Forbidden Geographies: Mapping Caste, Class, and Gender in the Film *Nishiddho* (*The Forbidden*)

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Abstract

This article examines the spatial politics of caste, class, and gender in *Nishiddho* or *The Forbidden* (2022), directed by Tara Ramanujan, through the concept of 'forbidden geographies' or the spaces that are inaccessible, restricted, or surveilled based on social hierarchies. The film follows Rudra, a Bengali sculptor, and Chaavi, a Tamil midwife and maid, as they navigate urban precarity, labour exploitation, and an inter-caste, inter-class relationship in Kochi. Through spatial analysis, this article argues that *Nishiddho* exposes how caste and class shape spatial access, while gendered restrictions further constrain mobility. Through its portrayal of workplaces, domestic spaces, and the urban landscape, the film highlights how social structures shape belonging, exclusion, and transgression in contemporary Kerala. Ultimately, *Nishiddho* explores the invisibilised architectures of caste and class that govern everyday life, positioning migrant labourers and marginalised subjects at the centre of a contested spatial order.

Keywords: Marginalisation; Forbidden spaces; Migrant labour; Gender

Introduction

The Malayalam film industry has often grappled with questions of caste, class, and spatial marginalisation, yet mainstream cinema frequently erases or dilutes these intersections. By portraying upper-caste men as heroes, cinema attempted to reinforce hegemonic ideologies at the end of the twenty-first century. In these films, characters from the marginalised communities were only sidekicks or criminals. This systemic absence or marginalisation is not accidental; it is the product of structural inequalities in society that cinema both reflects and reproduces. Released in 2022, the film *Nishiddho* or *The Forbidden* features the lives of migrant workers, two in particular, who seldom find a space on the

silver screen. In the light of Kerala's increasing dependence on migrant labour, this community has already gained some visibility in Malayalam cinema. But these portrayals are often limited and stereotypical rather than offering deep, empathetic, or politically engaging narratives. So, Tara has chosen to present a nuanced and sensitive portrayal of the migrant subjectivity in her debut directorial venture.

The movie focuses on Chaavi and Rudra, who have migrated to Cochin from Tamil Nadu and Bengal, respectively. Their experiences highlight how caste and class hierarchies shape urban belonging, labour exploitation, and interpersonal relationships. This article examines the concept of 'forbidden geographies,' referring to spaces that remain inaccessible, surveilled, or restricted due to entrenched social structures. It employs a spatial analysis of *Nishiddho* through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and Edward Soja's concept of thirdspace. Lefebvre's work unpacks how urban spaces reproduce caste and class hierarchies, while Soja's thirdspace framework enables examination of how migrants negotiate spaces that are neither entirely oppressive nor entirely liberatory. The spatial analysis of a film involves examining elements such as locations, movements, relationships, and even the characters' mental states. In this way, one can understand the power dynamics and narrative progression in the film. By analysing the key locations in the film—workplace, home, and cityscape— this article argues that *Nishiddho* highlights the often-overlooked spatial politics of caste and class in contemporary India. This essay also argues that*Nishiddho* reveals how caste and class influence spatial access, while gender further complicates mobility. It highlights the film's role in exposing the lived realities of those who occupy the fringes of urban society. As Kumar Anand writes,

Here, the intersectionality is that sociological approach which suggests and seeks to

> examine how various social and cultural categories of discrimination interact on multiple levels in the making of the systems of power, contributing to systemic inequalities. The intersectionality perspective assumes that the classical systems of oppression in society do not act independent of each other; instead, these forms of oppression correlate,

creating a system of oppression that reflects the"intersection" of multiple forms of discrimination. (1)

The City as a Caste-inflected and Classed Space

The story of *Nishiddho* is set in Cochin, a frequently imagined cosmopolitan hub in Kerala. In the broader urban landscape of Cochin, many migrants whom the state call *atidhi thozhilaalikal* which can be roughly translated as'guest workers'reside. These migrants are highly concentrated on the city's outskirts. Their accommodations are congested and unclean. One of the film's recurring visual motifs is the contrast between upper-caste, middle-class spaces, and the informal, precarious spaces occupied by migrants. For the migrants, the city is a liminal space where labour, caste identity, and gender intersect to produce heterotopic zones of ambiguity, resistance, and transformation. They live in fragmented and unstable spaces, which ensures no security for their lives or rootedness. This instability resonates with Foucault's notion of heterotopias as sites of crisis and deviation, where individuals who deviate from social norms, whether based on gender, caste, or class, are situated. The title *The Forbidden* itself signals a thematic engagement with spatial boundaries and acts of transgression. The broader urban landscape in *Nishiddho* serves as a contested space in which caste- and class-based exclusions are enacted. Public spaces such as markets, temples, and transportation hubs are depicted as sites of both interaction and exclusion. Rudra and Chaavi's movement through the city is marked by surveillance and social policing, reinforcing their marginalised status. Soja's thirdspace framework helps analyse these urban geographies as sites where dominant spatial orders are challenged, yet remain deeply entrenched in social hierarchies (Soja 1996). The film's visual composition, such as narrow alleyways, congested labour sites, and gated communities, visually reinforces the barriers that prevent lower-caste and working-class individuals from fully accessing urban life. In *Nishiddho,* the protagonists exist in a third space that is neither fully included in the urban economy nor completely outside its structures. Their romance unfolds in the interstices of the city, in spaces not fully controlled by caste or capital. Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space provides a foundational framework for analysing how caste and class hierarchies manifest in *Nishiddho*. Lefebvre argues that space is not merely a passive container but is actively produced

through social relations, power structures, and everyday practices (Lefebvre 1991). The film reveals how urban space is fragmented by class and caste-based exclusions, making certain areas accessible only to privileged groups while others remain confined to the margins. There are many instances of marginalisation based on caste and class. Chaavi brings oleander flowers to the local flower vendor, who sells garlands for Puja. But when she touches the jasmine flower, he says, "Oh! No! Don't touch it, it will wilt! It's for the temple" (*Nishiddho* 25:30-25:32). Discrimination against the lower castes is deeply ingrained in Indian culture. Although untouchability was outlawed, many people continue to face oppression and marginalisation due to their lower status. And if it is a woman, she is doubly marginalised. In another scene, when Rudra's cousin Phani sits on a ladies' seat in a bus, the lady in the same seat looks at him with disgust and says, "Stinks! No bath!" (*Nishiddho* 31:51). Phani says that, no matter how much we take a bath, we're going to stink because of the relentless work they have been doing. In another scene, Usha's father expresses his disdain toward migrant workers, even as his own son works in one of the Gulf countries. Many such instances show that Kerala, despite its progressive social movements, remains deeply structured by caste in its housing, labour, and mobility patterns. *Nishiddho* subtly reveals how caste operates within the city through its depiction of spatial restrictions on both Rudra and Chaavi. Edward Soja's concept of thirdspace (1996) expands on Lefebvre's ideas by emphasising the dynamic and contested nature of spatiality. Thirdspace is a space in which dominant social orders are both reinforced and challenged. In *Nishiddho*, Rudra and Chaavi's interactions across workplace, home, and public spaces illustrate this contested spatiality, as they attempt to navigate and subvert spatial restrictions imposed by their caste and class positions. Both of the central characters speak different languages. Over time, a quiet bond develops between Rudra and Chaavi. Their interaction begins with silence, awkwardness, and subtle observation. They start sharing meals, offering gestures of kindness, and engaging in brief conversations. They create a language which is a mixture of Malayalam and Bengali. They meet in secluded or nonconventional spaces. Their conversations evolve through the narrow alleys of urban garbage dumps and isolated railway tracks. Thus, in *Nishiddho*, the characters create a third space that transcends spatial boundaries, thereby

establishing a new sense of belonging. Though there are hints of attraction, the film never pushes their relationship into conventional romantic territory. Instead, the relationship is marked by mutual understanding and a sense of companionship forged through shared experiences of alienation and labour.

Domestic Spaces: Caste and Class Hierarchies

Domestic environments in *Nishiddho* further illustrate how spatial access is regulated by caste and class. Chaavi, as a Tamil domestic worker, enters upper-caste homes but remains a transient presence, unable to claim ownership or agency within these spaces. The film's depiction of her living quarters, often isolated and poorly maintained, contrasts sharply with the well-kept homes of her employers, emphasising the structural inequalities embedded in domestic spaces. Another vital point is that neither Chaavi nor Rudra has an ideal family. Chaavi lives with an old lady whom she calls *paatti* which means grandmother. She was rescued and adopted by this *paatti* and her late husband. Rudra's parents have died. So, they belong to the 'other space' constructed by society.

Workspaces: Labour Exploitation and Spatial Access

Rudra's introduction talks about how the lives of migrant workers are valued in Kerala. Workers migrate here for employment and to earn income, and they have taken over almost all sectors. Rudra argues that they do more work for low wages and neither have unions nor engage in strikes. Many accidents occur in these workplaces, and the authorities often fail to provide adequate support to the workers or their families. Rudra, a Bengali Sculptor, is confined to a workspace that reinforces his outsider status, both socially and spatially. An implicit caste bias characterises his presence in the art world, as his labour is valued for its utility rather than for creative agency. Similarly, Chaavi's work as a midwife and domestic worker places her within intimate yet subordinate spaces, reflecting how caste and class dictate access to different urban environments. The director also contrasts Rudra, who migrated to Kerala to make ends meet, and Usha's husband, who is enjoying his life in a foreign country without returning to his hometown. The workplace in *Nishiddho* serves as a microcosm of Kerala's labour economy, where caste and class determine not only wages but also physical movement and visibility within the city.

Gendered Spatiality: The Female Migrant Experience

Gender further complicates the spatial politics of *Nishiddho*. Chaavi's restricted mobility and economic dependence reflect how caste and class intersect with patriarchal norms to limit women's agency. Domestic work, often feminised and caste-marked, situates her within spaces that demand her labour but deny her social recognition. The film's narrative highlights how gendered spatial restrictions operate in conjunction with caste and class to maintain existing power structures, rendering transgression both difficult and perilous. Chaavi works as a female pundit, which is again a marginalised job for women. "Women have been barred from this profession because they are considered 'impure' to perform religious rituals and rites during pujas, weddings, funerals and thread ceremonies" (Chatterji 90). Even Rudra is somewhat sceptical of her when he first meets her in connection with his uncle's funeral. Because he has only seen male priests in Bengal. He approves it only because he cannot keep the body in the morgue for another day by giving a thousand rupees.

Chaavi was adopted by an elderly couple when her biological parents attempted to kill her at the moment she was born. Despite the passage of time, the society she lives in still prefers a male child over a female child. A woman is blamed if she bears only girl children, not the husband, whose sperm is solely responsible for the Y chromosome in bearing the male child (Haq 174). It underscores the brutal persistence of gender-based discrimination in Indian society. A woman who cannot have children is also looked down upon. Chaavi yearns to be a mother, although she is unable to have children. When Chaavi takes out the preserved umbilical cord, smells it, and holds it with such tenderness, it encapsulates so much of her silent emotional world: longing, loss, and an aching sense of displacement from motherhood. In such a cultural context that devalues women and their worth, the very presence and survival of a female becomes an act of defiance. Durga Puja, a grand celebration of the feminine divine in India, especially in Bengal, honours Goddess Durga as a powerful, independent force who triumphs over evil. Yet, this cultural glorification starkly contrasts with the lived realities of most Indian women, who continue to face systemic oppression, gender-based violence, and social inequality. While the goddess is revered as a warrior and protector, real women

are often confined to rigid gender roles, denied autonomy, and subjected to expectations of purity and sacrifice. This paradox is powerfully visualised by the director through the juxtaposition of two striking images: the idol of Goddess Durga being immersed in the Ganga, a ritualistic conclusion to the festival, and Chaavi emerging from a temple pond. While the goddess returns to the cosmic waters, symbolising the cyclical nature of divinity and rebirth, Chaavi's rising from the water suggests a reclaiming of agency and a symbolic rebirth of the female subject who has long been marginalised.

Conclusion

Nishiddho was produced under the Kerala State Film Development Corporation's initiative to support female directors. Tara is among the first filmmakers to receive funding under this scheme. In a society where women are discriminated against and oppressed for their gender, her presence behind the camera is a political statement. And by *Nishiddho,* Tara has proved her creative agency as a filmmaker. The embodied subjectivity, ambiguity and her sensitive treatment make her directorial debut a cinematic rebellion. She refuses to conform to patriarchal storytelling conventions by employing long takes, spatial metaphors, and minimal dialogue. In her film, the often-silenced people are given a voice to express themselves and to liberate themselves from the margins. Thus, in a way, *Nishiddho* becomes a rare Malayalam film that asserts how space and caste construct identity. It does not claim to reflect reality neutrally but instead constructs a space where gender, caste, and class collide. Through its portrayal of migrant labour, workplace hierarchies, and forbidden intimacy, the film critiques the hidden architectures of caste and class in Kerala's urban landscape. Dislocated from their native places, migrants exist as a marginalised and precarious class within their own country, denied both fundamental rights and spaces for creative self-expression. Tara critically interrogates the reductive practice of homogenising migrant workers under labels such as 'Madrasi' or 'Bengali,' exposing how regional stereotyping erases their complex identities and lived realities.

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The Jewel Box as Legacy: Feminist Revisions of Tagore in Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho*

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Abstract

This article examines the symbolic and narrative significance of jewellery in the representation of women's agency and identity in *Goynar Baksho* directed by Aparna Sen in comparison with *Monihara* by Rabindranath Tagore. Although both texts foreground jewellery as a central motif, their treatment reflects divergent understandings of femininity, autonomy, and material possession shaped by their distinct historical and cultural contexts. In "Monihara," jewellery functions as a symbol of psychological displacement and possessive anxiety within a patriarchal marriage, culminating in the tragic containment of female desire. By contrast, *Goynar Baksho* reclaims the jewel box as a site of intergenerational memory, economic agency, and feminist resistance. Through a comparative framework, this article traces the transformation of adornment from an emblem of entrapment to a medium of empowerment, while also engaging questions of class, inheritance, and postcolonial displacement. The article argues that Sen's adaptation does not merely modernize Tagore's narrative but critically reworks its symbolic economy, extending his concerns into a contemporary feminist discourse that foregrounds solidarity, historical consciousness, and women's evolving relationship to material culture.

Keywords: "Monihara"; *Goynar Baksho*; Rabindranath Tagore; Aparna Sen; Female Agency

Introduction

Tagore's interpretation of female agency in works like "Monihara" and others often portrays women as individuals striving for self-discovery and challenging societal norms, even within the constraints of a patriarchal society. While not always explicitly feminist, his characters frequently display a capacity for