



## A Postcolonial Reading of the Movie “Celluloid”

Joe Varghese

**ABSTRACT:** *The paper focuses on analysing the colonial influence in the movie Celluloid by analysing its characters and time-period. It also focuses on the impact of the western media “cinema” on the Indian society and the first Malayalam feature film Vigathakumaran.*

**Keywords**–Celluloid, Vigathakumaran

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Celluloid<sup>1</sup> is a 2013 Malayalam biographical docudrama based on the life of J.C. Daniel and the source of the story is the biography of J. C. Daniel written by Chelangatt Gopalakrishnan. The movie portrays how J.C. Daniel the father of Malayalam cinema made his film Vigathakumaran. The movie also shows different stages in his life. J.C. Daniel spends his entire fortune on making Vigathakumaran, but when it is screened at the “Capitol Theatre”, the upper caste people creates a chaotic situation when they see a low caste girl portraying the character of an upper caste Nair lady. Later we see him turn into the field of dental health becoming a dentist and practicing in Madurai and Pudukotai, and then we see how P.U Chinnappa an actor comes into Daniel’s life and convinces him to make movies again. Daniel whose passion lies in making movies goes to Madras with all his fortune to make movies along with Chinnappa, but Chinnappa cheats Daniel and finally Daniel loses all his money. Even when he returned to his family after 2 years, he was not able to succeed even in the field of dentistry finally becoming a failure as a dentist and a filmmaker. When the movie progresses, we see Daniel in his old age living in poverty finally dying in miserable conditions. He was a man with a vision and had many noble qualities but his love for cinema being his tragic flaw made him fall. The movie succeeded in portraying the tragic life of J.C. Daniel, a visionary who loved cinema with all his heart.

### CHAPTER - I

When we consider the character of J.C. Daniel from the movie Celluloid<sup>2</sup> from a postcolonial perspective from his tip to toes, we can see the colonial influence starting with his attire to his ability to use the English language in a time in which the people who had control over the language were scarce. The influence can also be seen in the scene in which Daniel talks about how before making the film they need to make a “screen story” and how the book “Photo play” contains details about how to make a screenplay. The book itself represents the knowledge from the west. When we consider the making of the movie Vigathakumaran, Daniel did not want to make a movie based on the Purana instead; he wanted to make a social drama like *The Kid*<sup>3</sup> by Charlie Chaplin this could also be seen as a colonial influence. But, when Daniel talks about the idea of making a social drama like *The Kid*, his friend Johnson tells him that the people there won’t like it, since it is a story from the white man’s land and he put forwards the idea of taking a story from “The Bible” like the Life of Jesus, to which Daniel replies that “that’s also a story from the white man’s land.”<sup>4</sup> This incident shows us the impact of in-depth familiarization with the ideas from west and how it becomes an unconscious part of psyche of colonised making them think that it is their idea. When we consider the basic theme and plot of the movie Vigathakumaran as shown in the movie Celluloid<sup>5</sup> and the basic theme and plot of *The Kid*<sup>6</sup>, we find it

<sup>1</sup>Kamal, director. Celluloid 2013. Prime Time Cinema/ Murali Films, 2013.

<sup>2</sup>Kamal, director. Celluloid 2013. Prime Time Cinema/ Murali Films, 2013.

<sup>3</sup>Chaplin, Charlie. *The Kid*. Associated First National Pictures, 1921.

<sup>4</sup>Kamal, director. Celluloid 2013. Prime Time Cinema/ Murali Films, 2013.

<sup>5</sup>Kamal, director. Celluloid 2013. Prime Time Cinema/ Murali Films, 2013.

<sup>6</sup>Chaplin, Charlie. *The Kid*. Associated First National Pictures, 1921.

similar, a child getting lost and then after a few years the child is reunited with the family after a turn of events. The way in which the identity of the child is revealed is also similar in Vigathakumaran, a scar on the back reveals Chandrakumar's identity and in *The Kid*, the handwritten note reveals the Child's identity. This is possible only because of the transfer of knowledge, which was a result of the colonial period. When we consider the story of Vigathakumaran that is shown in the movie *Celluloid*<sup>7</sup> Vigathakumaran also has certain similarities with a Malayalam poem called *Poothapattu*<sup>8</sup> by Edasseri Govindan Nair the poem talks about how Pootham tries to kidnap Nangeli's child after a turn of events the Pootham gives the child back to Nangeli. In Vigathakumaran, we have an image that is similar to that of Pootham that is the image of Bhoothanathan. However, the only difference is that Pootham gives back the child and Bhoothanathan does not.

However, when we deconstruct the movie from a Postcolonial perspective, we can find how cinema a creation from the west is able to make changes in the socio-cultural background. The movie *Celluloid*<sup>9</sup> shows us how a low caste girl like Rosamma is given the opportunity to portray the role of a high caste Nair lady called Sarojini in the movie made by J.C. Daniel. When Daniel and his friends go to see Rosamma perform onstage in order to evaluate her acting skills and cast her in the movie, "Sundararaj" one of Daniel's friend ask Daniel whether a low caste girl would be an apt choice to play the role of Sarojini a high caste Nair lady, to which Daniel replies "it is not important to consider the cast and creed of a person when it comes to acting? Because once she is dressed based on the character that she is playing, she will look like that."<sup>10</sup> The movie also shows how Rosamma is able to act with upper class people because of the identity given to her by the new medium called cinema. There is an instance in the movie where an actor called Pillai talks to Daniel about how Pillai being an upper caste person is not interested to act with women who belong to the low caste, Daniel's response to this is that "in cinema just as how it possible to turn a low caste person into a high caste person it is also possible to turn the high caste people into low caste using cinema."<sup>11</sup> Cinema being a western media is portrayed as something that could change the power equation in the caste system.

There is another scene in the movie *Celluloid*<sup>12</sup> where the cinematographer "Lala" a British individual asks "a black girl? Will she be suitable for your character? Does she look like an upper caste girl?"<sup>13</sup> but Daniel replies, "Well at least in cinema we should not be thinking about caste and colour,"<sup>14</sup> here also we can find how cinema having the potential to eradicate the notions of caste. Like this when the colonisers came into the colonies, they saw the people from the colonies as one. Earlier we see how Rosamma is only able to act with the people belonging to her own caste while she is acting in theatre but films gave her a chance to her to become something more. The idea of low caste people being converted into Christianity is seen in the case of Rosamma, she is a low caste girl who converted into a Christian. Rosamma's father is the cook of the white missionary priest. Rosamma also talks about how she prays to both her old god and "Jesus" her new god, before she performs on stage. The idea of missionary work can also be seen in the scene where the character "Johnson" is practicing a drama based on *The Bible* and we see the white missionary priest as the instructor of the play. These religious conversions were the result of missionary works during the colonial times. But when we look deeper to the idea of casting Rosamma as Sarojini there is an issue, when the idea of searching for an actress is raised 'Sundararaj' who is a friend of J.C. Daniel suggests that 'Janet' the wife of Daniel could be considered for the role but she says that "she won't act because the people would kill her."<sup>15</sup> To which Daniel replies that "that's the problem, here, which girl would you get to act in plays, let alone movies?"<sup>16</sup> Sundararaj replies, "That's true you won't get girls from good families, people say that only the uncouth girls would act in movies."<sup>17</sup> In this context, Rosamma could be seen as expendable because we do not see Daniel considering the idea of casting his wife in the movie.

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<sup>7</sup>Kamal, director. *Celluloid* 2013. Prime Time Cinema/ Murali Films, 2013.

<sup>8</sup>Govindan Nair, Edasseri. "Poothappattu." [Http://www.edasseri.org](http://www.edasseri.org).

<sup>9</sup>Kamal, director. *Celluloid* 2013. Prime Time Cinema/ Murali Films, 2013.

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<sup>16</sup>Kamal, director. *Celluloid* 2013. Prime Time Cinema/ Murali Films, 2013.

<sup>17</sup>Kamal, director. *Celluloid* 2013. Prime Time Cinema/ Murali Films, 2013.

### **CONCLUSION**

The colonial influence can be seen throughout the movie from the western media "cinema" to how the western knowledge and ideologies influence the characters, the presence of white people and even the motor cars shows the change brought forward by the colonial influence.

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