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A Critique of Patriarchy, Superstition, and Depression: *Appuram*



Indu Lakshmi's *Appuram* (2024) critiques the connection between patriarchy and superstition and its effect on mental health. The movie depicts the life of Janaki, a teenager who regularly witnesses her mother Chithra attempting suicide since she was little, who fears losing someone. Even though she keeps a close watch on the order of events with her father Venu, Chithra's self-destruction cannot be thwarted. The story cleverly doesn't give a single source for Chithra's depression. Rather, it functions as a result of systemic oppression. Here's a woman with intellectual ambitions, stifled by the patriarch's restrictions. But her nonconformity is stamped out by regressive tradition and superstition. This article argues that *Appuram* is both a mirror and a critique. It shows how patriarchal systems continue to sustain themselves by trapping women psychologically and normalising superstitious practices. It also shows space for resistance.

Theoretical Framework: Patriarchy as an Interlocking System

To fully appreciate the complex critique advanced in *Appuram*, we must first understand patriarchy not merely as individual male dominance but as what feminist scholar bell hooks terms an "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy"—interlocking political systems that form the foundation of our social structures. hooks emphasizes that patriarchy is "the single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit in our nation," a system characterized by "male domination and power" that governs "most of the world's religious, school systems, and family systems" .

Appuram vividly illustrates this systemic nature of patriarchy, showing how it operates through:

- Gender role socialization: The film portrays how patriarchal thinking is ingrained from childhood, teaching girls "to serve, to be

weak, to be free from the burden of thinking, to caretake and nurture others," while boys learn "to be served; to provide; to be strong; to think, strategize, and plan" .

- Religious and cultural justification: Chithra's father opposes her marriage to Venu based on horoscope compatibility, demonstrating how patriarchal control often masquerades as spiritual concern.

- Female complicity: The film pointedly shows women in Chithra's ancestral home actively enforcing patriarchal norms and superstitions, illustrating hooks' observation that "women can be as wedded to patriarchal thinking and action as men".

The film aligns with what PMC research identifies as the pernicious long-term mental health effects of patriarchal systems, particularly how "gender-based discrimination issued from patriarchal worldviews" shapes "mental health trajectories for children, adolescents, and youths".

This systemic understanding frames our analysis of the film's depiction of mental health, cinematic language, and resistance.

Social Construct of Mental Health: Depression in a Patriarchal Context

Appuram shows us a more complex approach towards depression. The film does not simplify depression to just a medical or a psychological problem. Instead, it shows how social and patriarchal situations make people mentally ill. A lot of Chithra's depression has tempered into attempts to commit suicide. So, Janaki is always anxious "to check if her mother is still breathing whenever she sees her asleep". The film does not blame any one thing for her condition, but instead paints it as the result of a combination of things.

Chithra was once a spirited and ambitious student. Her dreams, however, were crushed when her father obstructed her higher education despite her being a bright student. The film indicates that patriarchy causes her psychological fragility as it hampers a woman's autonomy over her own life and future. According to the film, the childhood trauma and the ambience of her ancestral house are contributory factors to her psychological state, and not nothing more.

As Indu Lakshmi seems to suggest, this narrative haziness regarding the reasons behind Chithra's suicide attempts is quite intentional. She explains, "First of all, suicidal tendencies do not come for any reason. There is a clinical condition. I think one of the largest mistakes is in trying to understand the whys of depression." By utilizing this approach, you challenge the audience's presumption of clear causation. Rather, depression is presented as resulting from biological, psychological, and social factors. Of note, patriarchal oppression is one such social factor.

Through a contextual psychiatry perspective, the film portrays how social system like patriarchy is a determinant of mental health. Research has shown that gender-based discrimination rooted in patriarchal worldviews has negative effects on mental health paths for children, adolescents, and youth. *Appuram* presents a cerebral case study of how systemic oppression inflicts psychological suffering on individuals, particularly women who are miffed with patriarchal limitations.

Cinematic Language: Visualizing Patriarchal Confinement.

Appuram's visual structure employs a careful use of cinematography that mirrors the internalization of the shrouding nature of patriarchy. Film director Indu Lakshmi and cinematographer Rakesh Dharan put in place visuals that critics claim creates a claustrophobic atmosphere felt by the characters.

The visual style of the film is constructed upon straight lines, steady shots, and carefully controlled mise-en-scène that eschews any adventurous transitions or abstract flourishes. This is a reflection on how patriarchy limits freedoms. The purposeful restraint of images in the film becomes a fine agent of shock in several scenes, delivering unexpected emotional punches. For instance, Venu softly informing the daughter about the mother's death.

Cinematography also highlights the emotional and physical isolation of the characters. In the last act, Janaki, who is forced shut in the attic, hears the noise of the funeral in the distance and sees the smoke from the pyre going up to the sky. This image shows how she was completely excluded from family ceremonies and mourning because of male menstrual taboos. The camera shows her powerless position to emphasize that tradition prevents women from participating in important life events, claiming ritual purity.

Rakesh Dharan's lens imbibe light like cotton absorbs water, gently which is never intrusive or out of line but great in grasp of subtlety envisaged by Indu Lakshmi. Through this understated and restrained visual approach, the film aims to avoid preachiness, instead letting viewers feel the constraints and

limitations that patriarchal systems impose on women.

The Ancestral Home: Superstition as Patriarchal Control

The film's second half shifts from the urban nuclear family setting to Chithra's ancestral home, where archaic superstitions and patriarchal traditions dominate. This spatial transition marks a movement from individual psychological struggle to systemic confrontation with intergenerational patriarchal practices. The ancestral home represents what one review describes as "the patriarchal upper-caste ancestral home" where "the father and the daughter are cornered by the extended family".

Appuram particularly highlights how superstition functions as a mechanism of patriarchal control through:

- Menstrual taboos: Janaki is confined to the attic during her mother's funeral because she is menstruating, based on the belief that menstrual blood is polluting. This physical exclusion from mourning rituals represents her symbolic erasure from family life and memory.
- Botanical superstitions: The film includes a scene where "an elderly woman claims that if a woman on her period goes near a basil plant, it will wither automatically", to which a younger woman counters that "no basil plant in her house has ever withered because of her presence". This exchange highlights the generational conflict between superstitious tradition and empirical reality.
- Astrological determinism: Chithra's father attributes her tragic marriage to horoscope incompatibility, using astrology to justify his initial opposition and to explain her death in terms that avoid examining his own

patriarchal role in restricting her opportunities.

The movie does not fully demonise faith. Rather, it depicts faith as a two-edged sword; it is liberating for some and restrictive for others. The harmony does this by showing that tradition is useful as it adds meaning to people's lives, as well as community. But it is also the patriarchal rules that Bradshaw identifies as requiring 'blind obedience, the essential repression of all feelings except fear, the destruction of the individual will, and the repression of thinking whenever it strays from the ... leader's thinking'.

What makes *Appuram*'s critique particularly insightful is its unmasking of women's complicity in the preservation of patriarchal superstitions. The women in Chithra's family uphold the very values that control their lives. Janaki's grandmother explains and enacts her exclusion. The family system therapist Terrence Real says that the "normal traumatization" of children and the passing on of gendered rules is how patriarchal systems maintain their power. Most often this is through the use of "potent emotion: shame". The movie shows that patriarchy is not just about men dominating women. It is about masculine culture taking control of everybody, which includes women too.

Janaki Subverts Patriarchal Norms through Resistance Spaces

Appuram highlights resistance against patriarchal customs through the assertive actions of Janaki, despite the pressure. Her non-compliance shows us that someone does not have to follow the rules set out by a superior authority. Janaki resists in many ways throughout the film.

The "to be or not to be" soliloquy - famous for Shakespeare's Hamlet - has been rehearsed, from Janaki's vantage point, because, as the director Indu Lakshmi explains, they "resonate with their situations" and "depicts the mental state of both the characters". In this classical reference, Janaki's struggle is placed within a framework of the wider human struggle against limitations of existence, meaning her struggle against patriarchy will also brought into universal questions of agency and existence.

In the climax of the film Janaki, she rebels against her confinement to the attic. Her rebellious outburst sends shock waves through her conservative maternal house, making an agreeable climax to the film. This direct confrontation with tradition is a release of the accumulation of tension in the film.

Janaki's ultimate act of resistance is to be able to perform her final act as Chithra's daughter by taking her ashes to the Himalayas. One can say that this mission, undertaken against family wishes, is a rebellion against the patriarchal appropriation of death rites by asserting the daughter's right to bury her mother as per her choice and not the custom.

Venu represents a quieter, more nuanced form of resistance compared to other more confrontational anti-patriarchal stances, which the film also presents. Through his tender support of his wife and daughter, as well as his willingness to negotiate oppression rather than militarily oppose it, he offers an alternative way of being a male ally.

Appuram suggests that meaningful resistance often begins with what seem to be small acts of defiance, as when a daughter

refuses to accept her disinheritance, a father agrees with his daughter, and a young woman asserts her right to mourn. The actions of these individuals may build up to what political theory would call a “status quo critique” which is “potentially radical and constructive”. At the end of the film, Janaki is shown wanting to fulfil her mother’s last wish, hinting that liberation is possible through what the director Indu Lakshmi, in several interviews, refers to as “a mirror of the reality around me....a reflection of reality” to interpret the last scene.

Appuram as Cinematic Social Critique.

Indu Lakshmi's *Appuram* works at last as what political theory may describe as “immanent critique”—a critique that works from within given social realities to open them up to contradictions and possibilities of change. The filmmakers do this by honestly examining the effects of patriarchy and superstition on the mental health of a woman who is trapped in a society. The film allows us to see the harsh realities of patriarchy and its harmful impacts, as well as the possibility of resistance from within it, through Janaki’s eyes.

The film's significance extends beyond its specific narrative to offer what bell hooks might recognize as a pedagogical tool for understanding patriarchy's "marked pervasiveness in individual and social existence, and its pivotal role in human development". *Appuram* helps make visible what many "do not use the word 'patriarchy' in everyday life," showing how this system shapes everything from educational opportunities to mourning rituals. The film

gives viewers what hooks says most men lack: a concrete understanding of "a major facet of the political system that shapes and informs male identity and sense of self from birth until death".

As a work of cinema, *Appuram* exemplifies how artistic production can create what realist political theory might identify as resources for "status quo critique that is potentially radical and constructive". The film's critical success—winning the Best Debut Director award at IFFK and a Special Jury Mention for Anagha Ravi's performance—suggests its resonance with audiences seeking meaningful engagement with social issues. Its production circumstances—self-funded, shot secretly in just nine days on a shoestring budget—further position it as what one review calls "situated away from the power structures of the industry and the state, in a space where voices so personal and esoteric find expression".

In the broader context of Malayalam cinema and Indian filmmaking, *Appuram* contributes to an emerging tradition of works that challenge patriarchal norms and explore women's interior lives with complexity and respect. The film ultimately leaves viewers with what Indu Lakshmi describes as "a mirror of the reality around me," refusing easy resolutions while affirming the possibility of resistance. In doing so, *Appuram* not only tells a compelling story but also participates in the ongoing struggle against what bell hooks identifies as the "life-threatening social disease" of patriarchy, offering cinema itself as a space for critique, reflection, and ultimately, transformation.

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