



International Journal of Innovations in Liberal Arts



<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16986847>

Love as “Folk Devil”: Navigating Caste and Moral Panic in *Kottukkaali*

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Received: JUNE. 09, 2025

Accepted: JULY. 25, 2025

Published: AUG. 30, 2025

Abstract

This paper examines the film *Kottukkaali* (*The Adamant Girl*) through the lens of Stanley Cohen’s theory of moral panic, arguing that the film constructs love across caste lines as a socially produced “folk devil.” When a young girl falls in love with a boy from a marginalised caste, her family interprets her defiance as spiritual possession, initiating a series of ritualistic and punitive responses. These responses, including consulting a seer and performing animal sacrifice, symbolise the mechanisms through which caste and patriarchal norms regulate female autonomy. The objective of this paper is to analyse how *Kottukkaali* exposes the cultural logics that stigmatise inter-caste love and reframe desire as deviance. By situating the film within the broader discourse of caste politics and moral panic, the paper highlights how such narratives challenge the legitimacy of tradition and reveal the social violence embedded in efforts to preserve normative social order.

Keywords: Caste, inter-caste love, folk devil, moral panic, deviance.

1. Introduction

The research paper offers a critical analysis of the 2023 Tamil film *Kottukkaali* (*The Adamant Girl*), directed by P.S. Vinodraj, through the framework of Stanley Cohen’s concepts of moral panic and folk devils. The analysis probes into the interplay of love, caste dynamics, and spiritual possession within the context of contemporary India. Applying these concepts to the film *Kottukkaali*, this paper shows how love itself could be framed as a “folk devil,” which further fuels a “moral panic” that seeks to curb individual autonomy.

In caste-bound societies, romantic relationships, particularly those that transgress caste hierarchies, are often perceived not as acts of personal agency but as disruptions to social order. These relationships provoke exaggerated, moralising responses aimed at restoring normative control, especially when women assert autonomy over their choices. *Kottukkaali* presents a stark example of this dynamic, where a young woman's inter-caste relationship is pathologised as spirit possession. The film critiques the stigma associated with inter-caste relationships, while reflecting on the struggle against patriarchal and superstitious norms. By situating *Kottukkaali* within the frameworks of caste politics and moral panic, this paper underscores the enduring influence of traditional beliefs in shaping contemporary attitudes toward love.

2. Statement of the Problem

The problem this paper addresses is the persistent cultural mechanism by which love is recast as deviance through the language of ritual, purity, and honour. By labelling inter-caste love as dangerous and immoral, society enacts moral panic to reassert patriarchal and caste-based control. This paper seeks to investigate how *Kottukkaali* exposes these mechanisms and critiques the broader social structures that demonise personal freedom.

3. Research Methodology

The concept of the “folk devil,” now widely integrated into everyday discourse, was first employed by Clare Alexander, a sociologist and researcher, in her acclaimed ethnography, *The Asian Gang* (2000), to describe the emergence of Muslim Asian boys as scapegoats within society. The concept traces its origins to the well-known British sociologist Stanley Cohen's influential work, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002), where he used it to characterise the Mods and Rockers of the 1960s and 1970s – youth subcultures that were vilified as symbols of societal breakdown. According to Cohen, the notion of a folk devil must be understood in conjunction with moral panic, as the two are inherently interconnected. He defines moral panic as follows:

A condition, episode, person or groups of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved (or more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (9)

Building on this theoretical foundation, the present paper examines how *Kottukkaali* portrays societal anxieties surrounding inter-caste relationships. These fears are dramatised through extreme reactions, such as the family's decision to consult a seer and perform the ritual sacrifice of a

chicken. These elements serve as potent symbols of the tension between traditional customs and individual autonomy.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Love as a “Folk Devil”

In *Kottukkaali*, love emerges not as a personal experience but as the epicentre of societal anxieties, portrayed as a disruptive force that threatens traditional values and caste-based social stability in rural Southern Tamil Nadu. The film follows Meena, a young girl whose romantic involvement with a boy from an oppressed caste provokes her family into believing she is possessed by an evil spirit. Their subsequent actions, such as a journey to consult a seer and perform ritual sacrifices, dramatise the mechanisms of moral panic as articulated by Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. Cohen posits that “societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic,” during which certain individuals, groups, or behaviours are labelled as deviant “folk devils” – constructed threats to societal values and interests (2). Such reactions, often disproportionate to the actual behaviour, are shaped by processes of stereotyping, public amplification, and punitive control. The film effectively illustrates how love, when it disrupts established caste hierarchies, is redefined as a social pathology, requiring containment and correction through ritualistic and violent means.

Understanding these societal responses requires an exploration of the concept of deviance. As Howard S. Becker, a prominent American sociologist, explains in his work *Social Problems*, “The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label” (9). In the context of *Kottukkaali*, Meena’s love is cast as deviant because it transgresses social norms of caste and familial structures. Traditionally, individuals are expected to marry within the same caste or community in Southern Tamil Nadu, maintaining the social order. By falling in love across caste boundaries, Meena defies this expectation, triggering intense societal reactions aimed at restoring control. *Kottukkaali* demonstrates the ability of public perception to turn a close relationship into a threat to society by showing how Meena’s love story devolves into a full-fledged moral panic. This reinforces Cohen’s argument that folk devils are socially constructed through amplified fears and moralistic discourse. Edwin M. Lemert, a renowned sociologist known for his 1951 work *Social Pathology*, further illuminates this dynamic by arguing that social control mechanisms often generate deviance they seek to suppress. This phenomenon is evident in *Kottukkaali*, where the family’s attempts to “correct” Meena’s behaviour through exorcism and violence not only fail to suppress her defiance but also alienate her further. These actions amplify the very tensions they aim to resolve, illustrating the cyclical nature of moral panic.

Cohen's framework provides critical insights into the deeper societal dynamics at play. Folk devils – whether individuals or behaviours – are constructed as exaggerated symbols of disorder. In *Kottukkaali*, love itself becomes the folk devil, stigmatised as a source of moral decay and a threat to the rigid boundaries of the caste system. The family's reaction to this perceived threat is both punitive and disproportionate, as evident in their resort to superstitious rituals and physical violence. This aligns with Cohen's observation that moral panics amplify fears and provoke extreme measures to control the perceived menace. The narrative of *Kottukkaali* critiques these mechanisms by portraying how the stigma surrounding inter-caste love oversimplifies complex issues of autonomy and identity. Meena's love, labelled as deviant, becomes a target of scrutiny, blame, and ultimately violence – not because it poses a genuine threat, but because it disrupts established social hierarchies. The film explores how such reactions are not just irrational but deeply rooted in patriarchal and casteist ideologies. For instance, Pandi, Meena's fiancé, interprets her defiance as an affront to family honour, responding with physical violence to reassert control. His actions reflect how patriarchal norms cast women as the custodians of tradition, making them vulnerable to societal backlash when they deviate from prescribed roles.

Furthermore, the film shows how these societal reactions are often counterproductive. The exaggerated reactions to perceived threats – framing folk devils as graver dangers than they truly are – serve to escalate tensions rather than resolve them. Instead of addressing the underlying anxieties about caste and autonomy, these measures deepen alienation and perpetuate the cycle of oppression. As Cohen explains, "An initial act of deviance, or normative diversity (for example, in dress) is defined as being worthy of attention and is responded to punitively. The deviant or group of deviants is segregated or isolated, and this operates to alienate them from conventional society" (11). This isolation, as depicted in *Kottukkaali* where Meena was kept aloof, fails to address the root causes of societal anxiety, leaving the oppressive structures intact.

Cohen's framework thus proves particularly effective in understanding how societies demonise certain groups unfairly and overreact to perceived threats. It shows the powerful role public perception play in shaping societal reactions, often leading to unjust consequences for marginalised groups. This framework is relevant to understanding *Kottukkaali*, where inter-caste love is framed as a 'folk devil,' igniting a moral panic aimed at curbing individual autonomy and maintaining the social order.

4.2 Rooster: A Symbol of Control and Moral Panic

The opening image in *Kottukkaali*, featuring a rooster tied to a stone in the same room as Meena, serves as a profound visual metaphor that encapsulates the film's central critique of caste-based and patriarchal

oppression. The rooster's restrained state foreshadows the societal constraints imposed on Meena, whose love for a boy from another caste is perceived as a grave transgression. This symbolic parallel between Meena and the rooster immediately establishes the film's critique of the suppression of individual autonomy in the name of tradition.

The family's ritualistic handling of the rooster parallels their treatment of Meena: both are reduced to objects of control, expected to conform to predefined societal roles. The rooster, immobilised by the stone, mirrors Meena's entrapment, as both are rendered powerless by forces beyond their control, symbolising how personal autonomy and desires are bound by the rigid expectations of caste and tradition. The act of tying the rooster and keeping it in close proximity to Meena carries an ominous implication, linking her perceived "possession" with the supposed contamination of inter-caste love. The family's belief system treats both as disruptions that must be contained, which reinforces the idea that love outside caste boundaries is a threat akin to an evil spirit that needs to be exorcised.

The rooster's attempt to break free from its ties, only to be recaptured and restrained again, shows Meena's own suppressed desires for freedom. This symbolises her struggle against the confining forces of tradition and caste. The momentary escape of the rooster is a glimmer of hope – an embodiment of the resilience and yearning for self-determination that persist even within oppressive structures. Yet, its immediate recapture underscores the relentless grip of societal norms, which refuse to tolerate deviation, especially when such deviations threaten the rigid boundaries of caste purity.

Just as the rooster's attempted escape disrupts the orderly ritual, Meena's choice for an inter-caste relationship is seen as a disruption that must be contained and corrected. By capturing the rooster again, the family reasserts control. This sends a powerful message that any attempt to resist social expectations will be subdued, no matter how natural the urge for freedom might be. This act signifies society's determination to "correct" perceived threats and restore its version of order by any means necessary, even at the expense of individual agency. This illustrates how moral panic operates to suppress individuality under the guise of maintaining societal stability.

The film intensifies this metaphor when, on the way to see the seer, the rooster appears unwell in the auto, struggling due to poor blood circulation caused by its tightly bound legs. When Meena's mother observes the rooster's suffering and suggests that it might need to be untied, a male relative scoffs, "Are you suggesting we untie it? You'd happily let anyone go scot-free" (00:41:44–00:41:48). His response reveals the community's harsh, uncompromising mindset – where even the smallest act of mercy is perceived as a dangerous concession. The rooster's physical suffering

mirrors Meena's own entrapment, as even the smallest suggestion of easing restrictions is met with suspicion and condemnation. Through this recurring motif, *Kottukkaali* brings to light the brutality of a system that prioritises social conformity over individual well-being. The rooster's fate – bound, controlled, and ultimately to be sacrificed – serves as a chilling reflection of how patriarchal and caste-based oppression function.

4.3 Women and the Patriarchal Setup

Kottukkaali lays bare the pervasive and oppressive roles assigned to women in a patriarchal society, where cultural practices meticulously restrict female autonomy under the guise of tradition. Through its narrative, the film critiques how women are burdened with the responsibility of upholding family and caste honour, subjecting them to constant scrutiny and control at every stage of life. One of the earliest instances of this control, in the film, is seen when Pandi's sister is prohibited from seeing the goddess during her menstruation as she is deemed "impure" by religious custom. This exclusion from religious spaces stresses how women are systematically marginalised through rituals that reinforce their perceived inferiority.

Similarly, the puberty ceremony, marked by gifts from her maternal uncle and the sacrificial offering of a goat, ostensibly celebrates a girl's transition into womanhood. However, it also emphasises how society views a young woman as a carrier of familial honour, particularly in terms of her future marriageability. The financial burden of this ceremony is also laid bare when an elder laments, "For your daughter's puberty ceremony, my son borrowed cash for the trousseau. He is still paying interest on that," while talking about the puberty celebrations of Meena (00:46:21–00:46:27). The man's lament about the financial strain imposed by the ceremony exposes the hidden burden that the family incurs in "protecting" her chastity and social value. What appears to be a celebration is, in reality, a reinforcement of patriarchal norms that frame women as possessions that need to be protected and controlled.

Meena's engagement to her maternal uncle, Pandi, exemplifies how patriarchal structures further curtail women's autonomy. This engagement, a common practice meant to preserve family purity, ensures that her future remains firmly within patriarchal control. Although Pandi permits Meena to pursue her education, any personal aspirations, she might have, are bound to family expectations and existing social norms. The engagement essentially marks her as already "taken," pre-emptively restricting her choices in love and marriage. When Meena later falls in love with a boy from an oppressed caste at the college, her family views it not as an expression of personal choice but as a betrayal of their honour and a disruption to their carefully structured social order. Her education is framed as the corrupting influence, positioning women's exposure to the world as gateways to moral deviance.

The tension escalates in a crucial moment when Meena, seated with her family in an auto on the way to Palamedu to see the seer, begins to lip-sync to a love duet playing on the radio. This seemingly innocent act becomes a trigger for Pandi, her fiancé. He interprets it as defiant and disrespectful given her recent romantic involvement with another boy. He, incensed by this display, flies into a rage and begins to beat Meena violently.

Pandi's anger then extends to other women, particularly her mother and his sisters, who in his view are complicit in Meena's failure to uphold family honour. He berates Meena's mother for failing in her "duty" to monitor her daughter's behaviour, saying, "A mother can tell when her daughter changes. You must've known. Immoral woman" (00:49:49–00:49:54). In this moment, Pandi's wrath not only serves to punish Meena but also seeks to enforce a system of accountability in which women are expected to control each-other's behaviour. His words, "What have you women done?," cast his sisters as collectively responsible for Meena's actions (00:49:41–00:49:43). Through this scene, the movie portrays how love, when it crosses caste lines, becomes a 'folk devil' – a feared disruptor that must be subdued, even violently, to prevent further moral contamination.

In a pivotal scene, two men in the family, intoxicated on their way to the seer, engage in a conversation that strips away the pretence of ritual concern, clarifying deeply ingrained patriarchal anxieties. The men speculate that her defiance stems not from spiritual affliction but from her personal choices, which they cannot openly acknowledge in a sober state. The conversation follows as:

Man 1: I don't think any evil spirit has possessed her.

Man 2: I think she's slept with her lover.

Man 1: I'm sure of it or why is she so adamant?

Man 2: I think so too.

Man 1: Do you think that boy lured her?

Man 2: No doubt of that.

Man 1: Things are beyond fixing. No use going to the seer. Take her to a doctor and find out if she's still a virgin.

Man 1: Look, we are drunk and so we spoke our minds. Do not spread rumours like this around the village.

Man 2: Why would I tarnish her reputation? Stop judging me. (01:00:23–01:00:53)

In this scene, the men's intoxicated state allows them to voice their suspicions about the girl's behaviour without the usual filter of social

discretion. Their conversation reveals a deep-seated anxiety about female sexuality that they feel compelled to hide with soberness as they suggest her “adamance” is not due to spirit possession but because she has “slept with her lover.” The fact that they can only voice these thoughts while they are drunk suggests that, beneath the formal veneer of ritual and concern for exorcism, there is a repressed, judgmental perspective on the girl’s choices that they dare not express openly. Alcohol here acts as a catalyst that enables them to let slip their belief that the “solution” to her behaviour is not spiritual, but physical – implying that her autonomy and defiance challenge their sense of social order.

By implying that the boy “lured” her, these men attribute her behaviour to outside corruption rather than personal agency, reinforcing the “folk devil” trope by Cohen. This interpretation reveals how moral panic manifests as a way to place blame externally, rather than recognising any agency or desire within the girl. In suggesting that she should be taken to a doctor to verify her virginity, they prioritise preserving family honour and caste purity over her dignity. This compulsion to control and assess her body reflects their reduction of her identity to mere chastity, exposing the underlying patriarchal and casteist structures that dictate such thinking.

Furthermore, the men’s awareness that these thoughts should be kept private – “Don’t spread rumours like this around the village” – highlights their hypocrisy. Although they consider such judgments privately, they are reluctant to publicly disrupt the socially accepted narrative of spirit possession. The temporary candour enabled by their intoxication reveals a layer of repressed, controlling beliefs within the family that undermine their overt commitment to ritual and honour. This scene highlights how moral panic around inter-caste love stifles empathy and leads to extreme measures. The movie critiques this aspect of caste hierarchy, revealing how internalised patriarchal beliefs are masked by public displays of concern, only surfacing fully when intoxication loosens the inhibitions enforced by societal expectation.

These examples illustrate how, in patriarchal frameworks, women are both revered and restricted, positioned as embodiments of caste honour who require constant monitoring and control. At each stage – from ritual purity to education, engagements within family structures, and coming-of-age ceremonies – women’s lives are dictated by moral codes that preclude personal choice and individual agency. These rituals and expectations create a moral landscape that prioritises family honour over women’s autonomy, trapping them within symbolic roles that deny them their own identity and desires.

4.4 Rituals of Control to Curb Moral Panic

Kottukkaali critiques this dehumanising moral rigidity by showing how society’s obsession with maintaining conformity stifles both personal

freedom and compassion, as seen in the family's strict adherence to ritual. Through this, the film underscores the extent to which caste-based control mechanisms work to suppress individuality and instil fear of any deviation. This also speaks to the way patriarchal and casteist ideologies treat women's choices as corruptions to be eradicated, especially when those choices disrupt traditional boundaries. Here, love is the 'folk devil,' perceived as an agent of societal disorder that destabilises established caste hierarchies. By pathologising her romantic involvement as possession, the family externalises the threat of her choice, projecting it as something sinister that must be exorcised.

This scene escalates into a moral panic, where the girl's choice is seen not only as a private matter but as a communal crisis. The community, represented by her family, feels compelled to respond drastically – consulting a seer and performing animal sacrifice – to restore a threatened social order. They believe, "She claims to be deeply in love. After they meet the seer, she will forget all about her love. He will totally change her heart and mind." Also, at the seer's place, Pandi's sister tells "the problem" to other women, recalling, "My maternal uncle's daughter was promised to my brother in marriage. She fell in love with her college mate and is adamant on marrying him. He must've done some black magic on her. We've come to exorcise her" (01:16:54–01:17:07). This sense of urgency and exaggerated response illustrates Cohen's idea of moral panic, wherein the perceived threat, in this case, inter-caste love, is exaggerated beyond its actual impact. This response is disproportionately severe as it represents a collective anxiety over social cohesion and caste purity.

The ritualised punishment, under the guise of moral and spiritual purification, exposes the lengths to which societies go to maintain power structures, condemning love that defies convention as demonic possession that must be purged. The journey to the seer in *Kottukkaali* serves as a microcosm of the societal mechanisms that enforce control over women's autonomy. The imagery of individuals holding roosters for sacrifice alongside the exorcism of another young woman starkly illustrates the cultural context of moral panic surrounding inter-caste or non-familial love. These rituals embody how patriarchal societies reframe such transgressions as manifestations of "evil" or spiritual possession, effectively demonising female agency in the process.

The seer's declaration that the possessed woman is "under the spell" and requires "pagan cleansing from head to toe" reveals the entrenched belief that any deviation from traditional norms—especially those tied to caste and gender—corrupts women. Love, that crosses caste boundaries, is thus reimagined as a 'folk devil,' a socially constructed threat that encapsulates communal anxieties about caste purity and women's agency. This belief system transforms a woman's personal choices into existential threats to societal stability. The romantic past of the possessed woman is no

longer a private affair but a symbolic danger to communal honour. Similarly, Meena's family interprets her defiance not as an act of personal agency but as a supernatural disturbance requiring correction. In both cases, families resort to rituals and sacrifices to restore compliance, reinforcing the societal need to regulate women's lives and decisions. These actions accentuate the patriarchal impulse to suppress individuality under the guise of spiritual and moral purification. Through these vivid portrayals, the film exposes how the moral panic surrounding "love as a folk devil" traps women within cycles of shame and ritual control, emphasising the intense societal pressure to conform to rigid caste and gender hierarchies. Sacrifices and exorcisms become tools to uphold collective norms, prioritising family honour over personal autonomy.

The tension peaks as Pandi hesitates at the climactic moment, ultimately refusing to complete the ritual to exorcise Meena. This pivotal decision leaves the moral and emotional conflict unresolved, with the film concluding on the powerful line: "The end of this journey is in your hands." By abstaining from offering a definitive resolution, *Kottukkaali* shifts the responsibility of dismantling these oppressive customs onto its viewers. This unresolved ending invites critical reflection on the societal structures that perpetuate moral panic and oppress individuality. It challenges the audience to confront their role in either perpetuating or resisting these traditions. The film suggests that transformative change, particularly in accepting love across caste lines, is not the burden of one person but a collective moral obligation, requiring a societal reckoning with the roots of its anxieties and prejudices.

5. Conclusion

Kottukkaali compellingly portrays how love, especially across caste boundaries, is constructed as a "folk devil" within a moral panic shaped by patriarchal and caste-based anxieties. Drawing on Stanley Cohen's framework, the paper has examined how such relationships are framed not as acts of personal agency, but as threats to social order, prompting disproportionate and often violent responses. These reactions reveal the entrenched structures of control that stigmatises female autonomy and uphold caste hierarchies.

By casting love as deviance, the film critiques the cultural logics that sustain moral panic, exposing their role in legitimising ritual, violence, and social exclusion. Its open-ended conclusion – "The end of this journey is in your hands" – functions as a challenge to the viewers, urging critical reflection on the oppressive norms we continue to accept and perpetuate in the name of traditions. Ultimately, this paper has argued that *Kottukkaali* does more than tell the story of one woman's defiance; it reveals the mechanisms by which society transforms private desire into a collective

crisis. In doing so, it compels us to reconsider the frameworks of morality, purity, and honour that underpin caste and patriarchal violence.

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