

## **An Overview of the Changing Paradigms of Caste, Politics and Gender Marginalities in Tamil Films from 2000 to 2021**

**DEEPTHY KRISHNA D.<sup>1</sup>**

---

### **ABSTRACT**

*“There is no use of simply acquiring titles or amassing wealth if one has no self-respect and scientific knowledge.” (E V Ramasamy, 511) is an oft quoted saying of Periyar reflecting the self-demeaning aspect of caste discrimination. The Brahminical hegemonic notions of Caste hierarchy pervaded into the social fabric of Dravidian traditions are now getting negated with the rising tide of Dravidian politics rooted in equality, justice and self-respect. This paper attempts to reflect upon the intersectionality of caste, gender and political perceptions in Tamil films from late twenties.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Voice of Dissidence, Dravidian Politics, Gender, Casteism, Male Gaze*

---

<sup>1</sup> Deepthy Krishna D. (deepthikrishna10@gmail.com) is a PhD Scholar at the Department of English and Foreign Languages, Cochin University of Science and Technology, Kerala, India.  
Copyright © 2022 Deepthy Krishna D. This is an open access article licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Dravidian political parties in Tamil Nadu were always at the forefront of propagating Dravidian politics through the filmic medium. M J Ramachandran, Annadurai, Shivaji Ganeshan and Jayalalitha were prominent figures in this. The films till the dawn of 2000's depicted women in conventional frameworks and the derogate representation of the third gender was merely a part of normal dictum. However, there were a few gems like *Kalki* (1996), *Kandukondain Kandukondain*, *Sindhu Bahiravi* et cetera depicting a shift from the stereotypes. The later films especially women-centric ones; made a daring attempt to open up the bold individualistic perspectives of women in public spaces. The films like *Iraivi*, *Mozhi*, *Aruvi* et cetera break away from such conventional passive women roles reflecting upon the changing perceptions of Gender roles. The films like *Paava Kadhaigal*, *Mandela*, et cetera are archetypal specimens reverting these conventional gender stereotypes per se.

The caste depictions in Tamil films from 2000 onwards, negate the regressive tendencies prevalent until then. The changing social outlook influenced by the Dravidian politics is quite evident in the films from Pa Ranjith's *Madras*(2014), *Pariyerum Perumal*(2018) , *Asuran* to *Jai Bhim*(2021). The portrayal of active, assertive, self-effacing heroes and heroines from lower caste communities depict this changing trend in caste dimension. The arrival of Dalit script writers and directors to this field has contributed much to the raw and real cinematic portrayal of the caste hierarchy in films. The Dravidian outlook rooted in Identity politics has contributed much to caste mobilizations among the masses and thereby nourishing the progressive values of dignity, self-respect and brotherhood beyond caste lines. This paper attempts to reveal such changing nuances in Tamil films, comparatively analysing a few films from the selected time frame.

In the academic realm the words film and cinema are used in different aspect of meaning. When we look at it, we could analyse the changing paradigms of semantic shift occurred in this field of art during the course of time. Movie is more indicative of the motion picture dynamics associated with it where that of the cinema reflects upon the cinematographic/ artistic realm in it. Cinema involves the overall language of lights, camera, camera movements, shadow, editing and encompasses everything that creates a meaning on screen. Film is a specific work created out of that language called cinema. James Monoco's observation is as follows:

French theorists are fond of making the differentiation between "film" and "cinema." The "filmic" is that aspect of the art that concerns its relationship with the world around it; the "cinematic" deals strictly with the aesthetics and internal structure of the art. In English, we have a third word for "film" and "cinema"—"movies"—which provides a convenient label for the third facet of the phenomenon: its function as an economic commodity. These three aspects are closely interrelated, of course: one person's "movie" is another's "film." But in general, we use these three names for the art in a way that closely parallels this differentiation: "movies," like popcorn, are to be consumed; "cinema" (at least in American parlance) is high art, redolent of aesthetics; "film" is the most general term with the fewest connotations. (Monoco, 222).

Thus, during the course of time in resonance with the changing technical and artistic developments in the field of films, it achieved different semantic dimensions. Various literary movements such as Art for Art's sake, Dada movement, Avant-Garde movements et cetera made its own reflection in this art too, like any other expressions. The societal culture in which the art finds its origin will always emulate the elements of the former. This is evident in films developed in different film industries all around the globe. The impact of politics, changing trends in societal frameworks, progressive as well as regressive tendencies prevailing in the society et cetera find reflection in the cinema born out of that society as well. So is the case with Tamil films too.

The exploration of caste politics is one such realm we need to ponder. According to Ashish Nandy, 'Tamil cinema has had an altogether different relationship with politics' (Nandy, 16). In a way, we can substantiate Nandy's opinion by citing many examples where Tamil film starts becoming active participants in Dravidian politics. The caste dynamics of Tamil Nadu are complex, and the portrayal of the same in films too exhibits that complexity. Many film critics like Hugo Gorringer and Karthikeyan Damodaran have the opinion that Tamil films until 1970's, were more centred on Dravidian politics. In the later phase the focus got shifted to more communist or socialist perspectives and after the 2000's it became more lenient to Dalit's identity politics. The arrival of Dalit film makers to this field of elitism, redefined the cinematic

spaces politically during the course of time. The films of Pa Ranjith's *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016) et cetera are better specimens of this.

Unlike the films in Hindi film industry, subscribing to the conventions of state dominance, the films from Tamil Nadu portray the growing dominance of emerging other backward caste's dominance in socio-political context. After seventies, there occurred an unconscious haste for emulation of Brahminism by Dalits. Sharan Kumar Limbale's stories in *Dalit Brahmin* was a real portrayal of that changing trend of the time. The glorification of certain caste and its customs was yet another feature of the films during those times. Starting with the *Thevar Magan* of 1992, we could see this romanticised association of violence with certain castes as if it is socially authored by them. This observation is being made by many critics like Karthikeyan Damodaran and Hugo Gorringe, too, especially about Madurai films. They also mention about the 'neo nativistic' turn in caste and gender dimensions occurred in Madurai films during the course of time. The counter posing of barbaric culture of the south with the more progressive egalitarian nature of Chennai was yet another facet of caste dynamics we found in later filmic depictions. Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' comes into play as an accepted reality in most of the Madurai films of those times. The attribution of power politics especially that of violence as a privilege to certain caste group, was a common thematic concern. The films like *Ghilli* (2004), *Thimiru* (2006), *Sandai Kozhi* (2006) et cetera well depict that trend.

Gender is the next realm of change after caste and politics. The films up to 2000's were typically subscribed to the general idea of patriarchy and glorified masculinity. In most of the films described above, the concept of masculine markers was attributed as power symbols for heroes and villains. The symbolic representation of long moustache and muscular body are symbolic representation of the same. There are instances in *Thevar Magan*, where the masculinity of the hero returning from London is being questioned due to lack of these symbolic makeovers. Likewise, the concept of valour was always celebrated as an unavoidable quality of the hero where that of meekness, passiveness and obedience et cetera as that of the heroine. The lyrics of songs in films like *Vettaikaran* (2009) are quite reflections of the same.

Misogyny was always in the forefront of all films and Tamil films were not an exception. The misogynistic dialogues made by the phallogocentric male heroes are

often welcomed by audience with great applause. The same was the case with the third genders. Dim witted girls with no worthy roles other than bunny and sexy looks were in the forefront of cinematic depictions. The use of *samma figure*, *sappa figure* et cetera are very common usages of tarnishing femininity. Amidst of the increasing sexist approaches in the films, there were a few exceptions like *Aval Oru Thodarkathai* (1974) , *Avargal*, *Sindhu Bhairavi* (1985), *Thappu Thlangal* et cetera by Balachander when the mainstream films were revolving around hero worship of MGR and others.

After 2000's there came up a number of women centric movies like *Aruvi*(2016), *Imaikka Nodigal*, *Kolamaavu Kokila*, *Mahanati*, *Kaattrin Mozhi*, *Raatchasi* (2019)et cetera. Even then we haven't lacked the same old 'male gaze' concept of Laura Mulvey rooted in our psyche. That is the reason why most of the female centric films do depict ideal women of phallic notions as if playing the role of didactic male ego. This male macho kind of gaze is quite evident in early films portraying the third gender as well. The film called *Appu* (2000) was one such. The transgender woman role by Prakash Raj was male ego satisfying character subscribing to the mainstream idea of transgenders as ill encompassing sex workers lacking dignity. For years preceding that, films came up depicting them as laughing stock and ugly characters of sexual satisfaction for the macho males. Some films are somewhat compassionate to trans characters though they too generally fit into the macho framework. *Thimiru Pudichavan* (2018), *Peranmbu* (2018), *Super Deluxe* (2019), *Paava Kadhaigal* (2020) can be added to this list.

In one way, when we look at the positive note of "gender as a performance", the oft quoted comment of Judith Butler in this context, the films like *Super Deluxe*, *Paava Kadhaigal* et cetera are viable expressions depicting this hypersexual trans characters acted on by male heroes Vijay Sethupathi and Kalidas Jairam respectively, as indeed a mere performance. The audience too can relate it to their senses that once the actors strip their feminine clothes, they will get rid of that gender trans performances. But the negative impact that it would create is that the transgender people's identity will be ridiculed as a mere performance by this heteronormative society. This is highly regressive in appeal. Is it possible to witness such roles being enacted by trans actors themselves in near future is a big question? Perhaps we could imagine a future where third gender people are being normalised breaking away from the skewed perceptions of them as experimental specimens in cine world!

Getting back to the caste dynamics, one cannot deny the paradigmatic shift that occurred in Tamil films with the coming of Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* in 2018. It was a deeply symbolic film with sharp undertones and powerful narration. Unlike the usual paradigm of passive, illiterate, submissive and subliminal and sub human portrayal of a Dalit hero, the film portrayed the evolution of an empowered hero of assertive nature who dares to negate the repression through non-violent mode for the first time. This sent shivers down the spine of the Tamil film industry groping in the darkness of selective casteism. It was a voice of dissidence. The final words of Pariyan, the protagonist is a reminder and resolution to all caste-based demarcations happening all around. 'Until you people remains to be the same and want my people to be dogs, nothing is gonna change' (*Pariyerum Perumal*).

Vetri Maran's *Asuran*(2019) was yet another film of an assertive Dalit hero, who resorts to violence as a mode of resistance. The voice of dissidence is placed on a platform of native authenticity, thereby sanctioning the mode of defence. The hero's emergence as the icon of saviour is stitched with blood cuddling plots with a symbolic representation of an *Asuran* who was born out for negating the atrocities happening due to caste hierarchy and oppression. The female gender is portrayed as supportive in nature.

Mari Selvaraj's *Karnan* came out in 2021 was another art representing the inter-caste power politics. The way caste interpolates into the different fabrics of power is well depicted in it. Here also, the hero emerges as a warrior against injustice and tries to subvert the hegemonic practices through violent dissidence. The film is also allegorical in many respects selecting mythical names of Karnan, Draupathi, Yema Rajan et cetera, trying to redraw the mythical narrative of an outcaste Karnan into the main plot of concern.

Madonne Ashwin's *Mandela* starring Yogi Babu is a different specimen portraying comically how trivial caste and politics are, in a fine manner. The 2021 political satire carefully made, depicts the dark and harsh life reality of a "lower-caste" barber trying to eke out a living yet denied of his identity finally becoming the focal point of the power politics in the village. The sarcastic tone through which the film narrates various nuances of native politics, caste and gender lines resonates with the changing dynamics of the above-said perspectives.

The final yet notable one redefining the caste gender and political dynamics of Tamil films was the film *Jai Bhim* by T J Gnanavel in 2021. The film touched upon the various nuances of injustice and its gravity layered on caste and gender lines in a fine manner through the politics of justice, giving a vantage point of Marxism and Ambedkarism for the viewers. The atrocities encountered by the tribals from the so-called law-makers, are questioned by means of prevailing law and system of justice. Here the tribal woman Sengeni emerges as the symbol of perseverance and justice. The character transformation from the level of a hapless tribal illiterate wife to that of an assertive individual is a notable feature of the character. Her search for her missing husband can be seen as an allegory of *Kannaki* in *Chilapathikaram*. The story is taken from the real-life experience of Rajakknu, a tribal man, and thus, it mirrors the gravity of such caste oppression prevailing in contemporary society. The last scene in itself encapsulates the all-encompassing humanistic politics of the film in a nutshell. The tribal girl sitting next to Chandru, the advocate; holding the newspaper in her hand trying to emulate his sense of dignity showcases the resolution of the real problem. That single shot in itself can open up numerous scopes of interpretations on this changing paradigm of caste, politics and gender in the contemporary Dravidian landscape per se!

#### WORKS CITED

- Gorringe, Hugo. "Caste and Politics in Tamil Nadu". Seminar 633, 2012, pp. 38-42.  
[https://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633\\_hugo\\_gorringe.htm](https://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633_hugo_gorringe.htm)
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Vy Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith. Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.
- Karthikeyan, D. "Madurai Formula Films and Social Realities." *The Hindu*, July 16, 2011.  
<https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4359>.
- Leonard, Dickens. "Spectacle Spaces: Production of Caste in recent Tamil Films." *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2015, pp. 155-73.
- Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema." Columbia University Press, 1973.
- Pandian, M. S. S. *The Image Trap*. Sage, 1992.
- Pinney, Christopher. "Hindi Cinema and Half-forgotten Dialects: An interview with Ashis Nandy." *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1995.
- Sivathamby, Karthigesu. *Tamil film as a Medium of Political Communication*. New Century Book House, 1981.