

Cultural misogyny, male solidarity and moral disengagement in the Malayalam film *Aattam*

Dr. K.S.Krithika

Associate Professor

Department of Visual Communication

Pondicherry University Community College,

Puducherry, India. Email: krithika_ks@yahoo.co.in



<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2602-1611>

Abstract

This paper critically examines how the Malayalam film *Aattam* (2023) portrays cultural misogyny and male solidarity in silencing victims of sexual assault. This film is a socio-psychological commentary on how patriarchal communities suppress dissent under the guise of unity and pragmatism. Framing the analysis through Janis's Groupthink, Moral disengagement by Bandura, Pluralistic ignorance by Allport, the Othering theory by Said and Hybridity by Homi Bhabha, the study explores how the men in the troupe collectively suppress dissent and rationalize silence, denial and moral evasion in the face of a sexual harassment allegation. The confined spatial setting and the performative group consensus in the film mirror mechanisms of complicity and cowardice. The analysis also traces caste-coded hierarchies that shape credibility and leadership, showing how social capital and moral authority are unevenly distributed. Ultimately, *Aattam* unravels the hypocrisy embedded in seemingly liberal male identities and highlights how institutional and interpersonal betrayals push survivors towards symbolic justice. The paper concludes by positioning the main character, Anjali reclaiming her voice through theatre, becomes an act of resistance and is a counter-narrative and symbolic justice to collective moral failure.

Key words: Cultural misogyny, Male solidarity, victim blaming, Group think, pluralistic ignorance, moral disengagement, Gendered violence.

Introduction

Anand Ekarshi's *Aattam* (2023), meaning "play", unfolds within a theatre troupe where art and life merge in unsettling ways. This film is a compelling study of how male dominated communities respond to allegations of sexual violence. It is not through open justice or accountability, but through a gradual erosion of empathy, moral clarity and collective integrity. At its surface, the narrative follows the disappearance of Anjali, the troupe's only female member, after a night of celebration and her subsequent accusation of sexual harassment against a member of the troupe. What begins as an investigation into a single incident quickly devolves into a tense negotiation of power, silence and self-preservation among thirteen individuals trapped within a shared space.

More than a story of personal violation, *Aattam* functions as a psychosocial study of group behaviour, exposing how male-dominated communities confront or evade ethical crises. As the troupe debates Anjali's claim, their decision-making process transforms into a spectacle of moral erosion. Allegations are doubted, motives are reinterpreted and responsibility is diffused until justice becomes unrecognizable.

This study argues that *Aattam* is not merely about an act of harassment but about the social mechanisms that enable it to be silenced. The film's voting sequences, its

claustrophobic mise-en-scene, and its shifting alliances create a microcosm of organizational life, where gendered hierarchies and collective denial intertwine. The paper critically analyses *Aattam* using a multi-theoretical framework that draws from Irving Janis's theory of Groupthink and Bandura's Moral Disengagement theory to examine how collective rationalizations emerge. Additionally, it draws on Said's concept of othering to understand how Anjali is marginalized and depersonalized within the group. Further, the film's conclusion where Anjali reclaims agency not through institutional justice but through art/theatre, offers a counter narrative that challenges conventional understandings of resolution. Instead of identifying a single culprit, Anjali indicts the entire system of silence, transforming the stage into a space of ethical confrontation rather than legal closure.

This paper intends to understand the weaponization of consensus and the collapse of moral responsibility in the troupe. And, how groupthink and moral disengagement normalizes sexual harassment and protects the perpetrators. Through the study we also assesses the process of othering that render Anjali invisible and shift the burden of proof onto the victim. These narrative elements are analyzed alongside the film's visual language, particularly its strategic use of confined spaces and the gradual emergence of male complicity in the crime, that transforms the group from passive bystanders to tacit enablers of the crime.

In tracing the group's moral decline, the study offers a searing critique of the performative ethics embedded in liberal male spaces. It reveals how cultural misogyny, caste-inflected hierarchies and affective manipulation combine to erode the possibility of justice. This cinematic narrative can illuminate the psychological structures of power, silence and complicity in male-dominated communities, while also demonstrating how art can become an act of resistance against moral collapse.

Literature Review

Several Indian films have explored systemic misogyny and the politics of silence round gender-based violence. For instance, *Pink* (2016) addresses the theme of victim blaming and the societal tendency to scrutinize women's behaviour rather than holding the perpetrators accountable. *Thappad* (2020) interrogates normalized domestic violence and challenges the notion that certain forms of domestic violence are trivial and negotiable. *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) exposes the everyday misogyny embedded in domestic spaces, underscoring how deeply patriarchal structure regulate women's labour and autonomy. In comparison, *Aattam* examines these themes within a collective male space, where moral evasiveness and the pursuit of self-interest reveal a performative solidarity that fractures the under ethical pressure. These films collectively reflect a growing interrogation of gender politics in India.

The dynamics of *Aattam* resonate with multiple strands of scholarship on organizational communication, moral psychology and gendered power relations. By integrating theories of group decision making and social complicity, this review establishes the theoretical foundation of analyzing how the film dramatizes the mechanisms of denial and silence within male-dominated communities.

Aattam, Misogyny and epistemic injustice

Shruthi Gurumoorthy's critical feminist analysis situates *Aattam* within #Me Too conversations in Malayalam cinema, arguing that the film foregrounds epistemic injustice a systematic disbelief of women's testimony as a tool of male dominance. She aligns with Miranda Fricker's framework, showing how Anjali's credibility is repeatedly undermined, reinforcing cultural misogyny that delegitimizes survivors. This paper maps psychosocial

group mechanisms like groupthink, moral disengagement, othering, etc as enacted within the film's enclosed social space. It situates *Aattam* as part of an emergent cinematic trend in Malayalam cinema that deconstructs victim-blaming and exposes the veneer of male empathy, drawing from both sociological and feminist theoretical traditions. By linking the film to documented industry-level misogyny like the Hema Committee findings, Kerala's Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) activism, memes about Kasaba dialogues, the analysis underscores how *Aattam* reflects and dramatizes the everyday moral bankruptcy encoded in cultural misogyny.

The News Minute traces a shift in Malayalam cinema from revenge narratives like 22 Female Kottayam (2012) to introspective films such as *Aattam* (2023), which interrogate the sociocultural complicity of men, rationalizing sexual violence and deploy victim-blaming as a default social reflex. These films interrogate the ways in which male-dominated spaces normalize misogynistic behaviour while concealing it under the guise of respectability (The News Minute, 2024). This reflects a broader cinematic evolution where female trauma is not only depicted, but the masculinist response to it is critically examined.

Research on patriarchal structures in Malayalam cinema underscores how women's labor is structurally devalued and how male stardom is built on the subordination of female participation (Frontline, 2024). The Hema Committee report also exposes entrenched misogyny within the Malayalam film industry, where women are systematically marginalized and superficial concern from male superiors often masks transactional solidarity rather than genuine support, which is the dynamic mirrored in *Aattam*.

Page and Pina (2015) explain how moral disengagement mechanisms such as euphemistic labeling, diffusion of responsibility and victim-blaming allow individuals to rationalize unethical conduct without feeling complicit. Within *Aattam*, these mechanisms surface as troupe members reframe harassment into a "logistical" problem to be managed rather than an ethical crisis demanding justice.

Page and Pina (2018) demonstrate that men's moral disengagement predicts their harassment proclivity, reducing guilt and moral self-sanction. This aligns with the troupe's gradual erosion of moral concern, as each member distances himself from personal responsibility under the guise of "group consensus".

The just-world hypothesis (Lerner, 1980) argues that people are motivated to perceive the world as fair, leading them to assign blame to victims to preserve a sense of order. In *Aattam*, Anjali's delayed reporting, immodest dress (according to the men), consumption of alcohol and emotional reaction are scrutinized, echoing victim-blaming functions to safeguard the group's moral comfort rather than addressing wrongdoing (Lerner, 1980).

Research on victim silence (Garrett & Hassan, 2019) demonstrates how survivors often avoid disclosure due to anticipated disbelief or retaliation, an anxiety that *Aattam* powerfully depicts through Anjali's reluctance to name her assailant immediately. Moreover, Tenbrunsel, Rees and Diekmann (2019) describe ethical fading and motivated blindness, whereby organizational cultures normalize misconduct by framing it as a matter of pragmatic negotiation, which mirrors the troupe's descent into collective moral apathy.

Existing scholarship thus suggests that misogyny in *Aattam* operates at both cultural and cognitive levels. Structural critiques (Gurumoorthy, 2025; Frontline, 2024) reveal the patriarchal norms of the Malayalam film industry, while psychological analysis illuminate the internal mechanisms, moral disengagement, victim-blaming and bystander apathy that reinforce silence and denial. This study contributes to the existing literature by analyzing how *Aattam* translates these mechanisms into its narrative form, showing how consensus-driven complicity and institutionalizes misogyny are not merely represented but performed within the diegetic space of the film.

Theoretical Framework

The study employs an integrated conceptual framework that combines spatial, psychological and sociocultural theories to analyze how *Aattam* stages mechanisms of silence, complicity and moral evasion in male-dominated communities, while also foregrounding the protagonist's counter-narrative through art.

Group Think

Irving Janis's (1972) concept of Group Think explains how the troupe's apparent consensus is manufactured. The desire for harmony and avoidance of conflict suppresses dissenting voices and forecloses genuine debate. Dissent is implicitly punished through social ostracism, while compliance is rewarded with belonging. In this context, the "vote" to expel Hari, later overturned for pragmatic reasons, reveals how decision-making becomes a ritual of solidarity rather than a search for truth.

Moral Disengagement

Albert Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement talks about the cognitive maneuvers that allow individuals to participate in injustice, while maintaining a positive moral self-image. In *Aattam*, it occurs through displacement of responsibility, minimization of harm and moral justification. Such mechanisms dilute individual accountability and convert ethical dilemmas into pragmatic concerns, transforming sexual harassment into a negotiable "problem" rather than a moral breach.

Othering and gendered marginalization

Edward Said's (1978) concept of Othering, alongside Homi Bhabha's (1994) hybridity, describe how dominant groups maintain control by marginalizing and depersonalizing individuals who challenge their norms. Feminist scholarship has demonstrated how this process operates within gendered communities, rendering women's voices suspect or irrelevant (Ahmed, 2017).

Visual suffocation and bystander apathy

While theories of groupthink and moral disengagement explain the cognitive aspects of complicity, the film's spatial and visual strategies reinforce what can be called "visual suffocation". This concept draws from Mulvey's (1975) Gaze theory and more recent work on cinematic claustrophobia by Choi (2020), emphasizing how spatial confinement visually communicates the inescapability of social surveillance.

Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative research design to examine how *Aattam* (2024) represents gendered power relations, moral complicity and group dynamics through

cinematic form and narrative structure. The analysis is grounded in critical cultural theory, combining film analysis with psychosocial and sociological frameworks.

Research Design

The research employs a textual analysis approach, which treats the film as a cultural text embedded with social meanings. Rather than focusing solely on plot or character psychology, the study examines how narrative strategies, spatial design, dialogue and group behaviour reflect broader social mechanisms of complicity and moral evasion in male-dominated spaces.

This design is particularly suited for *Aattam*, which unfolds almost entirely within the confined space and emphasizes deliberation and group decision-making over conventional cinematic action. By situating the film within theoretical frameworks such as Groupthink by Irving Janis, Moral disengagement by Albert Bandura, Othering by Edwards Said and Homi Bhabha and the lens of Oppression as visual suffocation, the research seeks to move beyond descriptive interpretation to expose the underlying ideological operations at work.

Five core segments were closely read. The initial voting discussions among troupe members, Anjali's private disclosure and confrontations with her lover, Vinay and with the elderly men in the troupe, the deliberations of the group surrounding compromise, the exposure of the "male apathy" and "othering" in the group discussions and the final scene in which Anjali stages her play.

Results and Discussion

Voting sequences and the tyranny of consensus

The repeated voting sequences in the film serve as a procedural façade of fairness, while consolidating the group's moral inaction. Consensus-building often viewed as a democratic ideal, can function as a coercive tool within enclosed social environments. The voting operates under coercive social pressure, where men who initially dissent are gradually silenced or persuaded to fall in line to preserve group unity.

As Sunstein (2002) notes, deliberative spaces often pressure individuals toward conformity by equating dissent with disloyalty. The film's confined setting, a single house where the troupe deliberates Anjali's claim, echoes the spatial claustrophobia of *12 Angry Men* (Lumet, 1957), where physical confinement amplifies pressure, thus mirroring the psychological weight of moral judgement. The heat, proximity and lack of exit, reinforce psychological entrapment in *12 Angry men*. Unlike Lumet's film where deliberation leads to justice, *Aattam* shows consensus as a weapon of conformity. In such contexts, consensus is less about collective reason, justice or truth seeking and more about social survival and minimizing disruption, producing what could be termed a "performative agreement", where members publicly confirm while privately harboring doubt. Damage control and preservation of group privilege takes priority. By transforming a sexual assault into a matter of "majority opinion", the troupe reframes a moral question into an administrative decision reducing Anjali's experience to a procedural inconvenience. This aligns with the Daniel Katz and Floyd Allport's (1931) "pluralistic ignorance", where individuals suppress their doubts to avoid social isolation.

Groupthink and Suppression of Dissent

Janis's (1972) Theory of Groupthink highlights how cohesive groups prioritize unanimity over critical evaluation. In high-pressure situations, members suppress dissent to avoid conflict, resulting in flawed decision making. Research on groupthink in organizational

and crisis contexts (Whyte, 1998; Esser, 1998) demonstrates how hierarchical pressures and shared loyalty intensify this effect. In *Aattam*, the troupe's voting ritual transforms moral deliberation into an exercise in conformity, reducing a serious ethical question of supporting Anjali to a numbers game that neutralizes individual accountability. Members suppress doubts while signing Hari's expulsion letter without confronting their conflicting motives, creating an illusion of unanimity. Those who are uneasy about what happened to Anjali, either dilute their statements or retreat into silence. Those who questioned Anjali's credibility is not challenged on moral grounds but were absorbed into utilitarian logic, prioritizing the benefits of the European tour promised by Hari and silencing the incident under the guise of compromise and forgiveness. The discussions reveal that the group's loyalty is not to truth but to their shared identity as a troupe and their aspiration for international recognition.

Madan functions as a gatekeeper, filtering information to prevent disruption, hiding the details of Europe trip while pushing Anjali for compromise. The discussion takes a turn when the men add pressure on Anjali, with Sudheer aggressively policing Anjali disrespectfully, saying, "Don't you dare call Aji brother cheap". For which Anjali retorts defending herself, saying, "I mentioned the words as cheap and not the person". Towards the end, Sudheer asks Anjali in a very harsh, disrespectful tone why she lied. This reflects how male-centered communities often sacrifice justice at the altar, reconfiguring harassment into a logistical problem rather than a moral crisis. The dynamic transforms the group into a self-reinforcing echo chamber, where keeping the troupe intact overrides any meaningful inquiry into what happened to Anjali. This film demonstrates how groupthink operates not through overt authoritarianism but through subtle social rituals like politeness, appeals to loyalty and emotional manipulation where coercion is masked as collective reasoning.

Moral Disengagement and justification of harm

Albert Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement elucidates how the men disconnect their behaviour from ethical standards through mechanisms such as victim-blaming, euphemistic labeling and diffusion of responsibility. Studies have shown how such mechanisms enable communities to tolerate gender-based violence by reframing harm as socially acceptable or even inevitable (Gini et al., 2014). In the film, phrases like "she was drunk" and "it could be tactile hallucination" are euphemistic labelling of the sexual assault as a "misunderstanding" or "drunken confusion" and softening its severity. Victim blaming comments like "I have told you not to drink with the men", "I always used to tell her to dress properly", serve to shift culpability away from the group and onto the victim herself.

Statements like "We all need to move on", "when she is ready to forgive him, we will bring him back", "Hari supported me when there was a meeting to remove me, so I cannot ask him to leave the group", exemplify this cognitive disengagement, as members rationalize inaction and prioritize group cohesion over justice. All the men maintain a moral self-image through displacement or diffusion of responsibility. This is evident in dialogues like, "We all decided together", "I will go with what the group decides", etc. These findings demonstrate how moral disengagement transforms an act of violence into a matter of procedural management diluting both accountability and empathy.

The moral justification they provide through dialogues like "for the sake of the troupe", "all these men in low paid jobs will get a good life if Hari stays back" and the eventual silence born, is not out of ignorance but of learned cognitive mechanisms for self-protection. The film demonstrates how language itself becomes a tool of ethical erasure. By redescribing wrongdoing in socially palatable terms, the group achieves what Bandura calls "moral numbing", enabling inaction while preserving a self-image of decency.

Gendered Othering and the caste-coded patriarchy

Edward Said's (1978) concept of Othering, later extended by Homi Bhabha (1994), in his notion of Hybridity, help explain how Anjali is systematically depersonalized and repositioned as "the outsider" within her own troupe. Though the men present themselves as urbane and liberal, they revert to patriarchal logics that cast Anjali as an object of suspicion and scrutiny. Feminist scholarship has demonstrated how this process operates within gendered communities, rendering women's voices suspect or irrelevant (Ahmed, 2017). In *Aattam*, Anjali is symbolically expelled from the moral community of the troupe: she is doubted, silenced and ultimately displaced from the group's collective identity. She is othered as a destabilizing agent, too confused, too late in reporting, too "free-spirited" and a liar. Her narrative is treated not as a testimony but as a liability for the group's image and prospects. Her trauma is erased and she is questioned and coaxed to make her believe that it could be her fault too, when Selvan, one of the senior members of the troupe says: "Think peacefully and say whether it's your fault too". Anjali's erasure mirrors how patriarchal communities depersonalize women, transforming them from subjects, like a colleague or victim in to a "problem" to be managed. Even her eventual act of artistic reclamation is received not with solidarity but with the troupe's silent, guilt-ridden observation, signaling that she remains "other" even in her resistance.

Madan who prohibits the consumption of non-vegetarian food in his house, embodies the identity of caste superiority. The film's depiction of this dynamic underscores how caste hierarchies influence credibility and leadership within the group. Although Aji chettan, (brother) the eldest member in the group, might traditionally be expected to mediate the conflict, Vinay, Anjali's lover, instead approaches Madan, implicitly acknowledging Madan's position at top of the caste and class hierarchy. Moreover, when most members hesitate to directly accuse anyone or make explicit statements, it is Sanosh, a temple priest, who first questions Anjali's claim of having seen Hari and subsequently shifts the blame towards Nandan, another member of the troupe.

Visual suffocation and bystander apathy

The psychosocial dynamics of the film with crowded compositions, limited exits and surveillance like camera angles evoke a sense of suffocation that mirrors Anjali's social entrapment. The troupe's deliberations framed in tight, crowded compositions create a suffocating sense of complicity, where silence becomes both a survival strategy and a form of participation in harm. The confined visual world of *Aattam*, its closed rooms, prolonged debates and organic handheld static framing produces what may be termed 'visual suffocation'. Anjali is frequently framed in crowded group shots, with one or two elements in the foreground, visually hemmed by men who debate her fate without granting her meaningful agency. The audience is trapped alongside Anjali in a space where every argument circles back to group self-preservation. The lack of visual "escape routes" mirrors her social entrapment. Every time, Anjali gets emotional hearing "forgiveness" and "compromise" and raises her voice, her voice is subsumed under overpowering, threatening male dialogue, visually and aurally enacting her silencing. This atmosphere illustrates the concept of "bystander apathy", where non-action is not merely passive but an active choice to preserve the group unity.

The men are not overt perpetrators but collaborators through silence, transactional compromises and solidarity and avoidance of legal scrutiny. The blurring lines between enabler and offender demonstrates how complicity in harassment is less about single acts of

malice and more about cumulative failures of courage. This visual strategy renders oppression tangible, not through direct violence, but through the claustrophobic mundanity of male moral cowardice. Through spatial composition, the film renders patriarchy not only as a social order but as a physical condition, a shared space in which women are denied choice and visibility.

From complicity to counter narrative

These mechanisms like spatial confinement, groupthink, moral disengagement, othering interlock to sustain a culture of silence. However, the film disrupts this cycle through Anjali's final act of artistic resistance. The film refuses closure through conventional legal or social justice. Instead, it grants Anjali the last word through theatrical performance, where she stages her own trauma and symbolically renders all men interchangeable perpetrators. By dramatizing her experience on stage and inviting the guilty spectators back into her narrative, she transforms art into an ethical counter-public sphere. In doing so, *Aattam* critiques not only institutional failures but also the intimate, everyday complicities that underpin patriarchal power. The ending reframes justice as aesthetic and psychological rather than institutional. It indicts the legalistic obsession with proof and instead offers catharsis through art, exposing the limitations of both consensus and formal justice in patriarchal spaces.

The detailed analysis positions *Aattam* not merely as a narrative to be explained, but as a cinematic case study that reveals how male-dominated collectives reconfigure sexual violence into a matter of procedural consensus and moral evasion. By bringing these frameworks together, this study situates *Aattam* within a larger body of research on organizational complicity in gendered harm. Prior scholarship has largely examined such dynamics in workplaces, political institutions or legal settings (Meyers, 2016; Phipps, 2020), but the film's fictional setting offers a distilled, allegorical view of these mechanisms in operation. Furthermore, its ending where Anjali transforms her trauma into performance, where art functions as a counter discourse, an alternative model of justice rooted not in institutional adjudication but in symbolic and artistic reparation, resonating with Butler's (2004) notion of vulnerability as an ethical resource. The ending reframes the narrative from victimhood to authorship. It aligns with feminist cultural theory, where "speaking through art" becomes a mode of reclaiming agency outside institutional structures. Her silence in the final confrontation and refusal to know the culprit in her drama, is not submission, it is an assertion that the moral failure belongs to the collective, not her.

Role playing in Social Dynamics

The title *Aattam* carries a deep psychosocial resonance, going far beyond just "play" in the theatrical sense. Each member of the troupe "performs a social role as a friend, mentor lover, skeptic, opportunist, depending on what the situation demands. These roles are not fixed, they shift based on power, fear and self-interest, echoing Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model, where social life is viewed as a stage where people change masks. The deliberations exposing the different layers of identity: the moral façade supporting Anjali, the opportunistic façade prioritizing the European tour and the defensive façade avoiding legal scrutiny. Every vote and argument unmask the hidden desires, prejudices and cowardice revealing how performance in real life is a survival tactic. The title suggests that the real play is not on stage but within the troupe's internal politics, where groupthink and moral disengagement strip away the veneer of solidarity and reveal complicity.

In the end, Anjali's theatre production reclaims "play" as resistance, transforming the troupe's performance of denial into her own performance of truth, collapsing the boundary between art and lived trauma.

The film *Kasaba* (2016) saw Kerala's Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) protest misogynistic dialogues and portrayals that demean women under the guise of cinematic realism. These controversies illustrate the industry's tolerance for hostile sexism and the backlash the female voices face when calling it out. This parallels the scenario that *Aattam* dramatizes through Anjali's ostracism after the accusation.

Conclusion

The title *Aattam*, meaning "play" in the Malayalam language, serves as a psychosocial metaphor for the performative nature of human behaviour in morally fraught communities. Within the male dominated troupe, every individual dons a role: the pragmatic negotiator, the cautious bystander, the manipulative opportunist and even the reluctant sympathizer. Each role is part of a larger performance where the truth of Anjali's harassment is less important than maintaining the troupe's cohesion and collective self-image.

The analysis reveals how consensus becomes theatre, staging unity while erasing moral conflict and prioritizing loyalty over justice. Groupthink disguises cowardice as harmony, masking the absence of ethical engagement. Moral disengagement reframes wrongdoing, transforming harassment into an administrative inconvenience rather than an act of violence. Othering renders Anjali invisible, repositioning her from victim to disruptor within the group's narrative. Visual suffocation captures the texture of complicity, showing how silence itself is an act of collaboration.

In this context, *Aattam* is not merely about an isolated assault it is about the social choreography of denial, the quiet negotiations of power and the ritualized suppression of female agency in male-centered spaces.

Yet, the film's ending introduces a counter-movement: Anjali's artistic reenactment becomes an anti-play within the play. By reconstructing the events on stage and refusing to unmask the culprit, she rejects the troupe's corrupted mechanisms of justice. Instead, she symbolically collapses all the men into one collective perpetrator, indicting the entire system of complicity rather than any single offender.

Thus, *Aattam* operates as both a psychological study of moral evasion and a political critique of patriarchal justice. Its narrative ultimately suggests that truth may not emerge through deliberation or institutional intervention but through acts of cultural defiance, where the oppressed reclaim the stage and rewrite the script. In doing so, the film compels viewers to confront unsettling questions: if silence and consensus can be performed, can resistance be performed too? And can it be powerful enough to unmask the façade of collective innocence?

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