

**Reflection of Social Reality in Films:
A Comparative Study of the Movies
Cooper's *Mr. Deed Goes to Town* and N.S. Krishnan's *Nallathambi***

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Abstract

Adaptation of foreign films is not so new to Indian cinema. In particular, the *Kollywood* started adapting foreign films when the narratives of Tamil cinema switched to Non-Mythological Narratives manifesting the socio-cultural and political realities.

The great depression epoch is the most crucial period that the world countries have come across the post-world war scenario. There are a lot of films from the great depression wave across the globe, reflecting their social realities. There is a need of deconstructive studies on such film narratives. *Mr. Deed goes to town* by Frank Capra is noticed as a film reflecting the great depression after the civilian war of America. *Nallathambi*, a blockbuster of N.S. Krishnan, which is an adaptive work of the earlier one, is a film of the same motive. These films from almost the same epoch of the great depression but from two different countries, i.e., two different societies, reflect their social realities with their own narrative aesthetics.

This article pursues a comparative descriptive study of both the films to study the nuances of adaptation in reflecting their social realities.

Keywords: Frank Capra, *Mr. Deed goes to town*, N.S. Krishnan, *Nallathambi*, Social Reality, films, Social Culture, narratives.



Frank Capra (1897-1991)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Capra

1. Introduction

1.1 Societies and Social Realities

Societies are not just made with any pre planned intentions or planning. Societies are formed by people and their varied behaviour towards one another. There are various factors like tradition, culture, socio – political, economic changes and others. Social culture is nothing but the compilation of repeated narration by the society to itself. Such narrations happen to be a part and parcel of the social practices.

Reality is an assemblage of what actually exists. Social Reality can be formally defined as an assemblage of the social realm existence. As John Searle summarizes in his theory, the social sphere is not as real as the concrete, physical world, and it is somehow more dependent on people’s minds. Hence, the social reality equips a clarified study on the concern societies.

1.2 Social Realities & Films

Lenin, the Great Russian revolutionary leader in 1922 said, “*Of all the arts, the cinema is for us the most important*”. From its origin both as an art form and as a social practice, Films are known for their ultimate potential to impact the societies they belong to, on their socio-political and economical factors. Film being a serious art form of narration tends to reflect the social reality over decades. Many a times these films happen to be a reflection of realities of people belonging to the sphere of working class.

2. Review of Literature

Robert A. Wilson through his work “social reality and institutional facts: sociality within and without intentionality” questions John Searle’s *The Construction of Social Reality* to sketch an alternative way of thinking about the relationships between intentionality and “social facts” or “social reality”.

An article ‘The ideological project of “Mr. Deed Goes to town”.’ by Patrick Gerster summarises the social reality of America during 1930s after the civilian war and how the film has helped to define the national preoccupations.



N. S. Krishnan (1908-1957)

Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N. S. Krishnan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N._S._Krishnan)

The biography of N S Krishnan “N.S.K. Kalaivaanar aana Kadhai” by Muthuraman drafts the political and ideological approach of N.S. Krishnan towards theatre, cinema and society.

3. Research Sample and Methodology

The entire study operates within Media and Cultural Studies framework. The deconstructive study of films is done on textual analysis approach. Tracing out the research trails on Tamil films scholar have formulated discourse through analyzing texts within the qualitative research structure. Textual studies enable breaking down the detailed characteristics of film text through unveiling various elements like dialogues, plot signs, codes, and ideologies.

Two films Cooper’s *Mr. Deed Goes to town* and N.S. Krishnan’s *Nallathambi* are selected through purposive sampling.

4. Analysis, Interpretation, and Discourse

Novel / text to cinema is the most ancient practice since the evolution of cinema began. Later when film makers started making their own stories from their creativity cellar, every film maker started practicing the art of story writing too.

Mr. Deed goes to town [1936], an Academia award winning movie by Frank Capra, being an inspired work from the short story “Opera hat” by Clarence Budington Kell and is a notable movie belonging to the great depression era and stands as one of the perfect examples for Text to cinema. At the same time the Tamil film ‘Nallathambi’ [1949] scripted Debut Screenplay work of *Arignar Annadurai* was adopted from the earlier movie is one of the perfect examples of

movie-to-movie inspirational works, which at the same time pioneered the Dravidian wave of Tamil Cinema.

Annadurai, known by his title *Perarignar* [Meaning the great scholar] tends to be the impeccable icon of the political sphere of Tamil Nadu. His contributions not only towards the political history of the state but also towards various domains like Teaching, Theatre, Literature, Journalism and Cinema justifies himself for the Title *Perarignar*. His Debut Screenplay work *Nallathambi* which was a tool for his political Manifestation is being analysed here.

Analysing the movies, both *Mr. Deed goes to town* and *Nallathambi* are the movies reflecting the realities of the social background they belong to. Placing on a weigh scale both *Mr. Deed* and *Nallathambi* are no way lesser to one another. Both the films very strongly speak aloud about a depressed phase that their respective societies were going through then. Very wise fully they speak about the society's voiceless people, their problems and the solutions for them. Though they seem to be similar in their principles, but their perspectives vary according to their writers.

This comparative analysis is a deconstructive study of both the narratives to explore how the playwrights have worked upon to portray, shape, and inform their society through their art. Five important scenes from both the movies are randomly selected and analysed breaking down the detailed characteristics of film text by examining various elements like dialogues, plot, signs, codes, and ideologies.

4.1 Hero Introduction

Both the stories begin in a similar pattern. A rich personality of the city passes away, writing a will that one of his nephews in a faraway village has the rights to claim all his properties. The beginning of Cooper's play was so precise in the death episode of one Mr. Martin Semple, richest man of the town. It was made so short without taking much time. Random shots of a car driven wild on the highway run over fence and Mr. Martin gets killed. But on the other hand, in N.S. Krishnan's *Nallathambi*, the *Zamindhaar's* [literally known as landlord in Tamil] death episode eats up almost 10 minutes at the beginning. 'Songs' of the movie being an integral tradition of Tamil cinema stands as the strength as well as the weakness for the film, whereas the first song and a stage play turns one to wonder "why it is needed here?".

The Tamil movie also has a small addition to the will, that the *Zamindhaar* has a daughter and his nephew (Zamindar's sister's son) who has the legal claim should marry her.

Hence the concerned officials go in search of the nephew who tends to be the protagonist of the play and bring him to the city for further proceedings, which is common in both the movies and the play goes on.

The Stream of differences between both the plays starts from the characterisation of the protagonists itself. Mr. Longfellow Deed or his introduction was so simple that his housemaid introduces him as a Tuba Player and a Post card poet, who writes poems on Post Cards. When she is questioned about his absence, she says he has gone to volunteer for the local fire engine crew. All these frames show that “Longfellow Deed is just a simple and innocent man”.

When it comes to *Nallathambi*, as discussed earlier, this part is intensified with a famous song *Nattukkoru sedhi solla...* in a *Therukoothu* [traditional Tamil folk art] format. Nallathambi unveils his face from a *Parai* [traditional Tamil instrument] as a ‘*Kattiyankaaran*’ - buffoon of the play. A 15 min song of this play turns to be propaganda for Periyar’s **Self respect Movement**. There is nothing to wonder since both the writer and the protagonist cum director - producer belong to the movement; they have used the film as a weapon for their propaganda.

1949 is the year by which DMK was founded by C.N. Annadurai. Being precise, though this film was released well in advance to date on which the party was inaugurated (*Nallathambi* was released on 4th Feb. 1949; DMK was officially formed on 17th September 1949 - Periyar’s birthday), this song penned by *Pattukkottai Kalyana Sundharam* explains the principles, aim and the philosophies of the DMK party as a foreseeing factor. The song was crafted in a way saying that the right-wing rule is going to end and the Rational Sun is going to rise. The song lists various elements in the format “*Andha kaalam*” and “*Indha Kaalam*”, literally meaning “then” and “now”.

‘*Kattiyankaaran*’ - the buffoon is considered as an important person in the Tamil street-play art. His ultimate role is to introduce the characters, entertain people with comedies, time and again. He alone has the ultimate freedom to speak anything beyond the script to engage people in a jovial way. *Nallathambi*, the protagonist who is a freelance theatre artist in the film, opens his own curtains as a *Kattiyankaaran*. As mentioned above, the song enlists a prolonged list of social reforms that the self-respect movement or the Dravidian movement was aiming for, which includes a society with self-respect, fundamental rights, rational thoughts, women rights, non – alcoholic society (a dry state). etc. N S Krishnan being a representative of the Dravidian movement through this song declares that the Right wing rule of the elite community is going to fall soon and the Dravidian party is going to get into action in future.

Cooper’s **Longfellow** has nothing unique on his entry, except being a simple man from a village far away from the city, having no idea about it, whereas *Nallathambi* has intensified the protagonist’s entry with a song of ideologies.

4.2 The City Life

Longfellow seems to be a very innocent man at the beginning of the play. He actually finds the entire city lifestyle new and wonders how to cope up with it. He wonders what to do with the huge sum of money his uncle has left behind. He finds something wrong with the system but stays confused sorting it out. The only controversial change he does is that he prevents a huge sum of money being spent lavishly on opera house.

But *Nallathambi* is portrayed as a social activist from the beginning. Volunteering stage dramas with social messages and other activities would show him as a man of social responsibility. He seems to be a man of ideology. Since his visit to the *Zamindhaar*'s palace, all his activities exhibit that he has some social responsibilities and some uncertain intentions. The only problem he had was how to use the money, benefitting the needy.

4.3 The Rice Hoarding

As the film moves, Mr Longfellow straight away goes to the city as the legal heir as per the will of his uncle Mr. Martin Semple, richest man of the town. Surprised seeing the huge city, its landscape his palace, etc., Longfellow gets confused what to do and what not to do. A dialogue from the film "They created a lot of great palaces here, but they forgot to create the noblemen to put in them" would explain that.

Nallathambi has something different to do with. He jumps out of the train on his way to the town seeing his friend *Raani* (T.A. Mathuram). Meeting his friend, he comes to know through Raani that her stingy father has hoarded a lot of rice in his house. Hearing this *Nallathambi* asks Raani to take him to her house. There again playing a prank on Raani's father *Nallathambi* makes him to provide free food for the beggars.

1940s, the post independence period of India, was the time by which the entire country was going through a severe economic crisis. 1964 to 1967, the period by which *Bhaktavatchalam* served Tamil Nadu as the Chief Minister, is marked as a dark period of the state's political history. Rice shortage and hoarding was a big problem then, as many landlords and rich men hoarded much rice under their control, which caused shortage, price hike, famine and hunger. Annadurai, the writer of the play, used his very first film to express his opposition against rice hoarding and rice shortage. There is something else to note in the political history of Tamil Nadu -- that same Annadurai after adorning the chief minister's chair of the state in 1967, worked hard to eradicate rice hoarding and shortage. He announced "one unit of rice - one rupee" scheme, as it was promised during his electoral campaign, for the working class through the ration system. Foreseeing his mission, Annadurai expressed it in this film *Nallathambi*.

4.4 The Social Responsibility

Longfellow would realise that there is a group of working class suffering with hunger and poverty due to the great depression as a farmer breaks into his house with fierce anger yelling at Longfellow. Feeding him with food to reduce his hunger, Longfellow realises that he has a responsibility to help the hungry people with the assets he has got through his uncle's death will.

Nallathambi and his friend Raani visit the nearby villages in person to examine the situation there. Their field work results in finding that famine and poverty spread all over the village. They find people suffering for food and some struggling hard for good clothing too. The most shocking thing they find is, though Rice is a prominent crop cultivated in the village,

people starve for food. Again, Annadurai stresses his view on rice hoarding, shortage, price hike and its affordability indirectly here.

Both the protagonists after these respective scenes turn to be very fierce in their social responsibilities. The social realities they learnt through their experiences turned them to be so. Both the heroes start spending their money for the needy, which irritates the rest of the family hence they file a case against them, framing them as ‘mentally unstable persons’. The climaxes of both the plays are extremely unique by their own way.

4.5 The Courtroom

The final episode of the play is a courtroom trial against the Protagonists of the respective films. First analysing Longfellow’s trial, we see that he gets accused as a mad man who is incapable of being a legal heir of his uncle. Initially he stays quiet but at a point of time he defends himself and that act is scripted to be the most interesting fact of the play. He pinpoints that everyone in the courtroom has some subconscious action while they think like some are ‘O’ fillers [filling the letter O on a printed matter], some are ear pullers [pull their ears], doodlers [sketch alienated characters]. The same way he plays tuba while he thinks, which doesn’t mean he is insane. He very clearly shows how the huge sum of money by the richest is spent useless and on the other side the poor starve to win their bread. Hence, he states that ‘he has decided to give everyone, who is in need 10 acres of land, one cow and one horse each. If they work hard for three years is all their own’. The judiciary panel finds him sensible and ends the trial just by saying ‘Longfellow was not only sane, he was the sanest person ever walk into the courtroom’.

The courtroom portion of *Nallathambi* again gets intensified through the visions of Annadurai and N.S. Krishnan. *Nallathambi* is accused as an insane personality as Longfellow was done. But being a sensible man of ideologies *Nallathambi* makes it very clear about his vision and mission towards the society. Being quite different, *Nallathambi* brings the villagers whom he met during his field work into the courtroom for the trial. The most prominent socio-political element of the film is ‘*Kindhanaar Kadha kalatchebam*’. *Nallathambi* in trial is framed as an insane man quoting his ‘*Kindhanaar Kadha kalatchebam*’, which is actually a street play of N.S. Krishnan, entitled ‘*Kindhanaar Chaarithiram*’ which is again a spoof material of ‘*Nandhanaar Charithiram*’. ‘*Kadha kalatchebam*’ is a *Bhraminical* style of religious sermon, where mythological stories are narrated on a public sphere. Annadurai and N.S. Krishnan very wisely have used this space in the film for the exhibition of their political ideology. Dr. Ambedkar, father of Indian constitution is the inspiration of the character *Kindhan* here. It narrates how a boy from an oppressed caste rises as an icon by educating himself. This portion is an absolute rebel against the elite culture *Kadha kalatchebam*. Narrating a nonmythological script, story of *Kindhan*, (from an oppressed caste) empowers himself through education, through an elite style of oration. This was a rebel art form practiced by N.S. Krishnan in his plays. Using the same in the film has intensified the entire script as political propaganda.

5. Findings and Conclusion

The deconstructive study of the films Cooper's *Mr. Deed goes to town* and N.S. Krishnan's *Nallathambi* finds that both have the same intention of reflecting their social realities.

But on a scale of comparison, *Nallathambi* is found to be more intensified on its intentions. *Mr. Deed* has the only intention to eradicate the economic imbalance of the society. The film's major intention is also the same. Longfellow in the film stresses "They created a lot of great palaces here, but they forgot to create the noblemen to put in them". At the end of the play Longfellow turns to be the nobleman. But *Nallathambi* is portrayed as a man of ideologies from the very beginning, as his introduction song itself frames him so. The same way the entire film *Nallathambi* is not only against the economic imbalance of the society but also focuses on social reform. It has a few more objectives being a propaganda for a political movement. Though Annadurai has intensified the script with his ideological factors, the film nowhere reduces the level of interest from the audience view.

This study concludes that the reflection of social realities in both the films focuses on the poor and working class and the economic imbalance in the society. At the same time though *Nallathambi* tends to be ideologically intensified due to the political stand of the script writer, actor, and the producer.

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