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Contours of Being and Belonging: Mapping the Transgression of Identities in Select Movies

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Abstract:

The tyranny exercised unconsciously on men's minds is the only real tyranny, because it cannot be fought against, opined Gustave Le Bon, French social psychologist, emphasising the impact of social conformity on the minds of individuals. By employing a qualitative analysis of the cinematic narratives of the films—*Thaniyavarthanam* (1987), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) and *Jojo Rabbit* (2019), which deal with three different aspects of social conformity—religious, social and political, this article examines the cinematic representation of the intricate relationship between individual and crowd through the lens of Lefebvre's spatial studies. *Thaniyavarthanam* explores themes of religious superstition and stigma surrounding

mental illness; *Taare Zameen Par* highlights the adverse effects of peer pressure and societal expectations; and *Jojo Rabbit* unravels the evils of blind nationalism. This research paper examines the impact of the spatial triad in the evolution and change of the protagonist's identities as they navigate their life journeys.

Keywords: Religious superstitions, Peer pressure, Societal expectations, Dogmatism, Blind nationalism.

In Jean-Paul Sartre's existential play, *No Exit*, Joseph Garcin, one of the three damned souls, painfully declares, "Hell is—other people!" (Sartre 1.3.576) despairing of his fate, tormented by the company of his fellow inmates--Inez Serrano and Estelle Rigault in hell. Unlike the old wives' tales that warned of "red-hot pokers" in hell, what awaited the three damned souls was the company of two others, trapping the souls in the inescapable gaze of judgement and scrutiny of their companions—the real torment. Garcin's words underscore the play's theme, that ultimate suffering stems not from physical agony but from the mental oppression of judgement and perception of others, which constrains one's freedom and sense of self; thus arises the conflict between the self and the other. Gustave Le Bon, a pioneering French social psychologist, expressed a similar sentiment, however, in a broader context, in his seminal work, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, where he opined that "the tyranny exercised unconsciously on men's minds is the only real tyranny, because it cannot be fought against" (Le Bon 165). Sartre's existentialist notion resonates with Le Bon's idea that individuals are driven by collective will rather than personal conviction. Art and literature have long explored this intricate relationship between individuals and society.

Cinema, often deemed a mirror of society, has long portrayed the conflict between the individual and society, which shapes our collective human experience. The films Sibi Malayil's *Thaniyavarthanam*, Aamir Khan's *Taare Zameen Par*, and Taika Waititi's *Jojo*

Rabbit poignantly portray their protagonists' journeys as they navigate the challenges of forging their paths, tainted by the influence of the crowd. The protagonists of these films undergo a profound metamorphosis as they navigate their journeys, shaped by the powerful forces of social persuasion. *Thaniyavarthanam*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *Jojo Rabbit* deal with three aspects of social conformity—religious, social and political, respectively. Balagopalan in *Thaniyavarthanam* becomes a scapegoat of the religious superstitions of his time; Ishaan from *Taare Zameen Par* is crushed by the weight of peer pressure and societal expectations; and Jojo from *Jojo Rabbit* is misled by the dogmatic ideology and blind nationalism that pervaded Nazi Germany.

Thaniyavarthanam, a Malayalam psychological drama film written by A.K. Lohithadas and directed by Sibi Malayil, explores the destructive impact of religious superstition, orthodoxy, and stigma surrounding mental illness in rural Kerala. The film narrates the tragic tale of Balagopalan, a village school teacher born into a family plagued by a history of mental illness in its men, who, misjudged by society, succumbs to its pressures despite being sane. Ultimately, Balagopalan Master is driven to insanity by the religious superstitions that governed his generation.

Taare Zameen Par: Every Child is Special, a Hindi drama film directed and produced by Aamir Khan, deals with the social aspect and offers a glimpse into the problems within the Indian education system, where the intense and relentless pursuit of academic achievement perpetuates a culture of unhealthy competition that overshadows individual creativity and talent. The film narrates the transformative journey of Ishaan Nandkishore Awasthi, a creative and artistic eight-year-old boy. Ishaan finds it hard to cope with dyslexia, which is misinterpreted as disinterest by his family and teachers, who fail to understand his learning disability and label him “stupid”.

Set in Nazi Germany's Third Reich, *Jojo Rabbit*, a satirical English drama film written and directed by Taika Waititi, adapts Christine Leunens' 2008 novel *Caging Skies*. The film offers a postmodern re-examination of this dark period through Johannes Betzler (Jojo), the titular character, who is forced to confront the harsh realities of war, ideology, and humanity, ultimately causing him to reassess his idolised view of Adolf Hitler, his imaginary friend. Jojo falls victim to indoctrination in Nazi Germany, where he, among other children, is stripped of their innocence and trained to kill for the Führer, their hero. *Jojo Rabbit* narrates the story of ten-year-old boy Jojo Betzler, an aspiring Hitler youth soldier whose world turns upside down when he discovers that his mother is secretly harbouring a Jewish girl, Elsa Korr, in their home.

John Donne, in his iconic poem, "No Man Is an Island", asserts, "Every man is a piece of the continent / A part of the main" (Donne, lines 3-4), emphasising that no individual exists in isolation but is instead an integral and interconnected part of the broader human collective. Man cannot be separated from the society he lives in. When an individual becomes part of a crowd, they undergo a profound psychological transformation. With such a psychological transformation, an individual no longer lives for himself but instead becomes a pawn in the hands of the collective, who sacrifices his personal ambitions and objectives in favour of the crowd. Gustave Le Bon, in his book, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, argues that such influence and dissemination of ideas and behaviours within a crowd can be attributed to three primary mechanisms: Affirmation, repetition, and contagion. These factors exert significant influence over the collective mindset, as repeated affirmations and contagious actions can readily persuade individuals to adopt a particular opinion or behaviour, often overriding their own personal beliefs. In this state, they relinquish their individuality, surrendering to the collective mindset of the group. He comments, "He is no longer himself but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will" (Le Bon 36). The protagonists assume their roles as automatons at different phases of the films, as the narratives unfold, surrendering

their agency and autonomy to the oppressive forces that surround them, illustrating the destructive impact of societal pressures that can reduce individuals to mere automatons.

The identities of the protagonists are in flux. The influences in the social spaces that they dwell in act as a catalyst in altering their identities. Henri Lefebvre, French Marxist philosopher and sociologist, in his seminal work, *The Production of Space*, shows that “(Social) space is a (social) product ... the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action ... in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control and hence of domination, of power” (Lefebvre 26). He suggests that space is actively created through social interactions and practices; thus, we cannot comprehend our existence outside of space and time, making it fundamental to our lived experience of the world. More precisely, Lefebvre identifies space as a social product and introduces a triadic framework comprising three interrelated aspects of space, which are spatial practices, representations of space, and spaces of representation. His model of spatial production distinguishes three forms of space and unites physical, mental, and social space. He connects spatial practices to the perceived, which is the physical organisation and daily routines within a given space; representations of space to the conceived, which is conceptualised space, which implies representations of power and ideology; and spaces of representation to the lived, which comprises the subjective experiences and symbolic meanings attributed to a spatial form.

The interplay between socially (re)produced perceived spaces and imagined conceived spaces ultimately shapes the lived experiences of the protagonists—Balan, Ishaan, and Jojo. Their realities are influenced by the complex dynamics between these competing forces in their surroundings, which are mediated by societal norms, cultural expectations, and personal perceptions. The opening scenes of the films present the core dilemma, foreshadowing the crisis that subsequently befalls the protagonists.

The setting of *Thaniyavarthanam* opens with a typical, traditional Nair *tharavadu* in rural Kerala—a woman clad in traditional attire lights the lamp at the *thulasithara* before an old, dilapidated *naalukettu veedu* at dusk as the grandmother chants prayers. The domestic space of *Marithampally tharavadu*—Balan's home, serves as a perceived space, where the conversation among the women in the kitchen reveals their social status and fall from glory and prosperity, the reason for which is known to be a curse. The grandmother's tales to her grandchildren reveal the endless loop of misery the family is stuck in—a curse of the family goddess that dictates that one male member from every generation will succumb to lunacy for a past sin. A witness to the downfall of men of three generations, the grandmother's storytelling is a powerful tool in reinforcing the legacy of religious superstitions deep-seated in *Marithampally* and passing down the generational trauma to successive generations. Home, often the synonym of comfort and safety, takes a dreadful turn here, as Balan's house is revealed to be a vulnerable space that later caters to his downfall, which indeed originates from the very walls of this conceived space, his "home".

Balan Master assumes his role as an automaton only later in the movie *Thaniyavarthanam*. In the beginning, he finds himself in an unsteady middle ground, torn between two conflicting worlds—the world deep-seated in age-old superstitions and rituals that the adults of *Marithampally* believe keeps them from falling apart and the other one aligning with the family's deviant, radical Gopinathan's world of reason. One by one, Balan Master's siblings try to find a way out of the loop; Gopinathan contemplates abandoning everything and finding a job somewhere far away, and Sumithra sees her marriage as an escape. Balan, however, bound by his responsibilities as the elder son, refuses to flee, instead he shoulders the burden of his family's troubles. His illness is triggered by a crucial turn of events—the death of the "madman in the attic", his uncle Sreedharanmaman, raising rumours

of Balan Master probably being the next one in *Marithampally* to fall prey to the *Bhadrakali*'s curse and go mad.

Thaniyavarthanam's screenplay by Lohithadas receives appreciation even today for its scientific precision and realistic portrayal of mental illness. The script utilises the “Diathesis-Stress Model” theory from psychopathology, developed by American clinical psychologist Paul Meehl in the 1960s, to describe the life of Balagopalan and the cause of his schizophrenia. According to this theory, the presence of mental illness in the family makes other members “vulnerable” to the illness due to the transfer of genes, as in the case of the men of *Marithampally*. This vulnerability, caused by genetic factors, is called diathesis. However, the diathesis only causes a mental disorder when it interacts with a strong environmental factor like stress, in the absence of which the illness is avertible. Society's fanaticism and stigma towards mental illness act as the stress factor in triggering Balagopalan's dormant condition.

Ishaan in *Taare Zameen Par*, however, is no mere automaton at the beginning of the film; he is exuberant but defiant. The opening scene of *Taare Zameen Par* introduces a myriad of dancing letters, words, and formulas, subtly foreshadowing Ishaan's struggle with dyslexia, which is revealed gradually as the narrative unfolds. The scene shifts to a tense Indian classroom, where students anxiously await their exam results, some nervously biting their nails. With each student's mark, the teacher announces, her facial expressions explicitly reveal the emphasis on academic excellence—beaming with pride for the high achievers and a frown of disapproval for the struggling students, including Ishaan. This crucial scene effectively establishes the pressure-cooker environment of the Indian education system. Ishaan exhibits deviant behaviour; when asked to read, he blatantly declares that "the letters are dancing" (*Taare Zameen Par* 00:23:38-40) and goes on to read gibberish. Without a second thought about the consequences, he bunks the class and sets out to evade further confrontations from his teachers. Ishaan undergoes a psychological transformation and begins to show symptoms

of Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD) only after he is sent to the boarding school, away from his family, where his sense of self begins to erode. A lonely Ishaan, who does not even know how to wear a tie on his own, is left to fend for himself and struggles in his new school, a struggle he believes is his punishment for his deviance.

In stark contrast to *Thaniyavarthanam* and *Taare Zameen Par*, the protagonist of *Jojo Rabbit*, Jojo Betzler, is an automaton from the film's outset. *Jojo Rabbit* establishes its premise by presenting Jojo Betzler, a zealous, young member of the Nazi Youth in World War II Germany, as he gets ready to attend a Hitler Youth Training Camp. Driven by determination and trepidation, Jojo declares his intention to "become a man" that day. To beef up his resolve, he seeks encouragement from his imaginary friend, Adolf Hitler, playfully portrayed by Taika Waititi. Hitler's childish caricature provides pep talks while spouting anti-Semitic rhetoric, reinforcing Jojo's naivety. As Jojo runs through the streets screaming "Heil Hitler!", a German rendition of The Beatles' "I Want to Hold Your Hand" plays, jarringly juxtaposed with footage of actual Nazi rallies. He completely adheres to the Nazi ideology, and anti-Semitic sentiment indoctrinated into his mind and believes his blue eyes and Aryan blood make him superior to other races. Jojo Betzler recites the oath of allegiance, "I swear to devote all my energies and my strength to the saviour of our country, Adolf Hitler. I am willing and ready to give up my life for him." (*Jojo Rabbit* 00:01:04-11) He sets aside his brewing anxiety and enthusiastically echoes Hitler's motivational mantra, "Snake mind, wolf body, panther courage, German soul". Jojo reiterating Hitler's words establishes his position as an automaton.

Gathering places are perceived and conceived spaces in the films that serve as cultural hubs for facilitating social connections and community building, fostering the exchange of information, ideas and values; reflecting and reinforcing social hierarchies, power dynamics and cultural norms; and even offering a space for resistance, subversion, and ultimately social change. The village tea shop in *Thaniyavarthanam*, the teacher's staffroom in *Taare Zameen*

Par and the Hitler Youth Training Camp in *Jojo Rabbit* are perceived spaces that serve as a powerful motif in the films and act as the mouthpiece of the society. The dominant ideologies and ideas originate from and are perpetuated through these social spaces, where they are affirmed and reiterated, thus establishing their existence as conceived spaces.

The teashop adjacent to the betel shop in the bustling centre of the village, which Balan Master frequents every day on his way to the school for his daily tea and betel, acts as a gateway into the developments that unfold later, and here, a lot more is served than just tea. A hot cup of tea, laced with village gossip and rumours, is a reason for characters to enter and exit the teashop conveniently. Holding a mirror to society, through this teashop, the director effectively introduces the sensibilities of his time—the culture, traditions, attitudes, beliefs, and superstitions that govern the lives of the villagers. It forms the beacon from where all gossip emanates and where it all subsides. A scene unfolds at the tea shop, where a villager, misinterpreting a newspaper headline, ‘Gandhi Lost’, raises a query to Balan Master, asking whether Gandhiji was still alive, unaware that the headline refers to Gandhi University’s defeat at a football match. The ignorance and backwardness of the society which becomes a catalyst for the woe that subsequently befalls Balan are underlined through this scene. Rumours about Balan’s descent into madness spread through the village like wildfire, starting with this bustling tea shop—a lived space which becomes a site for his trauma and struggle.

The teacher’s staffroom at New Era High School in *Taare Zameen Par* serves as a significant gathering place where Ram Shankar Nikumbh’s unconventional approach clashes with his colleagues’ traditional pedagogical methods. Ishaan’s teachers are all like-minded educators—practitioners of the hackneyed, traditional teaching methods, which prioritise rote memorisation over creativity and neglect individual learning needs. They find Nikumbh’s classroom equivalent to a “fish market” and dismiss his “singing and dancing” methods, which incorporate innovative teaching strategies, as ineffective for children of “formal schools”,

unlike the children of Tulip School for Special Children, where Nikumbh used to work. They claim that they “train kids to take on the world” and “run the race” to “compete, succeed and make a future.” One of the teachers reminds him of the motto of the school, “Order, Discipline, Labour”—the pillars of success, to which Nikumbh satirically replies, “Heil Hitler”, criticising the rigidity and overly authoritarian attitudes of the prevailing system.

The *Deutsches Jungvolk* Hitler Youth training camp in *Jojo Rabbit*, which Jojo and his best friend Yorki attend, is a far cry from a traditional summer camp where children typically enjoy carefree adventures and learn a sport or a skill. Children were not spared from the Nazi regime; as Adolf Hitler put it at the annual Nazi Party rally in 1935, “He alone who owns the youth gains the future.” Run by the one-eyed *Wehrmacht* Captain Klenzendorf, supported by *Unteroffizier* Freddy Finkel—the second-in-command and Fraulein Rahm—an instructor of the League of German Girls, the little Nazis in the *Jungvolk* are subjected to a gruelling regimen of physical training and military-style drills, where antisemitic sentiment is indoctrinated, and gender roles are reinforced. Captain Klenzendorf welcomes the children to the *Hitlerjugend* training weekend, where he promises to make men and women of them all. The children are issued their first *Jungvolk* daggers, a symbol of their initiation, and are given a preview of what they will do—boys will engage in bayonet drills, grenade-throwing, trench-digging, firing guns, blowing up stuff, and other wartime activities. At the same time, girls will be taught “womanly duties” like dressing wounds, making beds and “learning how to get pregnant”. Fraulein Rahm sketches a grotesque caricature on a blackboard and labels it *Der Jude* (The Jew), as children call out “horns” and “fangs”, associating Jews with vile stereotypes. She claims Aryans are a thousand times more civilised and advanced than any other race and takes the cadets to burn Jewish scriptures in the bonfire later that night.

Gustave Le Bon argues that the mind of a crowd is imbued with ideas and beliefs through three primary mechanisms: affirmation, repetition, and contagion. He describes these

mechanisms as somewhat slow, but once produced, their effects are very lasting. He comments, “Affirmation pure and simple, kept free of all reasoning and all proof, is one of the surest means of making an idea enter the mind of crowds. The conciser an affirmation is, the more destitute of every appearance of proof and demonstration, the more weight it carries” (Le Bon 141). Affirmation, however, he says, is inefficient unless it is constantly repeated. The thing affirmed is reiterated to firmly establish itself in the mind in such a way that, in the end, it gets acceptance as a demonstrated truth. The repeated statement is gradually embedded in the deeper layers of our unconscious minds in which the motives of our actions are shaped. At the end, the source of the repeated assertion is forgotten, and we come to genuinely believe it as the truth. Ideas, sentiments and beliefs possess a contagious power in crowds, as intense as that of microbes; contagious to such a degree that an individual willingly sacrifices his personal interest to that of the collective. Such contagion is so powerful that it imposes not only opinions but specific modes of feeling on individuals. It is never reasoning but contagion that propagates the opinions and beliefs of crowds.

The onset of the identity crisis of the protagonists is marked by crucial events—the death of Sreedharanmaman in *Thaniyavarthanam*, Ishaan’s expulsion to the boarding school in *Taare Zameen Par*, and Jojo’s initiation into the Hitler Youth Camp in *Jojo Rabbit*. Affirmation, repetition, and contagion are largely at play in finally establishing Balagopalan Master as “*Bhranthan Balan*”—a madman in *Thaniyavarthanam*; Ishaan as a lazy “troublemaker” in *Taare Zameen Par*; and Jojo Betzler as “Jojo Rabbit”, a self-doubting coward who hesitates to kill, in *Jojo Rabbit*.

The demise of Sreedharanmaman in *Thaniyavarthanam* becomes the first nail in the coffin already readied for the brothers of *Marithampally*, Balagopalan or Gopinathan—one of whom would soon be thrown into the throes of madness. As the villagers gather at the funeral, whispers of speculation spread; they wonder who among the remaining male heirs

of *Marithampally* is to incur the wrath of *Bhadrakali*; they ask each other, “Who next?” a question repeated by almost every pair of lips on screen. The night of Sreedharanmaman’s cremation, Balan is jolted awake by a nightmare of *Bhadrakali* chasing him through the woods; he finds the chain tethered to Sreedharanmaman’s drowned body. Once wakened from the nightmare, his family swarms over him, each one of them gazing at him, wide-eyed, in terror.

The camera zooms into the ashen faces of each of the family members, and the grandmother gasps, with her hand to her chest. Looking up, she asks, “Oh Mother, *Mahakali*! Have you forsaken my son?” (*Thaniyavarthanam* 00:50:35-40). Balan’s mother follows her lead and says, “Brother, all these rituals and offerings have been in vain” (*Thaniyavarthanam* 00:50:54-58), she laments. They are quick to conclude that the goddess’s curse is persistent and Balan is succumbing to madness, despite his reassurance that he is all right. Desperate for answers, the family patriarch summons *Panicker*, an astrologer, to determine Balan’s fate, which, to their dismay, is proven to be ill. Through *Panicker*, rumours spread throughout the village like wildfire, beginning with the bustling tea shop.

Life was moving as usual for Balan, but the villagers and the school staff all started closely scrutinising his gestures and mannerisms through a magnifying lens, misinterpreting his actions as the idiosyncrasies of a lunatic. As Balan steps into the schoolyard the next day, the playground falls eerily silent; the children stop playing and gaze at Balan in unison. In the classroom, a student bursts into tears when asked to pick her favourite flower. When Balan enquires about the reason for her outburst, she confesses that she is scared and then blatantly replies, “Everyone says Balan Master is mad” (*Thaniyavarthanam* 01:05:24-27). He gapes at his students with wide eyes. That day, lying on top of a hill, he hallucinates being chased by children, who pelt him with stones, yelling “*Bhranthan*” repeatedly. A stone strikes Balan in the forehead, and he falls, bleeding. When Gopi discovers him, Balan asks, “Gopi, am I mad?” (*Thaniyavarthanam* 01:06:44-50), marking the beginning of a downward spiral into self-doubt.

Convinced of Balan's madness, *Marithampally tharavadu* readies itself for the usual drill. Raman Karthavu, the family *vaidhyar*, prepare for the pooja, vazhipaadu and kolamthullal to cure Balan, all of which ultimately ends in Sreedharanmaman's room in the attic.

Balan's excitement upon returning home after a stint at Gopi's psychiatrist friend Raghuvaran's house is short-lived. Gopi introduces him as a mere neighbour to Sumitra's prospective groom; his own family has told them that Sumitra has only one brother, erasing his existence as a family member. To rub salt into the wound, he discovers that Damodaran, his father-in-law, has taken away his wife, Indu, and his children, Manikutty and Harikuttan, back to his home. This event becomes the coup de grâce to an already shattered Balan, turning him into a full-blown schizophrenic.

Ishaan's world is robbed of its colours when he is sent away from home to the boarding school in *Taare Zameen Par*. The school authorities declare that Ishaan is unfit to continue there and recommends the Awasthis to find him a special school. Mr Awasthi decides to get him into a boarding school, hoping to straighten him up. The decision is made, despite Ishaan's pleas to let him stay, and he is distraught at the thought. The next day, he wakes up screaming from a nightmare: at the railway station, Ishaan is separated from his mother, and he gets lost in the crowd while his mother boards the train unaware. He frantically calls out, "Mama!" and when she realises he is not with her, she screams his name and reaches out her hand to him, but it is too late; the train pulls away, leaving Ishaan behind alone. The nightmare is symbolic of Ishaan's struggle to keep up with the fast-paced world, an idea portrayed in the opening credits of the film through the animated sequence, inspired by the classic children's fable featuring a hare (metaphor for speed) and a tortoise (metaphor for slowness), sitting on a watermelon seesaw and balancing out each other.

Ishaan's fear of loneliness and disconnection from his family takes shape in his flipbook, which, when flipped rapidly, shows illustrations of Ishaan fading away from his

family. At the boarding school too, Ishaan struggles to read and write and the letters still “dance” around. The contextual song *Bheja kum*—a song made of insults alone, with “Idiot Duffer Lazy Crazy” as its refrain, masterfully captures Ishaan’s predicaments. The hardcore use of distortion on the electric guitars paired with the piercing chorus, “What is your problem? Why are you so dumb?” and the insults of the teachers as a mnemonic device forming the lyrics, altogether convey the intense environment Ishaan is hounded by. Ishaan’s haunting hallucination, where the letters and numbers morph into spiders crawling out of his books and moving towards him, shows his fear of learning. He is looked upon with prejudiced eyes by his Hindi teacher, Mr. Tiwari, whose faulty judgement prevents him from reflecting on Ishaan’s interpretation of the poem, *Dhrishtikon* (Perspective).

On his first day, Mr. Tiwari seats Ishaan beside Rajan Damodaran, a disabled student who hails first in class, hoping his company would have a good influence on Ishaan. Ishaan persists in being every teachers’ doormat until Ram Shankar Nikumbh, the new art teacher, steps in as his messiah. This way, the boarding school is a lived space, a site of both traumatic experiences and transformative growth. Ram is the first one to identify Ishaan’s dyslexia and the first to find out why “the letters are dancing”. He goes through Ishaan’s notebooks and figures out the pattern in his repetitive mistakes—his confusion with resemblant letters and spellings, mixing up B for D and “top” for “pot”, writing the mirror images of letters, and misspelling words like “animal” as “enamel”.

Ram pays a visit to the Awasthis and tries to enlighten Ishaan’s parents about his condition that causes him to have difficulty recognising letters and an inability to pay attention to multiple instructions like “turn to page number 65, chapter 9, paragraph 4, line 2”, or catch a ball because he cannot correlate spatial concepts like size, distance, and speed. Ishaan’s mother agrees that Ishaan has difficulty buttoning his shirt and tying his shoelaces, indicating poor motor skills, another symptom of dyslexia. Though Ishaan’s mother aligns with Ram’s

words, his father establishes that all these are merely excuses to avoid studying and compares Ishaan to his elder son Yohaana, his “dream child” who comes first in class. Towards movie’s climax, Ram intercepts Ishaan’s father as he is leaving and enquires if he is familiar with the Solomon Islands. He comments, “On the Solomon Islands, when the tribes need to clear the jungle to make way for fields, they do not cut down the trees. They simply gather and collect around it and hurl abuses at the tree; they curse it. Slowly but surely, after some days, the tree begins to wither. It dies on its own” (*Taare Zameen Par* 02:09:58-10:25). This remark is symbolic of the emotional damage inflicted upon Ishaan—the constant words of abuse and insults hurled at him by the very people he held dear to him, his teachers, peers, and even family members, gradually stamping out the potential of an otherwise brilliant child.

Jojo from *Jojo Rabbit* perceives himself as a Nazi of “pure” Aryan ancestry, boasting about his blood which is “the colour of a pure red rose”, his eyes blue and being “massively into swastikas”. Realisation dawns on him only later that he does not genuinely aspire to embody the ideals of a true Nazi; instead, he fits into Elsa’s description of “a ten-year-old kid who likes dressing up in a funny uniform and wants to be part of a club” (*Jojo Rabbit* 01:04:42-48). Jojo’s fear and hesitance make him an easy target of the older boys at the camp. In a disturbing test of loyalty, the camp leaders, Hans and Christoph, hand him a rabbit, and Jojo, like any other child, smiles and caresses it but gasps in disbelief when he is commanded to “kill it!” The other boys chant “Kill! Kill! Kill!” enthusiastically, goading Jojo to choke the rabbit to death, but unable to bring himself to kill the poor animal, Jojo gently places it on the ground and urges it to flee. However, before the rabbit can escape, Christoph grabs it, ruthlessly breaks its neck and throws away its lifeless body. Jojo is humiliated by the other boys, who start in with a mocking singsong chant of “Jojo Rabbit”, and he runs off into the woods, crying. His inherent goodness and empathy for the animal make him a “coward” to the jingoistic troop of young Nazis. While in the woods, he is visited by an imaginary Hitler, who reminds him that

it is good to be a rabbit, that rabbits are wise and cunning and live to fight another day; he encourages him to “be the rabbit”. However, after Jojo is seriously wounded in a mishap with a hand grenade in a clumsy effort to prove his manhood, backed by his imaginary friend, Hitler, he is relegated to non-combat tasks.

The darkness buried underneath the comical layers of the plot is uncovered in a gruesome scene where Jojo and his mother, Rosie, walk down the streets of Falkenheim to find a group of people hanging lifelessly from the gibbet in the town square as a warning for the living “traitors”. The board on the gibbet reads, *Wir haben das deutsche Volk betrogen*, “We have betrayed the German people.” Jojo, disgusted by the sight, turns away his head and mumbles, “Yuck”, but Rosie forces him to face the horror; she says, “Look”. He asks her what they did, and she replies, “What they could”, ironically appreciative of the act that got them killed. The camera zooms into the legs of the dead men and women, and as proof of their “crimes”, small anti-Nazi handbills that read “Free Germany, Fight the Party” in German are pinned onto their clothing. It is later revealed that Rosie is the clandestine source of those flyers when Jojo, while gathering metal scraps, sees her discreetly leaving them at the doorsteps of houses, exposing her identity as a non-violent, anti-Nazi activist. This scene is indispensable, foreshadowing the impending tragedy that awaits Rosie. The details are ominously prophetic, as the same gibbet that once displayed the lifeless bodies of the so-called traitors soon holds Rosie’s lifeless form, with the anti-Nazi flyer she distributed pinned to her pants, a testament to her final act of resistance. Rosie’s secret revolt extends far beyond distributing anti-Nazi handbills. She harbours a young Jewish girl, Elsa Korr, in the attic behind the walls of Jojo’s elder sister Inge’s bedroom; a perilous “crime” that could have all three of them killed if caught.

Alone at home one day, Jojo discovers Elsa hiding in the attic and is horrified when he sees her; he thinks she is his dead sister Inge’s ghost. He asks her, “Who are you?” and she replies, “A Jew,” and with that revelation, his world goes topsy-turvy. He learns from Captain

Klenzendorf that the Jew would be killed, along with anyone who harbours one, rendering the situation a “stalemate”. Instead, he gets the idea to write a book, an exposé on Jews from Captain Klenzendorf. Jojo approaches Elsa and asks her to divulge information about her people, reducing her to a xenophobic stereotype; he instructs, “Start telling me about your kind” (*Jojo Rabbit* 00:37:48-50).

During Jojo’s conversations with Elsa, she tries to teach him a lesson on the nature of prejudice and hatred. He asks her to answer his endless questionnaire based on his propaganda-driven perceptions of Jews for his upcoming exposé —“Yoohoo Jew”. His proximity to Elsa destroys his prejudice. Jojo and Elsa get to know each other, and their unlikely friendship blossoms. He even develops a crush on her; his tummy fills with butterflies as he waits outside the bathroom while she takes a shower, guarding her. He realises she is no monster but a lonely young girl who is longing for love, just like Jojo. In a tense scene that follows, four Gestapo agents arrive at the doorstep and greet Jojo, “Heil Hitler”. In just one scene, the phrase “Heil Hitler” is exchanged between all four agents and Jojo, a staggering thirty-one times in just a minute, showcasing the absurdity of the Nazis and their protocols, critiquing the fanaticism and blind obedience that defined the era. Evolving from a boy who deemed Elsa not a “proper person” to defending her against imaginary Hitler, “That thing”, he corrects der Führer, “is a girl”, Jojo is no longer the Jew-hating boy who swore his allegiance to Hitler in the beginning of the film anymore. He stands up for the ideals his mother, Rosie Betzler, died for, kicking Hitler out of his window, thereby killing his hate-feeding manifestation of the Führer—a testament to his resistance against the Nazi regime.

The social spaces inhabited by the protagonists—Balan, Ishaan, and Jojo—are transformed into lived spaces through the distinct meanings each protagonist assigns to them. For Balan, his home is a haunting repository of collective memory, shaping individual and family identities, while the village tea shop and school become fraught sites of struggle and

trauma. In contrast, Ishaan's school serves as a complex dual space marked by both trauma and transformation. Jojo's home, meanwhile, becomes a site of subversion and resistance, whereas the Hitlerjugend training camp embodies the toxic values of Nazi ideology, breeding intolerance and animosity.

The tag "*Bhranthan Balan*", the saying "Everyone says Balan Master is mad", and the question "Who next?" in *Thaniyavarthanam*; the tag "stupid", the lyrics of the song *Bheja Kum*, "Idiot Duffer Lazy Crazy" and the motto "Order. Discipline. Labour" in *Taare Zameen Par*; the tag "Jojo Rabbit", the chanting "Kill! Kill! Kill!" and the greeting "Heil Hitler!" in *Jojo Rabbit*, all serve as potent affirmations that are constantly repeated and reinforced by various characters in the films, ultimately leaving its marks in the minds of the protagonists—Balan, Ishaan and Jojo.

The lines of a Rilke poem, "Go to the Limits of Your Longing", appear on screen as *Jojo Rabbit* ends, "Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror / Just keep going. No feeling is final" (Rilke, lines 9-10). Rilke's words, "No feeling is final", find resonance far beyond *Jojo Rabbit*, as this theme of transience that underscores human existence finds common ground with *Thaniyavarthanam* and *Taare Zameen Par* as well. The protagonists of the films—Balan, Ishaan and Jojo, identify the lived and the perceived with what is conceived. As the triggering events unfold, the status quo of their lives is disrupted, forcing them into a downward spiral. Confusion and anguish take over their lives as the masses are quick to mould the protagonists to become pawns to their whims, as aptly described by Gustav Le Bon, "The masses have never thirsted after truth. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim" (Le Bon 126). The illusions of the masses take form in reality through the repeated affirmations perpetuated in the spaces that dominate the worlds of the protagonists, eventually reducing them to automatons devoid of agency and autonomy.

Balan, following Sreedharanmaman's demise, becomes the next ideal target to replace him as the "madman in the attic" and Ishaan, the stupid boy who should be enrolled in a special school. Jojo, however, is a victim from the beginning, blissfully ignorant and blinded by the indoctrination of the Nazi regime. *Thaniyavarthanam* ends with Balan's death at the hands of his own mother, who poisons him. The scene shifts to a haunting tableau, where Balan's son—Harikuttan, stares at the *kolam* of *Bhadrakali* as she dances in a frenzied ritual, foreshadowing his fate, suggesting that he will be the next "*Bhranthan*" of *Marithampally*. Fortunately, the identities are not permanent, as exemplified through Ishaan's and Jojo's journeys; their stories are a testament to hope and transformation. As *Taare Zameen Par* concludes, Ishaan is a changed boy to the amusement of his parents. He has aced academically and has reclaimed his vibrant self. The closing scene shows Ishaan rushing to the hands of Ram Shankar Nikumbh, without the helping hand of whom Ishaan would have ended up being a casualty of the Indian education system's lack of inclusivity. Though this failure continues to be the norm in India, Ram's approach opens a window of hope for a more inclusive future. *Jojo Rabbit* ends with Jojo kicking imaginary Hitler out of his window. However, less than two hours earlier, he was swearing allegiance to the dictator and practising "Heil Hitler" salutes in the very same room. The Nazis lose; the war ends; Jojo takes to the streets, dancing with Elsa, the Jew he condemned in the beginning, giving assurance that hatred spreads, but so does compassion. This change once again echoes Rilke's words, "No feeling is final."

The influences in the conceived and perceived spaces of the protagonists affect and alter their lived experiences. The acts and words of affirmation constantly echo in these spaces, gradually taking shape in the minds of the protagonists, reducing them to mere "automatons". The world, though not an ideal one, offers space for change. The lives of Jojo and Ishaan take a deviation, but for the better, reassuring that not all change is for the worse. Their lives testify to the transformative power of compassion, a catalyst for positive change. Conforming to the

influences of the crowd might seem like the least challenging path, but as Robert Frost suggested, taking the road less travelled will make all the difference.

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