence despite knowing that civilization has taught him to abhor it. Though we are constantly engaged in defining what makes us human - art, emotion, music, language - we are also constantly disguising our primal urges that give us away in certain situations.

Introduction

Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651) states that human beings could only live together in a civilized manner, if placed under the rule of an absolute sovereign because without such an arbitrary power, the “dissolute condition of masterlesse men, without subjection to Lawes, and a coercive Power to tye their hands from rapine, and revenge” (qtd. in Lloyd) would make impossible all of the basic security upon which comfortable, sociable, civilized life depends. This would make “the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short” (ibid.). In such a state of nature, man’s private desires would become the measure of good and evil. In the movie *Jellikettu*, the director Lijo Jose Pellissery employs Hobbes’ hypothesis of darkness and violence being inherent in man. The question he raises is not whether man is evil. Instead, he discusses the various manifestations of human evil. ‘*Jellikettu*’ means ‘bull-taming’, a highly controversial and bloody sport popular in Tamil Nadu, a sport where a man, who considers himself a superior being, tries to establish his manhood by subduing a ferocious bull that is released into human crowds. But Pellissery’s *Jellikettu* is not about taming the bull. It is an allegory on man, who loses his rational thought to the slightest external stimuli and is ripped apart of the facade of civilization in a rage-fuelled frenzy. On the surface, *Jellikettu* is about a village chasing a bull that is broken free. But beneath that, it is about man’s ego, the desire to establish himself as the

alpha- male, the breakdown of civilization and the realization of what we really are, inside. The movie presents man as an intrinsically evil creature who has been conditioned by imposed societal principles to camouflage his worst instincts and impulses.

Jellikettu is set in a remote South Kerala village where a typical Sunday morning begins with a visit to the local butcher Varkey to procure meat. Varkey with a metaphorical “Kaalán”(God of death) added to his name seems to enjoy the process of picking the right beast, dragging a rope through its nose, chopping its head off in a single blow, slicing and segregating it into spine and ribs. The tree branches at the local church are filled with hanging plastic bags of meat. Males high on testosterone and women who gossip, fight, cook and love are depicted effortlessly in the movie. The animals are all snorting and grunting in the backdrop. Chaos ensues on the night Varkey tries to kill a bull, but the animal runs into the wilderness. The beast rushes wildly through fields, plantations and human habitations, spurring the men of the community to give chase. The chase that lasts through the movie begins there. It is during the chase that the true self of the people are unveiled and we discover the repressed ‘self’ chained inside each one of us. “In 95 minutes, the movie goes its way into the brain and builds together a mini version of the world, exposing its filth” (Cris). It is a tale of bruised beasts and egos which “pulsate with an infectious, unrelenting energy that is exhausting and exhilarating, enervating yet invigorating” (Vetticad).

A young man Antony trying to exact revenge on his rival Kuttachan over a woman they both lust after, the fake virtuousness of a Hindu man who shudders at the sight of the raw meat but is quick to secretly remind his wife which meat recipe to make, a farmer with a saintly disposition going ballistic and showering expletives when he realizes that the bull has plundered his vegetation, an agitated policeman getting violent with his wife, the town's richest man Kuriachan finding himself the object of humiliation when he makes a last-ditch effort to procure some meat for his daughter's wedding, the men pouring in from neighboring villages to fuel more hatred and create more chaos, the clueless communists who are furious when their flag is felled by the bull- all these conflicts continue to play out in the background while the bull wreaks havoc. The whole village is trying to get it under control. As the villagers chase the animal, their real nature gets revealed and that is exactly where the story is focused. The difference between man and beast disappears gradually.

Man vs. Beast Dynamics

The ruckus created by the slaughter bull turns the entire village into a bedlam. Conquering it then becomes a matter of masculine pride, stirring up the primal instinct of man. *Jellikettu* is emblematic of the crass violence we are used to in the name of masculinity. It shines a mirror at the face of the machismo we have internalized as a society. In a story that starts as man versus wild, it doesn't take that long before man becomes the wild. The men display their basest instincts while trying to control the beast. They use this battle as an outlet to vent their simmering internal struggles, and gradually it becomes hard to distinguish between the four-legged animal and the primitive, wild bipeds hot on their heels. The men are charged: they shout, scream, growl, hiss and snarl like predators on the prowl and spit abuses out at each other depicting man's primal instincts. It only adds its own layers to this indigenous tradition of man versus the wild. Finally, the viewer is perplexed as to who is who. “What is evidently a wild goose chase soon becomes a man versus beast dynamic. The boundaries will begin to get blurry; the man's grunts and snorts uncannily matches

the beast's and in quick succession the man turns into a predator and the beast no longer wants to fight him"(Menon).

No character is individualized in this movie. It is the mob mentality that unravels in *Jellikettu*. Social Psychology which focuses on how people think about, influence, and relate to one another attributes human personality to specific background, environment, culture, and community. In this regard, Luke Holm suggests the attribution theory, which explains someone's behavior by analyzing their stable, enduring personality traits and the situation at hand. Depending on the situation, people may join together in what is commonly called a mob or a herd. When mobs form, they create a powerful influential factor that shapes a person's identity.

Sigmund Freud's crowd behavior theory primarily consists of the idea that becoming a member of a crowd serves to unlock the unconscious mind. This occurs because the super-ego, or moral center of consciousness, is displaced by the larger crowd.... In a crowd, the overall shared emotional experience reverts to the least common denominator (LCD), leading to primitive levels of emotional expression. This organizational structure is that of the "primal horde" -pre-civilized society. (Manstead 154)

Jellikettu draws one to analyze man's ability to lose a rational thought in such a rage-fuelled mob. The bull rips through farms, orchards, churches, shops, homes, and humans. "The villagers form a maniacal mob set on trapping and killing the monstrous mouthwatering mass of meat. Throughout the hunt the crowd devolves into a very *Lord of the Flies* filled mentality, making illogical and knee-jerk caveman crazed decisions as well as of course ego-fueled infighting" (Peligrosa). Using psycho-analytic approach of Freud, E. D. Martin interpreted crowd behaviour as the release for repressed drives. Through a crowd, the restraints of a superego are relaxed and primitive ego-impulses come into play. The 'censor' within the individual is set aside in the crowd and the 'instinct' or basic 'id' impulses, which are normally confined to the inner depths of the personality, come to surface. The crowd thus provides a momentary release of otherwise repressed drives (qtd. in Mondal).

According to Le Bon, the earliest and main exponent of crowd behaviour, the individual yields to instincts which had he been alone, he would perforce have kept under restraint. *Jellikettu* deliberately sets out to impress upon the viewers how similar humans are to animals, despite years of civilization trying to distinguish between the two categories. How it takes only a trigger for us to regress to who we really are. Like the hypnotized person, 'he is no longer conscious of his actsAt the same time that certain faculties are destroyed, others may be brought to a high degree of exaltationHe is no longer himself, but has become an automation who has ceased to be guided by his will.... In the crowd he is barbarian. He possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings" (qtd. in Mondal).

While explaining crowd behavior, Le Bon developed his most important notion of 'group mind'. Group mind makes people feel, think and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual would feel, think and act where he in a state of isolation. Its working is hypnotic and based on emotions, appeals, suggestions and slogans. Its acts are less rational and more emotional. It is an irresponsible mind focusing its attention on an immediate object. In this movie, the immediate object is the bull. "With the man vs. animal conflict as its central theme, *Jellikettu* serves as a powerful reminder of man's insatiable lust for power and supremacy over everyone else. The film also explores themes of envy, jealousy, machismo, and chaos and mob behavior" (Khan).

Men giving in to their most primeval urges and behaving like wild beasts, a crowd which is excessively emotional, impulsive, fickle, inconsistent, irresolute and extreme in action, displaying only the coarser sentiments make for a horrifying spectacle in *Jellikettu*. Psychologist William McDougall explains the two central phenomena of crowd behavior, namely, the intensification of emotion in a crowd and the lowering of intellectual level, as follows: The former is due to the principle of direct induction of emotion by way of ‘primitive sympathetic response’. He says, the greater the number of people in whom the same emotions can be simultaneously observed, the greater the contagion. The individual under the influence of emotion loses the power of criticism and slips into the same emotion. The metaphor thus employed in *Jellikettu* is that we are still hunter-gatherers, hunting and gathering everything within reach.

The main conflict is an ego battle between two men - Kuttachan and Antony who both work with Varkey the butcher. The explicit reason for their conflict is their lust for Sophie, Varkey's sister, who is interested in Kuttachan and rebuffs Antony. When Antony and Kuttachan are involved in an intense fight, both men only produce animal sounds, making the transformation from man to beast complete. The height to which the men take their enmity makes the audiences wriggle in their seats because it dissolves our “disguises and exposes what really drives us; the need to eat and mate, which we share with all other creatures. The line spoken by an old man in the warmth of a night fire – ‘this land had once been full of animals, and it is still so, look at those two-legged creatures’ becomes strikingly true.

The mayhem created by the bull: destroyed huts, the rampaged tea stall, plantations that the beast mows down, all these epitomize the collapse of civilization, further blurring the boundaries between man and animal. The mob yearns for blood and revenge. As darkness falls, liquor plays its part and the tenor shifts. The crowd now resembles less of a desperate mob trying to secure their homes from a beast on the prowl. It has attained a festive, celebratory mood reminiscent of a group of Neanderthal men creeping slowly around a prey. “Do you know which is the tastiest of all meats? Human flesh,” Kuttachan whispers, laughing slyly to an onlooker, as he trains his gun into the night. The climax with its spectacle of blurred limbs, greased footprints, mud strewn faces and frenzy rings in the ‘fall of Man’.

***Jellikettu* as a Spectacular Audio-Visual Experience**

There is a unique vision and utilization of cinematography, geography, choreography, and culture. The movie is quite an experience with its sound editing which disturbs and jolts the viewer on a psychological level. The human choruses singing in primitive words, the tick-tock of an unusually loud clock, the rhythm of the human breath, the loud banter at a crowded meat shop, all these inject adrenaline into a visual treat. The visuals capture the brutality and fear of darkness, and exemplifies the extent of havoc man is capable of. The movie begins in darkness, switches to daylight and goes back to the comforts of a night lit by flickering torches. The viewer feels entrapped in a vortex of human beastliness.

The absurdity is everywhere in this spectacular sound-and-light show. If the bull is indeed the manic creature the whole village is after, the first opportunity would have been taken to kill it, when it is trapped in the well. But Antony lowers himself on ropes surrounded by lit flashlights of the men on top, peering into the well. The background is built here because it symbolizes his journey into his inner self: the unfathomed, unconscious psyche-Antony's personal hell. The woman he desperately desires is repulsed by the sight of him. He tries to capture the bull, but fails. He watches in helpless anger and seething protest as the village rules

him incapable of discharging the task at hand, instead calling in Kuttachan, his blood nemesis. His lowering to the well symbolizes his attempts to reclaim masculinity in a hierarchical society. He must now prove to the society and to himself that he is the real victor.

Bharadwaj Rangan rightly comments: “The frenzy keeps escalating to the final scene involving a geometric formation and we see that this isn’t just night but also the dark night of the soul....A series of eyes - in a quick-cut, machine-like montage - were seen opening from slumber, in the initial frame. But by the end of the film, no eyes have really been opened”.

Conclusion

Jellikettu is as much a socio-political essay, a gutsy cultural critique and an allegory for the devolution of men over the ages, as it is an exciting, hormonally charging thriller. The movie’s stunning climax, where the hunters form a human pyramid, madly throwing themselves on the pile, having forgotten what they’re really chasing, ends on an ambiguous note. Did the bull escape and find itself outside the house of the bedridden old man or is it Antony who is torn down by the hunters who can’t distinguish between humans and an animal anymore is a question that baffles the viewers. Much to the audience’s horror, there is a hint of the latter interpretation when one remembers Kuttachan’s horrifying statement that human meat is the tastiest. The movie ends with expressionistic images of men in animal skins exulting over the meat that they have in their hands - is it that of the beast they have killed or have they killed one in their own clan? One is forced to contemplate whether there is ‘another’ and an ‘own’ at all. The metaphor of the human-animal conflict comes into play, as the end credits of the film roll; we introspect about our own humanness. The immortal lines by Simon in *Lord of the Flies* amid a search for the ‘beastie’ on the island rings in our mind: “Maybe there is a beast.....Maybe it is only us” (Golding 122).

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