

## **PUSHPA: UNRAVELLING THE PICARESQUE JOURNEY THROUGH CINEMATIC NARRATIVES**

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### **Abstract**

Cinema is an electronic genre of literature which serves both tenacities: didactic and entertainment. It addresses social issues of contemporary society. The selected film, Pushpa: The Rise is picaresque in its type. The picaresque writing existed in English literature in the first decade of the 18th century. The word 'picaresque' is of Spanish origin and means 'rogues' or 'roadside' character. Thrall and Hibbard view seven qualities of a picaresque narrative. The protagonist is from a lower class called the Picaroon. The hero transforms himself from an innocent to a responsible person. Picaro's episodic story is told with realism. Sometimes satire becomes a prominent element. The behaviour of a picaroon is short of criminality. It is autobiographical and first person in narration. These picaresque elements are observable in the film Pushpa: The Rise. Its hero Pushpa Raj is a picaroon. The hero is on a journey. Being a member of a lower class, he is humiliated by many. At first, the hero is on the periphery and later he possesses the centre. It satirises brutal practices with realism. The film is built around an episodic structure. It is an attempt to unravel the picaresque elements reflected in the film Pushpa.

**Key Words:** picaroon, humour, marginalised, journey, humiliated, episodic structure, satire, Pushpa and cinematic narratives.

### **Introduction**

Picaresque writing emerged in the early decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It originated in Spain in the 16th century and flourished in the later centuries throughout Europe. "... the earliest example is Lazarillo de Tormes (1553). The two most famous Spanish authors of picaresque writings were Mateo Aleman, who wrote Guzman de Alfarache (1599-1604), and Francisco Quevedo, who wrote La vida del Buscon (1626)" (Cuddon, 1999). The picaresque narration depicts a roguish protagonist's adventures who lives by his wits in a corrupt society. The genre talks about the life of a picaroon. The picaroon seems to be like an anti-hero who embarks on a series of adventures and escapades, often involving morally questionable situations. He is the servant of many masters and through it he satirizes contemporary society. Picaresque writing typically adopts a realistic style with elements of comedy. "According to the traditional view of Thrall and Hibbard (first published in 1936), seven qualities distinguish picaresque narrative form" (Prestath, 1936). The picaresque features are strikingly

observable in the South-based Telugu blog-buster movie Pushpa: The Rise. It was released on 17 December 2021, written and directed by Sukumar. It stars Allu Arjun as the title character.

### **Objectives**

1. To locate the traits of picaresque writings in the cinematic narrative under consideration.
2. To find out the parallels between picaresque writings and the cinematic narrative under consideration.
3. To analyse the presence and the effect thereof, of traits of picaresque writings in the cinematic narrative under consideration.

### **Analysis**

The picaresque, initially, is a marginalised person and performs from a periphery. Being a member of the lower class, his significance in society is nothing. He hardly speaks about the injustice he faces. He has no say about his lower position in society. He is portrayed as living a difficult life, struggling to make ends meet. However, later the picaresque overcomes all the difficulties and hardships and proves himself as a significant person in society. Later, he stands against the injustice and humiliation he received from his masters. In the end, the picaresque becomes a rich and well-established person. In the film, Pushpa is shown as a labourer. He is not even allowed to sit and drink tea in front of his master. He was fired from his job as he dared to claim himself as an independent man. Pushpa's father and stepbrother do not accept him and consider him and his mother to be the stigmas of the upper-class family. To prove himself as a significant part of society, he decides to earn money in an unethical way. It is a response to the humiliation that he received from the established class of society.

The picaresque from a picaresque film is involved in a journey. The journey is of two types: a time journey and a geographical journey from one place to another. At first, the picaresque is an innocent person, but at the end of the journey, he becomes a responsible person. The film picturises Pushpa's journey from his humble beginnings as a labourer to becoming a feared and influential figure in the smuggling trade. This upward mobility mirrors the typical picaresque narrative structure, where the protagonist experiences a progression from a marginalized position to a more prominent and adventurous role. In short, the journey underlines the story from rags to riches. This type of narrative element in films typically involves the transformation of a character from a position of poverty, obscurity or hardship to one of wealth, power or success. In the movie, Pushpa transforms not just in terms of his socio-economic status but also in his character and personality. His journey represents a significant change in his circumstances.

Realism is another element of a picaresque narrative form. It focuses on daily life incidents using simple language used by a common man. It also underlines the importance of the common man in society. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the common man came into the central position of society. The picaresque narrative form often includes vivid descriptions of locations, characters and situations, creating a sense of immediacy. "This critical understanding, along with the social reality of the time, provided the necessary ingredients

for the picaresque novel to arise. In its earliest inception, the genre not only gave readers a unique window into the exploits of destitute outcasts, but it also delivered an ironic critique of the “oppressive forces of contemporary society” (Ena, 2021). Pushpa’s motivational dialogues with his fellow labourers seem real and practical. The characters of the movie are common and one can meet them in day-to-day life. Scenes, incidences, locations and intentions of people presented in the film are common. The film picked up the trend of the novel genre to portray the common man as the hero of 18th-century society.

The film also features social critique. It highlights the injustices, corruption and hypocrisies of society. The rogue's escapades and interactions with people from various social strata provide opportunities to comment on the vices and foibles of the time. It also employs humour and satire to lampoon societal norms and conventions. The film includes elements of social commentary. The film sheds light on several social issues, including the exploitation of labourers, environmental concerns related to illegal logging and the economic disparities in the region. The benefits of the red sandalwood trade do not reach the marginalized and exploited labourers. This highlights the unequal distribution of wealth. The film underscores the need for environmental conservation and the consequences of unregulated exploitation. It criticizes the influence of money and power on decision-making, highlighting how it can perpetuate illegal activities.

The picaresque film is episodic in its structure and has a loose plot. It consists of a series of loosely connected adventures or escapade events. These episodes are often presented in a chronological or semi-autobiographical manner. In the film, there are many subplots connected by loose events. The loose plots add a variety of descriptions that increase the entertainment value of the film. Since the picaroon is on a long journey, the audience comes to know about contemporary society. The film describes Pushpa’s development portraying various phases of his life: his humiliation, his love, his life struggle, his story of becoming a smuggler and his loyalty. These phases are connected in the episodic structure. There is no concrete and observable plot.

The roguish behaviour is the signature style of the protagonist of a picaresque film. In the film, Pushpa displays performing roguish behaviours and traits. He is known for his cunning and resourcefulness. He uses his intelligence and quick thinking to outsmart his adversaries and navigate the dangerous world of red sandalwood smuggling. He possesses a street-smart attitude, allowing him to adapt to challenging situations. His ability to think on his feet is a key characteristic of roguish behaviour. Throughout the film, Pushpa Raj engages in deception and manipulation, both to protect his interests and to achieve his goals. He often employs strategic lies and misdirection. In Addition, he does not conform to societal norms or the law. He operates outside the boundaries of legality and this non-conformist attitude is a defining trait of roguish characters. While he may be involved in illegal activities, Pushpa Raj displays a strong sense of loyalty to his team and those who support him. This loyalty is often a distinguishing feature of roguish protagonists. Pushpa exhibits roguish behaviour throughout the film.

The picaroon often faces a moral dilemma. Though he has an illegal business, he is not cruel to exploit the sources and resources. He is shown to have a code of ethics and principles that guide his actions. He is fiercely protective of his team and is willing to take on powerful adversaries who exploit the marginalized. Despite his criminal activities, the film also highlights his sympathetic qualities, making it possible for the audience to empathize with his character. His journey from a labourer to a red sandalwood smuggler is portrayed as a response to the challenging socio-economic circumstances he faces. He relies on his wit, cunning and resourcefulness to outsmart his adversaries. Pushpa's character is morally ambiguous. While he is engaged in criminal activities, the film delves into his backstory and circumstances, painting him as a character who has limited options and is driven to a life of crime. His character embodies the classic picaresque traits of being crafty and resourceful to survive and thrive in challenging circumstances.

Like a typical picaroon, Pushpa is involved in a series of adventurous escapades. "The picaresque narrative deals with the adventures of a rogue who survives on his wit and presence of mind even when trapped in unfavourable circumstances" (Nayar, 2009). He navigates the dangerous world of the red sandalwood trade, outwitting both his enemies and the law enforcement agencies in various thrilling and often humorous ways. These adventures are central to the picaresque tradition, where the protagonist's journey is marked by a series of episodic adventures. The core plot of the film revolves around the illegal smuggling of red sandalwood. Pushpa and his team are frequently involved in daring operations to harvest and transport the precious wood, often facing law enforcement and rival smugglers. It also involves cat and mouse chases. Pushpa frequently finds himself in high-stakes situations where he must evade the authorities who are determined to capture him. These sequences involve intense chase scenes, shootouts, and close calls. The film often blurs the lines between right and wrong. It challenges traditional notions of heroism by presenting a morally ambiguous protagonist, Pushpa Raj, who engages in illegal activities but also fights against exploitation and injustice.

The picaresque narrative usually has first-person narration. It consists of pronouns such as I, me, my and mine and that demonstrates that the hero narrates his own story. In the film, the protagonist, Pushpa narrates his life story for the audience. He speaks directly to the audience, providing insights to audience's thoughts and feelings. The camera becomes Pushpa's point of view and the audience sees the events unfold as the character would. This technique is used to immerse the viewer in the character's experience, making them an active participant in the story. He narrates his life goals to a confidant and describes his life philosophy. He believes that one has to take high risks if one wants to be a rich man.

Thus, picaresque films are featured by picturization of a lower class, anti-hero protagonists, episodic structure, social critique, humour and satire. They serve as a lens through which the director can explore and critique the societies in which they are set, making them a valuable and enduring genre in the realm of literature. Pushpa, the 2021

Telugu-language film directed by Sukumar and starring Allu Arjun, incorporates several picaresque elements throughout its storyline.

### Conclusions

On the basis of analysis, observations and findings above, the following conclusions can be drawn, and the same also prove that the objectives of the study are largely achieved:

- The film Pushpa shows several traits of picaresque writing.
- The film Pushpa also shows several parallels with the typical traits of picaresque writing.
- In the film Pushpa, Pushpa, the protagonist, is a typical picaroon. He behaves like a rogue, and comes from a humble background, but is resourceful enough to work his way up the fortune ladder by fair means or foul.
- Like a picaroon in picaresque writing, the film Pushpa shows a lower-class, anti-hero protagonist, narrating his tale in the first person.
- Like a picaresque writing, the film Pushpa has episodic structure having loose plot.
- Like a picaresque writing, the film Pushpa is a social critique, marked by realism, humour and satire, all of which help the director make an enduring and valuable genre in the realm of cinematic narratives.
- Like picaresque narratives, the film Pushpa challenges traditional notions of heroism by presenting a rogue-like protagonist who navigates a world of adventures, escapades and often engages in morally ambiguous activities, thereby making the cinema serve both the purposes of literature: didactic and entertainment.

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