

**Analysing the Subversion of Grand Narratives of Tamil Cinema
through the Films *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL* and *Karnan***



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of
the requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in
English Language and Literature*

By

PARVATHI M

Register No. AB20ENG056

III B.A. English Literature

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous)

Ernakulam

Cochin-682011

Kerala

Supervisor

Ms.Harsha Prince

Department of English

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous)

Ernakulam

Kerala

March 2023

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project entitled “Analysing the Subversion of Grand Narratives of Tamil Cinema through the Films *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL* and *Karnan*” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Ms Harsha Prince, Department of English.

Parvathi M

Register Number: AB20ENG056

III B.A. English Language and Literature

St. Teresa’s College (Autonomous)

Ernakulam

March 2023

Ernakulam

CERTIFICATE

I hereby declare that this project entitled “Analysing the Subversion of Grand Narratives of Tamil Cinema through the Films *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL* and *Karnan*” is a record of bona fide work carried out by Parvathi M under my supervision and guidance.

Ms Harsha Prince

Department of English

St. Teresa’s College(Autonomous)

Ernakulam

March 2023

Ernakulam

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank God for giving me proper guidance throughout the process of crafting this project.

I would like to extend my gratitude towards Dr. Alphonsa Vijaya Joseph, Principal, St Teresa's College (Autonomous) for her support.

I am deeply indebted to my guide, Harsha Prince, Department of English, St Teresa's College (Autonomous), who has acted as a constant pillar of support from the very beginning; without whose guidance and constructive feedback I would have never completed this project.

I am grateful for Dr. Jeena Ann Joseph, who has given us a strong base on Research Methodology and all other faculty members of the department for their help and encouragement.

I am greatly thankful for Dr Preethi Kumar , Head of Department of English, St Teresa's College (Autonomous) for her constant encouragement and motivation.

Parvathi M

CONTENTS

	Introduction	1
Chapter 1	Pariyerum Perumal	6
Chapter 2	Karnan	18
	Conclusion	28
	Works consulted	30

Introduction

The history of Tamil Nadu has a lot to do with the caste system prevailing there. *Tolkappiyam*, a renowned text by Tolkapiyar, a Tamil scholar, talks about the earliest social life of Tamil Nadu. It mentions a four-fold caste system, including Brahmins, Arsar (rulers or Kshatriyas), Vaishyas, and Shudras. The concept of the dominance of one caste over the other came along with this. The so-called dominant class enjoys a high place in the social hierarchy since they control economic and political power. The society's lower class is viewed as intrinsically inferior. Most of the Tamil films have celebrated and praised the dominant caste through their plots; the protagonist of the film always belongs to the dominant caste group and guides the others, and such films are examples of the grand narratives of Tamil cinema. *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL* and *Karnan*, two movies that are dealt with in chapters one and two of this project, unquestionably mark a turning point in Tamil cinema's depiction of southern Tamil Nadu, which only glorified dominant castes. Rajan Krishnan contends that "the landscape of southern Tamil Nadu has been created as a metonymic extension of the caste identification of Thevars." (Damodaran).

Antonio Gramsci coined the term "subaltern" to identify the cultural hegemony that excludes and displaces specific people and social groups from the socio-economic institutions of society in order to deny their agency and voices in colonial politics. The protagonists of both the movies *Karnan* and *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL* are considered subaltern because their birth in poor sections of

society made them inferior to the upper class, which suppressed them in every possible way by questioning their right to life.

Debutante filmmaker Mari Selvaraj's hard-hitting anti-caste drama *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL* revolves around the life of Pariyen, a youngster from the lower strata of society who aspires to become a lawyer and lost his dog Karuppi to the caste-infuriated upper-caste clan residing in their neighbouring village. Karuppi was tied to the railroad track and got hit by the train in front of Pariyen. When he entered college, it seemed like Tamil was treated as a low language and academics were in English, which he found difficult to process. Whenever he questioned the teachers about not teaching in Tamil, he got silenced by them. He then got Jyoti Mahalakshmi, a girl who belongs to a higher caste, as a friend. Once, when he was invited to her sister's marriage, he got assaulted by the men in her family in the name of his caste. They even spit and urinated on him and beat him up to death. On a parallel note, the film also depicts honour killing scenarios in Tamil Nadu.

The antagonist in the movie, an old man named Thatha, is performing all the honour killings in order to protect the so-called honour of the upper caste family. Pariyen understood that he, as a human being, wouldn't be heard or validated in society because of his birth in a poor household; he even had to bring an actor to enact the role of his dad because he didn't want to get harassed for presenting his dad as an actor who always does female roles. His upper-caste classmates once locked him up in the ladies' washroom in order to defame him in front of the society. But then his principal, a representative of the downtrodden

mass of society, wanted him to retaliate against the casteist devils around him. His upper-caste classmates even undressed his father in public.

Jo's father tried to kill Pariyen with the help of an old man, but he failed in his attempt to kill him. Pariyen questioned Jo's father's caste pride and made him realise that he was not even worthy to remain a human being. This chapter of the project is an analysis of Mari Selvaraj's debutant movie, *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL*, which clearly questions the existing concept of Madurai Formula films, which only depicted savarna politics and the age-old caste pride in Tamil Nadu. This power politics that existed then is well depicted in the project with the help of Michel Foucault's power/knowledge discourse theory, which says that power is not confined to anyone and if at all power is exercised over a section of society, they should all obtain knowledge as an outcome, but that's not happening in the movie. In the theory, it says that power is not force or dominion. How power relations of inequality and oppression are diffused subtly in society is also depicted in this chapter by citing examples from the movie.

Karl Marx's theory of the proletariat-bourgeoisie conflict is also applied in this chapter to analyse the subtle ways in which the upper caste treated the lower caste as slaves. Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony is used to analyse the hegemony in which the protagonist and his clan lived for years. The chapter also emphasises on the blue colour symbolism of the movie which is pointing to the Ambedkarite ideologies of Dalit liberation. The concept of retaliation against subalterns in this movie was not so common in the Tamil film industry.

Mari Selvaraj's yet another masterpiece, *Karnan*, starring Dhanush, is dealt with in the second chapter of this project. In the film, Rajisha is performing the role of Karnan's love Draupathi; Lal is Karnan's uncle Yemaraja; Yogi Babu is Vadamalaiyan; and Natarajan Subramanian is SP Kannabiran. The movie revolves around the life of a dalit youngster called Karnan who is trying to give faces to the faceless people, even to the faceless deities of his village, who always had to keep their heads down in front of their neighbouring upper caste village because they don't own a bus stop on their own and they have to depend on the neighbouring village for getting buses.

Karnan lost his sister because they didn't get any transportation to take her to the hospital when she was dying on the road due to an epileptic seizure. Once, when the bus refused to stop and a pregnant lady stood by the side, her son threw a stone at the bus and broke the glass. Karnan and his friends also got involved in destroying the bus, which led the police officers to take the elderly men of their village to the police station since the youth refused to appear before the forces.

The caste-ridden police officers beat the elderly to death for the village elders who had the names of the great warriors of Mahabharata, who is the embodiment of Savarna politics. Karnan and his gang ransacked the police station. They brought their people back home, and they decided to retaliate against the police. But Karnan had to leave for a job after he received a letter from the Indian Army. The very same day he left, the police attacked Karnan's village, burned houses, and beat people, including a pregnant lady. Karnan's uncle Yama's role, played by Lal, is praiseworthy, as he even took his life in order to save his

villagers. Anyway, the villagers earned their right to have a bus stop after a series of events. Karnan's goddess-incarnated dead sister's recurrent appearance in the movie gives it symbolic significance. The subaltern resistance is portrayed here.

The second chapter, which analyses the film *Karnan*, includes social dominance theory, through which the caste-based dominance exhibited in the film can be critically analysed. A chained donkey stands as a major symbolic representation in the movie, which foreshadows the plight of the Dalits under the dominant class. The faceless deities in the film are also symbolising their resurgence to gain their basic rights, including bus stops.

Intersectionality Theory, proposed by Kimberlè Crenshaw is used in this chapter to examine the double oppression experienced by dalit women. In the film, a girl in the village is not allowed to go to college because she is slut shamed by the upper caste men. The five faces of oppression, including marginalisation, exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, proposed by Iris Marion Young limited their access to the institutions to attain a better life. Moreover, Louis Althusser says that the bourgeoisie maintains power through state apparatuses that include ideological and repressive state apparatuses. The bus vandalization and the following oppressive measures of authorities are tried to analyse through this. According to Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Counter Hegemony, the subaltern should raise a challenge to the social and institutional foundations of hierarchy. This theory is used to explain how the downtrodden masses of society counterattack against the violations committed against them by the people of higher social order.

Chapter 1

Pariyerum Perumal BA BL

Pariyerum Perumal BA BL (God Who Mounts a Horse), a Mari Selvaraj film on Dalit identity and politics actually speaks about how it feels like to be a Dalit in an Indian context .The film questions the concept of Madurai Formula Films which once depicted the never- ending caste pride that existed in Tamil Nadu. Pariyen, a Dalit student from the village of Puliyankulam is aspiring to be a lawyer in order to fight against the outraging caste issues that succumbed to their village from a very early age.

One particular intermediate caste cluster, the Thevar community, has consistently appeared in Tamil movies such as Devarattam ,Pasumpon ,Paruthi Veeran etc for over the past three decades, and a lot of focus has been placed on their social rank, bravery, and skill in battle. These movies served as vehicles and manifestations of the Thevars or other intermediary castes and directly or indirectly asserted their caste dominance and pride. Through his many frames of Tirunelveli town in the film , Mari Selvaraj strived to undermine that metonymic creation from the very first moment. For instance in the film he depicts a corporation building named after V.O. Chidambaram Pillai who worked for the lower class,along with statues of the Dravidian leaders like Kamaraj, Ambedkar, and Muthuramalinga Thevar.This is significant since South Tamil Nadu films once only centred on the figure of Muthuramalinga who is identified for his noble birth in Thevar community.

Apart from this, Ambedkar statues are frequently encased in iron cages in Tamil Nadu and other parts of India to deprive upper caste people from vandalising them. Also when the government of Madurai decided to rename the transportation company after a lower caste chieftain, Madurai and its surrounding areas descended into social configuration. In this context a building named after social activist V.O Chidambaram Pillai merely in a film is significant.

This movie mainly depicts the power play of higher caste people which disturbs the day today life of the commoners. Power relations in the educational institutions can be analysed with Michel Foucault's theory. According to Michel Foucault's concept of power /knowledge discourse, power is no longer a thing that individuals or groups may own. To the extent that all of our knowledge is the outcome or a consequence of power struggles, Foucault makes the case for the implications of power and knowledge. Power is necessary for society to function, hence no one can exist independently of others. Examining the relationship between the person and society, Foucault argues that the individual is not incapable of overcoming societal institutions or organisations. He does not loosen the restrictions placed on persons, and says that power is dispersed over all realms and not confined to anyone. Power is often seen as an unstable element ,which can be always challenged and as a result ,power relations must be permanently maintained and acknowledged. In the light of this theory power relations are not something that a particular group or society owns , so the caste based power play in the movie can't be justified with because as per the theory the result of exerting

power is attaining knowledge, but in the film it is not happening and the lead is even denied education.

This film also reflects the affinity and animosity among the students based on caste on the college campus. The director shows that the prejudices based on caste are not only in the mind of the students but also among the principals and professors of the educational institutions. In the movie the lead Pariyen aka Pariyerum Perumal is going to a law college to take admission with his mother because he didn't want to introduce his father who enacts females in dramas. The principal asked about his father's occupation and he said his father is a 'Vandi Maadu'(a colloquial tamil term referring to driver). When the principal asks what he wants to become, Pariyen replies that he wants to become a doctor. The principal said that he can't become a doctor by graduating from a law college. But Pariyen actually intended to become a law expert like Dr B R Ambedkar. Here the principal actually used his power against Pariyen by teasing him for his ambition without knowing that he actually meant to attain a doctorate in law like Doctor BR Ambedkar.

During the admission of Pariyan to the law college, the principal from a higher caste tells Pariyan that "a guy like you should be lucky enough to join this college"(00:10:39- 00:10:42) which conveys the notion that education is something that is unattainable to the subaltern community. It means that a guy like Pariyen who is from a Dalit community though not worthy to join this college is lucky enough to make it in to it which reflects the strong discriminatory mind of many principals who are from dominant castes towards the people of lower

castes. The law college principal, having understood that Pariyan is from a lower caste, suspects him as a potential troublemaker. “Most of the educationalists from dominant castes consider the Dalit students as habitual trouble makers ”(Susairaj 135).

Pariyen was taught in English, as he didn't know English, so he asked the teacher to teach in Tamil. Instead of teaching in Tamil she mocked him for not knowing English. Pariyen doesn't know English because he didn't get well off primary education as he belonged to the downtrodden mass of society and the teacher here is being subtly racist. She is using her authority as a teacher to look down upon Pariyen. Subaltern lives are denied of education because of their caste. Early Tamil films failed to depict the voice of subaltern, *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL* is a perfect counter narrative to that kind of films is what is proven through this incident.

According to Lois McNay

“ Foucault's interest was not directed at the expression of power in its most central and institutionalised forms such as class relations, rather he was concerned to examine how power relations of inequality and oppression are created and maintained in more subtle and diffuse ways through ostensibly humane and freely adopted social practices”(Foucault 3)

One example of subtle ways of institutionalised oppression can be seen in Pariyen's classroom. The director shows the discrimination against Dalits in the

classrooms of educational institutions. Like in most cases for the Dalits, classrooms as a space are not a space of equality but of varied forms of discrimination. There has been a custom even now in a few places where Dalit students are compelled to be seated at the back benches of the classrooms. Moreover, Pariyen was also physically assaulted by Jo's cousin, Lingu for taking a seat in the front bench. Lingu and his gang even threatened Pariyen, if they would pee on him in an effort to remove him from front bench. There are several caste related intonations in this. The subaltern lives are contrasted with animalistic lives. The campus communities of most of the colleges reflect the caste-mindedness among the students through the formation of friends groups based on caste.

He got scolded from his English professor for not knowing English. While the English professor was giving notes to them Pariyen and his friend were drawing zeroes in order to act as if they are also writing notes.. Professor caught them and instead of correcting them he teased them and gave them impositions. Jyothi, their upper caste classmate helped them with impositions. Once when the teacher asked whether Pariyen was present or not Pariyen interrupted it by asking "Is it wrong if I come ? (01:18:13- 01: 18:15). Yogi a friend consoles him by saying that "he can be anywhere anytime"(01:18:16-01:18:17) . Yogi also said "How much ever you scream no one will understand you"(01:18:19-01:18:20). This depicts the grim reality of lower caste lives even in educational settings. When Jyothi got ragged at one point of time by her seniors, her cousin Shankaralingam saved her and asked her why she didn't say her caste name so

that she will be excluded from ragging in the name of her noble birth,.In the history of Tamil cinema, the lives of subaltern groups have become invisible or misrepresented, or showcased in a way that justifies their place in the social order. However, the entry of Dalit directors Pa. Ranjith, Mari Selvaraj, Vetrимaran etc heralded a new cultural revolution within Tamil cinema through the films like Madras, Kabali, Kaala, Asuran etc. which systematically addressed this cultural invisibility and devaluation of subaltern groups and thus the Tamil Meta narratives got a subversive take through this.

While analysing the caste related atrocities and honour killings there are plenty of instances in the movie which substantiates that. The antagonist in the movie, an old man who is known as Thatha kills some young people because they are engaged in inter-caste love marriage. He killed them and left them on railway tracks in the name of suicides. But it is basically honour killing .The symbolic death of Karuppi in the railway track adds up to the honour killing deaths of Tamil Nadu. Caste issues portrayed in the film even extends to Pariyen's dog's plight. Pariyen's dog Karuppi, as the name suggests represents the whole downtrodden mass of cast-ridden Tamil Village Puliyanikulam who got brutally killed by the Savarana people residing in the neighbouring village. They were furious with Pariyen's tribe for hunting in their place and bathing their animals in the pond that both villages share.

Basically all the honour killings happened in Tamil Nadu till date is also based on this reason that is upper caste people are triggered by the fact that lower caste people are entering their families which in turn disrupts their caste pride so

they kill the lower caste people. Here in order to trigger Pariyen and gang they tied Karuppi in the railway track for the train to hit her. Train rushing towards Karuppi is seen in a long shot. Pariyen and his clan rushing towards the track is shown in a bird's eye shot which says how insignificant these masses and their efforts are and Karuppi died in front of him. Women's screaming is being heard in the background after Karuppi's passing. The cruel behaviour of these individuals toward animals demonstrates just how heavily they have been poisoned by caste.

When Pariyen is distressed about everything he chooses to sit alone in his classroom and it seems like Karuppi is running towards him to console him. Karuppi represent the downtrodden mass of Podiyankulam who got brutally killed by people who is in a higher social status than them. The song comes later titled "Naan Yar" shows Pariyen as the one who is questioning his own identity and existence. The lyrics from this song includes "Who am I? Who am I that trains chase to mow down ?"(01:11:02- 01:11:06). Karuppi got tied to the railway line by an angry mob and she got killed when a train hit her. This incident is visible in those lines. Another rhetorical question in the song that Pariyen throws into the limelight is "Who am I that hangs dead from the blossoming trees?"(01:01:08-01:01:10). This indicates the recurrent honour killings happening over a decade in Tamil Nadu. Honour killings generally happen in the marriages in which a woman of higher caste marries a man from a caste that is considered as inferior to them. There is this notion prevalent in many folk songs of Southern Tamil Nadu which says that the only way to prevent the intermingling of higher castes with the other lower caste, is to kill them.

The most dangerous effects of caste pride is also portrayed in the film. There is an instance in the movie where Pariyen was the only one who got invited to Jyothika's wedding. When he came for the wedding Jo's brothers treated him in a very inhuman way. People started beating him up asking "How dare he come here? (01:01:33-01:01:33). Drink my urine Drink it You came here, right?" (01:01:58-01:01:59). This incident throws light to the Fundamental Premise of Karl Marx which says that the society is always in a state of tussle where the proletariat (have-nots) and bourgeoisie(haves) are against each other. The weaker segment the have-nots are always confronting violent opposition by the haves.

Jyothika's dad even said to Pariyen that he knows who he is and where he is from. He also said "You both study together, does that make you equal?"(01:02:37-01:02:39). This question actually draws attention to the hidden agendas of the privileged intermediate castes of Southern Tamil Nadu. Dad even says to Pariyen that please don't talk to his daughter otherwise they will slit his throat. They will kill him and his daughter too. The dangerous hegemony that existed then in the society prompted the predominant class to suppress the subaltern clan in every possible way. It sounds like even he is helpless about saving his daughter's life when caste comes to the issue. According to Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony, Hegemony is the cultural, moral and ideological leadership of a group over allied and subaltern groups Pariyen's clan has learned to live with this hegemony for a very long time but Pariyen is not ready to live with it.

The heroine in the movie named Jo is leading an alienated life and she doesn't even know if Pariyen had come to her house for the wedding and she complains to him for not coming saying that she had told so many things about him to her father mother brother etc ,still he didn't turn up for the function. It seems like she is unaware of the caste related atrocities happening around her .She is living in the privilege bubble that her upper caste birth gave her. Jo asking Pariyen about his injuries and Pariyen getting beaten up by her family members are shown in the same scene.

The power dynamics that the higher caste is displaying in the film is entirely different from Michel Foucault's Theory of Power. "Power is the ability of one entity to influence the action of another entity"(Foucault 3). In *The history of Sexuality Volume One* Foucault defines power as "the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and they constitute their own organisation"(Foucault 91). Foucault says that in mediaeval society power has been consolidated largely through the open display of violence . But Foucault's power is impersonal, it is not force, capacity,domination or authority. It is neither possessed nor exerted by individuals, groups or institutions..

The blue colour symbolism in the movie which brings light to the Ambedkarite ideologies is another aspect in the movie which shows the Dalit resistance. In the song named 'Naan Yaar 'chained up Pariyen is seen, Pariyen and Karuppi painted in blue can be seen running.This is an example for the blue colour symbolism in the film. Mari selvaraj portrays Karuppi as a version of hounded Pariyen.She is actually a caste clash fatality which is a grim reminder of

the honour killing death of Ilavarasan who was found dead on a railway track. When Karuppi was hit by a train her dead body also seemed to be painted in blue. The Blue colour symbolism in *Pariyerum Peruamal BA BL* is used as a semiotic marker which represents dalit uprising and idiomatic in the Ambedkarite Literature which proclaims that all the creatures under the blue sky are equal.

Every victim of caste-based violence in the movie such as the victims killed by the antagonist an old man named Thatha, are depicted in blue, demonstrating the colour's significance as a symbol of caste's pervasiveness. The song spattered with blue colour denounces these deaths as martyrdom and calls for a blue revolution that bring social justice and equality. Pariyen running with a lantern is a representative of the upcoming revolution.

.In *Pedagogy Of the Oppressed* Paulo Freire says that

“For the oppressors it is always the oppressed (whom they obviously never call ‘the oppressed’ but- depending on whether they are fellow countrymen or not –‘those people’ or the blind and envious masses or savages or natives or subversives) who are disaffected ,who are violent , barbaric, wicked or ferocious when they react to the violence of the oppressors”(Freire 56).

This can be connected with an incident in the movie where Pariyen got locked up in the ladies toilet for questioning Lingu's injustice of denying him the right to sit and learn on the front bench. Lingu couldn't accept the fact that Dalits are also coming to the forefront of society with the support of education so he

wanted to portray Pariyen as an uncivilised one by trapping him with a case of women assault because he stood up and fought for his right to study in front of everyone and this hurted Lingu's caste /community pride.

Once when the antagonist of the story The Old man happened to sit near Pariyen on a bus, he came to know that Pariyen is from Puliyankulam village. Old man's caste pride didn't let him sit near a lower caste man so he got up from the seat. When Pariyen's father was called upon to the principal's office to enquire about the incident the only question that his father asked him was 'I can speak without fear right?'(01:45:18 - 01:45:21).The brutalities of caste pride is evident here.

Another heinous act in the movie is Shankaralingum and his friends are undressing Pariyen's father just because he belongs to the Dalit community and he does female roles in plays . Shankaralingam,Jo's cousin even made her dad believe that she is going to elope with Pariyen and said that day all his pride will go down the drain.Thatha the antagonist is also making excuses for his honour killings by labelling it as his efforts to keep the honour of woman of upper caste and also as offerings to God.Caste pride and related atrocities are linked with religion in order to make it sensitive so that people won't question the deeds of the dominant class .

A long shot of Karuppi painted in blue is approaching Pariyen who is beaten to death by Jo's family in a railway track is portrayed in the film.Blue coloured Karuppi approaching Pariyen is an example of resistance of the

marginalised, it shows the burning thrust inside their minds to claim their right to live. When Jo's dad came to see if he was dead, Pariyen said to him, "How am I inferior to you? My hands held the plough but it also wielded swords. I will study what I like and do what you can". This kept the father's head down.

Finally when Pariyen and Jo's father met in the presence of her, Pariyen said to him that "Until you change, nothing is going to change." and the film ends in a scene where Pariyen is drinking Black tea and Jo's father drinking milk tea which clearly states the subtle distinction that is inherited by the upper castes. So with this kind of film Mari Selvaraj, PA Renjith and all are labelled as 'Madras Talkies Rebels' who stood out from the conventional way of Tamil Grand narrative films and portrayed the lives of Dalits as such.

B R Ambedkar's photograph in the principal's room amplifies the political undertone of the movie. Principal told Pariyen and his father that despite being chased like a pig he didn't flee or hide. He studied like a maniac and now those who once sought to silence him are folding their hands in respect. In response to a Teacher's inquiry about whether he had encouraged Pariyen to engage in fights the principal said "At least he won't hang himself" Let him die fighting" (01:48:09- 01:48:12). The notion of subaltern retaliation is a subversive seen in the Tamil cinema which was once the cradle of caste based classification.

Chapter 2

Karnan

Tamil cinema is known for its vital role in representing the socio political realities of Tamil Nadu as such .Instead of focusing on the dominant upper class and middle class lives in Tamil Nadu the subaltern experiences are brought into the forefront of the society.Phule's, Ambedkar's and Periyar's subaltern ideologies prompted Dalit film makers to focus on Dalit centred Tamil cinema. Mari Selvaraj is also a prominent Tamil film director who made a wake up call to mainstream Tamil politics through his films like *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL* and *Karnan*.

The conflict between the Thevars, a renowned upper caste section of society and the Devendra Kula Vellalars, formerly untouchables known as Pallars, is depicted in this movie *Karnan*, which is set in a remote village in southern Tamil Nadu. *Karnan*, a Mari Selvaraj directorial venture starring Dhanush is inextricably related to the village's caste-based identity.

The reference to Mahabharatha characters in the films adds up to the theme of Dalit Resistance. While looking at the Mahabharata parallels in the film, along with the name *Karnan* the film also has characters named after Yemen ,Draupadi ,Dhuryodhanan which are also from the epic. *Karnan* and *Draupadi* romance is one of the highlights of the film but this is forbidden in the original saga, that is *Karna* is rejected by *Druapadi* during a competition to choose her partner on account of his birth . *Karnan* a defiant and daring character in

Mahabharata whose birth was considered as disgraceful because he was brought up by a charioteer and thus got sidelined. Thus the marginalisation that the Karna in Mahabharata faced can be equated with the experiences of Dalit youth Karna in the film. The tale of Karnan in this film takes place in Karnan's home land, a secluded village in Tamil Nadu's southern districts. It is a village whose main request is for a dedicated bus stop for the locals, by giving them the luxury of not having to travel to the adjacent village Melur (the village of upper caste people) in order to board a bus. The people of Melur thus treat the Podiyankulam folk less . However, this bus politics issue is not the sole one, caste is subtly playing a great role in this fury over generations.

The lack of identity of the villagers of Podiyankulam is depicted in the film using faceless masks. Film begins with Karnan's sister lying dead on the road due to an epileptic seizure and buses and cars pass by without stopping to help her and then she dies, Mari Selvaraj refuses to reveal her face when the camera focuses on her; she is given a deity's face instead. Even the gods that the inhabitants of Podiyankulam worship lack a head and have no faces. The death of Karnan's sister due to the negligence of authorities is just another death in government statistics. The local goddess of Podiyankulam doesn't have a face of her own. She becomes the head of those who are deceased, as a way of making sure their suffering isn't forgotten. That's why Karnan and his clan believed that his dead sister is a goddess incarnate. There is also a scene in the film where a group of headless people were searching for Karnan. Karnan's dead sister, now with the goddess's head, appears in her father's dream, pointing to hidden treasure

in their house. They do find a few coins. This scene actually foreshadows Karnan's destiny: he will dig out his people's treasure for their freedom. Their goddess has buried it under them and seems to represent the insistent thrust forward of Podiyankulam's past.

The Animal symbolism in the film is also significant in showing its politics of Dalit Renaissance. As part of village tradition Karnan bisects a fish and wins the sword. It's actually Karnan reclaiming their past from the clutches of oppressors. They celebrate this victory by mounting on elephants and dancing on streets. The privileged savarna groups of the populace became quite uncomfortable by these basic acts of celebration, which include dancing on the streets or mounting an elephant. Mari Selvaraj also portrays a donkey that hops around the village but its front legs were tied with a rope. Karnan notices this and he even asks why they have bound the donkey's legs and he had this urge to free it so that it can run according to its will. Likewise In *Karnan*, there is a recurring image of people's feet frozen in place. Sometimes they are shown barefoot, other times they are wearing chappals, and the wrinkles on their feet have a distinct backstory of hardships and toils. The donkey's legs being tied to prevent him from running away or escaping serves as a metaphor for their imprisoned existence. Their hands and feet are chained together by caste. The lack of bus stops in Podiyankulam is basically restraining the people of Podiyankulam from travelling, that is their freedom of mobility is restricted here. Thus the persistent imagery of the chained Donkey intersects with Karnan's emotions which indicates that the donkey will be free at some point.

The film can be analysed under the light of Social Dominance Theory which explains how society maintains group-based dominance in order to control the weaker section of society. Almost all stable societies can be thought of as group-based dominance, in which one social group, frequently an ethnic, religious, national, or racial one, holds disproportionate power and benefits from special privileges, and at least one other group has relatively little political influence or ease in its way of life. There is an instance where Karnan got cheated in Kabaddi by the players from the dominant class residing in Melur. This can be compared to the grand narratives of Mahabharata where the Karnan in Mahabharata had to face several humiliations and setbacks just because he was raised by a lower caste charioteer.

A girl from Karnan's village happened to go to Melur bus stop to fetch a bus but she ended up getting verbally abused by the upper caste men in that particular village. They even slut shames her and said to her father that "Why let your girl sit there when we men are out here?" (00:24:21- 00:24:24) . She even said that she doesn't want to go to college anymore . This is an instance which clearly portrays the double oppression that Dalit women are facing over ages. Intersectionality Theory proposed by Kimberlè Crenshaw can be used to determine the double oppression experienced by this dalit woman. The five faces of oppression by Iris Marion Young are marginalisation, exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. This is also a metaphor for the state's refusal to accept the Dalit communities and attach them to institutions of modernization and advancement, such as colleges or hospitals. This is just another

method of limiting the village's residents from having access to chances for employment, healthcare, and education. The series of authoritarian brutality begins with a young boy throwing stones at a bus which refused to stop at his pregnant mother. The crowd including Karnan also joined in the boy's attempt to break the bus which finally became a collective protest of the villager's against authorities negligence towards them.

When the police came for investigation the police inspector SP Kannabiran asked the names of the village elders and was infuriated to hear the names of village elders like Duryodhanan, Abhimanyu etc. The police man accompanying SP said 'Though they are paupers, they think that they are royalty, The names they have given themselves "(01:28:11-01:28:15). The policemen keep on humiliating them by asking whether they are the descendants of emperors now. The police even asked the chief farmer to remove the turban and to get his hands off the police which made them question their superiority. The headless deity coming amidst the scenes also indicates the resistance of the villagers.

Marxist sociologist Louis Althusser suggests that the bourgeoisie maintain power by using both repressive state apparatus and ideological state apparatus. "The repressive state apparatus includes the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc"(Althusser, Lenin 96). These are the agencies that function by violence that is at some point imposing punishment or privation in order to enforce power.

Here the police dealt with the issue of vandalization of bus in a very oppressive manner ,they took the elderly people of the village to the police station and they were beaten to death. SP yells at them for daring to touch a policeman. "Madamswamy's son is Dhuryodhanan now ? You thought you could change your names and become kings overnight ? "(01:45 :20 - 01:45:24) This question reverberates the age-old communalism within the dominant class. "Which kingdom do you kings rule over?"(01:45:26-01:45:28).The notion of the dominant class which doesn't allow the downtrodden mass to come to the forefront of society is very much evident in this dialogue of police men.

There is a scene in which SP Kannabiran takes fishing rod from a commoner,captures one and kills it.This incident has a parallel with the brutal treatment of policemen towards the old people .They were caught and beaten to death just like how a fish is caught in a fishing rod and he even said that these old men puff their chests ,twirl their moustaches and stood proudly before him like they are equal to upper caste authorities which according to him is belittling him and his social status. That's why he suppressed them to where they should belong, that is under the foot of the dominant class.

The scariest thing in this state sponsored violence is when the collector gives an order to the policemen to ransack and beat up the whole village . The Image of a butterfly battling to live in the police station is symbolic of the plight of old men .But Karnan and the other young men vandalised the police station and took their men out which shows the strong retaliation of Dalit for their resistance. They knew that the atrocities against them were not for vandalizing the bus but

for wearing a turban ,standing tall against authorities.The film also throws light to how some state sanctioned dalit murders which are portrayed as suicides like the death of Yemaraja, Karnan's uncle.

It was Antonio Gramsci who introduced the concept of hegemony which includes ideological and moral leadership of society which can be achieved through ideological state apparatus and repressive state apparatus .This gives the elite savarna sect of society the ultimate power to rule downtrodden mass. So he wanted the proletariat to develop their own counter hegemony to withstand the suppression by elites .

The only way the working classes can prevail in this existential struggle,in Gramsci's view, is by cultivating their own "organic intellectuals"—a group of workers who are class conscious and capable of articulating a plausible, alternative vision of what society would be like under communism. This is what exactly Karnan and his clan is doing .The entire village especially Karnan's uncle wanted him to get in to the job he got in Armed forces for bringing up organic individuals in their community because they knew that the elders of the village couldn't talk back to the authorities because they don't have education and so they are not that capable to resist the power play between dominant and oppressed class.

In *Hegemony and Counter Hegemony* "Counter-hegemony refers to the efforts of social and political actors that challenge the cultural and institutional foundations of hegemony."(Adkin.). When a place is going through some political

or social crisis the section that is getting affected by the crisis is the subaltern section. When the subaltern starts to question these unfair practices of authorities ,then the authorities retaliate with their coercive powers like police or military to suppress protests, strikes and other forms of organised opposition ,thus a war of position occurs between hegemonic and counter hegemonic forces . This war is shown in the movie .

Karnan says to the villagers that the police have captured their village and robbed their dignity. So he raised a question to the village elders "What's the point of living like vermin? How many generations must suffer like you did ? "(01:53:05 - 01:53:09). The villagers under the leadership of Karnan are going for a counter hegemony here . This kind of subaltern resistance is rarely portrayed in Tamil cinema which is basically a hub of savarna political interests .

The song in the movie titled “Don't y'all give up papa” shows the visuals of Karnan's sister with the face of deity and several feet of young girls which represents the doubly oppressed lives of the girls belonged to lower castes. Masked children are seen all over the village. The girl represents their ancestral deity Katupechi . Along with the villagers preparing for attacking the armed forces some horse feet longing for freedom are also shown. Later Karnan and that one chained donkey comes in a single frame which is an indication for the liberation of Dalits from the clutches of Savarna people. The dance of the girls with deity masks are seen throughout the song which indicates that the ancestral deities have come to see the spirit of the villagers to retaliate against the unfair practices . Karnan's sister watches the village from hill top .

When Karnan was halfway to his journey to join CRPF his village got ransacked, knowing that he returned to village with his sword and simultaneously the deity figure representing his sister came upward from the bottom of water and she even applauds Karnan's dad's deed of giving him the sword .When Karnan caught SP he repeated the same questions which the SP once asked to the village elders . Karnan asked SP his name and his father's name .He said his father's name is Kandaiah. Now Karnan yelled at him saying ,If Kandaiah's son can be Kannabiran Why can't Maadasamy's son be named Karnan?and then beats SP .

He also said that authorities doesn't care about the needs and problems that the subaltern faces, the only thing that matters to them is the way they stand before then and address them .When Karnan wounded SP with sword the local diety's face was also shown in the scene as if she is quenching for the the blood of oppressors. Even in the deathbed the police aren't letting his caste pride die; he still asks Karnan to touch his feet for forgiveness. When SP was killed by Karnan ,a child's cry is heard ,a little donkey crossed the borders and reached near it's mother etc that is they got liberated from the clutches of caste hierarchy and the village of Podiyankulam got a bus stop and thus children were able to go to educational institutions without the fear of getting slut shamed .The movie closes with his goddess incarnated sister clapping her hands for winning something everyone of them yearned for ages and after accomplishing her long cherished dream of having a bus stop she hid herself behind a mountain with a hope that no any child will die without reaching hospital because of the lack of transportation facilities.The film ends with Karnan saying that "They beat us for just asserting

ourselves. Now that the assertion started, we won't back down". This line of thought is very rarely seen in Tamil Grand Narrative films which is primarily from an upper caste gaze.

Conclusion

This project has analysed two Tamil films, *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL* and *Karnan*, which challenges the caste system and the dominance of upper castes in Tamil Nadu. This analysis has been formulated on the basis of theories proposed by Antonio Gramsci, Karl Marx, and Michel Foucault to highlight the power dynamics that perpetuate inequality and oppression in society.

Chapter one of the project dealing with the film *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL* used Michel Foucault's theory of Power knowledge/ discourse and substantiated the fact that the power politics depicted in the film is merely based on caste pride, it does not contribute anything to enrich the knowledge of the society. According to Michael Foucault, power exertion will help the society to attain knowledge and there by discourse can be propagated easily. This film is also analysed in the light of information from Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony and proved that Pariyen the protagonist of the movie, and his clan were suppressed to the dominant caste in every means and their past were considered as uncivilised by the dominant castes. The use of blue colour symbolism in *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL* is pointing to Ambedkarite ideologies of Dalit liberation.

The second chapter of the project dealt with the film *Karnan* starring Dhanush. The character names of the films are from the epic Mahabharata which glorifies savarna politics and it is used as a revolutionary counter act in the film as part of the resistance downtrodden mass. The double oppression faced by the subaltern women is substantiated in the chapter with the aid of Inter sectionality Theory which depicts how a person's socio-political identity determines the type

discrimination and privilege of that person in society, a girl from Karnan's village got slut shamed in a bus stop because she belonged to the lower caste. Animal Symbolism also acts as a tool for resistance where human lives are compared to the lives of chained donkey longing for liberation from age-old oppression. The authoritarian brutality in the film is explained by Louis Althusser's concept of repressive state apparatus and ideological state apparatus where the armed forces used repressive state apparatus to ransack Karnan's village and the retaliation of the villagers shows the counter hegemony of villagers.

The films' protagonists, Pariyen and Karnan, are considered subaltern due to their birth in poor households, which makes them inferior in the eyes of upper-caste society. This study has shown how *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL* and *Karnan* have subverted the dominant or grand narrative in Tamil cinema, which glorified upper-caste characters and their politics by voicing their rights. The films' depiction of the protagonists' struggle for agency and voice in a society is seen as a critique of the cultural hegemony that excludes and displaces specific people and social groups from the socio-economic institutions of society. The project has also highlighted how the films challenge the dominance of upper-caste society by giving voice to faceless people and deities. In short, this project has analysed two powerful films that offer a critique of the cultural hegemony that perpetuates inequality and oppression in society. The study highlights the importance of challenging dominant narratives and amplifying the voices of marginalised groups to bring about social change through a subversive reading.

Works Consulted

Selvaraj, Mari, director. *Karnan*. Zee Studios, 2021.

Selvaraj, Mari, director. *Pariyerum Perumal BA BL*. Lyca Productions, 2018.

Damodaran, Karthikeyan. "Pariyerum Perumal: A Film That Talks Civility in an

Uncivil, Casteist Society." *Academia.edu*, 9 Nov. 2018,

https://www.academia.edu/37735553/Pariyerum_Perumal_A_Film_That_Talks_Civil

Devaki, V. "Representation of Cast(e) in Tamil Cinema: Pride and Prejudice." *On*

the Contours of Marginalization- Voices of Voiceless, 1st ed., Walnut

Publication, March 2019. [ity_in_an_Uncivil_Casteist_Society](#).

Divya, A. "Why Can't the Son of Maadasamy Be Karnan?": Caste, Gender, and

the Rise of the Male Subaltern in Tamil Cinema", *Quarterly Review of*

Film and Video, 2022, DOI: 10.1080/10509208.2022.2150504.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. vol.1, Translated by Rober

Hurley, Pantheon Books.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 30th anniversary ed., Continuum,

2000.

“Karnan: A Deep Reading into Mari Selvaraj's Subversive Searing Saga.”

CinemaExpress, The New Indian Express, 14 Apr. 2021,

<https://www.cinemaexpress.com/stories/trends/2021/apr/10/karnan-a-deep-reading-into-mari-selvarajs-subversive-searing-saga-23876.html>.

Kemmelmeier, Markus. “Social Dominance Theory.” *Wiley Online Library*, 26

October 2015,

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/9780470672532.wbepp23>.

Mohan, Ashuthosh. “Symbols That Define Karnan's World, Explained.”

Filmcompanion,

<https://www.filmcompanion.in/features/karnan-movie-dhanush-symbols-that-define-karnans-world-explained-mari-selvaraj-rajisha-vijayan-lal>.

Ramachandran, Avinash. “Pariyerum Perumal: Blue Is the Warmest Colour.”

Avinash Ramachandran, Wordpress, 30 Sept. 2018,

<https://avinashr13.wordpress.com/2018/09/30/pariyerum-perumal-blue-is-the-warmest-colour/>.

Sharma, Sandeep Kumar. “Michel Foucault's Concept of Power/Knowledge

Discourse: A Critical Analysis.” *Epitome*, vol.4, January 2018,
http://epitomejournals.com/VolumeArticles/FullTextPDF/317_Research_Paper.pdf.

Sukumar, Daniel. “Dhanush's 'Karnan' through the Eyes of the Marginalised.”

The Quint, 1 June 2021,

<https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/hot-on-web/dhanush-karnan-caste-oppression-voice-of-marginalised-police-mari-selvaraj#read-more>.

“The Foucauldian Concept of Power.” *Lkouniv.ac.in*.

2020.https://www.lkouniv.ac.in/site/writereaddata/siteContent/202004021930365629saroj_dhal_socio_FOUCOULT.pdf.