



Blood, Pride, and the Rooster: Deep Play and Masculine Honour in *Aadukalam* (2011)

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Abstract:

This paper expands Clifford Geertz's idea of "deep play" as a play with high stakes to reveal the emotional and psychological repercussions of the deep entanglement with play, through a reading of Vetrimaaran's *Aadukalam* (2011). *Aadukalam* presents cockfighting as a ritual and a spectacle but also reveals the dark underbelly of cockfighting culture. A game that ceases to be entertainment and extends into questions of pride, honour, skill, and belonging is bound to have dire consequences. This paper argues the games become violent expressions of masculinity and male sexual desire, an element that Geertz alludes to but does not discuss. As the rooster becomes the object of labour, care, honour, and virility, power begins to operate through it; the desire for power destabilises the structural unity of cockfighting as a collective sport. At the core of the film is the shifting and deteriorating bond between Pettaikaran and Karuppu where a relationship rooted in loyalty and devotion ultimately challenges social hierarchy, thus revealing the tragic element of the game.

Keywords: *Aadukalam*, Vetrimaaran, Deep play, cockfighting, Clifford Geertz, Thick description.

Aadukalam (Playground) is a 2011 Tamil film directed by Vetrimaaran. The film presents rooster fighting not a petty activity to pass time or a simple contest between animals, but as a dense social ritual, through which power, machismo, allegiance, and reputation are publicly performed. In a game where betting and violence are surface phenomenon, the cultural poetics and dynamics of kinship and authority present the deeper elements of play. The movie begins with a description of the importance of rooster fighting in Tamil history and culture: “right from the times of Sangam literature to modern writings, cockfights are mentioned in many epics and books” (00:02:20-00:2:30). The description further reveals that while cockfighting has been banned due to concerns regarding animal cruelty, it is a practice that is still organised and enjoyed by men in areas of Tamil Nadu. It is referred to as a traditional art form that has been preserved over the generations by trainers. These trainers judiciously passed on the techniques of rearing and training the roosters to a set of carefully selected disciples. This paper employs an instance of cockfighting from India to better understand Clifford Geertz’s idea of deep play and to further highlight aspects that are visible in *Aadukalam* but exceed Geertz’s theorisation.

Clifford Geertz in “Deep Play” states that cockfighting in Bali is not appreciated by the elite class and its illegal status makes the secrecy associated with the organisation of a game extremely important (2). *Aadukalam* too begins with a scene of the police raiding the tournament spot. The immediate reaction after the police’s arrival is declared marks the beginning of a narrative that is generationally rooted in cockfighting. Rathinasamy, the police officer who helps organise cockfights has been in the game for over thirty years and has never lost a match to anyone except for Pettaikaran (00:05:43). Pettaikaran is not as influential and rich as Rathinasamy. However, the latter feels an indelible mark on his honour to have never won a match against Pettaikaran. This element anchors the narrative. The climax and the consequences that unfold as

the film reaches its end, draw their momentum from the rivalry between Rathinasamy and Pettaikaran.

That cockfighting is a serious game is clear from the fact that Pettaikaran never reveals his training techniques to anyone but his disciples and his three most trustworthy men: Durai, Karuppu, and Ayub (00:06:50). The intensity of the final game lies not in what plays out in the arena but in what the roosters come to represent: they carry the pride and reputation of the men who train, own, and identify with them. Clifford Geertz's idea of deep play is therefore useful because it explains how a game can involve stakes far greater than money or victory. Yet *Aadukalam* also complicates Geertz's account of cockfighting as a symbolic display of status. As the relationship between Pettaikaran and Karuppu deteriorates, the film reveals that prestige is not merely performed in the arena; it can become a fragile and destructive form of authority. The cockfight thus becomes the language through which jealousy, hierarchy, and betrayal are both expressed and intensified.

The most crucial aspect of deep play as per Geertz is: the stakes involved do not justify the utilitarian aspect of the game. It is not only money that is at stake but also, honour, sentiments, and one's sense of personal success is invested into the game. *Aadukalam* is about cockfighting but the main character that weaves the narrative together is Karuppu, Pettaikaran's jockey and initiator, who initiates all cocks into fights. Son to a single mother, Karuppu lives in the utmost poverty. His home resembles a small cramped alley, that can barely accommodate two people. His mother constantly complains about having to do odd jobs at an old age to make ends meet. His house is mortgaged, but Karuppu cares only about his cocks and tournaments. He claims to work hard, and it is true that Karuppu is undefeated in his cock fighting skills—he is quick to act, nimble with his movements and pays utmost attention to the game; which gives his craft an edge over his

competitors—but he barely pays any attention to domestic matters. It is his inability to think beyond cockfighting that has reduced his home to such a despondent state. His poor judgment of priorities exasperates his mother, but for Karuppu’s emotional investment in the game prevents him from paying any heed to her rants. When his mother threatens to kill one of the cocks for food, he lashes out and threatens her: “If you dare touch it, I’ll kill you” (00:15:43).

Karuppu’s extreme response establishes the passion he has for the game which extends to his deep loyalty for Pettaikaran. He refuses to borrow a single more penny than he deserves and considers it his utmost honour to be able to help Pettaikaran win the game. When the movie opens the police is raiding a match between Pettaikaran and Rathinasamy. The match is declared inconclusive because of the raid. Rathinasamy is desperate to win and assures the players that the raid was not his doing (he is a police officer with considerable powers in the area), but Pettaikaran refuses to compete with him ever again. Despite being a police officer who could have falsely charged Pettaikaran and his men, Rathinasamy follows the rules of the game with all honesty. Winning fairly in the cockfighting arena means more to him than the power and influence he possesses as a police officer. He also thrashes his men for stealing Pettaikaran’s cocks without his knowledge and refuses to charge a case against Pettaikaran’s men when they kill his hen in revenge. As per Geertz’s observation, cockfighting has an element of prestige attached to it. Therefore, trainers and practitioners avoid rule violation and foul play. Rathinasamy’s degeneration from an honest player to a corrupt player (and police officer) highlights the shadow element of a high-stakes game.

Geertz describes the Balinese cockfight as an “image, fiction, a model, a metaphor. . . a means of expression” where the fight’s purpose is not to heighten or assuage social passions but to display passions in a medium of “feather, blood, crowds, and money” (23). In the scene where

Karuppu's cock runs away from the play field, Pettaikaran asks Karuppu to cut the cock because he believes that "Pettaikaran's cocks must face death bravely in the arena only" (00:35:15). The cock that runs from the game cannot be Pettaikaran's because he is not a man who runs away from a challenge. This resolute obstinacy is what disables Pettaikaran from welcoming new players into his team of trainers and from allowing other emerging players from his team, like Karuppu, to be publicly acknowledged as better players. Geertz's theorisation in this context reads as idealistic for he seems to attach a very naïve perception of passion to the game which involves such high stakes. While it takes extreme efforts to get a cock ready for the game, Geertz does not quite explain how those passions affect the trainers, and how it affects their lives outside the arena.

J.I. (Hans) Bakker in "Deeper Play" explores how Geertz's "Deep Play" misses the socio-cultural and political-economic context of the religious ceremonies in his thick description of the Balinese cockfight (81). While it is true that any thick description will have a limited expanse and culture as a lived experience will always exceed that, this paper explores the neglected aspects of human relations—with the self and one's community—as an essential s of deep play. Casey O'Donnell on "Balinese Cockfight: Deeply Extending Play" succinctly notes that "deep play is always implicated in the game itself" where it is impossible to hold the game at an arm's length when a player is so deeply involved in the ecosystem of the game. The player and the game come-to-be as a singular entity that affect each other, where the game is affected by the player as much as the player is affected by the game.

Muhammad A. Kavesh in his discussion of cockfighting culture in rural Pakistan presents a sensory anthropological approach to analyse the love for cockfighting in Pakistan. In an attempt to explore inter-species intimacy, Kavesh explores the sound, smell, training process, and the commingling of violence and cared in the cockfighting cultures of South Punjab (153). Beyond

the sensual and the textual, Kavesh's discussion about the Pakistani cockfighting culture investigates the the relational and emotional elements of cockfights that Geertz's thick description of the Balinese cockfights glosses over, but does not explore deeply.

The next interplay of the personal and the game emerges when Rathinasamy's mother refuses to eat or drink as her health constantly deteriorating. In a state of unconscious delirium, she requests her son to defeat Pettaikaran at any cost and bring the lost honour home. Women are generally not associated with cockfighting, neither do they seem to be allowed to participate in or witness cockfights and yet, Rathinasamy's mother's deep investment into the game seems to prevent her from dying peacefully. Her sense of personal honour, familial legacy, and social respect is so deeply intertwined that she can barely think of anything else despite being on her deathbed (00:36:35). The film's narrative structure is deeply rooted in the anxieties associated with the depth of the play. Geertz hints towards this unease that Rathinasamy's mother feels when he equates "pride to selfhood, selfhood to cocks, and cocks to destruction;" it is not that the game in itself matters, but the deep associations it comes to have with the individual sense of pride that makes it so essential for survival (24).

The first seeds of distrust sprout when Rathinasamy helps Durai with his bail. Despite being from opposite factions, Rathinasamy helps Durai; this action moves Durai because the people whom he counted on did not show up when Rathinasamy did. Pettaikaran senses foul play but his first instinct is not to help Durai figure out the web of lies, but to exclude him from further discussions regarding the tournament. The exclusion comes from a place of fear where Pettaikaran does not want Durai to leak their trade secrets. Geertz in "Deep Play" opines that the "slaughter in the cockfighting is not a depiction of how things literally are among men, but, what is almost worse, of how, from a particular angle, they imaginatively are" (25). The Durai-Rathinasamy incident

challenges the observation altogether. It is observed that Pettaikaran's shrewd nature is not only manifested during the game, but it also leaks through his personality in all the decisions that he makes. Cock fighting is not an isolated game that happens only during tournaments or from a couple months before. It is a temperament that the trainer and their team inhabit; it is their personality, occupation, obsession, passion, and sole purpose.

So deeply ingrained is the cock fight in the men who play them that their domestic lives have also to be planned accordingly. Pettaikaran consoles a heartbroken Karuppu with a reminder that men like them can only ever get involved with women who are content with their husband's nomadic life. He explains that since cock fighters spend most of their time fighting or preparing for a fight, it is impossible to stay with a woman who does not support this madness. This scene puts Rathinasamy's mother's desperation into perspective. The woman who spent her life supporting her husband's cockfights is unable to accept her son's defeat in the game. Rathinasamy goes to the extent of killing Ayub to incite Pettaikaran to participate in the tournament to be able to win at least one game before his mother dies (00:48:11). Geertz's argument that to treat cock fighting as a pastime tends to obscure the cognitive and emotional impact it has, rings most true in Rathinasamy's desperation to win (27).

Then real opportunity appears when Pettaikaran approaches Rathinasamy to seek permission to conduct a tournament in Ayub's name. The dialogue that establishes the sheer importance of the game is when Pettaikaran challenges Rathinasamy that if he were to allow the tournament to happen, all his fighter cocks will be defeated; if Rathinasamy wins even one fight, Pettaikaran swears to tonsure his head and his moustache, fall at Rathinasamy's feet and quit cockfighting forever; if Rathinasamy loses he has to follow suit. The stakes are just too high. Pettaikaran says: "you say hair is money and competition is life" and asks Rathinasamy to accept

the challenge. This scene illustrates how cocks become “symbolic expressions or magnifications of their owner’s self” as hair and beard are not simply hair but a badge of honour for respectable men, and to shave off one’s head is to carry the mark of shame. Even if it does not signify much to the spectator, it carries extreme shame for the person whose head has been shaved. Cockfighting is so neatly encoded within the culture that a police officer agrees to give a permit for the illegal tournament, risking not only his job and prestigious post, but also his regular source of income and social stature just to be able to win a tournament.

This is where honour starts taking negative connotations. The “status gambling” is at its peak here, where both parties have way more to lose than a mere cockfight (17). It is this sense of loss that makes the two men extremely afraid of losing, where desperation to win is an all-consuming force that blurs all ethical boundaries and renders the men incapable of thinking beyond the game. What follows are the visuals of men squatting around each other, preparing their cocks as if they were getting ready for war. They are fed high quality diets and the best cocks are brought in from everywhere. (00:54:19-00:54:36). Karuppu forcefully steals Irene’s tuition fee as a fine for having wasted his cock-rearing time. Karuppu spent that time trailing her against her wishes. When it is time for the tournament, and he finds himself unprepared, the ends justify the means (00:55:31). He spends all of that money to arrange the best possible food and training items for his cock despite Pettaikaran’s strict orders to cut the run-away cock.

The sheer size crowd that comes in to attend the tournament is staggering (56:11). This scene establishes that cockfight in Madurai is not a marginal, local game but one that attracts thousands of spectators. Rathinasamy is shown injecting his cocks with “English drugs,” so their one shot will equal ten of the opposing team’s. The spectators resemble Geertz’s “superorganism” where despite the game being all about one cock defeating the other, the men surrounding the arena

are invested into the gam—with all their senses—as if it were a personal win or lose for them. As Rathinasamy keeps successively losing the first few matches, the stakes, which were already high, multiply tenfold. In this highly charged atmosphere, what matters is winning. The interesting part is that the victory comes from the effort of a bird who does not entirely understand the burden it carries: “the cock cannot speak, but it knows how to kill” (1:04:21). In this extremely electric environment is where the main conflict of the latter half of the movie is introduced.

Karuppu wants his cock to fight and he is extremely confident about his cock, but Pettaikaran warns him that if that cock were to ever appear in his field of sight, he will cut it himself. Karuppu is so confident of his cock’s abilities and so desperate to pay back Irene’s tuition fee that he registers the cock for a thousand-rupee fight just to be able to pay her back (01:02:31). Pettaikaran reaches the arena fuming and warns Karuppu of the poison that pride and arrogance are. Ironically, Pettaikaran is operating from the very emotions that he is warning Karuppu against. It is humiliating for Pettaikaran to have his authority challenged by a newcomer, and Karuppu can’t leave the tournament without testing his faith in his cock. It is not that Karuppu deliberately disrespect Pettaikaran, but his deep investment into the cockfight blinds him to his duties. Pettaikaran publicly disown Karuppu and distances himself from all his fights. He sacrifices his strongest jockey for his honour. Relations cease to matter when authority and masculinity are questioned (1:06:56). He is nonetheless relieved when the cock wins.

When Karuppu caves in and accepts Rathinasamy’s offer of ten thousand rupees for another fight, Pettaikaran publicly denounces Karuppu. Karuppu, who is enticed by the prospective win of ten thousand against the loss of a single rupee is very excited for the match. Karuppu’s material deprivation and history of poverty cannot be ignored in this case. His loyalty to Pettaikaran takes third priority after his desire for victory and desperation for money. The depth of the play manifests

visibly here. Despite the high stakes involved, the adrenaline rush of the game is such that the idea of a loss is not as discouraging as the idea of victory is alluring. Karuppu's cock kills Rathinasamy's cock in that round. Geertz explains that the thing that makes Balinese cockfighting deep "is not the money in itself, but what, the more of it that is involved the more so, money causes to happen: the migration of the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cock fight" (17).

Geertz presents the world of cockfighting as an honourable, code-driven game respected by everyone. He does equate the game with "simulation of the social matrix" but does not gloss over negative emotional tendencies that defeat and betrayal engender. The jealousy, envy, passion, rage, anger, hatred, fear, and desperation that convert grown men into children fighting for a snatched toy is either not a part of the Balinese social scene or has not been delved into by Geertz. While Geertz does specify that "a man never best against the cock owned by a member of his own group," there is no mention of what would happen if a situation like that of Karuppu and Pettaikaran were to arise (18). If Geertz's observations were to be singularly considered, the fault lies entirely with Karuppu for dreaming beyond what he was permitted to, but if Karuppu's context, reason, background, and social situation were taken into consideration, he does not seem entirely wrong.

Rathinasamy is enraged by the loss and asks Karuppu to play again in exchange for a farmland. Karuppu, who has only seen poverty all his life and is blown away by the enormity of ten thousand rupees, refuses to play again. This is when Rathinasamy promises to pay three hundred thousand rupees if Karuppu was to win, in exchange for ten thousand is Rathinasamy's cock was to defeat Karuppu's. The match is filmed as if it were a war zone; the affective exchange permeates the atmosphere. A child is seen crying from the intensity of the emotions (01:19:50-01:19:58); Karuppu's hands are shivering as he prays desperately under his breath (01:21:06). In

an extremely stressful match, the spectators are seen to go through a wide range of emotions during the last two minutes when Karuppu's cock finally defeats Rathinasamy's. The scene exemplifies Geertz's idea that great emotional absorption will mean greater general absorption in the match (22).

Pettaikaran wants Karuppu to lose to be able to maintain his authority in the group, but he wants Karuppu to win so Rathinasamy remains defeated. He is engulfed in an emotional tug-of-war: he is angry when the fight is declared, (for how his order was defied), anxious as the fight goes on in hopes of favourable results, and simultaneously happy-sad when the match is won. The happiness soon turns into disappointment because Pettaikaran takes Karuppu's win as a personal loss. The final announcement: "Karuppu is the next Pettaikaran" threatens Pettaikaran's hold over the cock fighting group. He walks away dejected from the tournament despite having won all the matches. Rathinasamy shaves off his hair and beard to his mother's humiliation; she feels she has lost the honour that was generationally accumulated by Rathinasamy's family (1:23:54). While Pettaikaran has won, Rathinasamy decides against taking unethical revenge against him because he can see what Pettaikaran lost because of his victory. He knows that this sense of loss will make the group implode, and that Pettaikaran will not be able to digest the dishonour that Karuppu's victory has brought him.

The next half of the movie is where Pettaikaran goes from being the patriarch of the group to a Shakespearean Iago who pits his own group members against each other, inciting them to kill Karuppu (02:02:44). He steals Karuppu's prize money just before he was to pay for the canteen space at the railway station (1:50:24). He even badmouths Karuppu in front of Irene. He thrashes his wife on suspicions of adultery with Karuppu (02:03:30). She left her family to be with Pettaikaran, only to be ousted because of his perceived sense of defeat against another man.

Karuppu refuses to suspect Pettaikaran despite his mother and his friend's warning that the disappearance of money is extremely suspicious (01:51:02). What follows is the deepest play of what a sense of failure with a game can do to life of a person. Karuppu reluctantly realises the web of lies that Pettaikaran has surrounded him in when he finds the bag of his lost prize money at Pettaikaran's home.

Alan Dundes' chapter titled "Gallus as Phallus: A Psychoanalytic Cross-Cultural Consideration of the Cockfight as Fowl Play" makes a startling observation that was hiding in plain sight. In equating the rooster with the male phallus, Dundes explains how the winning rooster can be taken to represent the owner's potency, which here is Karuppu, while the defeated rooster represents the emasculation of the owner (299). In this game, Pettaikaran never loses but something worse happens: his roosters never enter the arena. Not only does Karuppu's cock win all the matches, but it is also the cock that Pettaikaran insisted on being cut. He even threatened to cut Karuppu if the cock was not cut. The cock's victory not only makes Pettaikaran feel emasculated but also discredits his 40 years of cockfighting knowledge with the victory of a cock he did not support. This is perhaps why he compared himself to a beggar when Karuppu tried to honour him by giving him the entire prize money. It is this feeling of emasculation that makes him thrash his wife and accuse her of adultery.

True to Geertz's description, cockfighting becomes a spectacle that is culturally disseminated and popularly enjoyed. Furthermore, it entangles lives and ways of living. *Aadukalam's* success lies in presenting the destructive elements of the passion. A cultural analysis fails to take into consideration the pitfalls of deep play because while the game is played and performed in public, the repercussions are dealt with in one's personal space. While Pettaikaran himself walked away from his previous trainer's group along with Durai, he does not have the

ability to grant a similar freedom to Karuppu. Karuppu is young and inexperienced so Pettaikaran accords his initial victory to beginner's luck, but by the end of the tournament the atmosphere shifts drastically. The tragic element of the film emerges from the destruction of the bonds that begin as shared passion for the game and ultimately destroy everyone involved.

Clifford Geertz's description of a cockfight tends to be romanticised in some descriptions: "What the cockfight says it says it in a vocabulary of sentiment—the thrill of risk, the despair of loss, the pleasure of triumph" (27). When simply read, this statement gives a grand impression of cockfight as a cultural expression but what lies beneath the thrill, despair, and pleasure is what *Aadukalam* presents. The very thrill that motivates a trainer to train his cocks to win can also compel him to eliminate competition by any means necessary.

Conclusion

Aadukalam demonstrates rooster fighting as a game that exceeds realm of mere entertainment into deep personal entanglements. The arena is a social space which is entered long before the tournament happens. Those invested in the game spend their entire lives in the arena: planning, training, procuring cocks, strategising, and arranging funds for the game. This is a play in which skill, loyalty, masculine identity, and public respect are tested before an eager community of spectators. Through its visual presentation of training, preparation, spectatorship, and competition, the film displays why cockfighting holds such emotional power for its participants. The birds are treated as carriers of their handlers' reputation, making every contest a matter of personal as well as public significance.

The film is a visual representation of why Geertz calls Balinese cockfights "sentimental education," and yet, it is a cautionary tale for those who may assume that the game is devoid of

any pitfalls (27). While Geertz does mention that people go to cockfights to find out how a usually composed man transforms in the arena, this paper highlights the depravity that follows that transformation. A win may instil faith in one's capabilities but a loss makes the trainer desperate and needy beyond himself. As represented in Rathinasamy's case, to have one's honour attached to a game where roosters fight against each other is not an easy burden to carry. Money is perhaps the least important thing that Rathinasamy loses, for Pettaikaran ends up losing his family, his boys, his respect, and ultimately his life for being unable to accept another winner into his group. The relationship between Pettaikaran and Karuppu reveals the central conflict of the film. The way Karuppu's success changes the meaning of his relationship with Pettaikaran reveals that the game transcends all human values and relations. The film's achievement lies in revealing how mentorship can become destructive to the point of fatality when the mentor sees the student's achievement as a challenge rather than a continuation of his own legacy.

The tragedy of *Aadukalam* and therefore the tragedy of cockfighting lies in the slippery slope between pride and jealousy that a game with such high stakes can generate. The film does not denounce rivalry itself, it recognises the excitement, discipline, and communal energy that surround the cockfight. However, it also shows that competition becomes dangerous when honour is treated as fragile and when masculinity must constantly be proved through victory over others. Ultimately, *Aadukalam* takes Geertz's narrative deeper and becomes a powerful story about the cost of tying one's identity entirely to prestige. This is the hidden cost of cockfighting that Geertz alludes to repeatedly but never concretely. Cockfighting offers its characters recognition and belonging, but it also creates a system in which admiration can sour into resentment. By moving from the thrill of public competition to the pain of betrayal and loss, the film exposes the instability beneath masculine honour.

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