

Form, Aesthetics and Politics in Contemporary Marathi Cinema: A Reading of Caste and Gender in *Fandry*, *Sairat* and *Court*

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ABSTRACT

In the paper, I attempt to engage with the question of caste and gender in terms of their (re)organisation and operationalisation within the discourse of cinema. The paper undertakes an in-depth analysis of the three Marathi films, Fandry (2013), Sairat (2016) and Court (2014) exploring their aesthetics and politics through centrally looking at the categories of labour, space and desire within these films. I argue that in Manjule's Fandry and Sairat the spatialisation and physicality of caste, labour and desire within the cinematic landscape become central in the operationalisation of caste structure and hierarchies. I also argue how Manjule through his aesthetics and form creates new modes of spectatorship and oppositional gaze. On the other hand, Tamhane's Court through its insight into the polarised spaces within the urban landscape reveals the spatial and violent caste structure.

KEYWORDS: *Caste, Space, Labour, Desire, Marathi Cinema*

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Introduction

Regional Marathi films *Fandry* (2013), *Sairat* (2016) and *Court* (2014) have been extensively celebrated, discussed and engaged with in terms of the questions of caste and gender within various platforms. While *Fandry* and *Sairat* written and directed by Nagraj Manjhule have been discussed in terms of his semi-autobiographical approach and subversive tendencies, with Manjhule belonging to a dalit community the films have led to the rise of ideas around Dalit-Cinema, Dalit and anti-caste aesthetics in cinematic discourse (Yengde and Edachira). The lacuna within the mainstream Indian Cinema of representation and identity of dalits and their aesthetics including music, history, culture and a critique of its hegemonic casteist tendencies have been the driving forces towards conceptualisation of Dalit-Cinema. It is in this trajectory, that the paper attempts to examine how the question of caste is operationalised and (re)organised in the discourse of cinema through a close-reading of these three films.

Manjhule explicitly plots the questions of caste, desire and labour in his films, in an interlinked manner where the spectator is implicated closely in the landscape of caste and desire. However, *Court* written and directed by Chaitanya Tamhane, a non-dalit belonging to dominant community engages with these questions of caste and gender differently. Unlike Manjhule's films where the spectator is implicated within the cinematic landscape of caste and desire, Tamhane places his spectator at a distance, with a sense of objective and distant spectating. I also engage with the new form of spectatorship that is produced through these films.

The paper is an in-depth analysis of the three films, exploring their aesthetics and politics through centrally looking at the categories of labour, space and desire within these films. I will look at the mapping of caste, labour and desire through locating these within the cinematic landscape of the three films. The questions that I ask include - How are the categories of rural and urban spaces in these films concerned with the question of caste and gender? How is the question of labour and labouring bodies captured within the cinematic discourse? How is the question of desire - the possibility and impossibility of inter-caste romance re-worked within Manjhule's films? I argue that in Manjhule's *Fandry*, *Sairat* and Tamhane's *Court* the spatialisation and physicality of caste, labour and desire within the cinematic

landscape become central in the operationalisation and (re)organisation of caste and gender structure and hierarchies.

Spatialisation of Desire, Caste and Labour in *Fandry* (2013)

The opening scene of the film *Fandry* (2013) begins with a background score which softly begins and then rises through the entire scene. The first image that emerges on the screen is the still shot of the black sparrow with a long tail on a tree flocking from one branch to another in the woods. The next shot is a tracking shot which provides us with a glimpse of the parched and rocky landscape which further leads to a blurred medium shot in which an adolescent boy enters the frame whom we can vaguely see through the grass. Next, there is a tracking shot of the landscape where we again witness the black sparrow which later takes flight. This is followed by a shot of a hand holding a slingshot and then a close-up of a dark-skinned adolescent's face soaked in sweat looking towards the trees rising up towards the sky. This makes us aware that he has been out here for some time now. Again, there is a tracking shot of the landscape which is followed by a shot of the adolescent hiding behind a fallen tree trunk closely looking at the black sparrow which is again flocking from one tree to another. At this point, it is quite clear that he 'desires' the black sparrow. In the next shot, he pulls a slingshot at the bird from a distance but fails in his attempts and finally walks away. The long scene ends with him walking off in the parched landscape with the setting sun in the background. This pursuit and desire for the black sparrow is a recurring scene throughout the film, where Jabya alias Jambuwant Kacharu Mane (performed by Somnath Awghade), the protagonist with his friend and his confidant Piraji is always 'looking' for the bird. In this opening scene itself, the question of desire is being laid down which then is evoked throughout the film.

How does one understand the idea of spatialisation of desire within the cinematic landscape? In her conceptualisation of the framework of "queer diaspora"/ "queer diasporic desire", Gayatri Gopinath through critical intervention into the dominant nationalist and diasporic formations engages in "radically resituating questions of home, dwelling, and the domestic space" (Gopinath 14). Gopinath's discussion focuses on the "impossibility" of queer female diaspora subject and desire, which she argues to be inextricable from the fetishization of the heterosexual female body, and the simultaneous subordination of gay male

subjectivity within the dominant discourses of nation and diaspora. Further, the queer female diaspora subjectivity and desire remain unimaginable and unthinkable not only within heteronormative and patriarchal discourses of nation and diaspora but also within mainstream liberal feminism and mainstream gay and lesbian politics and theory (19-20). Through her queer reading of the South Asian diaspora cultural texts including films, music, and literature, Gopinath argues for the centrality of the “home” space – as domestic, community, and nation space in foregrounding and imagining the queer female diaspora subject and desire. The “home” space emerges as the site of radical disruption in the South Asian diasporic texts – for the representation of queer female diaspora subjectivity and desire, as the oppressive, violent and “impossible” home space is imaginatively reworked to dislodge its heteronormative logics (14-15). The “home” and homeland space are re-territorialised through the queer reading of the female sexuality and desire in Bollywood cinema – the representation of queer female desire emerges as most disruptive to dominant ideologies of nation and community in spaces of “impossibility” of queer incursion like the domestic space in terms of homoeroticism of homosocial female spaces.

Shohini Ghosh examines Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* (1998) along similar lines to Gopinath’s suggestion of resituating the discussion of the queer diasporic cultural text within the discourse of non-heteronormative sexuality and desire that are available to South Asian audiences (Ghosh 25). Ghosh discusses the dynamic, changing and contradictory idea of culture and tradition through her queer reading of the cultural and physical space of “home” and “family” in the film. In *Fire*, the “home” space – Hindu middle class-dominant caste, a patriarchal and heterosexual household is reworked through the queer female erotics and desires of the protagonists, Radha (played by Shabana Azmi) and Sita (played by Nandita Das). The film unfolds the story of the Kapur family, a Hindu middle-class household in New Delhi. Both Radha and Sita are in loveless marriages, and while Ashok has taken a vow of celibacy, it is Jatin who is in love with Julie, his Chinese-Indian girlfriend who refused to marry him as she does not want to live in a joint family and become a “baby-making machine”. It is only with time that both Radha and Sita are drawn to each other becoming friends, and eventually falling in love. The queer female desire is spatialised in the film through scenes suggesting homoerotic gestures, activities and events in the “home”

space sites that are traditionally been used to “keep women in their place” like the kitchen, terrace and bedroom. In her in-depth textual analysis of the film, Ghosh reveals the spatialisation of queer desire in the “home” space,

The terrace is a space of work and leisure. Here the women hang and dry clothes and at the same time look out to catch glimpses of the world outside. From here Radha and Sita watch a wedding procession go by as they wait for their husbands to return. The terrace also allows play and games and the re-working and dismantling of rules. Here, Radha and Sita turn the husband-worship of Karva Chauth into a ritual of their love for each other and where an innocuous game of hopscotch turns into erotic foreplay (Ghosh).

In her analysis of the cultural text, the Malayalam film *Avalude Ravukal* (1978), Navaneetha Mokkil Maruthur tracks how the shifting circuits of this landmark film disrupt and re-configure the regional cultural-public space of Kerala. Through the contentious trajectories of *Avalude Ravukal* in terms of its shifting intertextual networks and diffused modes of reception, Mokkil Maruthur argues how in the film the dividing lines between the body and mind, pleasure and rational, excess and containment, soft-porn and realism are blurred. This relationship then (re)organises a ruptured and fragmented, representational history of desire, and sexuality in the regional public space of Kerala, especially around the figure of the prostitute (Mokkil Maruthur 280-281). *Avalude Ravukal* presents the story of the everyday struggle of a young Hindu woman, Raji who works as a prostitute and has sex with men in hotels and other semi-public spaces. Throughout the film, the protagonist, Raji “criticises the social structures that push her into prostitution and then label her as ‘bad woman’” (274). Initially coded as a sexually desiring and titillating soft-porn film, throughout the decades of heterogeneous modes of its circulation including its screenplay there have been several attempts to re-coup, it in terms of the realistic aesthetics of the film. These shifting codes can be attributed to the changing position of the prostitute or sex worker as a political actor and participant in the AIDS program in the late 1990s in Kerala (275). The attempt to fix the gaze of the spectator as a realist/rational rather than desiring one is indicative of the mutually constitutive relationship between the “excess” of cinema and moral

anxieties within regional public culture and space (274-276). Through her critical textual reading of the film, Mokkil Maruthur discusses the spatialisation of the desiring/titillating body of the prostitute through dreams, nightmares, anxieties, and memories in the film. However, in the film, the sexual and bodily excesses are constantly contained through its turn toward psychological depths and social commentary (277).

Gopinath, Ghosh and Mokkil Maruthur in their respective works argue around the spatialisation of “queer” desire in the cinematic landscape which attempts to rupture and fracture the “home” spaces – domestic, community, regional and national spaces which are mediated through dominant ideologies of patriarchy, heterosexuality, caste and racialised hierarchies. I borrow this understanding of spatialisation of desire in my reading of Manjule’s films of how questions of space and desire attempt to disrupt the patriarchal and brahmanical discourses of gender and caste arrangements in the cinematic (rural) landscape.

Nagraj Manjule’s *Fandry* (2013) tells the narrative of Kaikadi-caste Jabya, a young Dalit adolescent who resides along with his entire family in the outskirts of the village Akolner in the arid region of Maharashtra. Jabya, the young protagonist of the film has a crush on his dominant-caste classmate Shalu (performed by Rajeshwari Kharat). His desire for Shalu, the dominant-caste classmate is mapped onto Jabya’s “looking” for the almost mythical black sparrow with a long tail. This is a rare (almost mythical) bird which he attempts to capture. Jabya plans to act on the advice of the local cycle shop owner and village “oddball” Chankeshwar Sathe alias Chanakya (performed by Nagraj Manjule) that catching, burning and throwing the ashes of the bird on Shalu will cast a magic spell around her and further lead her to reciprocate Jabya’s love and desire. Jabya can often be seen “looking” for the black sparrow in the arid rural landscape along with his friend and confidant, Piraji alias Pirya (performed by Suraj Pawar). The endless “looking” for the mythical black sparrow through the parched and rocky rural landscape captures not just the caste differences between Jabya and Shalu but also Jabya’s dream, desire, labour and friendship. The rural landscape becomes central to the spatialisation of caste along with the spatialisation of desire, Manjule engages with the rural landscape steeped in caste difference and hierarchies, which leads to this (im)possibilities of desire.

Another scene which extensively captures the spatialisation of desire in the film includes where Jabya along with Pirya can be seen sitting in Chankya's shop which is located adjacent to Shalu's house as Jabya takes the moment to "look" at Shalu. The opening shot of a shop hoarding reads "*Aashiqui Cycle Mart & Carom House*" loosely translated as Love Cycle Mart & Carom House, the name itself advocates for love/romance. The scene further builds this desire through the game (space) of carom is a close-up of the game reveals "Aashiqui" (love) written on the side of its pockets. The game board and its mobility seem linked to the play of looks and the erotics of romance, in which there are possibilities of losing and winning. This is done through a shot-reverse shot that captures Jabya's "looking" at Shalu accompanied by a beautiful background score. This is followed by Chankya's claim that he would not be able to get the Queen in the game and his hands shake whenever he strikes for the Queen. However, on the persuasion of another person, he gives it a try but fails in his attempt. Meanwhile, Jabya is seen exchanging looks with another of his classmates, a dominant caste Patil boy, this shot establishes a tension between the two which later develops in the film. The scene ends with Chankya asking Jabya to leave for school as he is seen looking in the direction of the school as Shalu enters the frame. Chankya's gesture makes it clear that he is in support of Jabya's desire for Shalu. The entire carom game and Chankya's attempt to win the Queen, which he fails to win over, metaphorically speaks of Jabya's desire for his "Queen" – the dominant caste Shalu, which the game suggests as being impossible. Chankya's own failed attempt to bring his "Queen" (Chankya's wife) home relating to (im)possibilities of inter-caste marriage is another story which is later revealed in the film. This entire sequence evokes the question of desire through space and game which marks the possibilities of disrupting the caste-hierarchies in the village space.

Simultaneously, the question of caste seems ubiquitous within the film, here the entire landscape in terms of space is marked by caste hierarchy. In one of the earlier scenes in the film, Jabya along with his friend Pirya is wandering in the woods looking for the black sparrow both of them are on a tree as Jabya gets closer to the bird's nest, in the next shot an old woman enters the frame and notices Jabya on the tree. Assuming that he is going to destroy the nest she shouts at him not to do so and asks him to immediately get down from the tree. Jabya responds that he was only

“looking” to see if it is a white sparrow or a black sparrow. She tells him that the bird is like a high-caste Brahmin and if he touches her, it will be abandoned by its flock and later it will get killed. In another scene, in the village procession, Jabya in his new shirt is there to impress his love Shalu through his dance, he even asks Chankya for his “*hagli*” (percussion folk instrument) so that he can play that in the procession to impress Shalu. While Jabya dances with Pirya in the procession, forgetting his identity, he is pushed and targeted by the dominant-caste Patil boys. Later Jabya’s father Kachru (performed by Kishore Kadam) calls Jabya who is immersed in the celebration to engage in labour. Jabya is seen crying through the course of the procession as the dominant-caste boys mock and dance around him.

The entire dream sequence, later in the film, is amidst a beautiful landscape echoing Jabya’s desire. However, this dream sequence does not last long as he is woken up by his father bringing him back to reality. This reality of his caste hits him as in the next scene Jabya’s entire family is required to engage with their caste-based labour of catching pigs and the entire village becomes spectators of this act. There are multiple scenes throughout the film where on the one hand cinematically the landscape is implicated in the formation of Jabya’s desire, and on the other hand, the staging of caste hierarchies. The spatialisation of desire in the rural landscape of the film then attempts to trouble the caste regime of the village through the “anti-caste” desire of Jabya.

In *Fandry* the caste structure is operationalised through its spatialisation and physicality. Jabya’s family belongs to the marginalised caste in the village of Anorak, and are involved in denigrated caste-based labour which includes catching fandry (which means pig in Kaikadi language) in order to keep the village pig-free which makes them untouchable. Jabya and his family are often called abusive slurs including fandry. Thus, both the animal and the community are considered untouchables which leads them to inhabit the space outside the main village. This physicality of caste could be understood through the category of “Spatial Brahmanism” which refers to the “graded inequality of different classes which finds its material base in an unequal division of labour as well as place” (Ambedkar and Moon, and Donald). Thus, this “division of labour is also the division of geographies” noting that the place is marred in caste hierarchies (Donald 2015). The conception of spatial brahmanism could be

mapped on the spatial and social distances as well as segregation that are visualised in *Fandry* where Jabya's house is located outside the main dominant-caste village. The Mane household supplies labour by doing menial jobs including cleaning the dominant-caste village through the removal of pigs, thus revealing the exploitative nature of spatial brahmanism. This physical infrastructure and geographies of caste then facilitate the practice of distance and intimacy (Doland 94). In the film, the Mane family usually enters the dominant village with the purpose of labour and education.

The category of "experiential space" also helps in understanding the spatial organisation and production of hierarchical caste relations in Manjule's films. Referring to the framework of Lefebvre, Gopal Guru argues that "space is experiential in its depths when understood in its cultural manifestation" claiming that space is a culturally constructed phenomenon and not just geography or socially neutral space (78-82). For Guru, it is this phenomenon of "experiential space" understood in terms of the "the dynamics of local configuration of power and the resultant experience which then leads to having a bearing on the social thought in early twentieth-century India" (78-82). Guru suggests, that the "structuring and restructuring of a given space is a result of specific activities carried out by a historically dominant social group, which achieves its hegemonic purposes through a regulated exercise of civilizational violence against those social groups that are victims of this kind of violence" (83). The idea of civilisational violence with reference to caste-based violence is linked to the Dalit struggle to liberate rigid spaces through the transgression of boundaries. For Guru, the definition of civilisation violence includes "not only the physical violence of corporeal annihilation of being but the elimination of certain groups like untouchables from socially and culturally active relations" (83).

There are several scenes in the film which capture the idea of "spatial Brahmanism" and "experiential space". Both Jabya and his father Kachru Mane's interactions and associations with the dominant-caste village become central to the understanding of spatialisation and physicality of caste hierarchies in the film. In one of the initial scenes in the film, Jabya can be seen visiting Pirya's household which is inside the dominant-caste village with the intention of learning about the school work that he missed because he was working alongside his family to earn some wages in the village. Jabya directly enters Pirya's house where he finds Piraji lying on a mattress on

the floor. After sitting and talking next to Pirya he learns that his friend has been ill for the past two days and hence missed school. Pirya then tells him to go to another of their classmate, Kulkarni's (Vedant) house and ask him for it. They discuss their search for the black sparrow where the latter tells him that they'll find one near the graves and will go once Pirya feels better. The last shot in Pirya's house reveals the household space of Pirya, a mud house with minimal items including a lantern and a picture of Dr Ambedkar hanging on the top of the old worn-out wooden door for the entrance inside the house with Pirya's mother offering tea to both of them. This makes the spectator realise that Pirya also belongs to the Dalit community and this leads to Jabya having access to his home space. This scene becomes more interesting in comparison to the very next scene where Jabya can be seen standing outside the entrance in the front yard of Vedant's house. Here unlike in the earlier scene, Jabya doesn't enter the Kulkarni house but rather calls for him standing at the boundary of the household. The space of Kulkarni household is revealed to the spectator, with Vedant's mother sitting on the cemented slab in the front yard of the house, the house walls can be seen with pictures of the Hindu god, Ganesha. Also, Vedant's mother refers to Jabya as "Kaikadi's son" in his presence. As Vedant enters the frame, he walks towards Jabya who is still standing at the periphery of the Kulkarni house. Their conversation regarding the schoolwork happens at the entrance of Kulkarni's house itself. Jabya occupies the outside space (profane) Kulkarni house while Vedant occupies the inner space (sacred) of the front yard of his house. Further, the camera positions the spectator along with the Brahmin Kulkarni as in having access to the space which is denied to Jabya. The reading of these two scenes brings forth spatialisation of caste hierarchies in the dominant-caste village of Akolner through the visual grammar of the film.

The spatialisation and physicality of caste division in the film can also be seen through understanding of the "untouchable body as a cultural space which is then regulated by Brahmanical rule" (Guru 86). The "social and ideological division of the space into universal sovereign (sacred) and particular sovereign (profane) was created and regulated over the body of the untouchable" (Guru 87). In the film, the "untouchable body" of Jabya's father Kachru Mane's interaction, association and navigation of the dominant-caste village (puritan inner) and Mane's household

(impure exterior) outside the village space provides a peek into the embodied spatial division of places. Kacharu's interaction with the dominant-caste village space is in terms of his labour which includes his caste-based occupation of catching fandry. Within the space of the main village, Kacharu's body language is timid, his eyes are cast downwards and hardly meet dominant-caste villagers. While he has access to his speech within the village, it was rather soft and almost mute. In the film, the scene with his brief interaction with the dominant caste Patil household is useful in this regard. Kacharu is seen taking out a piglet from the tank outside the Patil house, Manjule through the dialogue exchange and camera framing indicates the spatial inequality where the 'sacred' main village is dominated by Brahmanical ideology, and spatial hierarchies are created through Kachru's body within the frame as servile, his voice is so subdued, and it is hard to hear him. Patil's warning to Kachru regarding Jabya's attempt to transgress the 'sacred' space of the dominant caste village through refusal to the caste-based labour is followed by Kachru's reaction of cursing Jabya and apologising on his behalf. This scene endorsed the idea of universal sovereignty practised and enjoyed by the dominant castes within the village space. Apart from servility, Kachru is also coded as a figure of mockery in the dominant-caste village as he is repeatedly referred to as a "worthless man". However, once Kachru got back to the Mane household his body language and speech changed drastically. He can be seen often speaking with a command to his wife, Nani and children.

There are multiple scenes within the film where the protagonist Jabya along with his family are seen toiling in the woods, construction sites as well as home (making baskets to sell in the market) and clear incidents linked to Jabya's father Kacharu Mane's caste-based labour – to get rid of the pigs in the village. In the last sequence which is a long sequence of more than 25 minutes, the entire Mane family can be seen involved in this caste-based occupation of capturing pigs to earn the amount for their young daughter, Surekha's marriage. It is due to Jabya's continuous need to labour for the family to meet ends that despite his interest in attending school and studies, he must be absent from it². One of the initial scenes in the film which last

²It needs to be noted that within the Mane household also it is the dalit women that is further discriminated, Jabya's elder sister Surekha unlike Jabya doesn't have access to education further she is

for around thirty seconds includes the entire Mane family involved in the labour of digging pits. The entire family Jabya along with his father, mother and two elder sisters, Durpi and Surekha can be seen engaged in hard labour, the continuity editing technique makes it possible to see a seamless transition as the day progresses – Jabya and his family are seen as labouring as time passes from morning to evening.

Some of the questions that emerge are – how is the question of labour and labouring bodies captured within the cinematic discourse? What does the filmmaker seek to represent through this? The film attempts to reflect on the linkages between labour, caste and gender. Meena Gopal in her discussion of the social reproduction which includes the often invisibilised and undervalued subsistence and socially necessary activities done by women as well as numerous degraded tasks performed by women/workers in the informal sectors centralises caste-based labour. Further, suggesting that “caste hierarchies, as much as gender hierarchies contribute to the segmentation and devaluation of labour” (91). The Mane family’s labour including the gendered labour are to be viewed through the lens of caste-based labour.

Under the caste-based labour relations, the stigma of untouchability becomes central in commanding compulsory labour of dalit castes in the most menial, filthy and defiling occupations in both rural and urban areas (Gopal 92). Dalit women along with dalit men are seen in the position of public labourers. There is also a continuous threat of violence both physical and sexual which ensures the control over the socially reproduced labour of Dalits. In *Fandry* this becomes evident with the dominant-caste village demand of Kachru Mane and later his entire family to engage in the defiling job of catching pigs. Despite the attempt to decline the caste-based stigmatised labour owing to his old age, Kachru is asked to do the job and take his entire family to complete the task. Kachru’s reaction to Jabya’s rejection of doing the caste-based labour needs to be read in terms of his fear of banishment from the village. This threat of violence and removal of the dalit family is also seen repeated in the final sequence, as the dominant-caste men of the village mock Jabya and his sister, Durpi as they carry the pig on their shoulders to remove it from the village. As Gopal Guru observes, the “stigma of untouchability further reduces the opportunities of advancement and

being prepared to be married soon. The other elder sister, Durpi is referred as an abandoned women with a child and often seen working alongside the family.

continues the alienation of self, despite legal guarantees and mechanisms of equity” (94). Despite Jabya’s access to modern institutions of school and education along with the dominant-caste classmates in the village, he continues to be stigmatised as “fandry” and becomes the target of other casteist abuses by the dominant-caste Patils in the village and is forced to do the menial job of catching pigs.

Re-working Romance in the Landscape of Caste in *Sairat* (2016)

Manjule’s second film *Sairat* (2016) tells the story of a transgressive anti-caste romance and violence of Archana Patil alias Archie (performed by Rinku Rajguru) and Prashant Kale alias Parshya (performed by Akash Thosar) through the landscape of Bittergaon in Maharashtra and Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh. The film attempts “not only to make the caste “order” visible but to also make those aesthetic forms public which enables its mistranslations in the services of hegemonic structures and communities; in other words, the challenge is to make the dissonance between the social and cinematic habituation public” (Kumar 366). *Sairat* explores the question of caste violence through intervening into aesthetic violence – of the popular film forms including “melodrama” and “realism” which resolved the caste question through “social compromise” and “passive revolution” respectively (Prasad and Kumar). It is in the re-working of these film forms/aesthetics that Manjule re-imagines the questions of desire, caste and gender. The use of the popular melodrama tropes of songs, choreography, and musical drama in *Sairat* is an attempt to disturb this formulaic genre. This is complicated through the second half of the film when the elongated moments of romantic love come face-to-face with the crisis indicating a break away from the melodrama form and delving into the realistic tendencies of cinema.

The romance in the first half of the film is also re-visited and re-framed by centralising questions of caste and gender. The film portrays Archie as bold, agential and outspoken, as she indulges in the “looking” at Parshya. This “role reversal” needs to be understood through Archie’s location as the dominant-Maratha woman belonging to the Patil family in Bittergaon. The caste dominance of Marathas is embodied through Archie as well as his family including her father, Taty Patil and brother, Prince “Dada” Patil. In *Sairat* caste relations of labour and space are visualised through the dominance of the Maratha-feudal family of Archie in the village of Bittergaon. The generational inheritance of land by Maratha-caste landowners at the

expense of those who till the land ensures their continuing dominance of the socio-economic and political power relations (Yengde 7). The film in its opening scene of the cricket match in the village lays down the socio-political-economic power dynamics within the village-space of Bittergaon where Maratha-caste dominance is revealed through Archie's father, Taty Patil a local sugar baron and politician along with his son Prince. Further, Patil's remark regarding the opposition politician of "Never mind about ruling the constituency, learn to control your women first!" reinforces his dominant-caste ideology which thrives on the regulating of marginalised communities/groups including women. In another scene, where Archie and Parshya along with their friends meet in the fields for the first time, she proudly claims that the entire land belongs to the Patil household – "as far as your eyes go, all of it belongs to us." This scene articulates the caste-based labour relations in the village where the Maratha caste emerges as the landowning caste in contrast to Dalit and other marginalised castes who are engaged in other forms of caste labour. Parshya is seen helping his father in catching fish, and working at a repair shop of his friend's father.

While Archie leads the romance – riding the horse, motorcycle, and tractor, rescuing Parshya from his cousin Mangya, declaring her love to Parshya first, and "looking" at Parshya in the college classroom, Parshya is seen as docile, submissive and vulnerable. The question of desire is simultaneously implicated in the structure of caste in the landscape of Bittergaon. Taty's comment regarding the control of women in the family, Prince slapping the Dalit professor in the college and violence against Parshya, his family and, friends after knowledge of their affair becomes public are instances of this caste-based economy.

The second half of the film marks a shift not only in its location – from the feudal landscape of Bittergaon to the urban landscape of Hyderabad, but also from the aesthetics of musical melodrama to realism. The vivacious songs are replaced by sombre background music and the enormous rural landscape of romance is replaced by the cramped, and dark urban landscape. The city is bereft of its glamour, charm and brilliance but rather seems unwelcoming and violent to the transgressive young couple; it is through the images of cramped spaces, slums, and filth that the spectator along with Parshya and Archie is familiarised with the city-space of Hyderabad. The caste-hierarchies of the rural landscape are also reworked – Parshya's location in the

caste-hierarchies makes it easier for him to adjust to the working-class life of the city, while as the caste-dominance of Archie recedes, she struggles to survive in the city-slums. Archie is often seen crying and missing her home space, the violence of the city space makes her at times forget the violence of the village space; in one scene she remembers her family as “good folks!” The violence and struggle in the city-space also bleed into their relationship as Archie leaves Parshya as the latter turns insecure and aggressive leading to violence towards Archie. Parshya then attempts to commit suicide. However, Archie returns and both of them are reunited as they decide to give their relationship another chance. In the urban landscape which is filled with dirt, darkness and violence then romance gets re-worked as the spectator is made to confront the nitty-gritty of urban life post-escape, as the inter-caste couple negotiates their living together. In the second half of the film, romance is thus implicated in the violence, pain and struggle of the urban landscape of Hyderabad.

The film significantly complicates the romance/desire dynamics through its foregrounding of the structures of caste and gender, the film further draws attention to how the landscape of desire is also the landscape of caste and gender hierarchies. Manjule draws on the idioms of romance/desire but re-casts it throughout the film. In *Sairat*, then the question of desire/romance cannot erase the caste and gender hierarchies, but can only be re-worked through them.

Caste-based Spatial Segregation and Violence of Urban-Spaces in *Court* (2014)

Court centralises the question of legal violence through the trial of lokshahir and political-social activist, Narayan Kamble (performed by Vira Sathidar) in the “death by accident” coded in terms of “suicide” of the manual scavenger, Vasudev Pawar. Kamble is charged with inciting Pawar through his “obscene” and “inflammatory” songs of appealing to all manual scavengers to commit suicide rather than engaging in this filthy and defiling labour. While the film engages with the conception of legal violence through the court, I attempt to unravel the ideological and spatial violence outside the courtroom trial visualised through heterogeneous spaces inhabited by those involved in the case. The film peeks into the physical, socio-political and infrastructural polarisation of the lived spaces of the modern city space of Mumbai. It is through the courtroom trial that these co-existent yet heterogeneous spaces and their inhabitants come to un-successfully speak to each other.

B.R. Ambedkar in his discussion around the concepts of social justice and nationalism critically engages with the question of space and how it produced and maintained the social inequalities and hierarchies – for him the village space was a site of injustice where the untouchable lived and suffered in ghettos (Cháirez-Garza 7). In comparison to the village space of inequality and injustice, for Ambedkar, it was the modern urban spaces of the city that held promise and opportunities for liberation, movement, and democratic and egalitarian life (10-11). However, the caste-based social and spatial segregation of the village space was found to be replicated and reproduced in most Indian cities and urban spaces, including Mumbai (Guru 90). During the colonial era, the localities like the Bombay Development Department (BDD) which included Ambedkar’s residence, and other labour *chawls* were organised around the lines of caste and even sub-castes. Further, most untouchables migrating to colonial Bombay were forced to live in slums around the city. The urban space of modern-colonial Bombay rather than restructuring towards a more egalitarian social morphology further rigidified the socio-spatial caste relations which articulated dominant-caste repulsion for the untouchables (Guru 90-91). This caste-based spatial segregation has continued in post-colonial times, with studies suggesting Dalits in Delhi and Bombay still live in segregated settlements (Ganguly 51).

The film provides glimpses into these caste-based segregated spaces perpetuating caste division and violence within the modern city of Mumbai. The film begins with the opening shot of lokshahir Narayan Kamble living and working as a tuition teacher inside a small room in a *chawl*. The wide-angle frame of the camera captures the location through its detailed architecture and social dimensions. The heterogeneous and distant locations and spaces that these characters in the film inhabit are to be read in terms of being organised around caste-based social and spatial hierarchies. Being a Dalit lokshahir, Kamble can be seen in *chawls*, slums, and streets where he sings ballads on corruption, cruelty and immorality of urban life and politics. His songs including “Know Your Enemy” which emerges early in the film a few minutes prior to his arrest in its lyrics, “Pandemonium is here, time to raise and revolt/Time to know your enemy/Tough times are here/ We are uprooted from our soil/This era of blindness/Has gauged our eyes/A gent appears a crook/An owl resembles a peacock/A giant becomes babyish/ a baby turns into giant/humanity is in

cages/it burns it disintegrates/the good ones are forgotten/The good for nothing, praised/The enemy is all destructive/Yet we sing of his praise/Time to know your enemy” is addressed to fellow city dwellers occupying these spaces, which speaks of his pro-people and anti-caste political activism. While Kamble can be seen on one end of the spectrum of Dalit spatiality within the urban spaces, it is Vasudev Pawar, the manual scavenger who becomes the other end of the spectrum. In the scene where Vinay and Subodh (performed by Shirish Pawar), who is part of Kamble’s troupe visit the Sitaladevi slum to inquire about Pawar and his family, the camera through its wide angle captures the space including its narrow lanes along with a statue of Ambedkar at the entrance of the lane. Pawar, the deceased manual scavenger inhabits not just the caste-based segregated slums but also the underground, invisible and garbage space of the gutter, where he dies.

Tamhane brings the question of caste and labour through the “presence” and “absence” of the manual scavenger. The death of Vasudev Pawar, the manual scavenger is played out at the intersection of caste-based labour, legal violence, and casteist Brahmanical ideology. Throughout the film Pawar remains a distant figure as his death is translated and mistranslated into an “accident”/ “suicide”; he is visualised through a film poster with a manhole worker in the background and a photograph held by the prosecutor, Nutan during the case trial (Bargi, 2018). Both the prosecutor lawyer, Nutan (Geetanjali Kulkarni) and defence lawyer, Vinay Vohra (Vivek Gomber) codifies and re-codifies the death in terms of the “suicide” and “accident” respectively with the discourse around “presence and absence of technologies” confining it to the “biopolitics of the state” rather than acknowledging and revealing the caste violence (Bargi 31). It is through the testimony of Sharmila Pawar (Usha Bane) that the idea of Vasudev Pawar acquires an identity. The testimony brings forth the details about Pawar’s life and work, the caste-based occupation of manual scavenging. It further reveals the hazardous conditions of his caste-based stigmatised labour where he wasn’t provided with safety and other mechanical equipment for his work by the state. While entering the manhole, he would rely on the presence of an insect (cockroach) to check if there was enough oxygen in the gutter. He had already lost one of his eyes due to this menial and hazardous work. Apart from the cockroach he also relied on alcohol to bear the stench of the gutter. He would also often engage in domestic violence,

beating his wife and children. While it is quite clear to the spectator and the lawyers and judge regarding the victim and accused belonging to the Dalit community, the trial doesn't engage in the caste-relation of labour in the case of Pawar. The modern economy has not just failed to integrate caste-based occupation within it, it has instead entrenched these (Gopal 94). The caste-based labour of manual scavenging gets translated in terms of sanitation facilities in new productive economies through the collision of dominant-caste ideology and state, Pawar is a contractual worker under the state who is responsible for the continuation of the caste-based stigmatised labour in his life but also non-acknowledgement of caste-based labour and violence in his death.

The defence lawyer, Vinay is seen inhabiting multiple socio-cultural spaces – Human Rights Conference and elite spaces of high-end shopping-mart, posh clubs, gated-housing buildings as well as a fine-dining restaurant. It is clear through his living spaces and conversations that he belongs to the dominant caste and elite class of the city. While progressive in his ideology, Vinay, who is working as a criminal lawyer for marginal groups/ individuals often arrested on false charges; it becomes clear that he has the finances to continue defending his clients in such cases. It is Vinay who pays the bail amount of 1 lac for Kamble and being asked regarding the same he tells Kamble that the case will go on for a long time and he can pay him whenever he is able to do so. In a later scene, Vinay meets with what can be referred to as ideological violence, when he is attacked and his face is blackened by the offended “Goymari Sect” for his critique of the “regressive Goymari practices” during the court trial. The scene is framed in such a way that it points towards the everydayness and normalisation of the ideological violence often coded in terms of “intolerance” and “freedom of speech”. This moment of violence against the progressive-elite lawyer is telling as the moment of darkness, humiliation and hurt is resolved with liberal consumerism; the scene of the lawyer crying is followed by his salon appointment. On the other end, the public prosecutor, Nutan occupies the living spaces of the local train, the domestic household (kitchen), a local restaurant and a theatre. These socio-cultural spaces locate her identity as a middle-class dominant-caste woman. There is a scene where Nutan is seen watching and cheering a jingoistic play disguised as comedy which refers to the racial and caste-superiority of dominant Marathas through

inciting ideological violence against the “outsider” immigrant (North Indians). The category of “outsider” can also be translated in terms of other marginalised caste and communities who are often seen as a threat to Maratha dominance in the city. Nutan’s conversation with her colleagues also brings forth this ideological violence, telling them that “he should simply be sentenced to 20 years of jail, and it’s too tiring to see the same faces and cases every day”! It is these lived dominant-caste-class spaces that are reproduced through exclusion, and even extermination of the “outsider”.

New Modes of Viewing and the “Oppositional Gaze”

The caste structure and its relations of power have been central in organising the practices of looking – the question of “who can look?” is determined through caste hierarchies and structures of domination. This hierarchical conception of the “gaze”/ “look” is mapped onto cinema since Dalit history, politics, symbols, and struggles have been negated (or stereotypically represented) on the Indian cinema screen. Filmmaker, Jyoti Nisha discusses the idea of the popular casteist “gaze” in context of the mainstream Indian cinema,

This gaze of “othering”, silencing, and appropriating the existence of history, knowledge, and symbols of marginalised communities have been tools employed by the upper caste filmmakers deliberately. Evidently in that process, they have not only capitalised on such discourses but have also stripped the marginalised characters of their dignity and agency replicating the same hierarchical structures of caste on-screen (Nisha).

The “Bahujan spectatorship” with an “oppositional gaze” rooted in “standpoint theory” and “oppositional consciousness” rejects the Brahmanical representation of caste and marginalised communities in Indian cinema (Nisha). The conception of “Bahujan gaze” become central to her critical spectatorship of the mainstream Indian cinema which often found an overlap between the casteist gaze of the state and with casteist gaze of cinema. The “Bahujan spectatorship” resonates with the “oppositional gaze” which emerges in response to the racialised power relations – where the “gaze”/ “look” of the “other” (white) not only interrogates the “look” but also look back leading to the possibility of resistance and agency of the black people. hooks as a black female spectator claimed that there is “power in looking” (hooks 115). The idea of the

“oppositional gaze” discusses the category of the black spectator and particularly the black female spectator who resisted mainstream cinema and also created independent black films. With reference to black female spectatorship, hooks argue that “looking at films with oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically access the cinema’s construction of white womanhood as phallogentric gaze” (122). hooks maintain that the black female spectator chooses to be “outside that pleasure in looking” which Mulvey suggests is determined by “a split between male/active and female/passive” through theories of psychoanalysis of Freud’s “scopophilia” (objectified look) and Lacan’s “mirror stage” (narcissism). The black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on a phallogentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of “women as image, and man as bearer of look” was continually deconstructed” (hooks 122-123). For hooks, the visual construction of gender in the Hollywood cinema is intrinsically linked to the questions of race and racism.

The conception of “Bahujan spectator” of “Bahujan female spectator” with an “oppositional gaze” which not just rejects the Brahmanical casteist gaze but also creates new modes and aesthetics of spectatorship finds its presence in one of the interviews of filmmaker, writer and poet Nagraj Manjule of *Fandry* and *Sairat* fame. On being asked about Manjule “perennially engaged with the issues of love and caste in his films”, he responds, “they say love is blind, it doesn’t see caste. But the question of caste always creeps in. It isn’t so easy to fall in love in India without the spectre of caste looming large. Caste is the foundation of our society. It’s a reality that you need to have a special talent to avoid. Bollywood has that talent, I don’t. The only divide there is in Bollywood – where love stories are material – is of class.” (Joshi) This clearly brings forth Manjule’s attempts towards questioning of the mainstream Hindi cinema through “oppositional gaze.”

The “gazing”/ “looking” of dalit teenager Jabya at dominant-caste Shalu occurs throughout the film – parched landscape, streets, school, village-fair as well as dreamscape. There have also been other moments of “oppositional gaze” with Jabya’s denial and rejection of engaging with the caste-occupation of catching “fandry” when he is called by the Patil household to capture and take the pig away, unlike his father Kachru Mane who has been coded as village servant performing the menial labour of

catching pigs. However, it is only in the last scene, that this “oppositional gaze” becomes much more pronounced, tactile and excessive as a furious Jabya is seen throwing a stone at his abuser which is in fact thrown at the camera itself, and hence the spectator. In *Sairat* the “looking”/ “gazing” is attempted through the reworking of film form – of melodrama and realism in Indian cinema, the final scene where both Archie and Parshya are murdered by her family members is revealed through the POV of the child marks a complete overturn of the cinematic aesthetics. Despite overcoming numerous hurdles of the inter-caste romance/desire across different landscapes and years, the final act of caste violence erases all possibilities of transgressive romance/desire/union. The “oppositional gaze” then critiques the popular cinematic containment or resolution of the caste question which here exceeds the cinematic framework through the muteness and blackness of the frame.

In *Court*, the moment of “oppositional gaze” could be read through Kamble’s lokshahir tradition, in the film the songs are located in the Dalit-Ambedkarite political culture in Maharashtra. In his ballad which Kamble performs, after his bail reflects on state and legal violence, interestingly, the song makes an intervention into the discourse of art and aesthetics. The lyrics include, “Amidst all this noise about the arts/Truth has lost its voice/ Art is your hogwash/A deception in the name of aesthetics/ Screams from the funeral pyre/cannot be called performance/We will be genuinely obliged/If you do not label us: ‘Artists’.” Written and sung by Shambhaji Bhagat and performed by Vira Sathidar, both belonging to the Dalit political-cultural and Ambedkarite traditions and activism in Maharashtra, the ballad through its artists, performers and lyrics become an important critique of dominant aesthetics and artists including that of the film *Court* and director Tamhane itself.

Conclusion

The current paper attempts to highlight how the questions of caste and gender are significantly linked to aesthetic practices in cinema. In the paper, I do an in-depth analysis of the aesthetics, and narrative tendencies of the three Marathi films *Fandry* (2013), *Sairat* (2016) and *Court* (2014), I unpack how the politics of caste and gender are (re)formulated through these films. I do so through the reading of the discourses of caste and gender at the intersection of labour, space and desire in the three films. Through my close reading of the three films, I argue that categories of caste, desire

and labour are mediated through the spatial cinematic landscape; the plotting of the landscape (rural and urban) in terms of “spatialisation of ‘anti-caste’ desire”, “Brahmanical spatialisation”, “experiential space” and “caste-based spatial segregation” reveal the intersections of caste, desire and labour. I have given a detailed account of this through my analysis of several scenes and aesthetic tendencies in the three films which negotiate the discourse of caste and desire through their spatialisation within the cinematic landscape. The paper further, seeks to show how instead of creating a set idiom and formula to represent caste, what we have in all these films are experiments with aesthetic forms that disturb and re-work the certainties of spectatorship and push for new modes of representation. The idea of “oppositional gaze” becomes central to my understanding of this rejection of the Brahmanical casteist gaze and creates new modes of spectatorship. The theoretical concerns discussed in this paper can be further pursued to understand the linkages between cinema and its challenges to social hierarchies.

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