

**The Possessed Body: Abjection, Caste Hierarchies, and the Manifestation of Evil in
*Bramayugam***

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of the body as a site of abjection in the movie *Bramayugam* (2024) through Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Kristeva defines abjection as the human reaction to what is impure, taboo, or other - often manifesting through bodily fluids, decay, and death evoking both fear and disgust. In *Bramayugam*, the protagonist Kodumon Potti, a Brahmin priest possessed by the evil spirit *chaathan*, undergoes a physical and moral transformation that renders his body abject. His decaying and grotesque form evokes disgust and fear, destabilizing the traditional association of Brahminical bodies with purity, control, and societal dominance. The film's visual language emphasizes bodily decay, juxtaposing Potti's transformation with the decaying mansion, fortifying the theme of bodily and societal collapse. This portrayal interrogates caste hierarchies, where the Brahmin body which is historically seen as a vessel of religious and social authority becomes a site of contamination and evil. *Bramayugam* critiques the fragility of societal hierarchies by illustrating how evil can infiltrate

and dismantle systems of control through the corruption of the body, highlighting the intertwined relationship between physical decay, moral collapse, and the manifestation of evil. By foregrounding the abject body as a necessary vessel for evil to manifest and thrive, *Bramayugam* underscores the fragility of caste based power and the cultural anxieties surrounding bodily degradation. The paper argues that Potti's abjection subverts the traditional notions of purity and impurity by portraying the body as a liminal space where evil resides and gains power.

Keywords: Evil, body, caste, fear, disgust, etc...

Introduction

The body has long served as a locus for negotiating power, identity, and societal hierarchies. Julia Kristeva, in "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection", defines abjection as the reaction to what threatens the boundary between self and other, pure and impure, life and death. Abjection provokes fear and disgust, destabilizing the subject's sense of order. Kristeva writes, "The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I" (1). The abject body, marked by decay, bodily fluids, or transgression, becomes a site where societal norms are interrogated and disrupted. In *Bramayugam*, a Malayalam-language horror film, the protagonist Kodumon Potti, a Brahmin priest, becomes the vessel for *Chaathan*, an evil spirit. The film's visual and narrative emphasis on Potti's decaying body and moral disintegration destabilizes the traditional association of Brahmin bodies with purity and dominance. This paper argues that *Bramayugam* critiques caste hierarchies by portraying the Brahmin body as a liminal space where evil reside, subverting the notions of purity and impurity central to caste ideology.

The Abject Body in *Bramayugam*

Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection provides a compelling framework for analyzing *Bramayugam*'s unsettling portrayal of the possessed body. Abjection emerges when the boundaries that separate the self from the other are destabilized, provoking simultaneous fear and disgust. As Kristeva articulates, "It is not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order" (4). This disruption is evident in the transformation of Kodumon Potti, a character whose body shifts from being a symbol of Brahminical purity to one of abject horror. Potti's physical decay—marked by oozing sores, discolored skin, grotesque deformities, and erratic movements—renders his body a site of visceral revulsion and terror. His degeneration visually and symbolically violates the caste system's sanctified notions of bodily purity and discipline. The abject body, as Kristeva suggests, confronts us with the fragility of the distinctions upon which social and individual identities are constructed.

The film's cinematography underscores this abjection with chilling effectiveness. Close-ups of Potti's decayed body, framed against the backdrop of the crumbling mansion he inhabits, forge a stark visual parallel between the collapse of his physical form and the decay of the rigid socio-religious order. The mansion, once a site of grandeur and power, now mirrors Potti's body—a hollowed, corrupted structure teetering on the edge of ruin. This imagery recalls Kristeva's assertion that "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (4). In this sense, Potti's decaying form does not merely signify his personal demise but also serves as a potent metaphor for the ideological disintegration of caste hierarchies. The portrayal of abjection in *Bramayugam* extends beyond Potti's physical transformation, engaging with broader cultural anxieties about bodily degradation and

contamination. As Mary Douglas argues in *Purity and Danger*, “The body is a symbol of society... any threat to its boundaries is a threat to the social order” (Douglas 115). Potti’s transformation into an abject figure transgresses the carefully maintained boundaries of caste, purity, and morality, exposing their inherent fragility. The grotesque merging of his once-revered body with filth and decay reflects societal fears of contamination and the collapse of traditional hierarchies.

The film aligns abjection with possession, presenting Potti’s body as a battleground between human agency and supernatural forces. Possession, in this context, serves as an allegory for the invasion of external, uncontrollable elements that defy societal norms. The abject body becomes a vessel for collective fears—of spiritual impurity, moral failure, and the dissolution of cultural values. By embodying these anxieties, Potti’s transformation challenges the audience to confront the unsettling implications of abjection, both on an individual and a societal level. The abject body in *Bramayugam* also invokes the uncanny, as described by Sigmund Freud. Potti’s decaying form is familiar yet disturbingly other, a perverse distortion of the human body. The uncanny disrupts the audience’s sense of safety and normalcy, heightening the film’s horror. Through the abject, *Bramayugam* critiques the fragility of societal constructs, revealing how easily they crumble when confronted with the grotesque and the uncontainable. The film’s treatment of the possessed body underscores the inextricable link between physical decay and social collapse. The abject is not merely a source of horror; it is a mirror reflecting society’s deepest anxieties about order, purity, and identity. In Potti’s grotesque transformation, *Bramayugam* offers a haunting meditation on the vulnerability of human and societal boundaries, compelling the viewer to grapple with the fragility of the systems that define and constrain us.

Caste Hierarchies and the Fragility of Power

Historically, the Brahmin body has been imbued with notions of sacredness and control, serving as a physical and symbolic anchor for caste hierarchies. Texts like the *Manusmriti* and other ancient scriptures elevate the Brahmin as the custodian of purity, equating their physical cleanliness with moral and spiritual authority. Meena Dhanda aptly observes, “Caste hierarchies are sustained through the ritualized purity of upper-caste bodies” (Dhanda 142). This sanctity, however, is not inherent but constructed and maintained through ritual, discipline, and social compliance. *Bramayugam* disrupts this carefully curated image by presenting the Brahmin body as susceptible to corruption, decay, and possession, undermining its historical association with inviolable purity. The film’s narrative positions Kodumon Potti as a paradoxical figure, both a victim of possession and a perpetrator within the caste system. As a priest, Potti embodies the Brahminical monopoly over spiritual and ritual power, which reinforces the rigid societal hierarchy. His role as a gatekeeper of purity grants him authority but also makes his eventual downfall more poignant and subversive. The possession of Potti by *Chaathan* symbolizes a profound inversion of power.

Chaathan’s intrusion into Potti’s body operates on multiple levels. On one hand, it corrupts the individual, desecrating his once-sacred form. On the other hand, it serves as a symbolic challenge to the caste system itself. *Chaathan*, often revered for his defiance of authority and alignment with the oppressed, becomes a vehicle of resistance against Brahminical dominance. By inhabiting the body of a Brahmin priest, *Chaathan* metaphorically invades the sanctum of caste power, rendering it vulnerable and permeable. This act disrupts the ideological foundation of the caste hierarchy, revealing its fragility and dependence on the illusion of purity

and control. The portrayal of Potti's possession and physical degradation is amplified by the film's visual and narrative strategies. The cinematography juxtaposes Potti's decaying body with symbols of Brahminical sanctity, such as prayer rooms, sacred threads, and ritual objects. This visual dissonance highlights the collapse of the sacred-profane binary upon which caste hierarchies are built. Moreover, the film's use of folklore and mythology situates *Chaathan's* possession within a broader cultural narrative of resistance. As a figure associated with the oppressed and marginalized, *Chaathan's* role in the narrative challenges not only Potti's individual authority but also the systemic inequalities he represents.

The fragility of caste power is further underscored by the community's response to Potti's transformation. His degradation and possession create a rupture in the social fabric, as the community grapples with the contamination of their spiritual leader. The rituals and practices that once reinforced Brahminical supremacy prove inadequate to restore Potti's purity or reassert his authority. This failure exposes the performative nature of caste hierarchies and their reliance on unchallenged obedience and belief. *Bramayugam* uses the possession of Potti to unravel the constructed sanctity of the Brahmin body and, by extension, the caste system's ideological underpinnings. *Chaathan's* invasion of this sacred vessel transforms it into a site of resistance, illustrating the inherent instability of power structures that rely on exclusion and oppression. The film's critique extends beyond the individual, calling into question the cultural and societal mechanisms that sustain caste hierarchies. In doing so, it offers a powerful narrative of defiance against entrenched systems of inequality.

The Liminal Space of Evil

In *Bramayugam*, the body emerges as a liminal space where boundaries between purity and impurity, good and evil, are contested. The possessed body, as both a vessel for and a manifestation of evil, disrupts binaries central to caste ideology. As Kristeva notes, “The abject confronts us . . . with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her” (13). The abject body, caught between life and death, self and other, embodies the collapse of societal order. The film’s climax, in which Potti’s decaying body becomes the epicenter of *Chaathan*’s wrath, underscores this collapse. The visual spectacle of his grotesque demise highlights the fragility of caste-based power, suggesting that no body, however sanctified, is immune to corruption. This portrayal critiques the cultural anxieties surrounding bodily degradation, particularly in a society where purity is both a physical and ideological construct.

Conclusion

Bramayugam uses the abject body to interrogate caste hierarchies and the cultural anxieties surrounding purity and impurity. Through Potti’s possession and subsequent transformation, the film critiques the fragility of societal structures that privilege certain bodies while marginalizing others. By foregrounding the abject as a necessary vessel for evil, *Bramayugam* challenges traditional notions of purity, illustrating the interconnectedness of physical decay, moral collapse, and systemic disintegration.

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