

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

— 12th Year of Open Access —

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. XII, Issue-1 (February 2021)

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Finding Home Within: A Cross Cultural Study of *Sudani From Nigeria*

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Article History: Submitted-30/01/2021, Revised-20/02/2021, Accepted-22/02/2021, Published-28/02/2021.

Abstract:

Sports in developing and underdeveloped countries have assumed more sociological relevance as people assimilate and appropriate them within their culture. The Malayalam movie *Sudani from Nigeria* gives the audience and academicians a rare opportunity to understand how football as a culture works in not just India but also Nigeria. It portrays the story of two people who seek to locate 'home' within the context of football and the issues they face. The research aims at understanding, locating and analysing the narrative of sports in subaltern cultures by taking this movie as a primary text.

Keywords: Culture, Diaspora, Sport, Subaltern.

Introduction

Recreation in developing countries has been an area of utmost interest for many academicians since it has been dominated by western influences in history. It is often seen as a space for neo-colonialism. The production of pirated copies of Hollywood movies, sports equipment, etc. which are produced in first world nations and are expensive to others, is in itself a form of resistance though they may be considered unethical by their respective sites of production. This 'reverse cultural appropriation' in underdeveloped/ developing countries requires greater attention as it not only becomes their form of resistance but also sheds light on what one finds as 'their's'. The very reason why soccer -a sport that is otherwise alien to certain cultures and countries like India, Nigeria, Congo, etc. - gains popularity and becomes a part of their identity is this larger phenomenon. Literary and artistic representations like movies are by far the most valuable resources in understanding this dilemma. *Sudani from Nigeria* is a 2018 Malayalam movie that discusses not just the story of two people of different races, country, and culture with nothing in common but their passion for football meeting, but also issues much larger. Written and directed by Zakariya Mohammed, the movie is about the camaraderie of a

Nigerian footballer named 'Sudu' by native Malayalees after being mistaken for being a Sudani and his team manager Majeed.

In a nutshell, Majeed, the manager of the local football team MYC Accode, is a man with an immense passion for the game of football, like any other person who's born and brought up in Malabar. He recruits three Nigerian footballers for his team and ends up winning several tournaments. But the star player of the team, Samuel Robinson aka Sudu confronts a fatal accident by slipping on the bathroom floor which leaves him bedridden for a month and stays at Majeed's house. Eventually, both Majeed and Sudu form a deep friendship, resulting in the declaration of the issues faced by Majeed, with his step-father. Back in his home country, Sudu had lost his parents in the Nigerian Civil war, and was living in a refugee camp with his grandmother and sisters until Majeed recruited him. In a hassle created by a picture published in the news, the police demand the identification of Sudu, which leads to the truth that his passport is lost. While trying to find the same, Samuel discloses to Majeed that he can't apply for a duplicate of the passport as the original was a fake. Towards the end of the movie, Majeed finds the passport, understands Sudu's need of going back to Nigeria, and brings back his stepfather to his home in a retrospection. In the final scene, when Sudu leaves for Nigeria, he exchanges his jersey with Majeed, an expression used in football games between two captains of the competing teams, to show mutual respect.

The movie becomes a text for study not just for its diasporic plot but also because of its cultural significance as a text that codified the local culture of an area that is independent of the rest of the state/ nation. It does so through its selection of theme and the dialect (spoken in the movie). The major questions that this research aims at answering is as follows

1. How does cultural difference affect one's understanding and construction of the idea of home?
2. How a sport like football unifies two entirely different cultures and becomes a space for subversion of neo-colonialism?

Football- the absent character

The entire movie revolves around two culture's undying passion for football. In the Malabar region of Kerala (a southern state in India) a variable form of football exists in the name 'sevans' where they have restructured the rule of a game having 11 players to 7. It can be seen as an act of appropriating a sport that requires a huge ground to the small fields found in Kerala. While looking from a critical aspect, one correlation that can be found in the movie is that the central characters come from underdeveloped nations like India and Nigeria. Affinity

towards a sport like football or cricket comes from underdeveloped physical education and sports participation (Andreff 309). Scholars like Andreff identifies that football in particular is popular among such nations and communities as there is low financial support from the government for sports-related activities, and football is, by far the cheapest option in sports as it only takes a ball to play. In India, the sport that is more popular is cricket, which is necessarily a colonial by-product. Cricket was and is practiced in spaces that lie close to the centres of power during the colonial time. Malabar region, however, was attached to the Madras presidency, and was geographically far away from the capital of Madras. Furthermore, the cultural differences between Madras and Malabar are to be taken into consideration as Malabar spoke the language of Malayalam and Madras spoke Tamil- which the local administrators preferred. Hence, there was a minimal number of British officers who were stationed there.

While Sudu earns a living to support his family back in Nigeria, Majeed who is equally financially deprived runs a football company- both choose football as their source of income due to sheer passion. Football not only unites both the cultures but consoles them from their day to day lives filled with misery. In the long shot at the end, when Majeed sits on the front porch happily, we see the painting of a kid playing football painted by Sudu in the backyard of the house. In a way, the camera sums up the whole essence of the movie of football as a practice that brings happiness within these two people- thus alluding to how people find 'home' within a sport.

Physical and mental borders

One of the key issues that Majeed faces in his life is his hatred towards his stepfather who is a night watchman. This hate actually stems from not being to accept the fact that his mother was ready to marry for a second time. In reality, as explained by his mother, she was forced to do it by her family. The mental border he shares with his family is immense and, Majeed feels at home with his his football team. The movie also brings the international issue of war and immigration to the middle-class audience of Kerala on a lighter note, through the family background of Sudu. He migrates to a slightly better country due to sheer poverty. This condition of his nation is the result of the Nigerian Civil War. B.C Nindi, in his study of the migration among Africans, opine that "they have left their homes to escape ethnic or communal strife, the exactions of tyrannical governments or wars" (Nindi 98). He also estimates that there are more than 460,000 refugees in Sudan from their neighboring states. This estimate is enough to understand the identity crisis of Samuel Robinson, who in reality is from Nigeria, but had to

migrate to Kerala for life. He faces double displacement in his life as he had to leave Nigeria for safety and to India for better income.

When Sudani from Nigeria is analyzed from a diasporic point of view, one can understand that the protagonists of the story are in search of a home, something that exists spatially yet not emotionally in their lives. While Sudu's home is shattered by the war, Majeed's is by prejudices and misunderstandings. Thus, the shared concept of 'conflicted home' becomes a common aspect that ties both the lead characters.

Roger Kennedy, argues what becomes central for the movie:

having a home implies both having a physical entity, the physical structure of the dwelling, the house, but also something that goes beyond building blocks into the area of the interior of the soul. If exiled, we may be able to carry the sense of home with us, yet there is often a poignant yearning for the original home (Kennedy 12).

The life of Sudu alone plays an important role in understanding the scale of issues faced by migration. The fact that he doesn't have an identity that adheres to one nation-state creates an identity that is ambiguous for him. This is one of the reasons why he had to go for a fake passport. Both Majeed and Sudu in the end realizes that the only way to erase such borders in their lives is to confront them, hence Sudu goes back to Nigeria and Majeed asks his stepfather to live with them.

Two mothers

Two characters that stand out in the narrative of the movie are the two mothers that take care of Sudu. Savitri Sreedharan and Sarasamma Balussery present the viewers with a memorable performance as Jameela (Majeed's mother) and as Beeyumma respectively. Jameela is this silent mother who is very much hurt by the behaviour of her son. She longs for the company of her husband but does not express it as she knows Majeed hates him. She is even more hurt due to Majeed's ignorance towards her. Jameela becomes a complex character as we can see her blaming herself for the way things are between herself and her son, as well as with her second husband. Her confidante Beyumma is the only person who knows about her worries. At the point when Sudu is injured and nobody is ready to take care of him due to financial constraints, Jameelas not only steps forward in doing so but regains her agency as the mother by saying "Mothers across the world clean up the shit of the children, even when they forget it!", which eventually hurts Majeed.

Once she starts taking care of Sudu, she forms a complex relationship with him. Sudu then becomes her friend and towards the end a son she never had. She understands him despite

the language barrier and he does the same. Towards the end, she is even seen gifting Sudu a pair of golden earrings meant for his sisters. Savitri Sreedharan earned a special mention from the juries of the National Film Awards for her touching performance as Jameela.

The emotional aspect attributed to these mothers is perhaps the most intelligent thing done to secure the 'home' idea (that recurs throughout). The ever-old gendered notion that women make a house a home can be seen reiterated here, but analysing the movie from cultural and thematical perspectives, the plot assumes an even higher position. In the plot, Jameela is a woman who has lost her agency in multiple ways, including when her objection towards a second marriage was neglected by her family members. Her son's ignorance of her position as the mother is something that silenced her for most of her life, and only when she assumes the position of being a mother for Sudu, does she get that agency back. This, even though being a gendered one in nature, is agency nevertheless and enables her to stand up on her own and demand respect- at least as a mother.

The Grammar of Sudani from Nigeria

The attention that the scriptwriters gave in creating a rural culture for the silver screen is worth mentioning as Malabar, especially the district of Malappuram speaks an altogether different slang which is heavily influenced by Arabic. The writers and the actors were able to recreate lingo spoken in the Malappuram district, which adds a sense of reality to the whole movie. There is a sense of complete lost-in-translation effect whenever Majeed talks to Sudu, as both know minimal English, but we see communication happening even with a few words. What makes *Sudani from Nigeria* so relatable yet a classic is this quality scripting and dialogues.

The movie is incomplete without talking about its actors Soubin Shahir (Majeed) and Samuel Robinson (Sudu). Both the actors make it evident why *Sudani from Nigeria* had to be a movie and not a theatrical production, as the plot revolves around not just the space associated within Malabar and Nigeria, but also two independent individuals whose internal conflicts had to be expressed through extreme close-up shots. When Majeed feels bad about his behaviour towards Sudu, one day he comes up to him and says sorry in Malayalam, saying that you won't understand it but had he said it in English he wouldn't have meant it. Shahir gives a satisfied and sorry look at Sudu one last time and leaves the room. The moment becomes so important in the movie that the viewers feel sympathy and sorry towards Majeed.

Nowhere in the movie, is it said that the setting is Malabar, but we understand it from the camera angles put forth by Shyju Khalid and the 'Malabar Malayalam' spoken in the movie.

There is a football team poster in every nook and corner of the frame, that Khalid cautiously places not making it the center of attraction but also not too trivial. The movie opens with the sevens match and throughout we see both adults and kids playing football. The costume designer quite skilfully gives most of the characters Jerseys of famous players to wear, even at home. These conscious yet tiny additions into the frame unfurl how inexplicably football has been integrated into the culture of Malabar. This sheds light on two main aspects:

1. The vast time it has taken to integrate a sport into the culture that it is seen as a part of their identity now- thus hinting at the history of football in Malabar
2. People turning to football to earn a living (through managing small clubs) implies that there is a demand among the locals for football, thus suggesting it to be a cultural product.

Diaspora- Trope for Identity Creation

In the narrative, the only one who undergoes a displacement in terms of locality/ state is Samuel Robinson or Sudu. The war and refugee crisis of Nigeria has forced him to stay at a camp along with his two sisters and grandmother. Being the only one the remaining family depends on for income, Robinson hence takes up football as a way for emotional therapy and income. His arrival in India can be thus read as a way of both escapism and performance of duty towards his family. Being a representative of the larger Nigerian diaspora, the character of Sudu brings in an international political realm to the otherwise local theme of the movie. What Sudu craves is a space for himself, where he can be free from all the worries of war and poverty. He sees football as such a space which in turn ‘liberates’ him and his family (financially and emotionally). One can assume that this is one of the reasons why he even takes the ‘risk’ of forging a fake passport to leave for India.

The world he encounters after he arrives in Malabar is entirely different. The place is geographically, culturally, and linguistically different. The main issue between such Nigerian football players and the locals as seen in the movie is language as both speak only minimal English. But this broken English connection proves to be an integral part of the narrative as it leads to the creation of an emotional bond between Majeed and Sudu. As opposed to the contemporary understandings of diaspora, where one does not intend to return to the homeland, Sudu or Samuel Robinson has desires to go back after the accident badly, thus hinting at the conventional diasporic perceptions. (Faist 12)

Samuel Robinson’s acceptance of his nickname of ‘Sudu’ (named by the locals) is one of the key aspects that marks his identity construction. He acknowledges the fact that the locals

see him as the ‘other’ and as an object of curiosity- as seen in the scenes where the people of the village come to Majeed’s house to have a look at the bedridden Samuel Robinson. In the entire movie, Robinson answers to the name of Sudu, even though he knows that it is a name given mistaking his nationality to be that of a Sudani. One of the reasons why he accepts this is because of the uncertainty of his own national identity. Robinson comes from a refugee camp along the borders of Nigeria and Sudan, and this has created a strong dilemma and disillusionment in his mind as to what his identity is. Thus, he decides to go with what the locals call him, trying to be one of them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, sports in developing or underdeveloped countries function as a ‘space’ where the people can construct their identity free from the colonial or dominating forces that surround them. Each game, tournament hence becomes a performance of their subversion. This has, over the period of time, amassed cultural implications as they have ‘reformulated’ the rules of the sport (be it any) to suit their own needs- which are highly socio-politically dependent. Discourses around the said sport are created, disseminated, and evaluated so as it engulfs their emotional and social vulnerabilities and projects a culture that is independent of what the sport initially meant (in the larger western context) and subverts the oppressive factor about it. Popular cultural representations like *Sudani From Nigeria* assert their agency among canonical literature thus, exploring these subaltern cultures in their totality.

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