Imagery of "Beastliness" as an atavistic human trait in Lijo Jose Pellissery's Jallikattu (2019) - A Semiological Study

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Abstract
The paper focuses on the imagery of "beastliness" as an atavistic human trait in the nationally acclaimed Indian director, Lijo Jose Pellissery's Film "Jallikattu" (Malayalam,2019). Semiological review of the film reveals that the director has adroitly used different symbols, metonyms, visual motifs to visualize the concept of beastliness in the film. Analyses also reveal that the director has deployed the techniques of French New Wave filmmakers and Brechtian techniques to create a coherent meaning of beastliness as an existential theme. Moreover, "retroactive reasoning' was another cinematic convention found in the study to connect and create deep meaning in the active film audiences about beastliness in the nonlinear narrative structure.

Introduction
Jallikattu (2019) is a Malayalam film directed by Lijo Jose Pellisery who has carved his own niche in Malayalam cinema with bold and experimental themes. He is a recipient of Silver Peacock for the best director at the 50th International Film Festival of India for his film Jallikattu, and was awarded the Best Director at the 48th Kerala State Film Awards.

The screenplay for *Jallikattu* is written by S.Hareesh and R.Jayakumar and it is based on a short story "Maoist' by S. Harish. The film casts Antony Varghese, Chemban Vinod Jose, Sabumon Abdusamad and Santhi Balachandran in lead roles. The plot revolves around a buffalo which escapes right before it is slaughtered in the night of a hill town and the attempts by the people of the village to capture it.

Jallikattu is a traditional practice in certain villages of Tamilnadu where an agitated bull is left loose into a crowd and men try to capture the bull. In this movie, the attempt by the owner of the buffalo, the butcher to trace the buffalo, being his livelihood is soon taken over by the village. For the villagers it becomes an event to escape their monotony, ego fights and pride. Through a number of characters and in the course of the film, Lijo Pellissery brings out the beastliness in humans and also how the basic instincts of aggression and sex are manifested in different ways.

The film also explores the psychology of a mob where in the security of a mob brings out the expression of the basic instincts and beastliness in men. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines 'Beastliness' as the manifestation of the traits or the gratification of the appetites of a lower animal. In *Jallikattu*, this concept is portrayed as an atavistic trait or man returning to the behaviour of his cave dwelling ancestors. Atavism denotes a way of thinking and acting of humans as their ancestors. It can be manifested in biological or psychological manner as in thinking (Seitler, 2008). In this study, researchers attempts to analyse the imagery of 'beastliness' through semiotics, exploring the underlying concepts depicted in the film.

Methodology
The research method followed is a qualitative study, using the techniques of descriptive content analysis with semiology. Content analysis is typically called quantitative as it involves counting and summing phenomena, to even support studies of more qualitative nature. Krippendorff (1980) calls it primarily as a symbolic method as it is used to investigate symbolic material, conducting much interpretative works, relying on a good knowledge of the texts under examination. This method of textual analysis is frequently combined with other methods

in qualitative research. Researchers attempts to analyse the imagery of 'beastliness' through a combination of semiotic analysis, syntagmatic as well as paradigmatic analysis of the film texts to explore how the director has created meaning through the visual signs and cinematic techniques.

Influence of French New Wave movement and Brechtian Criticism of Cinema on building the Imagery of Beastliness in *Jallikettu*

The French New Wave is one of the most influential movements in cinema history. This movement emerged in the late 1950's is also known as '*La Nouvelle Vague'*, and characterized by its rejection of the period's conventional filmmaking. This movement initiated out of a group of film critics who created and spearheaded the influential French cinema journal 'Cahiers du Cinema', and included noteworthy filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut, Éric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, and Claude Chabrol.

The New Wave filmmakers countered the stereotypical Hollywood filmmaking through experimental approaches to editing, visual style, and narrative, as well as considering the social and political undercurrents of the period in cinematic portrayal. The techniques included fragmented and discontinuous editing, sequential shots, hand-held shots, authorial commentary, and usage of diegetic sounds. Furthermore, these radical filmmakers made use of irony and existential themes, and combined realism and subjectivity to create a narrative ambiguity, creating a new visual language for cinema. (Neupert, 2007)

Moreover, French New Wave techniques were not period specific, and is widely used by prominent contemporary film makers like Quentin Tarantino, Martin Scorsese and Indian film makers like Lijo J Pellissery. In the movie "Jallikattu' Lijo Pellissery predominantly uses long takes, hand held shots with documentary fluidity like Alexander Astruc's 'Camera Stylo'   (Camera -Pen) to capture 'uncut' reality, a non -linear narrative with fragmented editing to emphasis the cinematic theme to the active audience. (Neupert, 2007)

'Jellikattu' is not hero centric or people centric. Rather than portraying an issue that is usual and pertinent in its surroundings, it turns out to be a raw portrait of existentialism, strongly addressing the migration that took place post Indian independence aided by religious and political patronship. Lijo Pellissery through his Editor Deepu Joseph brings numerous autonomous shots with displaced diegetic inserts, subjective inserts and explanatory inserts to bring a cohesive meaning even when following a disruptive narrative structure. The scenes which narrates the early life of Anthony and Kuttachan when they are with Kaalan Varky, their rivalries for male dominance, lust and betrayal are covered with long takes with displaced diegetic inserts ('real' diegetic images but temporally out of context), subjective inserts (memories, fears); and explanatory insert (single shots which clarify events for the spectators). According to Christian Metz, autonomous shots with the above mentioned inserts can bring an order of reality without linking them chronologically. Besides these, it gives room for active audience to draw beastliness out the characters. (Monaco, 2009)

Another film technique found in *Jallikattu* is the Distance effect or alienation technique introduced by Brecht in drama to take emotion out of the production and persuade the audience to distance themselves from the make believe. This approach deconditions the spectator and "make strange" the lived social world, freeing socially conditioned phenomena from the "stamp of familiarity" revealing them as other than "natural" (Stam, 2000)

"The distancing effect is achieved by the way the "artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him [...] The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place." (Brecht, 1964)The use of direct audience-address is one way of disrupting stage illusion and generating the distancing effect. In performance the performer "observes himself"; his or her object "to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work." (Brecht, 1964)

Jallikattu starts with a prologue comprising extreme close up shots of human faces with prominence of hairy facial features like eyelashes, mustache, nose hairs and beard and end with an elderly person taking his last breath, and the cinematic narration continues. Again the narrative flow of the film is disrupted with an epilogue after the end of the filmic story. Like the prologue, epilogue consists of an animated video with facial features of primitive men like uncombed hair, chest hair, mustache, beard, body hair and hairy ears, and also envisages the last breath of the hunted animal. Moreover, the animated video act as a palimpsest art with a multilayered record, creating an "involuted" phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are interwoven, competing with, and infiltrating each other, and it conserves the vividness of individual texts, while exposing the adulteration of one by the other. And

this art form was born out of a need to erase and destroy previous texts, the re-emergence of those destroyed texts renders a structure that privileges heterogeneity and diversity.

Furthermore, this approach deconditions the spectator and "make strange" the lived social world, freeing socially conditioned phenomena from the "stamp of familiarity" revealing them as other than "natural" (Stam, 2000). This alienation technique applied by the director prevents the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor, and which consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer." (Brecht, 1964). The alienation effect serves a didactic function insofar as it teaches the viewer not to take the style and content for granted, since the medium itself is highly constructed and contingent upon many cultural and economic conditions.

Jallikatttu also deploys Brecht's proposed specific techniques to make counter cinema like the refusal of heroes, a rejection of dramaturgy which constructs through mise-en -scene and montage even when the cinema's narration depends of multiple characters, and the usage of direct address by the characters like an elderly character in the film speaking about the beastliness of the migrant people in the hill town during the hunt for the escaped buffalo to the audience. This address is the like the authorial commentary found in the works of French New Wave filmmaker Jean Luc Godard.

The above mentioned findings reveal that the filmmaker is strongly influenced by the autertistic attributes of French new wave filmmakers like long takes, the usage of hand held shots, nonlinear narrative structure, and the Brechtian theatrics of counter cinema like distancing effect, direct address, and rejection of heroes in the film in depicting the beastliness of the characters in the film.

Metonyms that stands for Beastliness in Jellikkettu
In the movie "Jallikatttu', the word '*pothu*' which means buffalo in Malayalam, is used as a metonym to convey the meaning of beastliness. For examples, the character Kaalan Varkey calls his assistant Anthony '*pothu*' for his incapable and inhuman actions. The character in the role of Police Inspector in the film is calling his wife '*Pothu*' for her aggressive and unsupportive behaviour over phone. There is another situation, when the character Paul approaches a senior village petition writer to seek help for filing a plea for getting shoot order from the District Collector for killing the buffalo, the petition writer uses the word '*mahisham*' (which is an euphemistic and sanskritized synonym) instead of '*pothu*'. This word appears totally alien to Paul and he insist to rewrite it as '*pothu*', as it sync with crude animalistic behaviour. Lijo Pellissery uses this metonymy to build the concept of beastliness in viewer's mind.

In 'The Postmodern Animal', Steve Baker (2000) describes "animal-endorsing" approaches to art, underlining perspectives of various culture's resources of constructing and classifying the animals around, in order to make them significant and evocative to the humans. With a handful of imageries, the film '*Jellikettu*' draws a parallel of the inhabitants of the town, all set to render performative masculinity, with the assorted values in the popular culture related to the animal that is wrenching havoc. It is also interesting to note how the discourse on animalistic tendencies gives light to the cultures of violence, giving them a representational force. The transformation of the form of the nonhuman animal into comparable and figurative planes of untamed cave dwelling, stone-club wielding human signification in the film is clearly an inevitable epitaph here. The underlying beastliness willingly verbalizes the growth fundamentals of the human subject and the disciplinary exercises of men turning wild exactly as the beast, all set to assert themselves over all others.

Lijo J Pellissery gives the human/nonhuman animals symbolic and material prevalence by envisaging conditions that can incite violence from them, when they are owned, addicted, consumed, jeopardized, and slaughtered. This beastliness which is forced upon the animal but find parallels with lewdness, megalomania, sexual frustration, and aggression in human animals of the same world, though the latter exercise them not for their existential reasons. At one point, the realisation occurs that the problems in fact arise less from the buffalo's rampage than from the scheming jealousies and petty enmities that divide the villagers.

According to Blanchard, et al, (1999), challenge is a crucial characteristic to generate aggression/violence over resources. *Jellikattu* presents its first big challenge in the form of the untamed buffalo unleashing beastly mayhem, whose capturing is the sole way for the return of respectfulness and to amplify the vexed masculinity to the men, putting their capacity of their brutality under test. For most animal species, a challenge consists of the presence of a same- sex adult in one's own territory. In the same lines is the other challenge that emerges in the narrative amidst the pursuit of the buffalo which becomes a proxy mission for establishing alpha male status for most men who run after the animal, especially between Antony and Kuttachan, who are wooing the same lady.

Combative fighting behaviour and offensive aggression decides access to available resources for most animal species. As with humans and non human animals, manufacturing of relationships between individuals of a species establish their relative priority of access in advance. Thus central basis of anger/aggression/violence in humans is similar to the situations/stimuli that bring out unpleasant assault in nonhuman animals, i.e., a challenge to the annoyed individual's power, autonomy, and image. The violent chase in the part of the buffalo to maintain its independence turns aggressive in the same way with the chaotic hunters who turns uninvited opportunists dressed up to falsify evolutionary advancement over mind-melting brutality. Averill (1982) suggests that "It would seem that anger is often subsidiary to the more inclusive goal of achieving personal control over a situation. . ." This atavistic commonality of human/non human animals is highlighted by many motifs sprinkled across the film.

Furthermore, there is a close up shot showing a combination of animal and human foot print together as a singular entity while people chasing the buffalo, revealing to viewers the similarity of impressions both human and animals make in earth in reality. In modern times, we identify animals with their foot prints whereas human beings are identified individually with their finger prints and not collectively identified like animals. In another scene during the capture of buffalo from an abandoned well, an old man character point's out to younger generation that these men are beasts with two feet and carry beastly like attributes.

The film also uses effective diegetic and non-diegetic sounds which convey the theme of the movie. The film starts with diegetic sounds like the sounds of animals to convey the pristine beauty of the nature. And later background score (non-diegetic) by Prasanth Pillai, which is acapella-based background score with "JeeJi JeeJi" and "UFFF'sounds that are associated with primitive or tribal lives of humans. Moreover, in the opening scenes of movie and when people come together to capture the escaped buffalo, the director adroitly use hypnotic repetition of ticking clock sound to image stereotypical and mechanised human lives, especially lives of men in the hill town with their daily chores including, consumption of meat, absurd frenzies, lewdness, violence, megalomania, male chauvinism, aggression, gluttony etc. Above all, these visuals with quotidian rhythm act as a visual motifs. A motif is a repeated narrative element that supports the theme of a story, and Lijo Pellissery is using these motifs in film to improve the visual narrative significance to convey a local story into a universal story about human nature.

Lakoff and Johnson argue that 'the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. Furthermore, metaphors need not be verbal, and in films, a pair of consecutive shots is metaphorical when there is an implied comparison of the two shots. These visual metaphors in films can also involve a function of 'transference', transferring certain qualities from one sign to another. Lakoff and Johnson also note that metaphors may differ from culture to culture but argue that they are not arbitrary, being derived initially from our physical, social and cultural experience, whereas metonymy is a function which includes using one signified to stand for another signified which is directly or closely associated with it. Moreover, metonyms are based on various indexical relationships between signifieds, notably the replacement of effect for cause. When compared with metaphors, metonyms may be visual as well as verbal. (Berger, 1993). According to Jakobson, film is basically regarded as a metonymic medium, 'metonymy can be applied to an object that is visibly present but which represents another object or subject to which it is related but which is absent' (Hayward, 1996). Furthermore, the filmmaker has predominately used the metonym *'pothu'* as a motif to bestow a 'grounded experience' to the viewers by visualizing how the characters attribute beastliness in human being and making these traits as inseparable from the traits of their forefathers. (Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

Major characters as symbols signifying beastliness as an atavistic trait in the film.
The researcher has done the character analysis, and looked into character functions of the prominent characters in the film, and examined whether the character functions represent the prominent characters as a symbol for the 'beastliness' in the film.

Character	Character Function	Signification
Kalan Varky	The butcher in the film, he exhibits sexual frustration, violence and uses abusive language	lewdness, megalomania, sexual frustration, aggression
Anthony	He is an assistant to Kalan Varkey, and having rivalry with Kuttachan, and wants to possess Sophia	lewdness, sexual frustration, male chauvinism, megalomania, aggression
Kuriachan	He is an affluent high range planter who is into alcoholism and interested in meat delicacies. He is also into illicit relation with the local prostitute.	lewdness, sexual frustration, gluttony

Priest	He is the local priest, and very much concerned about his meat delicacies, and supports the violent behavior of people in the hill town.	gluttony
Kuttachan	He was an assistant to Kalan Varkey, and is having rivalry with Anthony to possess Sophia. He exhibits hunter traits, sexual frustration and into illegal activities	lewdness, sexual frustration, male chauvinism, megalomania, aggression
Paul	He is an affluent planter, Law abiding citizen but cunning. When his farmland gets affected by the rampage, he approaches the authorities to get shooting orders.	lewdness, cunningness
Shanku	Peeping Tom of the Village.	lewdness, sexual frustration
Poomala Gang	Group of people from the adjacent villages who are at loggerheads with the people in the hill town, and shows violence, male chauvinism, megalomania, and celebrates the hunting of buffalo.	male chauvinism, megalomania, aggression, lewdness
Sub Inspector	In the film, he is into domestic violence, and leads people in robbing rubber sheet during the attempt to capture buffalo in the night.	male chauvinism, megalomania, aggression, lewdness
Naxal Prabhakaran	He is an opportunistic in the midst of trouble, and bargains with a bank official to protect his interest when his life is at stake.	violence, cunningness
Sofia	She is the sister of Kalan Varkey, and shows sexual frustration and maintains sexual relation with both Anthony and Kuttachan. She is adjusting to patriarchal system by accepting male dominance.	sexual frustration, aggression

After analysis, it is found that all the major characters in the film symbolize the concept of beastliness, as their character functions signify the various meanings of beastliness, and the director has built them as herd of people not as individuals, and imaged them to a primal state of basic instincts.

Sigmund Freud has postulated that there are basically two instincts in humans i.e. *Eros* or life instinct and *Thanatos* or death instinct. Further he believed that humans have a fundamental instinct of destruction and this was manifest in aggression toward others. He classifies aggression as an innate biological drive that is in the same category as drives related to hunger and sex. Freud has used the term libido to refer to the sexual urges. He said that it could be used to refer to any need satisfying pleasure oriented urge. (Marcuse, 2015)

In addition to these, there is a nameless fat village character in the movie, who is shown scared and keep himself shut inside his house ignoring his wife and child when the villagers' announce that the escaped buffalo is creating ruckus in the hill town. Later, the same character is actively taking part with the large male group in the night to catch the escaped buffalo. Here, the director is bringing how a mob can incite violent behavior in passive individuals. Mob Psychology is a theoretical approach attempting to explain collective behavior solely on the basis of the psychological states of the people who participate. It says that people behave differently in groups than as individuals. They can even go to the extent of being immoral or unjust in contrast to their true behavior. Mob gives a sense of anonymity and they take upon the identity of the group, it allows people to defer accountability, and responsibility to the group. In the excitement of being part of a mob one can lose touch with one's moral code and even violate it. (Goldstein, 2003)

Other symbols connoting 'beastliness' and the usage of 'retroactive reasoning 'to create a coherent meaning of 'beastliness' in a non-narrative structure.
In the film, blood, meat , fire are recurring images which signifies life style of primitive men who were predominantly into animal hunting, and hunting wasn't just for satisfying their hunger but were also a part of recreation to satiate the beastliness in them. To highlight the cruelty against animals, the slaughter attempt on buffalo is made prominent through a slow fade out to black. In visual grammar, fade to black is the most dramatic transition found and is used symbolize completion, meaning a narrative thought is finished. On a practical level, this typically means fading to black at the end of a dramatic scene. The slower fade with more time spent on black indicates a more significant end. (Pramaggiore &Wallis, 2005)

The end sequence in the narrative segment of the movie, where all the men pounce on the innocent animal to create a surrealistic human pyramid, trying to grab a pound of flesh, not to satiate their hunger but to show their

dominance, and even wants a share in killing to satiate their male pride. Furthermore, these shots are connected with an animated video of primitive cavemen who celebrate hunting with their cacophonic traits and infighting, exhibiting hyper masculinity, reinforces the fact that humanity is evolved from its crude beginning and these traits are still there in human beings as atavistic features. Atavism denotes a way of thinking and acting of humans as their ancestors. It can be manifested in biological or psychological manner as in thinking. In atavism of a biological nature, an ancestral trait which was lost during the process of evolution reappears. It is an example of how biological traits are preserved in DNA and appear during process of evolution. Body hair, non-retractable ear lobes, coccyx in human beings are examples to this. In social sciences, atavism can take place in the form of reversion in thinking and acting in the manner of our primitive ancestors. The Austrian psychiatrist Ainslie Maeres has referred this to atavistic regression as in hypnosis the higher brain functions were switched off and the brain reverted to an archaic mental state which affected subjects cognitive processing by accepting ideas without logic. (Hammond, 1990)

Furthermore, this animated video with close up shots of primitive men with hairy body, uncut hair, hairy pinna, prominent nostrils and forehead, is connected with the beginning shots comprising the close up shots of men and women with hairy features (prologue). In doing this, the director coaxes the viewer's sub consciousness into making the connection between the images. This theory, works well in nonlinear narrative structure, as there the filmic flow is disrupted with flashbacks, multiple storylines and ensemble casting. (Insdorf, 2002). Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski introduced this cinematic theory of "retroactive reasoning," in which images that seem ambiguous upon first viewing accrue greater depth when revisited later on. And this cinematic interventions in the form of 'retroactive reasoning' in *Jallikattu* could connect the disrupted narrative format, and created coherence and meaning for the viewer, and could emphasize the concept of beastliness as an atavistic trait.

Conclusion

Internationally acclaimed director Lijo Jose Pellissery's '*Jallikattu*' is one film that intelligently integrates not so seasoned cinematic exuberances to narrate a tale where 'men' whose inherent beastly nature take a destructive turn in their attempt to control the fellow women and the environment around. Wisely told in the backdrop of attempts of a village mob to recapture a buffalo who escaped death from a butcher before his attempt to slaughter, this movie perfectly reflects our contemporary human society, and portrays a conflict between the beast and the beast within humans. In this attempt to chase and repossess the aggressive animal out there in and around the woods, much of the insecurities and frustrations lined up around skull cracking patriarchy, together with woes about class divide and migration come to the fore. The wild buffalo hunt thus turns out to be a mirror for its characters to realize the beastliness in them, as the movie's premise shifts to 'man is wild' preposition, gradually assembling the realization about who is the real beast in the actual sense. In the post humanist thought, this asymptomatic alien 'animality' seems to have always resided within the cohesive focus and values of humanism. The dormant, confined 'beastily other' within the human self thus aptly fit in the perpetual post-humanistic approaches.

Semiological review of the film " Jallikattu "reveals that the director adroitly used different symbols, metonyms, visual motifs, to visualize beastliness in human as an atavistic trait, and thereby highlighting the plight of human civilization. The director predominantly uses the auteristic styles of French New Wave filmmakers like non-linear narrative structure, long takes and the usage of hand held shots, and Brechtian techniques like direct audience address, distancing effect and rejection of heroes by deploying ensemble casting to create a coherent meaning of beastliness, for active film audiences. Furthermore, the characters are used as symbols to represent beastality remaining in men even when they cover themselves with tags like social animal or civilized being. This is explored through a psychological phenomenon exhibited by the characters called 'atavistic regression', which reverts human being to an archaic mindset and switch off higher brain function, i.e., representing humans with basic instincts like animals. The director also uses another cinematic convention called "retroactive reasoning".to connect the disrupted cinematic flow and generate existential meanings with prologue, epilogue and a narrative interposed with numerous story lines, flashbacks, and multiple characters. Furthermore, Lijo J Pellissery as a filmmaker has skillfully used mise-enscene and montage to build characters as super predators and has reduced them to primal state of basic instincts. The disjointed narrative style with prologue and epilogue, focusses mostly on herd of people rather than individuals, symbolizing that humanity is existing with inherent beastly attributes.

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