

RESEARCH ARTICLE**The Myth of Odiyan as a Collective Fear: Portrayal of the Subaltern Resistance in the Movie “Odiyan”**

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Abstract:

Occult practices are a common scene in all most civilizations. Occultism and culture blend and forms ‘occulture’ which makes each society unique. Kerala also has its inimitable occult traditions. Many of the myths and occult beliefs of Kerala are centred mainly on its various castes and communities. The myth of Odiyan is popular in Southern- Malabar, especially in Palakkad region. One who conducts the occult act of *odi* or *odi vidya* is known as *Odiyan*. *Odiyans* particularly belong to the lower section of cast hierarchy. The *Janmis* and other upper classes employed *Odiyans* as an instrument to suppress their enemies in a competitive feudal system. *Odi* also can be considered to be the subaltern resistance towards the upper- class power system, after an extended epoch of insults and suppressions. The myth of Odiyan became popular worldwide with the release of the 2018 Malayalam movie *Odiyan*, directed by V. A. Shrikumar. *Odiyan* is the fictitious story of the last Odiyan, Manikyan in Thenkurrissi. The movie brings out, caste as a parameter and presents the character of Odiyan as an alternative rebel and as a collective figure against the prevalent power structure of the time.

Keywords: Caste, Hierarchy, *Janmis*, Movie, Myth, Occult, *Odi*, *Odi vidya*, *Odiyan*, Resistance, Subaltern.

Occult practices are a common scene in all civilizations. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines occultism as the “belief in or study of the action or influence of supernatural or supernormal powers”. Many cultures strictly believe in supernatural elements and follow practices associated with them. Occultism and culture blend and forms occulture. Occulture is a term coined by Prof. Christopher Partridge, and by definition, it is a subculture of occult themes in opposition to the dominant culture. Occulture constructs each civilization unique and distinctive. Similar to other societies, Kerala also has inimitable occult traditions.

The cultural diversity of Kerala is incomparable, and it varies from one area to another. Kerala’s culture is an amalgamation of Dravidian and Aryan cultures. Kerala does not have a particular religious belief, even though the majority of its inhabitants are Hindus. Similar to other Indian states, Kerala also followed the

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caste system at times, where Namboothiris, the priestly class gained the ultimate hierarchical authority. After Namboothiris, Nairs, Ezhavas and Shudras followed the hierarchical order. People who come after Nairs in the hierarchal order were labelled as Avarnas.

Many of the Namboothiris and Nairs were the wealthiest landlords. They forced, exploited and suppressed other castes for their personal growth and development. The Shudra class comprises many castes (*jatis*), including Panan, Pulayan, Parayan and Mannan. Many of the myths and occult beliefs of Kerala are centred mainly on various castes and communities of the state. Each caste holds their beliefs in the supernatural, sternly. Belief in *Kuttichathan*¹, *Odiyan*², *Gulikan*³, *Rekshassu*⁴, *Yakshi*⁵, *Marutha*⁶, *Maadan*⁷ and *Maaranam*⁸ are some of the common occult beliefs in Kerala.

The myth of *Odiyan* is popular in Southern Malabar, especially in Palakkad region. One who conducts the occult act of *odi/ odi vidya/ odi seva/ odi marichil* is known as *Odiyan*. According to the *Folklore Dictionary* of Dr M. V. Vishnu Namboothiri, many of the communities were experts in *odi vidya*, including Adiyan, Kurichyar, Paniyan, Velan, Pulluvan, Panan, Parayan, Kurumar, Koppalar, Malayan and Kuravan. *Odi* can be assumed to be an occult art which consists of shape-shifting. It could be learned from a Guru, but the majority of the *Odiyans* learnt the art from their ancestors traditionally.

Myths of *Odiyan* fluctuate from place to place. Some of the orally transmitted popular myths state that *Odiyans* particularly belonged to the community of Parayan. The *North Arcot Manual* records Parayans as the impure Valluvans (qtd. in Joseph). Playing the drums (The *Para*⁹) and crafting bamboo products were their major occupations. In addition to this, Parayans were skilled in skinning animals and selling their hides. The later might be brought fear among people, and it could have added Parayan to the mythical stories of *Odiyan*. Anyhow, the myth of *Odiyan* is attributed to the lower castes that were once slaved labours to the so-called 'upper caste' landlords; the *Janmis*. In a certain extent, *Janmis* and other upper classes employed *Odiyans* as an instrument to suppress their enemies in a competitive feudal system. *Odi* also can be considered to be the pride revenge of lower castes upon the upper- class power system, after an extended epoch of insults and suppressions. In other words, the cult of *odi* must be a subaltern resistance in a Brahmanical-feudal society. Similar to any other occult beliefs for each caste, *Odiyan* also constitutes fear as a major tool for existence.

Odiyan is believed as a sorcerer who has many supernatural skills. *Odiyans* were experts in shape-shifting. The common animal shapes used by *Odiyans* were jackals, buffaloes and cats. These *Odiyan* shapes can be differentiated from normal animals with their enormous size, black colour and certain body defects.

¹ Popular in Malabar as a mischievous 12-year-old demon.

² See next paragraph.

³ Believed as an important warrior of Lord Shiva.

⁴ Revengeful male souls who kill humans and suck blood

⁵ The female version of a *Rekshassu*.

⁶ Bloodsucking ghostly spirit of a wild animal.

⁷ A tall male spirit, usually of watchmen or soldiers.

⁸ A kind of poison believed to be used in black magic to harm or to destruct people.

⁹ A cylindrical measuring device/ a kind of drum

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The black colour of the animal body would help the *Odiyans* to hide in the darkness, especially in the new moon day (the *amavasi*) where there is no light. Jackals, buffaloes and cats are common animals which can be seen easily in the houses of the working class. Animals with defected body parts could be a representation of both physical and mental torturing which lower-castes had been undergone for a long period.

Stories associated with the supernatural skills of *Odiyan* are closely connected to the mystery oil which is believed to be made by them. It is supposed that the superpower of the *Odiyans* comes from the self-made oil that they apply behind their ear. In conformity with the mythical stories, the oil is made up of the amniotic fluid of a pregnant woman. The primary targets were women with their first pregnancy (Thomas, 2017). The *Odiyans* identify pregnant women during days and send spells to the targeted lady at the dead of the night. Accordingly, the targeted woman would walk unconsciously during her sleep to a particular spot where *Odiyan* waits. The *Odiyan* would collect fluid by taking the foetus out from the womb. Later, the lady would be sent back home, but she would discover death very soon.

The fluid collected from a pregnant woman would be added to some secret ingredients to make the oil. Later it is preserved and would be used for the shape-shifting purpose. The oil would be applied behind the ear of the man who is ready to do the *Odividya*. After the *odi* cult someone who is trustable must be waiting for the *Odiyan* to come back, to wash out the fluid from the ear with cow- dung water; to get back to his original human appearance. There are orally transmitted stories that there existed *Odiyans* who lived their whole life as an animal when they were cheated by the companions.

According to Dr Anil Kumar, Prof. Thunchath Ezhuthachan University of Malayalam (qtd.in Nijeesh):

Odiyans transforming into animals is an art of speed and a method of frightening people out of their wits. More than first-hand narratives, we have so many exaggerated stories of *Odiyans* that aimed to create fear. At the same time, the persons who practice *odi vidya* have been reluctant to divulge details of their traditional practices.

The myth of *Odiyan* was not so popular in the other area of the state even in the northern parts of the Malabar, until recently. The myth became popular with the release of the 2018 Malayalam movie “*Odiyan*”, directed by V. A. Shrikumar. “*Odiyan*” is the fictitious story of the last *Odiyan*, Manikyan in Thenkurrissi, a village of Palakkad district.

The movie brings out, caste as a parameter and presents the character of *Odiyan* as a rebel against the prevalent power structure of the time. The movie brings direct indications to the lower caste clan of *Odiyan* Manikyan by presenting him with a costume of the *mundu*¹⁰, the *thorthu*¹¹, the *kadukkan*¹² and a black threaded neck chain. His *mundu* has no golden border and is not white as that of the upper- class, which indicates Manikyan belongs to the working- class section of the society. There are several indications that Manikyan’s family had been the permanent workers of a wealthy *tharavadu*¹³ namely ‘Kelakathu’. Manikyan was brought up and trained the *odi* by his Muthappan (grandfather); the Mootha Manikyan. Mootha Manikyan’s son was afraid of *Odividya*, a job which he might have to do in future. So, he left home with his

¹⁰ Mundu is a common garment worn around the waist. It is a common garment used by both men and women

¹¹ A thin shoulder garment

¹² An earring stud

¹³ A term commonly used for ancestral house, usually by Savarna families

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wife and daughter by letting his father bring up his son as an *Odiyan*. After the death of Mootha Manikyan, younger Manikyan became the only and the last *Odiyan* of Thenkurissi.

While discussing caste as a major component, there are several instances in the movie, by which the main character of *Odiyan* is insulted several times by the upper classes. Upper caste authorities used the *Odiyan* Manikyan several times for their sakes, even as an instrument to hide the murders committed by them. The rich upper caste authority of Thenkurissi, Ravunni Nair committed two murders and accused Manikyan as the offender. It denotes how strong the caste system was at times in Kerala and how hard the adversities faced by lower castes.

Mootha Manikyan, the elder *Odiyan*, during the training days of *Odi* advised his grandson that “You are the fear! This whole land should fear you” (39:09). *Odiyan* Manikyan follows his Muthappan’s words that he should not kill anybody using his skills. But there are certain scenes in which Manikyan uses his skill to protest against Ravunni, the Nair. Within no time Manikyan becomes the fear of Thenkurissi and other neighbouring villages of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Manikyan earns money through *Odividya* as it is his *kulathozhil*¹⁴.

The character of Manikyan is given a black blanket to depict the shape- shifting of the *Odiyan*. After the long period of training, *Muthappan* gave Manikyan a black blanket, as he had inherited one from his ancestor. There is no evidence whether an *Odiyan* inherits a black blanket as a tool, even the myth itself is a perplexity to the non- valluvanadans. The colour black represents the darkness where *Odiyans* hide. In addition to this, the colour itself is a direct indication of the marginalised and Dalits.

Unlike the prevailing myths related to *Odiyans*, the movie portrays Manikyan as a normal human being who has a flexible body, as he had undergone a long period of strict physical training to run fast, to climb trees and to imitate the physical movements of appropriate animals. Unlike the mythical *Odiyans*, the character of Manikyan uses masks, models of the horn and hoof of a bull, black blanket etc. Still, there are certain instances where Manikyan transforms completely into animals like Elephant and Deer. But the movie does not cover the transformation process completely. There is no debate on the impression that an *Odiyan* can scare and can confuse people only in darkness. The movie also discusses nothing more about the validity of the self- made mystery oil, which can be removed only by another person, from the ear of the animal shaped *Odiyan*.

The cult of *odi* could not be performed in daylight. It can be for two reasons. Firstly, shape- shifting in *odi* is a magic which needs enough shade to transform the shapes. Secondly, darkness provides enough security to the *Odiyans*, when they conduct the act of *odi* against the powerful upper- class authorities, who have enough supremacy to suppress them in no time. The movie portrays the initiatives of the villagers of Thenkurissi, led by Ravunni Nair, to bring electricity to prevent Manikyan from the act of *Odi*, and it also portrays Manikyan’s protest to the rich savarna society by destroying the street lights.

In conclusion, *Odiyan* is a fictitious story of the last *Odiyan* of the Thenkurissi. *Odiyan* Manikyan can be called as the collective fear of Thenkurissi, as the other members of the *Odiyan* clan. Anyhow the cult of *odi* can be considered to be an existentialist tool, and it can be a way of a dispute of the marginalised in a feudal society. *Odi* can be a way of protest from the part of the suppressed who finds darkness as the best shades to raise their suppressed wail and anger. Some of the *Janmis* use the *Odiyans* as a mere instrument to

¹⁴ A particular traditional job of the family.

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oppress their opponents. Some of the *Odiyans* have forced by the authority to employ their skilful art for the sake of their landlords, unwillingly. Anyhow, *Odi* could be a method of resistance towards widespread social hierarchies of the time. The *Odiyans* used fear as a major tool to confront the protests in a timid society which could not give any space to the people of working class. The movie *Odiyan* successfully presents *Odividya* as a protest against the prevailing authorities of the feudal system, as represented in the prevailing myths.

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