

**THE TRAP OF POWER: HIERARCHIES AND RESISTANCE IN
BRAMAYUGAM**



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of
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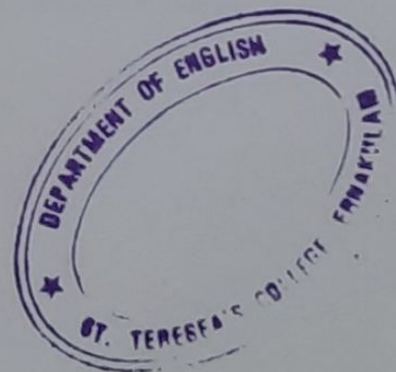
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This research explores the intricate dynamics of caste and power hierarchies in the film *Bramayugam* through a post-colonial lens, investigating how the film subverts traditional power structures and presents power as a paradoxical force that entraps both the oppressor and the oppressed. The study seeks to understand how the film's inversion of caste hierarchies contributes to a broader critique of societal structures, reflecting the tensions between dominance, resistance, and subjugation. By situating *Bramayugam* within the framework of post-colonial theory, the research will draw on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to analyse the film's treatment of caste, voice, and agency. It helps to uncover how power functions as a trap that ensnares characters across social positions. The methodology involves a close reading of the film, focusing on narrative structure, character development, dialogues, cinematography, and symbolism to reveal underlying socio-political themes. Ultimately, the research aims to demonstrate how *Bramayugam* serves as a powerful cinematic critique of caste and power dynamics, contributing to ongoing conversations about social hierarchy, resistance, and post-colonial identity in contemporary Indian cinema.



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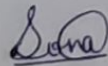
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I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled "The Trap of Power: Hierarchies and Resistance in *Bramayugam*" is a record of bona fide work done by me under the supervision of Ms. Sayoojya C. S., Assistant Professor, Department of English, and that no part of the dissertation has been presented earlier for the award of any degree, diploma, or any other similar title of recognition.



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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled "The Trap of Power: Hierarchies and Resistance in *Bramayugam*", is a record of bona fide work carried out by Sona John under my supervision and guidance.



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Introduction

The concept of power has always been central to human civilization, shaping societies, governance, and interpersonal relationships. Power, in its various forms- political, social, and personal- has the potential to both create and destroy. The pursuit of power often reveals the frailties of human nature, prompting individuals and institutions to prioritize dominance over justice, control over collaboration, and ambition over ethics. This paradoxical nature of power makes it a compelling subject of exploration, particularly in storytelling.

Cinema has long been instrumental in examining the nuances of power and its ramifications on humanity as a visual and narrative medium. Films have delved deeply into the psychological, social, and political implications of power, critiquing the structures that perpetuate dominance and inequality across the globe. Malayalam cinema has consistently demonstrated a keen sensitivity to these themes, reflecting the socio-political ethos of Kerala's complex society. Known for its realistic storytelling, the Malayalam film industry has frequently engaged with issues such as poverty, class, caste, gender, and the power dynamics underlying these social constructs.

From its early days, Malayalam cinema has mirrored the cultural and social attitudes of Kerala's evolving society. Films were initially shaped by the patriarchal norms of the time, portraying a world where women were confined to domestic spaces as *antharjanams* (those who remain within the enclosures of their homes) while men thrived in the public sphere. Early narratives often centred on issues like *makkathayam* (patrilineal inheritance) and *marumakkathayam* (matrilineal inheritance), with characters either adhering to or opposing these societal expectations. Over time, the industry began

to challenge these entrenched norms, evolving to present a more critical view of the structures that divide and oppress people.

Modern Malayalam cinema has increasingly foregrounded themes of resistance against systemic power with its incisive narratives and nuanced characters. These films critique the pervasive influence of power in everyday life and its potential to corrupt even the most ordinary individuals. In this tradition of films exploring power and resistance, *Bramayugam* (2024), directed by Rahul Sadasivan, stands out as a significant cinematic achievement. Set in the mansion of Kodumon Potti, a magician played by Mammooty, the film addresses issues of caste, class, and power that lurk beneath Kerala's social fabric. The narrative revolves around Potti's attempt to capture an evil spirit (Chathan) that tormented and murdered the members of the mansion. Alongside Potti, characters like Thevan (played by Arjun Ashokan) and the cook (played by Sidharth Bharathan)- members of marginalized castes- rise to resist the authoritarian and oppressive rule of Potti, adding layers of conflict and resistance to the storyline. The film is set in Kodumon Potti's mansion where Thevan and the cook are enslaved forever. Later in the plot, it is found that it is Chathan who is inhabiting Potti's body. This revelation is followed by the struggle to escape from Chathan which further uncovers hidden truths.

Bramayugam is deeply layered with symbolism, portraying power dynamics not as a distant or abstract issue but as an omnipresent force shaping individual and collective lives. This film critiques the deeply entrenched hierarchies perpetuated by both tradition and systemic power. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" this paper seeks to analyse the mechanisms of caste oppression, the voices of resistance, and the narratives of marginalized individuals that disrupt dominant social hierarchies through a postcolonial lens.

Bramayugam departs from traditional portrayals of power by giving its subaltern characters agency and space to resist. Their defiance disrupts the caste hierarchy, underscoring how marginalized communities can challenge systems of oppression. This resistance is amplified through the film's emphasis on narrative and representation. By centring the voices and experiences of the marginalized, *Bramayugam* functions as a counter-narrative to dominant caste discourses. In line with Spivak's call to "let the subaltern speak," the film enables its subaltern characters to articulate their subjectivities and reclaim their agency. The film becomes a spectral narrative that gives voice to the marginalised through the employment of supernatural elements. A spectral narrative is a tale that evokes a sense of the supernatural by exploring themes of past, memory, and the presence of things that are absent in front of the human eye.

The film employs techniques such as close-ups, long takes, and muted colour palettes reflecting the starkness of the lives of the characters and the pervasive nature of their oppression. At the same time, the film's symbolic elements critique the internalized hierarchies of caste and power, inviting viewers to engage critically with these systems. By intertwining realism with postcolonial critique, *Bramayugam* achieves a dual focus on the tangible and intangible forms of subjugation, creating a cinematic text that is both deeply reflective and powerfully subversive.

This project seeks to explore *Bramayugam* as a narrative of resistance against caste and class hierarchies, using Spivak's framework to unpack the mechanisms of power and dominance embedded within the film. By examining the intersectionality of caste with broader power structures, this paper aims to reveal how *Bramayugam* critiques the socio-political hierarchies of Kerala's society while offering a platform for marginalized voices to resist and reclaim their identities. Through its layered

storytelling and visual depth, the film stands as a testament to the transformative power of cinema to challenge dominant narratives and amplify the voices of the oppressed.

Bramayugam has been noted for its nuanced portrayal of power, caste hierarchies, and resistance. This literature review examines scholarly works and critical analyses relevant to the film's themes, focusing on historical, cultural, and cinematic contexts. Gilles Tarabout's study, "On Chattan. Conflicting Statements about a South Indian Deity," offers a critical exploration of the dualistic perceptions of Kuttichathan in Kerala. Tarabout highlights the deity's complex identity, oscillating between reverence as a protective figure and fear as a mischievous or malevolent spirit. The study emphasizes how moral and ideological perspectives shape the social narratives surrounding Kuttichathan, marking him as a liminal figure between devotion and demonization. This fluidity aligns with *Bramayugam*'s representation of power dynamics, where the supernatural becomes a metaphor for the unseen forces of oppression and rebellion.

In "Revisiting the Endangered Folk Religion of Kerala," Krishnan S. Navneeth discusses the marginalization of Kerala's folk deities like Kuttichathan amid the rising influence of Sanskritization. Navneeth's work underscores how folk religions often reflect the struggles of the oppressed and marginalized communities, whose spiritual practices challenge mainstream caste structures. The interplay of caste and folk worship in Navneeth's analysis parallels the power struggles depicted in *Bramayugam*, where the supernatural becomes a site of both oppression and resistance. Asko Parpola's "The Iconography and Cult of Kutticcattan: Field Research on the Sanskritization of Local Folk Deities in Kerala" further explores the transformation of Kuttichathan's cult in the face of Brahmanical assimilation.

Parpola's field research provides valuable insights into how the iconography and rituals of Kuttichathan were redefined to align with dominant Hindu norms, often stripping the deity of its grassroots significance. This process of sanitization resonates with *Bramayugam*'s allegorical critique of systemic hierarchies, portraying how dominant forces co-opt local identities to maintain control.

Contemporary critiques of *Bramayugam* provide a lens to examine its narrative of power and class. Aswin Bharadwaj's review, “*Bramayugam* Review | A Well-Crafted Fusion of Horror and Power Politics,” highlights how the film masterfully blends supernatural elements with societal critique. Bharadwaj argues that the film's portrayal of authoritarianism and its repercussions reflects the underlying class struggles in Kerala, using horror as a medium to underscore the insidious nature of power. Soumyabrata Gupta's article, “*Bramayugam*: Ghosts, Classism and the Oppressed,” delves deeper into the intersectionality of class, caste, and supernatural oppression in the film. Gupta's analysis points to *Bramayugam* as a commentary on systemic exploitation, where the supernatural becomes an extension of societal power dynamics. The film's lower-caste characters' resistance against domination mirrors real-world struggles for equality and justice, a theme consistent with the historical narratives of Chathan worship.

Vishal Menon's critique, “*Bramayugam* Review: Allegorical Horror at its Best in this Eerie Commentary about Power Struggle,” reinforces the film's allegorical depth. He emphasizes how *Bramayugam* employs visual storytelling and atmospheric horror to depict the cyclical nature of oppression and rebellion. The allegorical treatment positions the film within a broader discourse on the psychological and societal impacts of hierarchical power. Together, these works reveal a multifaceted understanding of *Bramayugam* and its themes. They provide a historical and cultural

foundation, showing how Kuttichathan's iconography and worship reflect caste and class struggles.

This thesis work encompasses five chapters- the first chapter introduces the project topic; the following chapters discuss the theoretical framework, the analysis of the film *Bramayugam* which is divided into two chapters- one looking into the power-play in the film and its corrupting nature and the next reading the film as a tale of resistance and reclamation of lost voices, and the conclusion. The thesis conducts a postcolonial reading of the tropes of power, hierarchy, and resistance in *Bramayugam* where the employment of caste inversion in the film dismantles mainstream power narratives, taking Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" as the theoretical basis. To conclude, the project looks at the major role that power and hierarchical position play in corrupting the individual exercising it, and how caste inversion is employed in the film to reverse the trajectory of the flow of power and act as a tool of resistance.

Chapter 1

The Master's Voice and the Servant's Silence: Reading *Bramayugam* through Spivak's Subaltern Lens

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" analyses the flow of power from higher to lower castes. Spivak's arguments in this essay are used in the context of Kerala's cultural milieu to further investigate how this direction of powerplay and systemic oppression is reversed through the employment of caste inversion. This study will be rooted in post-colonial theory, particularly focusing on how post-colonial narratives challenge and resist the structures of power and oppression. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian scholar, literary theorist, and feminist critic, is a Professor at Columbia University and a founding member of the Institute of Comparative Literature and Society, Columbia University. She is best-known for her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and the translation of and introduction to Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie*.

Bramayugam is also being analysed as a spectral narrative where the employment of this narrative technique provides a space for the marginalised through the introduction of ghost characters. The lead character in the film, Chathan, is a supernatural entity who was considered as the deity of the low-castes of Kerala in the earlier centuries, and later began to be worshipped by everyone irrespective of their castes. This figure, who is portrayed as a slave gifted by goddess Varahi to Chudalan Potti, one of the ancestors of the mansion, is shown as fighting against the wrongdoings inflicted upon him by Potti. Thus, this film becomes a spectral narrative, as popularised by C. Ayyappan, where the unearthly figures find their place and voices in mainstream narratives. C. Ayyappan, through his short stories, have

introduced the narrative style of thanatography where the non-human entities narrate their experiences and the miserable life they led, and seek revenge by entering a body which would enable them to speak back for the miseries they endured during their lifetime. Thus, *Bramayugam* would be analysed in the light of spectral narratives, where Chathan acquires agency over Potti and seeks retribution for his confinement.

Spivak's essay titled "Can the Subaltern Speak?"- first published in 1988 as part of the edited volume *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*- provides a strong foundation for the postcolonial analysis of *Bramayugam*. She opines through her essay that the attempts of criticism arising from the West is the result of a "desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as subject" (Spivak 66). She talks about the work *Intellectuals and Power*, which was a casual conversation between the two celebrated French philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, published in the 49th issue of *L'ARC*, an issue dedicated to Deleuze. The main topic of discussion in this conversation is about the place of theory and practice within large social movements such as workers' struggle. Both the critics emphasize the heterogeneity in the networks of power/desire/interest and that the intellectuals of the society must attempt to know the discourse of the society's Other. According to Spivak, while both Foucault and Deleuze discuss important topics like these, they ignore the question of ideology and its implication in economic and intellectual history. Spivak talks about the main aim of the workers' struggle as "the desire to blow up power at any point of its application" (67). According to Spivak, the subject lacks desire. Spivak quotes Althusser:

The reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the

ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class “in and by words” (Spivak 68).

Spivak writes that “the theoretician does not represent (speak for) the oppressed group” (Spivak 70). Those who act and struggle are considered to be mute when compared to those who act and speak for themselves. For Spivak, the formation of a class is “artificial” and “economic.” She talks about Karl Marx’s usage of the term *vertreten* (represent or act on behalf of) and his opinion that ...the small peasant proprietors cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must appear simultaneously as their master, as an authority over them, as unrestricted governmental power that protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above (71).

Through these words, what Spivak tries to point out is that the underprivileged and the people of the margins are considered as a group who do not have the agency to represent and speak for themselves; rather, they need an external agency to speak for and about them, and these subjects should remain in a master-slave relationship with their representatives. Spivak critiques the concept of subjectivity as a collective agency that was used by the colonisers- the so-called saviours- to keep the colonised under control.

For Spivak, the clearest available example of epistemic violence is the portrayal of the colonial subject as Other. The narrative of imperialism can only be seen as a text of ‘subjugated knowledge,’ as the real life of the colonised, as it is, is nowhere documented. Spivak discusses about how the British codified the Hindu law which was based on the four major texts of *sruti*, *smriti*, *sastra*, and *vyavahara*. She

also talks about Macaulay's Minutes which described the imperial masters' need for a group of people who would refine the vernacular dialects of the country and act as translators for the British.

A version of history was gradually established in which the Brahmans were shown to have the same intentions as (thus providing the legitimation for) the codifying British: In order to preserve Hindu society intact the successors (of the original Brahmans) had to reduce everything to writing and make them more and more rigid. And that is what has preserved Hindu society despite a succession of political upheavals and foreign invasions (Spivak 77).

This passage shows how Hinduism deeply rooted itself on rigid frameworks and laws which formed a strong foundation based on class and caste distinctions in the Indian society and how these laws were strictly followed and imposed upon the Other by the ruling Brahmin class. The existence of Indian social system was entirely dependent on this rigid framework that separated its people based on class, caste, and religion.

Gayatri Spivak then moves to talks about those living in the margins- "the silent, silenced centre" (Spivak 78). Here is where she raises the question- "can the subaltern speak?" Spivak talks about the need for a Subaltern Studies' group where its intellectuals should "rethink Indian colonial historiography from the perspective of the discontinuous chain of peasant insurgencies during the colonial occupation" (78-79). She chooses the views of Derridean deconstruction over the discourse of Foucault and Deleuze in the definition of the subaltern classes or the marginalized. Derrida does not speak about 'letting the other(s) speak for himself' but rather invokes an 'appeal' to or 'call' to the 'quite-other.' (89). Derrida describes the

situation of in-betweenness faced by the marginalized using the term “antre.” And this experience of in-betweenness cannot be homogenised as it is different for the marginalized from one area to another, and is heterogeneous.

The consciousness of the Indian nation should be rewritten for the subaltern to be able to speak. To emphasize the importance of “measuring the silences,” Spivak talks about Pierre Macherey who said that what is important in a work is what it does not say. The subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow (Spivak 83). She emphasizes the need of a revolutionary struggle from the side of the subalterns.

...if it is against *power* that one struggles, then all those who acknowledge it as intolerable can begin the struggle wherever they find themselves and in terms of their own activity. In engaging in this struggle that is *their own*, whose objectives they clearly understand and whose methods *they can* determine, they enter into the revolutionary process...by fighting in those places they find themselves oppressed (Spivak 85).

This paper applies the tenets of Spivak’s essay to analyse the film *Bramayugam* with regards to its depiction of powerplay and the non-conventional reversal flow of flow of this power and oppressive mechanisms through caste-inversion. The next chapter delves deeper into an in-depth analysis of the film’s narrative structure, character development, and visual elements to understand the inversion of caste and power hierarchies. Dialogues, cinematography, and symbolism will also be examined to uncover deeper layers of meaning related to power and resistance.

Chapter 2

Bramayugam: A Tale of Power-play and Its Corruptive Nature

Bramayugam employs the figure of Chathan as the symbol of power and oppression, and at the same time, as a symbol of resistance against these repressing structures. The narrative behind the origin and cultural significance of Chathan in Kerala's cultural milieu reveals a multifaceted identity of the deity. The figure of Chathan, also known as Vishnumaya, occupies a unique and complex space in Kerala's folklore, mythology, and cultural imagination. Rooted in the traditions of the Malabari Hindus, Chathan is often depicted as a mischievous yet benevolent supernatural entity who performs acts of both mischief and divine intervention. His character embodies a blend of tribal, Hindu, and regional traditions, evolving to reflect changing societal and cultural narratives.

According to legend, Shiva, disguised as a sage, encountered Koolivaka, a tribal girl from the forests of Kooli. Entranced by her beauty, Shiva expressed his desire for her, but Koolivaka, an ardent devotee of Parvati, sought divine intervention to preserve her chastity. Parvati, moved by Koolivaka's devotion, disguised herself as the tribal girl and united with Shiva, leading to the birth of Chathan. This divine act not only preserved Koolivaka's purity but also fulfilled the celestial purpose of creating a powerful child capable of defeating the asura Bhringasuran. Raised by Koolivaka in the Kooli forests, Chathan grew up as a protector of his foster tribe. Riding a buffalo and playing the *ezhara*, a traditional musical instrument, Chathan displayed extraordinary strength and weaponry skills from a young age. His preferred weapon, the *kuruvadi* (a short stick), became a symbol of his martial prowess. As he matured, Chathan discovered his divine lineage and purpose during a visit to Kailash,

where his parents, Shiva and Parvati, bestowed upon him divine blessings and knowledge of warfare. Adopting the name Vishnumaya, he ultimately defeated Bhringasuran, aided by the four-hundred kuttichathans (little spirits) from his spilt blood during battle.

The legend of Chathan extends beyond this heroic narrative, embedding him deeply in the socio-cultural fabric of Kerala. Regarded as a protector of the marginalized, Chathan chose to stay among the poor and downtrodden, rather than ascend to the heavens. His followers, particularly from the Malayan tribal community, venerated him as their guardian deity, addressing him with reverence as Sree Vishnumaya Kuttichathan. His three-hundred-and-ninety surviving kuttichathans became symbols of his enduring legacy, protecting devotees and assisting them in times of need. Chathan's portrayal in folklore is marked by dualities. While devotees view him as a benevolent protector who fulfils wishes in exchange for offerings through *Chathan seva* (Chathan service), others perceive him as a figure associated with black magic and mischief. This dichotomy is evident in popular culture, where depictions range from the playful and endearing Chathan in *My Dear Kuttichathan* (1984)- India's first 3D film- to the vengeful and cunning portrayal in recent films like *Bramayugam* (2024). This dichotomy that is attributed to Chathan can be seen in the film where on one hand he is the saviour and benevolent benefactor of those who beg for mercy and are depended for survival and on the other hand, he is the trickster who cunningly manages to lead his enemies astray- both physically and mentally- and encounter those who step in the midst of his way to acquire unending power and dominion over the world.

The character of Chathan embodies a rich tapestry of symbolism, blending elements of tribal heritage, Hindu mythology, and socio-political commentary. His

origin story, marked by divine intervention and tribal devotion, highlights themes of resistance, loyalty, and the interplay between power and vulnerability. Chathan's continuing relevance, as reflected in oral traditions, temple worship, and cinematic representations, underscores his enduring role as a cultural icon. The dual nature of Chathan, as described in the traditional narratives, is illustrated through *Bramayugam* where he sympathizes with the downtrodden character (Thevan) of the film, while at the same time, turns out to be a malicious and vengeful spirit when it comes to the issue of possessing power. The film presents this duality to showcase how power corrupts those who exercise it.

Bramayugam, written and directed by Rahul Sadasivan, is analysed through the postcolonial lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The movie discusses the rigid, age-old caste system and its atrocities that were prevalent in the 16th and 17th centuries in Kerala. The character of Thevan is that of a "Paanan" who has run away for his life from the king's court when war broke out (most probably a reference to the Battle of Colachel in 1741 during the reign of King Marthandavarma between the Dutch and Travancore), and the cook, too, is a low-caste bound for his life in Kodumon Potti's mansion. The reference to the Battle of Colachel brings in the colonial aspect where Thevan is the colonised individual suffering under the Dutch invasion and colonialism of Travancore, who once again enters a state of double colonisation where Chathan becomes the colonial master. The different dimensions of caste system and the powerplay associated with it is clearly shown throughout the movie.

The opening shot of Kodumon Potti with a close-up shot of the ring on his hand showcases the power he holds in the mansion and on all those who enter its premises. The powerful, domineering Potti has ensnared the time and life of the cook

and Thevan. *Bramayugam* plays the role of a narrative discussing the central role of power and power relations that comes along with the caste system or any such hierarchical systems, where power corrupts those who are exercising it. The cook and Chathan are blinded by the alluring rewards that power offers them, and both suffer out of this undying thirst for power and position. The cook, who is the son of Kodumon Potti, born to a low-caste woman, has come to avenge his father's death and inherit his hereditary wealth and power. He always scorns at the Paanan for which he is scolded by Potti (Chathan). Here, we can see Chathan who is residing inside Kodumon Potti's body using an upper-caste body for the conduct of an act that favours the low-caste. This subverts the traditionally set-up practice of the higher castes to ridicule and curse the low-born individuals.

The close-up shot of a spider on its web is a symbol of how Chathan is weaving a trap to ensnare anyone who enters the premises of the mansion. He becomes a figure who empathizes with the members of his community while at the same time does not move back from removing those who become an obstacle in his way to acquire power. Chathan himself is trapped inside the web of power of which he himself is the master. "I have been alone for quite a few years now. I have forgotten the last time I stepped out of the gateway" (*Bramayugam* 27:33-27:38). In the words of the cook, "relishing in the intoxication of power, the Chathan enslaves and dominates anyone who comes close to it. It has created a realm of control around itself. The Chathan is both the master and the prisoner of that realm" (01:23:28-01:23:42).

These words prove how Chathan is the authoritarian master who controls the web of power he has created inside the mansion, but at the same time he himself is not able to get out of the vicious circle of power that imposes and restrains him from

experiencing the real freedom that the world offers. He can only reside in Kodumon Potti's body and cannot get out of the mansion's boundaries, just as the cook and Thevan. This completely dismantles the dominant position the high-caste enjoys over the low-caste, as both groups in the film are victims of the same situation.

The game of dice becomes an important symbol of power exercised by Chathan in the movie and later becomes a symbol of resistance employed by Thevan. It becomes the symbol of Chathan's never-ending power and domination where he makes Thevan pawn his time as part of the game. Chathan says that it is Thevan's destiny that brought him to the mansion and narrates every incident from the latter's life that ultimately brought him there. The supernatural element of spectral narrative is employed here where Chathan lists out the past events from Thevan's life and even makes the dice turn into number six. Chathan finally succeeds in making Thevan stay at his mansion for the rest of his life.

The cook's outburst towards Thevan shows the low-caste is looked down upon and crushed down by those of the upper classes. "Who are you to command me? A lowlife who survived on the scraps of some palace! A mere moth that came rushing towards the sight of a flame!" (*Bramayugam* 45:25-45:34). Potti retorts against the cook who speaks against him saying, "Keep your head down, you dog!" (50:35), once again portraying the dominating aspect of power. And according to Spivak, the acceptance of this dominance by the marginalised group is a factor that aids in the perpetuation of oppressive power. When Thevan offers himself to Potti's service in the beginning of the film, it automatically leads to his subjugation.

The cook narrates the tale of Kodumon Potti, his ancestor Chudalan Potti and others, who came to ensnare Chathan to Thevan who is struck with horror after seeing

Kodumon Potti's another face. Chathan was a gift from the goddess Varahi to Chudalan Potti, the former enclosed inside a magical box. But Potti enslaved Chathan and made him suffer. The exhausted Chathan told Potti that he will show him hell if he looks into his mouth. The intoxicated Potti looked into his mouth and Chathan sucked up Potti's soul and killed him. Thus, liberated from Potti, Chathan gained control over the mansion and mercilessly killed all its members. Many powerful sorcerers came to banish him but they failed. And Kodumon Potti is the last descendant that has come to destroy Chathan.

Potti covering his body with crushed bones, the union of the yakshi and Potti (Chathan), and Chathan bringing rain that lasts for days- all these elements of mystery and supernatural traits make the movie a spectral narrative. Potti (Chathan) had killed the dancer who became a nuisance to him, and he states that he would kill anyone who comes in his way, denoting that he would not hesitate to kill Thevan too, for the single purpose of attaining and maintaining his power and supreme authority. The cook befriends Thevan to make him his companion in destroying Chathan. During their conversation, Thevan raises the agony of all those who are low-born: "I think our birth itself is a mistake" (*Bramayugam* 01:10:02). Chathan succeeds in not letting Thevan leave the mansion and erases his memories, trapping him forever. "Those in power take pleasure in toying with the freedom of others. It need not be the result of wrongdoing" (01:25:08-01:25:15). "The Chathan has only one aim- to stop anyone from seizing his power and attain immortality" (01:27:52-01:27:58).

The colonising masters observed the subjugation and subjectivity of the colonised as something that aided their easy rule on the natives. In the same way, Chathan took away the last things that were left for Thevan as his own- his time and memory- and made sure that the latter remains his servant for life. The corruptive

nature of power is depicted in various forms in the movie. The cook uses Thevan as a mere bait to destroy the Chathan forever; Chathan tortures Thevan and the cook by creating a maze. He even takes the form of a young Kodumon Potti to allure the cook into his trap, just as he did to his ancestors. Chathan himself utters words signifying how dangerous power can be: “Once he confines me within that box, he will kill you! ...He will make me kill you! ...This power will be nothing but a waste for you! You will be struck by lightning’s wrath!” (*Bramayugam* 01:59:36-01:59:41, 01:59:48, 02:01:06-02:01:12).

After Chathan comes out of Kodumon Potti’s body, the cook takes the ring and asks Chathan to come to him as he is his new master. Thevan tries to prevent him from wearing the ring saying that whoever wields power will be corrupted and commoners like him will always be its victims, pointing to the ever-ending cycle of power dynamics. The cook torments to kill him if he stands in his way. A fight follows between the two ending with the scene of the mansion falling down. After this, the board of the dice game is shown where all the big sticks have fallen and only the smaller ones remain. This indicates the end of the era of Chathan’s dominating power over Thevan and the cook. But this does not destroy Chathan forever as he has found another body- Thevan- to reside from now on, who would now be trapped in the entangling web of power, just like how the spider is stuck in its own web as shown in a previous shot in the film. This points out that the cycle of power is never-ending and it has the agency to corrupt anyone who has hold of it.

The film ends with a shot of Thevan with a stud on his right ear instead of the left, showing that the Chathan has now taken the body of Thevan, who lies dead under the crumbles of the mansion. This is revealed when the cook comes back again for the ring and beats Thevan down. Thevan is shown holding the ring and this indicates that

he will from now on be Chathan's new master and would soon start to rush behind the riches that the power that he has acquired now would offer him.

The cook runs away for his life and he encounters the Portuguese army who has entered Kerala as part of their colonising mission of the 17th century. The cook attempts to throw stones at them- indicating the abhorrence of the colonised towards the coloniser- but is shot dead by the coloniser, again showing the omnipresent force of power in this world. Thevan (Chathan) wears the ring on his right hand, and sees his reflection in the river as that of Potti's- showing that now he (Chathan) has the power that was only accustomed to the high-born people. This shot ends the movie by making the unheard voices of the marginalised, voiceless, and oppressed people heard through a tale that inverts the hierarchy of the caste system, and at the same time underlines the never-ending corrupting nature of power.

The close-up shot of the ring, the spider web, and the board of the game of dice- all three serve as important symbols of power and domination in the film. These symbols, which represented Chathan's power and dominion in the beginning of the film, undergo changes towards the end. In the beginning, the ring symbolizes Chathan's unending realm of power; the spider in the spider web stands for Chathan who is waiting in the mansion to allure helpless human beings into his trap, completely cutting of their ties with the external world; and the board of the game of dice presents Chathan as the winner who pawns Thevan's time as his reward. Towards the end of the film, the ring shifts from Potti's hands to Thevan's, once again denoting the loss of power of the high-caste and the low-castes taking control and overpowering those who once dominated them; the spider web which represented a trap in which Chathan was once the master, also shows him as a victim of the same web; the board game shows all the big sticks on the board that has fallen down and

only the smaller ones standing straight- again denoting the oppressed gaining an upper hand over their oppressors.

The use of monochromatic colour scheme, close-up shots, slow, menacing music, and the medium-pace of the progression of the narrative has efficiently contributed in the film's successful rendition of the evil and corrupting nature of power and other hierarchical structures in the Kerala society based on the norms of caste and gender. The black-and-white colour scheme employed by the director stands for the dichotomic existence of the three lead characters in the film. All three of them go through two different states where on one hand they are powerless, helpless victims of the power-play in action, and on the other hand, they are strong upholders of power which gives voice and power to the once-oppressed individual over their oppressor.

The first ray of sunlight that one can observe in the film is only towards the last few minutes where Chathan, who has now taken up Thevan's body, comes out of the mansion after years of confinement. Even though Chathan was the master of the mansion, enjoying the luxuries of life by dwelling inside Kodumon Potti's body, he himself was leading a life trapped inside the four walls of the mansion. He tells Thevan that it has been years since he has stepped out of the mansion's gate, and the cook too explains that the Chathan is both the master as well as the slave of the entangling web of power that he has built inside the mansion.

Chapter 3

Bramayugam: A Tale of Resistance and the Empire Writing Back

Bramayugam acts as a narrative of resistance against the domineering narrative of power. One can observe that the element of power that is omnipresent in the film's narrative corrupts its lead characters on one hand and turns them into tools of resistance and defiance on the other hand. The film opens with a scene where a "yakshi"- an enchanting, sensual female spirit with long hair and an enticing physique- allures Koran (played by Manikandan. R. Achari), Thevan's companion in the dark, dense forest. This opening scene itself becomes a postcolonial mouthpiece used by Rahul Sadasivan as it depicts the female subject, who is even more deeply in shadow according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, overpowering the male gender and establishing her agency. Her beauty becomes a weapon by which she exerts complete control over the male gender, who is allured by her beauty and follows her, entranced.

The film is a spectral narrative that intertwines reality with the supernatural, giving voice to the long-lost communities of Kerala represented by the "yakshi" (the oppressed female gender), Thevan (a low-caste figure), and "chathan" (a low-caste deity/spirit). A spectral narrative is a storytelling approach that emphasizes the presence of elusive, haunting, or ghostly elements within a narrative.

The film gradually reveals that it is not Potti, but Chathan who is using the body of the deceased Potti as a physical agency to exercise power and domination, thus disrupting the narrative of caste system, where the high-caste dominates the low-caste. A process of caste inversion is employed by the director where the low-caste Chathan overpowers and avenges himself by murdering his wrongdoers and taking hold of the mansion, a symbol of the power and dominance of the upper caste

Brahmin community. This technique contributes in labelling the movie as a postcolonial text. The cook's pursuit for power ends up in a tragedy where he loses his life and power is transferred to Thevan. Here, Thevan wins over the cook who is in a way in an upper position over him as he is Kodumon Potti's half-son. On the other hand, the cook is also a victim of the caste system and its power dynamics as he is Potti's illegitimate son born in a lower-caste woman. He is not accustomed to enjoy the luxurious life entitled to the upper-class members of the society just because his mother was a low-born and therefore is not accepted as a member of the Brahmin community. His experience can be equated to the legend of Chathan where Chathan became a low-caste figure only because he was born to the forest-dwelling girl Koolivaka even though his father was Lord Shiva. The cook is also accustomed to a similar life situation where is prohibited from all the luxuries of life that the Brahmins of 17th century Kerala enjoyed just because he was born from a low-caste woman.

The entire filmic narrative is that of caste inversion where the flow of power is in the opposite direction. There are dialogues in the movie which challenge the patriarchal notions of caste system: "No one becomes a Brahmin by birth, only through karma" (*Bramayugam* 17:02). When Thevan asks whether he is allowed to enter the mansion, Potti (Chathan) says, "What if I am unconventional that way?" (21:41) and recites a Sanskrit shloka from the second verse of "Ashtadasha Kandam" which translates as: "A delightful guest is most graciously welcome. Be they lowborn or of noble caste!" (21:53-21:59) which also shows Chathan's (low-caste) knowledge in those things which are meant to be learned by members of the high-caste only.

There was a time in Kerala's history when molten "iyyam" (tin) was poured into the ears of the low-castes who accidentally happened to hear the mantras being recited. They were not allowed to learn them, let alone hear. This film is also set in

such a time period- the 17th century Kerala- where caste distinctions were visible vividly. It is in this period that Chathan, who is disregarded as a low-caste figure by the upper class, is shown as exerting power over the physical body of the upper-class Potti, and reciting the slokas that only the high-castes are allowed to imbibe.

All the words uttered by Chathan who is residing in Potti's body, becomes a strong backlash against the patriarchal Brahminical community who rigidly observes all the laws put forth by their sacred religious texts and texts of law, and is not ready to loosen them up a bit. Chathan is reciting these words when he is inside Kodumon Potti's body, and this completely dismantles the agency that the high-caste has even on their body. The high-castes of Kerala, who exert their power over the low-born of the society, by imposing rules over their everyday lives, are portrayed in this film as completely lacking agency over their own lives, being attacked and subjugated by a low-caste figure like Chathan. This becomes a strong representation of how the repressed and the marginalised groups would eventually find their voices as the caste and class boundaries would gradually fade away, and what that prevail would be the burning desire to reclaim the lost voices and agency. This makes *Bramaygam* a strong postcolonial text which resembles the arguments put forward by Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", reacting against the suppression and silencing of the low-castes.

Chathan becomes a representative voice for all those who are residing in the margins- "the silent, silenced centre" (Spivak 78). He denies the existence of God and expresses his dislike when Thevan talks about the favour that God has done for him. Potti, whose body is now overtaken by Chathan, tells that it is fate and not God that bought him there. The game of dice, which was discussed as a symbol of power for Potti (Chathan), becomes an agent of resistance here when Thevan uses it to know

where Chathan has hidden the key to the secret chamber with the lamp inside. He makes use of the same words that Potti (Chathan) said to him before playing the game: “When one is drowning in a deluge of boredom, *pakida* is the finest remedy!” (*Bramayugam* 01:29:32-01:29:37). This becomes an instance of ‘the empire writing back’ where the colonised uses the words of coloniser, here in the colonial context of Kerala’s caste system.

“What if he is not wearing the holy thread! He is a great Brahmin after all!” (*Bramayugam* 44:47-44:49)- these words by Thevan depicts how physical appearance is not a necessary mark to label someone as a high-caste or low-caste. At the same time, this dialog can also be seen as a hint that points out that it is not Kodumon Potti, but Chathan residing in the body. The reply which Thevan gives to the cook’s insult is a poignant proof that the voiceless is given voice in a postcolonial narrative: “We are both equals here. Puppets, swaying to the master’s tune. I may be a lowly Paanan in your eyes. But master considers me as his guest” (45:44-45:53).

Potti is shown as eating meat which is against the Brahmanical practice, thus breaking the conventional Brahmanical norms. This again proves the absence of Potti who is a Brahmin and the presence of Chathan who defies all conventional Brahminical practices. Chathan is voicing his resistance against the unfair treatment that he endured under Chudalan Potti’s hands and disregards the mere outward gestures and practices of the Brahmin community, carried out in the haste to prove that they are the purest human beings in this world.

When Kodumon Potti threatens Thevan by saying that he might even dare to take his life if he becomes a nuisance just like the dancer who was once a refugee in the mansion, the latter replies by saying that one who has forsaken the rituals and

customs may not understand the divinity of music as an art form- once again giving voice to the oppressed and marginalised. Thevan speaks back by denying Potti's observations on art and God even after the latter threatens him to death. Potti's (Chathan) reply to this is shown as his shadow replying to Thevan, thus indicating the absence of a physical body and Chathan's existence as a non-material body (*Bramayugam* 01:05:09- 01:05:40). Chathan's disregard towards the existence of God and the rituals and customs of the Brahmin community becomes a mouthpiece that looks down upon the customs of the community and their belief in God which Chathan sees as mere life practices that would label the Brahmins as perfect in every aspect of their life. For Chathan, both are ways designed by Brahmins to wash off their sins and atrocities they commit against their fellow human beings, just because the latter was into a lower caste. In this scene, both Chathan and Thevan become representatives of their castes finding their voice amidst the dominant narratives of power and hierarchical systems. Chathan becomes both the oppressor and victim in the film.

Thevan uses his consent to subjugation under Chathan, which contributed in ensnaring him in the mansion forever, as a tool against his cruel master to find the key for the latter's destruction. He says, "The key to my destiny is in your hands, master... You hold the key to my freedom" (*Bramayugam* 01:30:13, 01:30:29). He courageously speaks against Chathan who has erased even the slightest hope of survival he had in his life. "I know you have not held me here to sing. To shatter my faith, to completely wipe away the thought of God. To lose all hope, to suffer in pain until I die in this hell. So you can revel in my suffering" (01:37:38-01:38:02). This is as same as what the colonisers did to the colonised.

The film ends with the destruction of Potti's physical body and Chathan's resurrection from the body. He then enters Thevan's body, the body of a low-caste, thus giving agency to Thevan's physical body even after his death. Through this, Chathan is exerting his agency as a low-caste figure residing inside the body of a low-caste. *Bramayugam* therefore challenges and dismantles the prescribed notions of the patriarchal Kerala society on caste and gender. It presents a mix of scenes where the three lead characters become strong symbols of power that corrupts human beings on one hand as well as agents of resistance against their oppressors.

Conclusion

The portrayal of power and the direction of flow of power is inverted through the employment of caste inversion in the film. Power, in its various forms- political, social, and personal- has the potential to both create and destroy. The pursuit of power often reveals the frailties of human nature, prompting individuals and institutions to prioritize dominance over justice, control over collaboration, and ambition over ethics. Malayalam cinema has always dealt with the theme of power and its nuances. Modern Malayalam cinema, with its incisive narratives and nuanced characters, has increasingly foregrounded themes of resistance against systemic power. These films, rooted in realism, critique the pervasive influence of power in everyday life and its potential to corrupt even the most ordinary individuals. In this tradition of exploring power and resistance, *Bramayugam* (2024), directed by Rahul Sadasivan, stands out as a significant cinematic achievement.

In *Bramayugam*, the interplay of power, hierarchy, and resistance unfolds as a complex narrative that critiques Kerala's deeply entrenched social structures. Through its layered storytelling, symbolic representations, and visual language, the film captures the cyclical nature of oppression and the subversive potential of resistance. Drawing on Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's critical framework in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the film emerges as a cinematic exploration of the ways marginalized voices struggle to assert agency against systemic power.

The figure of Kodumon Potti exemplifies the corrupting influence of hierarchical power. As a magician wielding knowledge and authority, Potti's dominion over the enslaved Thevan and the cook mirrors historical caste-based oppression. His quest to control the spirit of Chathan is emblematic of Brahmanical

attempts to tame folk deities and co-opt their significance into hegemonic Hinduism. However, the eventual revelation that Chathan inhabits Potti's body inverts the power dynamics- suggesting that dominance ultimately devours the oppressor, reflecting the destructive nature of hierarchical power. The character of Chathan, with his dual nature as both protector and tormentor, embodies the ambiguity of power itself. On one hand, Chathan's sympathy for Thevan and his connection to Kerala's tribal traditions position him as a symbol of grassroots resistance. On the other, his vengeful possession of Potti highlights how power, even when seized by the oppressed, can replicate cycles of violence. This duality is visually reinforced through the film's stark cinematography, with muted colours, and lingering close-ups emphasizing the weight of systemic subjugation.

Bramayugam grants its subaltern characters space to resist. Thevan and the cook's defiance against Potti's control disrupts the mansion's microcosm of caste hierarchy, echoing Spivak's call to let the subaltern speak. Their rebellion, though fraught with suffering, becomes a form of narrative reclamation, challenging the inevitability of oppression. The film's use of horror as a narrative device further amplifies its critique of power. The spectral narrative of the film employs supernatural elements that includes the figure of Chathan to display the power dynamics inherent in the film. By blurring the line between the supernatural and societal terror, *Bramayugam* underscores the omnipresence of caste and class oppression. The horror genre's inherent ability to externalize psychological and social anxieties allows the film to viscerally portray the inescapable weight of hierarchy, making the subaltern experience palpable to viewers.

Bramayugam functions as both a cautionary tale and a beacon of hope. It warns of the corrosive effects of power, showing how even divine or supernatural

forces are susceptible to its corrupting influence. Yet, in depicting the persistence of resistance- the refusal of Thevan and the cook to remain silent- the film gestures toward the possibility of change. By intertwining Kerala's folklore with postcolonial critique, *Bramayugam* bridges historical struggles with contemporary realities, urging viewers to confront the enduring legacies of caste and class inequality. It stands as a powerful testament to cinema's capacity to challenge dominant narratives. Through its intricate exploration of power's entrapments and the resilience of the oppressed, the film amplifies subaltern voices and reclaims narrative space for those historically silenced. It is a reminder that resistance, even in the face of overwhelming dominance, carries the potential to disrupt and dismantle systems of oppression- a message that resonates far beyond the screen, into the heart of societal transformation.

The theoretical framework of this study- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay titled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" puts forward her major arguments on the condition of the subaltern. *Bramayugam* illustrates the subaltern experience of the low-castes and marginalised groups of the 17th century Kerala society. According to Spivak, the subject lacks desire. The character of Thevan in the film plays the role of this desire-lacking subject, where his initial subjugation and acceptance of Kodumon Potti (Chathan) as his master results in his confinement within the mansion. She talks about how the underprivileged and the people of the margins are expected to be dependent on a master or a representative who would talk for them, and not allow them to talk for themselves. Spivak critiques the concept of subjectivity as a collective agency that was used by the colonisers- the so-called saviours- to keep the colonised under control. Spivak puts forward the clearest available example of epistemic violence- the portrayal of the colonial subject as Other. According to her, the narrative of

imperialism can only be seen as a text of ‘subjugated knowledge,’ as the real life of the colonised, as it is, is nowhere documented.

Gayatri Spivak then moves to talks about those living in the margins- “the silent, silenced centre” (Spivak 78). Here is where she raises the question- “can the subaltern speak?” According to Spivak, the consciousness of the Indian nation should be rewritten for the subaltern to be able to speak. And this is what *Bramayugam* has taken into consideration- it has subverted the linear flow of power from high-caste to low-caste and has employed the element of caste inversion where the low-castes are no more subordinate to their colonial masters.

The different dimensions of caste system and the powerplay associated with it, which is clearly portrayed in the film was analysed in detail in this study- how the two lead characters of the film- Chathan and the cook- become the agents of power and once they acquire this power, giving up all other aspects of their lives, and transforming into authoritarian masters holding power. Chathan, who is a low-caste figure, distances himself away from standing up for his devotees and gets immersed in securing the hold of power that now possesses. The cook, who is the descendant of Kodumon Potti, tries hard to acquire his hereditary wealth by freeing himself from Chathan’s clutches. When the ring- the symbol of power and authority in the film- comes into his possession, he too turns out to be a stubborn individual who is not ready to give up what he has won, even after numerous warnings about the same power that would put his life in danger. Ultimately, power becomes a corrupting and destructive force that would deprive anyone of their basic human qualities and turn them into perpetrators of violence.

Bramayugam was also analysed as a narrative of resistance where the subaltern finds their voice and speaks back, paying heed to Spivak's call for change. The film becomes a narrative of resistance against the domineering narrative of power. Here, the characters who were on one hand perpetrators of violence and wrongdoings due to the power they held, transforms into the subaltern subjects who reclaim their missing voices. Chathan, Thevan, and the cook- all the three characters are representatives of the lower classes who were subjugated in the patriarchal Brahmin-ruled 17th century Kerala society. They find their own voices through caste inversion in the film. Chathan, a low-caste figure, and a gift granted to Chudalan Potti by goddess Varahi, was the latter's slave, who was tortured mercilessly. Chathan avenges his life by killing Chudalan Potti and all other members of his family, including Kodumon Potti. He then enters Kodumon Potti's body, and uses the same as a device to rule over the physical world.

Thevan, the low-born Paanan who was subservient and obedient towards Chathan who was residing in Potti's body, also rebels against the chains of confinement put over him. *Bramayugam* has made use of suitable dialogues that counteracts the dominating language and prowess of the Brahminical society of 17th century Kerala, by giving voice to the downtrodden and sidelined communities through Thevan's character. Thevan becomes the power-holder in the end of the film when Chathan finds Thevan's body as his next refuge; thus, portraying the resilience and revival of a community that was once looked down upon.

The cook, too, retorts against Chathan's dominating rule, by announcing his relation with Kodumon Potti and reclaiming his family wealth. He is not at all afraid of Chathan's trap of black magic and sorcery; he does not fall into the deceiving plan of Chathan who disguises as his own father. Rather, he succeeds in dragging out

Chathan from the power-yielding body of Kodumon Potti, destroys his physical existence, and attempts to make him his own slave. Even after he leads a miserable life just because he is the half-son of Kodumon Potti, he establishes himself as capable of inverting the caste system and ending Chathan's existence in Potti's body. Thus, all the three characters succeed in writing back against the empire and is given agency in the film to raise their voices against the injustices meted upon them. The film makes efficient use of Spivak's call for a change in Indian consciousness towards the subaltern and writes back against the empire.

The film completes its role as a postcolonial narrative by ending with the arrival of the Portuguese colonisers into the lands of Kerala, whom the cook scorns upon and tries to attack. The monochromatic colour gradient used in the film has extensively contributed in conveying the grave issue of caste difference and power dynamics based on the criteria of caste to the audience.

The box-office success of the film, grossing over 85 crore proves how the film with both its technical and content quality has succeeded in depicting the evils of caste system which still prevails in the Kerala society and haunts the minds of its inhabitants. Further study can be conducted in this field by looking into why it took so long for Malayalam cinema to employ the technique of caste inversion to discuss the issues of caste system and the violence perpetrated in its name. The film directors should brainstorm such narrative techniques and cinematographic methods which would aid them in clearly conveying the intended messages.

The box-office success of a monochromatic film in this 21st century which makes the best use of latest technologies and cinematic intelligence should make scholars and film enthusiasts think about the use of artificial techniques and other

expensive technical support systems in making a film a box-office hit. Studies should be conducted on how Malayalam films should concentrate not only in bringing out the miserable plights of the marginalised and downtrodden low-castes of the society; rather, they should also indulge in portraying the oppressed as raising their voices and weapons, and winning in the battle against their oppressors, who rob them of their time, rights, and their entire lives.

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