



IDENTITY POLITICS IN PRASANNA VITHANAGE'S FILM *GAADI: CHILDREN OF THE SUN*.

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Abstract

Through narrating the story of the Rodi tribe, the movie *Gaadi: Children of the Sun* by Prasanna Vithanage, delves into identity politics in Sri Lanka during the Kandyan Kingdom. Although it is set in this era it mirrors the current social fabric in many ways. In the movie the main protagonist Tikiri, is the young wife of Bulathgama Disawa. Bulathgama Disawa conspires against King Sri Vikrama Rajasingha together with Ehelepola Adigar, but their plan to overthrow the king of Indian dissent backfires. As a result, all the women including Tikiri must choose between drowning themselves or marrying a man of the Rodi caste. Tikiri is the only woman who decides to live and is taken by the first Rodi man who reaches her from across the river. The fact that they opt to die rather than be our part of the Rodi tribe itself is very telling about the ideas of honour and sense of identity that women embodied. Identity is one of the main themes in the film as Tikiri grapples with class, gender and caste identity. In an interview Vithanage asks the question, "Is identity more important than the sanctity of life?" which embodies the main focus of the movie. Tikiri is adamant not to give up her identity as a person of upper class and caste which results in many deaths in the wake of a national crisis. Her upper caste husband is juxtaposed with her new husband who is from the Rodi tribe to add to this theme. This paper is a discussion of the theme of identity in the film in the light of Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities." The shift in Tikiri's identity in terms of class and caste together with her gender is revealing of the role that caste and class play in identity politics in Sri Lanka. The research method is one of qualitative analysis while applying Anderson's theory to the narrative. The movie presents a unique instance when a person's class and caste changes in an instant and this simultaneously undercuts the validity of caste while also showing how engraved caste is in society as Tikiri negotiates with her identity that is thrust upon her.

Keywords: identity politics, class, caste, gender

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INTRODUCTION

Gaadi: Children of the Sun by Prasanna Vithanage, was selected as one of the hundred not to be missed films from Asia in 2019. It narrates the story of the Rodi tribe and delves into identity politics in Sri Lanka during the Kandyan Kingdom. Although it is set in this era it mirrors our current social fabric in many ways. The main protagonist, Tikiri, is the young wife of the Bulathgama Disawa. Bulathgama Disawa, together with Ehelepola Adigar, conspires against the King Sri Vikrama Rajasingha, but their plan to overthrow the king of Indian dissent backfires. As a result, all the women including Tikiri have to choose between drowning themselves or marrying a man of the Rodi caste. Tikiri is the only woman who decides to live and is taken by the first Rodi man who reaches her from across the river. The fact that the rest of the women chose to die rather than live among the Rodi people shows how much they were abhorred.

Identity is one of the main themes in the film as Tikiri grapples with class, gender and caste identity. In an interview Vithanage asks the question, "Is identity more important than the sanctity of life?" which embodies the focus of the movie. Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" can be applied to this narrative to show that notions of identity connected to class and caste are social constructs.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a discussion of the narrative in the light of Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities." The shift in Tikiri's identity in terms of class and caste together with her gender is telling of identity politics in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the method is one of qualitative analysis while applying Benedict Anderson's theory to the narrative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The film exposes the fissures of our society and how divided we are as a society. The desire to have a Sinhala Buddhist King and suffering as a result of it is relevant to today as well. Those who wanted a Sinhala Buddhist regime rebelled against that very regime at Galle Face in 2021.

The theme of betrayal is threefold in the film. The Sinhala being betrayed by the Sinhalese themselves, the betrayal by the British and at a personal level Tikiri is betrayed by her own husband at the end. Juxtaposed to this is the protection she gets from the Rodi tribe when the executioners throw stones at her after she decides not to commit suicide. Even when the Rodi tribe is inconvenienced because of her non acceptance of her new identity the leader of the tribe insists that they stick together. Finally, the tribe is massacred because of her, ordered by her own upper caste husband, and it is only then that she takes on the identity of a Rodi by taking off her upper garment which was forbidden for the Rodi caste. Betrayal from her own tribe makes her give up her upper class and upper caste identity. She is disgusted by her own tribe.

The narrative juxtaposes Tikiri's husbands. Vijaya, from the Rodi caste, is caring and protects her with his life even though she openly rejects him, whereas her first husband saves himself and lets all the women in his household die. He also orders her to be killed at the end of the film when she defiantly stands up and stares at him while the women entertain them. Vijaya's name is significant as it resonates with the first king of Sri Lanka who established Anuradhapura as his kingdom. The ending where Vijaya goes into the wild with Tikiri seems to suggest that they will propagate the Rodi clan once again. This goes hand in hand with the Rodi's claim that they descend from Sinhalese royalty.



There are many stories about how the Rodi caste came into being. Hugh Nevill, a British Civil Servant has recorded that the Rodi caste provided venison to the palace. In this version a Veddha archer who was providing venison to the palace once killed a small boy he met in the jungle and delivered it to the royal household. The King's daughter Navaratna Valli enjoyed the meat and wanted more of it. As a result the Veddha continued killing children and delivering human flesh for her. One barber who came to the palace who came to complain about the disappearance of his only son was given rice and venison curry to eat and he recognized his son's deformed knuckle in the curry. When the king got to know, he stripped his daughter of all ornaments and gave her to a scavenger (Hussein).

The origins narrated by Robert Knox in his "Historical Relation of Ceylon" (1861) is different. Knox writes that the Dodda Veddhas who were hunters were assigned the task of delivering venison for the king. Instead of venison they brought human flesh and the king commanded more of the same kind of venison. The king's barber got to know the secret and revealed it to the king. The king was so enraged that he punished them with a decree that disallowed them from dwelling among the inhabitants of the land and that they should beg for a living as untouchables (Hussein).

During the Kandyan Kingdom, both Rodi men and women were compelled to go bare-bodied and resided in separate hamlets known as 'Kuppayam.' The Rajakariya (duty towards the state) included the supply of rope made of animal hide for trapping wild beasts. During Knox's time their primary occupation was begging. Later on the women would sing hymns in praise of their legendary ancestress Ratnavalli and spin brass plates while the men played a one-sided drum called *Bum-Mendiya*. Rodi women are renowned for their extreme beauty and this may be because Kings cut off great and noble men against whom he is highly incensed by delivering their daughters and wives to these tribes as it was considered far worse than death (Hussein). This may also be why they claim to be of royal descent. In the film, the old woman in the village which is burnt down by the British refers to Tikiri's beauty and although they are treated as untouchables the women are asked to dance for the Adikars where Tikiri reveals herself to her husband.

M.D Raghavan in *Handsome Beggars: The Rodiyas of Ceylon* (1957) connects the term Rodi to the Pali word 'rudda' and the Sanskrit word 'rudra' meaning hunter. In the film they are punished for pretending to be hunters and not members of the Rodi clan. Transgression of caste identities is met with punishment. The Rodi tribe, including the children, being beaten mercilessly is a foreshadowing of their final massacre. It also embodies the cruelty that the upper castes have unleashed on the lower castes.

The punishment of the women in the film resonates with the more popularly known story of the Ehelepola family. Ehelepola Adigar conspired with the British against the King and it is a well-known story of how his wife and children were executed when the younger son, Madduma Bandara, showed his bravery by showing that he is not afraid to die. Coincidentally Ehelepola's daughter is also Tikiri. Similarly in the movie Tikiri is ordered to be executed for something she did not do. Just because she is the wife of the Bulathgama Disawa who conspired against the king, she becomes a property to be destroyed and a means of punishing the male.

Tikiri has to take on the identity of the man in both marriages. When Vijaya marries an upper caste woman, his identity does not change. As his tribe leader says, "You will always be a Rodi." The lower castes cannot change the status quo. It is the upper caste men who decide who should belong where. The scene in which Vijaya finds Tikiri swinging on a tree root mirrors that of the first scene in which she is on a swing with two children from the Adigar's house. It suggests her longing to try and sustain her lost identity.



However, the powerful act of her standing up and looking at the upper caste people who are passing by is an act of defiance as the Rodi are expected to move aside on the road and not make eye contact. The indignant look in her eyes speaks enough words for all that is not said in the movie. The movie embodies a deafening silence throughout which symbolizes the lack of a voice and it is significant of how these unjust social practices have not been talked about.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The shift in Tikiri's identity in terms of class and caste intertwined with her gender is revealing of the role that caste and class play in identity politics in Sri Lanka. The movie has been criticised for narrating the story from the point of view of an upper caste woman, but it presents a unique instance when a person's class and caste changes in an instant and this simultaneously undercuts the validity of caste and class while also showing how engraved these identities are in society as Tikiri negotiates with her identity that is thrust upon her.

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