

***Locating Public Angst in Cinematic Narratives: A Cultural Critique of Tamil Film
Kaala***

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Abstract

The paper aims to locate the angst in the public discourse on the Tamil language film *Kaala* (2018) directed by Pa.Ranjith. *Kaala* portrays the life and challenges of the protagonist, played by one of the most popular Tamil film actors Rajinikanth, his family and members of his under-privileged community who take on the antagonist and his avarice towards land-grabbing and evicting the protagonist and members of his community from their homes. The film portrays the everyday struggles and their modes of resistance against the powerful devices of the politician-villain. The paper aims to look into the film's directorial subversion of portraying the protagonist from the underprivileged section of the society, a paradigm unbeknown to the Indian and language popular cinema. The objective of the study is to locate the differing discourses about the movie and to answer the question-is there an attempt to alter the popular cinematic narrative by portraying a realistic depiction of society through its plot and narrative structure and the problems depicted. The author argues that popular Tamil cinema particularly played by popular actors like Rajinikanth with a wider mass appeal can alter the imagination of the popular Tamil masses if not Indian. It points out that the creative efforts at interrogation of prescribed structures and cultural history is worthy of eliciting public debates/discourses in a society where most of them are unable to partake in conversations of culture and modernity.

Keywords: *Kaala*, Rajinikanth, Pa. Ranjith, Tamil Cinema, Caste, Dalit Identity Politics, Tamil Politics, Realism in Tamil Cinema, Mythologies in Tamil Cinema, Dravidian Politics and Cinema, Subversion,

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Introduction

***Kaala*: A Summary of the Movie**

Kaala is a Tamil language film directed by Pa. Ranjith and dubbed in other Indian languages and was released in India and worldwide in 2018.

A politician and minister at the Central government, Haridev Abhayankar, alias, Hari *dada* played by Nana Patekar, tries to evict people out of their homes living in Dharavi, a slum in Bombay. He promises them to build new homes with modern amenities under a government scheme with help of his aide, Vishnu Bhai played by Sampath Raj. Karikaalan, alias, Kaala played by Rajinikanth living with his family opposes Hari and his moves to protect his people who once upon a time migrated from Tamil Nadu. Kaala lives with his wife Selvi played by Easwari Rao and his two sons- Selvam played by Dileepan, Lenin played by Manikandan; his friend Vaaliyappan played by Samuthirakani, his grandchildren and Mani the dog.

Kaala's former lover Zareena played by Huma Qureshi returns to Dharavi to serve her own people after having worked in the slums of Rio and elsewhere in Africa but oblivious to Hari's intentions. Hari sends his henchmen to kill Kaala. During the assassination attempt, Kaala's wife and his older son Selvam gets killed. In a series of incidents, Hari incites trouble and threatens to bulldoze Dharavi. Kaala ensures they protest and defeat Hari's designs. Hari uses the police to impose a curfew and raid the area in an effort to kill Kaala and his men. Towards the end, Kaala's house is set ablaze and the police believe Kaala is dead. Hari arrives in Dharavi to lay foundation for his scheme and starts hallucinating. He sees Kaala in the crowd. The crowd kills Hari and the government scraps the scheme. Other slums begin to emulate Kaala's vision to protect their own land.

Politics, Realism and Symbolism in *Kaala*

Kaala and Realism

Kaala is unequivocal in articulating the need to subvert the dominant social, political and cultural paradigm. It employs cinematic realism as a film practice (not as a genre or movement) vis-à-vis classic narration and art film. The paper attempts to articulate cinematic realism in *Kaala* which refers to the verisimilitude of the film- to the believable and realistic story, characters and setting though not exclusively.

A mode of film practice is not reducible to an oeuvre (the films of Frank Capra), a genre (the Western), or an economic category (RKO films). It is an altogether different category, cutting across careers, genres, and studios [...] A mode of film practice, then, consists of a set of widely held stylistic norms sustained by and sustaining an integral mode of film production. Those norms constitute a determinate set of assumptions about how a movie should behave, about what stories it properly tells and how it should tell them, about the range and functions of film technique, and about the activities of the spectator. These formal and stylistic norms will be created, shaped, and

supported within a mode of film production (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985, pp. xiii-xiv).

Kaala does not obey the rules of the classic genre in cinema, nevertheless tells a story that is accessible and engaging and creates a more popular yet serious film. *Kaala* also falls into what is called a *masala*, meaning a mix of melodrama, action, comedy and songs followed by most popular films in Indian cinema. *Masala* means a combination of spices in Indian cuisine and in Indian cinema (Tamil and other languages) it indicates a combination and use of a range of emotions in film to elicit a range of emotions.

Review of Literature

Tamil Cinema: A Short History

Tamil cinema has evolved over the years. Like elsewhere in India, namely Bombay and Calcutta, it began with the mythological. Early directors who portrayed religion and societal institutions in a critical light had a strong cultural impact on Tamil society. K. Subrahmanyam's *Thiyagabhoomi* (1939), story of a young woman who abandons an unhappy marriage and wealth to join her father in the freedom struggle is a case in point.

As Thoraval (2000) points out, during the post-war period the cinema of Madras was marked by the increasing popularity, in parallel with the anti-British struggle for Independence, of an ethno-linguistic 'nationalism', anti-Hindi and anti-north (India), and as its corollary, the putting forward, in literature and on the screen, of the glories, languages and culture of the ancient 'Dravidians'.

Political parties like the DK (Dravida Kazhagam meaning Dravida federation) and DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) brought in social and political awareness among audiences through cinema (Hardgrave: 1975). Beginning from E. V. Ramaswamy, the founder of DK, C. N. Annadurai and Karunanidhi, they all wrote stories and dialogues for several films. These films employed the Dravidian party's ideology-anti-Brahmin, anti-religion and anti-Hindi ideals. The sensational *Parasakthi* (1952) written by Karunanidhi articulated the Dravidian ideology and served as an epitome of the life and times of the DMK argues Vasudevan (2000). Tamil cinema during this period borrowed extensively from the reformist politics of Dravida movement. Cinema was used as a tool for mobilization and propaganda. Those who acted in these films were seen to be messiahs. This helped actors like MG Ramachandran and his contemporary Sivaji Ganesan, turn into screen heroes and eventually becoming politicians. They had a messianic hold over the people and the state argues Pandian (1992). Both Karunanidhi and MG Ramachandran, a screenwriter and actor respectively, served as Tamil Nadu's chief ministers. Jayalalitha, an actress, and cast alongside MG Ramachandran as a heroine, too became chief minister donning the mantle of All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, AIADMK, a party founded by MG Ramachandran after breaking away from DMK. After the recent death of the grand patriarch, Karunanidhi, and Jayalalitha a while ago, Tamil politics and its current leadership, for the first time in its history, seem to be functioning without trappings of cinema.

Tamil politics has been largely and successfully impregnable to national parties at the Centre. During elections and depending on convenience, national parties strike an alliance either with DMK or AIADMK agreeing on seat sharing. Of late, reigning Tamil cinema stars like Kamal Hassan and Rajinikanth have expressed their desire to enter politics either by forming their own or joining a national party. This to say, Tamil cinema and Tamil politics continue to mutually attract each other facilitated by language, identity and caste. This relationship is furthered by the huge fan following who owe allegiance to their movie stars. (Dickey: 1993)

Tamil cinema has had a strong influence on the socio-political and cultural life of Tamil Nadu. It has traits that are unique, namely, firstly the language, like for example the Telugu and Malayalam cinema or for that matter Bengali or Assamese cinema. Tamil signifies not just the written and spoken word, but ethnicity, territoriality and an all-encompassing identity that is Tamil (Ramaswamy: 1997). It signifies a cultural marker that subsumes all other identities namely religion and caste, though the same language is used in cinema as a reformatory tool and many a time a weapon to fight against discriminatory practices born out of caste in Tamil society. It is also used to glorify and exaggerate. Such overtures are a way of life in Tamil Nadu. Tamil cinema mirrors such overtures of exaggeration and glorification. It also mirrors, crucially, the cracks in the social structure that has been portrayed in *Kaala*.

Theoretical Framework and approach

A discourse analysis was employed to understand and analyse the narrative and discourse/subtext and meaning of the movie Combined with a sociological analysis of caste and identity politics of Tamil Nadu.

3 markers were chosen-Narrative (Realism), Politics, Symbolism

Academic scholarship has historically ignored the subaltern perspective in cinema in India and particularly in portraying caste and its power relationship that is at play at various levels in society. Cinema and politics have coexisted together and both have found refuge in each other that for years several actors found their way to be elected as electoral representatives and political rulers. It has been a subject of academic scrutiny from a sociological and political science perspective. Though caste as a subject has been dealt outside of the screen, Dalit identity was never addressed on the screen. The crucial marker that distinguishes Tamil cinema is its language that renders it unique identity. But within the Tamil identity there are several layers that make its identity heterogeneous and inclusive. This paper looks at the Dalit identity politics that forms the narrative in *Kaala*.

Caste and Society in Tamil Cinema

In an effort to locate realism in Tamil cinema it is important to understand the historical origins of Tamil cinema, how it evolved, became a tool for propaganda in the hands of political parties and how it has started reflecting social realities (Ravi & Sundar: 1998). Till the eighties, caste did not appear in Tamil cinema. By then, leading actors, MGR and Sivaji Ganesan had walked into the sunset of their career. Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan were emerging as the new leading stars (Pandian: 1992 & Hardgrave: 1971,73 &75). The onus of what was being projected on the

screen, meaning the stories they selected that became the prevalent discourse in Tamil cinema, depended on the directors. This was the era of K.Balachander, P.Barathiraja and Mahendran-top directors. The oeuvre of films from these directors explored several themes. For example, a Balachander film would portray the importance of a Brahmin hero while Barathiraja's films were set against the backdrop of rural Tamil Nadu. Though, in *Mudhal Mariyadhai* (1985) the story revolves around a Thevar hero and a Dalit heroine, and their relationship, Barathiraja fell shy of breaking away from his own shackles of caste. A few other directors, like K Bhagyaraj, also introduced caste politics in their films by portraying the dominant caste he belonged to. But none of them explored the world of Dalits in Tamil cinema.

Inter-caste love emerged as one of the narrative in the late nineties. Inter-caste relationship and marriage is still forbidden and a taboo in India even now though there are exceptions to this rule. Dalit boys and girls are raped and murdered even now. In the late nineties, Cheran's *Barathi Kannamma* (1997) portrayed the story of such inter-caste love. The movie explored the relationship between an upper caste girl and a Dalit boy. In the end, the girl commits suicide and her lover jumps into the funeral pyre and ends his life. Though movies like *Barathi Kannamma* explored inter-caste relationships, they fell woefully short of articulating the Dalit angst. Dalit or lower caste characters were portrayed in such a manner they unquestioningly accepted their position and anything they did, which is proscribed in the caste system, incurred the wrath of the upper caste which meant they ended up being murdered in the movies. Which is nothing but the reality in India even now.

The lack of social and cultural diversity in Tamil cinema, this paper would like to argue, much like in any other cinema in the world, is because of the lack of diversity in filmmakers. There were hardly any Dalit filmmakers early on in Tamil cinema and as a result, audiences had no choice to see the reel reflecting the real. Even if there were cameo references, Dalit characters were shown in poor light, were the butt of jokes and ended up as a reference of ridicule because of the colour of the skin, eating habits and so on so forth.

The Emergence of Dalit Narrative in Tamil Cinema

Alongside Ranjith, award winning filmmakers like Vetri Maaran Mari Selvaraj and Gopi Nainar used every trick in the film trade to make successful Dalit-centric and at the same time successfully popular films. Like *Kaala*, these directors have and want to turn the dominant discourse on its head. These films have a strong sense and bearing on Dalits and the downtrodden creating social awareness. These films also reflect the lived realities and ideologies that were not part of the political spectrum in Tamil Nadu earlier and importantly compellingly project the Dalit identity and the ills that haunt them. Vettri Maran's *Visaranai* (2015) and *Aram* (2017) are powerful examples not because they are politically correct Dalit films, but an effort in using cinema effectively to articulate the Dalit identity.

For example, Ranjith's debut, *Attakatthi* (2012) followed by *Madras* (2014) which explored the life of urban Dalits, were critically acclaimed. They were fresh takes on the film practice in Tamil cinema and crucially filled the void that just did not care to tell the stories of Dalits and the oppressed. Essentially, this is making of uncomfortable cinema, largely because it was considered taboo. The breakaway

wouldn't have been possible had not been for Dalit filmmakers themselves. For long, Tamil cinema was impervious to the concerns of the Dalits. In a way it is significant because the lives and travails of the oppressed are being told by the oppressed that renders cinematic authenticity and political legitimacy. This perhaps, this paper argues, articulates the Dalit angst by using cinema as an influence to project the Dalit identity and its inclusiveness and importance in the society at large.

The efforts of filmmakers like Ranjith also highlight how they have subverted the oppressive narrative by celebrating Dalit stereotypes. And this leitmotif runs through *Kaala* whether it is colour, beauty, lifestyle, behavioural, attitudinal or any such stereotype associated to Dalit identity. In *Kaala*, a voiceover intones: “*Kaala na karuppu... kaalan... karikaalan... sanda pottu kaakuravan* [Kaala (in Hindi) means black... kaalan or karikaalan (a celebrated king of the Chola dynasty)... is the warrior who fights and protects].”

Realism as Film Practice

Robert McKee (1999) argues there are three narrative prototypes; namely classical narration, realism and art film. In realism, he says, the arch plot is characterized by a single and active protagonist, causality and linear time within a continuous narrative and a closed ending. Antiplot is characterised by coincidence, nonlinear time and inconsistent realities. Finally, Miniplot covers plots with multiple and passive protagonists, internal conflicts and open endings reflective of social realism. But a typology like this could also include other forms of realism where like in *Kaala* (2018) played by an active protagonist and an antagonist symptomatic of the Indian *masala* and yet subvert the dominant discourse by way of treatment and importantly that articulates the angst of the oppressed.

Robert McKee's Narrative Prototypes

	Classical Narration	<i>Kaala's</i> Realism	Art Film
Characters	Psychologically clear cut	Socially well-defined but complex	Complex and ambiguous
	Goal oriented through action	Adapting through a situation through attitude through conception of self and society and own experience.	Searching for meaning
Plot	Causality	Episodic and Accessible	Episodic & Ambiguous
	Closure	Open Ending: A New Beginning	Open ending (in terms of interpretation)
Style	Emphasize plot	Emphasize plot. A bit stylized.	Stylized
Conflict	Specific and outer world	Structural: Intimate and social relations	Existential
Fiction	Consistent	Consistent	Inconsistent

If cinema is to be viewed as a mirror to society and its changing times, its storylines too have mirrored the problems that threaten society- genocidal ethno-nationalism, economic disparity, religious intolerance and retrograde ideologies regarding gender, caste, race and sexuality. *Kaala* is a mirror that captures these reflections.

Kaala's Realism and Narrative Structure

Kaala's characters form a dichotomous opposite in the narrative structure. They are clearly defined between Kaala, the protagonist, his family and the downtrodden that he fights for, and Hari, the antagonist who wants not just to take over the land but to coopt Kaala's social and cultural sphere. The plot is a reflection, and a fight between India's landless (who are the sons of the soil) and those who want to evict them. This theme has been played out in several popular Indian films through the ages. But *Kaala* used this theme to associate land, social and cultural space to electoral representation and democratic politics but importantly played by a Dalit protagonist who challenges the dominant paradigm. In the movie, after an election, Hari's party wins every other seat except the imagined Dharavi.

The Politics and Symbolism in *Kaala*

The politics of *Kaala* is located in the politics of struggle, protest and resistance by the Dalits. Kaala fights against Hari's evil designs. The politics of *Kaala* is also located in the dichotomy of its characters, pitting one against the other between protagonist and antagonist, good and evil, and peaceful protest and violence. Most importantly, the protagonist, Kaala played by Rajinikanth is cast as a Dalit hero fighting for the rights of his people against Hari played by Nana Patekar (a Marathi actor who mostly acts in Marathi and Bollywood movies), a Brahmin by caste. Hari wants to build his own project in Dharavi.

Dharavi is the largest slum in Asia, located in heart of Bombay with a population close to one million living in just 2.1 sq.km making it perhaps one of the most densely populated places in the world with little access to health, sanitation, and drinking water. Dharavi is also home to migrant Tamils from Tamil Nadu who form 50% of Dharavi's population. Kaala, too, like many Tamils, migrates with his father to Bombay and into Dharavi in the movie. The discord between Hari and Kaala's father dates back to Kaala's father's times when in a duel, Hari murders Kaala's father and his men, set fire to Kaala's wedding day reception where Zareena and Kaala are about to get married. There's a history of protest in the movie since Kaala's father's times and Kaala dons the mantle in the present day to take up the cudgels against Hari.

Contestation of Space in *Kaala*

Kaala's politics is located in the contestation of spaces and the modes of everyday protest. In fact, the movie opens with a narration in the background that says their (peoples') fight is a fight for the land and war began with private property and continues to be fought for it. In a way, the director tells us *Kaala* is an embodiment of the voice of people and the voice of angst and protest articulated by Kaala. *Kaala's* politics is also located in the dichotomous opposites of the powerful and powerless, the powerful upper-caste and the powerless Dalits. The powerful have control over land and by extension wield political power and the Dalits continue to be oppressed by the powerful and in *Kaala*, they are being forced to give into the evil designs of Hari, who over the years have tried to break the back of those who speak up for the people of Dharavi.

Subversion of Caste and Subverting the Dominant

The narrative of *Kaala* turns the narrative of Ramayan, an epic in Indian mythology on its head by subverting the dominant and celebrating the oppressed. In the epic, the fight is between Ram and Ravan. Ram is an epitome of an ideal male and a virtuous husband who fights Ravan, the villain, a ten-headed king of the demons. The fight between good and evil culminates, in the present day, in the form of a festival (Dussehra) where Ravan's effigies are set in flames across India signifying victory of good over evil. Ram and Ravan are used loosely in everyday conversations across many parts of India to signify good and evil, purity and pollution, fair skinned and dark skinned. Ravan is used as a derogatory term to body shame people in India because of the skin colour.

Kaala's director, Ranjith, subverts the Ramayan narrative and plays Kaala and Hari (a generic Hindu name for god), an allusion to Ravan and Ram in the epic. Kaala is dark skinned and Hari fair skinned except that the film reverses the roles of Ram and Ravan. Kaala, also called as single-headed Ravan (unlike the ten-headed Ravan in the mythology) will do anything and everything to fight the evil politician that Hari is. While Hari wants to destroy Dharavi and (rename it as Dhandakarnya, the forest where Ram went into an exile for 14 years in the epic) everything that it stands for, Kaala wants to protect his people and the land. The director also subverts Ramayan narrative using the dialogues in the film particularly between Kaala and Hari to highlight the dichotomy and tension that holds Kaala and Hari together and

importantly the conflict that separates their worlds. By doing so, the film challenges a lot of prejudices and mindsets that are given birth to by mythologies.

Hari's real-estate company is name Manu. Manusmriti is a code, among other things, is seen as institutionalizing caste system in India and the source of India's inequalities based on caste. Hari quotes from Ramayan written by Valmiki (the epic Ramayan is also written by another Tamil poet Kamban), calls himself Ram, born to rule and eventually says that Ram has to kill Ravan.

In the final sequence, while Hari is performing his *puja* (prayers) his men set Dharavi on fire and hunt for Kaala and family. In the epic, Ram's devotee, Hanuman, monkey god and king of his troupes, set Lanka on fire after rescuing Sita, Ram's wife. Later, Sita walks through fire to prove her chastity and purity. In the movie, Kaala goes through a baptism of fire as if it were. In fact, he is tested at every turn in the movie. He stands steadfast to his ideals and commitment to his people even after his wife and son is murdered. He is unfazed in the face of adversity. By now, the people of Dharavi, including his family members and Zareena, who once had a differing opinion now realise that Kaala has been right, right from the beginning. They are inspired by his altruism and the ideals he lives by and perhaps a duty to carry on the fight. Now, *Kaala* is not just about Kaala, but the ideals that he helped instill in Dharavi among his people.

After the fires die down, Hari comes into Dharavi to lay the foundation for his real estate project. The camera pans towards the crowd. Hari is surrounded by the swarming hundreds, each and every one of them who have gathered to stand up for the very principles that Kaala stood for. Kaala is not there in the crowd but Hari sees his apparition. A child throws black dust in the eyes of Hari leading to his killing. The entire screen turns into black. The climax is a reiteration of Kaala's rules in his own fort, which is Dharavi- that Hari can't get out of Dharavi on his own volition. Early on in the movie, when Hari comes visiting Kaala and after exchanging pleasantries, Hari gets up to leave. Kaala reminds him that he doesn't have the permission and yet Hari paying no heed to Kaala's warning and walks back to his car. In the ensuing sequence, Hari's car is blocked and eventually walks up to Kaala and asks him for permission. In the end, Hari never makes it out of Dharavi. He never sought permission from Kaala or his people in the first place. It is *Kaala's* message for Hari and his ilk that it will be impossible to lay claim on a land that is not their own particularly when those who live there fight till the end even if it means one among them, like Kaala, is killed. *Kaala* is not about Kaala and Hari, it is about subverting the dominant and the oppressor through an idea that gets germinated among the people of Dharavi.

Conclusion

Kaala represents and portrays the everyday life of Dalits in Dharavi. It articulates their angst and their ways of protest against those who want to lay claim to their own land. Employing a realistic portrayal of migrant Dalits' fight against a corrupt politician, the movie employs dramaturgical aspects of narration found in realism as way of cinematic narration. It consists of all the ingredients of Tamil popular cinema including casting one of the most popular stars, Rajinikanth. It is here that *Kaala* deviates from other popular films that it explores Dalit identity politics through commercial cinema. It questions the established rules and challenges the hierarchy of caste system in India. The movie celebrates the life of Dalits, their mores, values, habits and symbols otherwise considered derogatory by the upper caste. The director draws the power of the narrative from the very myth to turn the myth on its head to demolish the paradigm that gives sanction to caste system. It plays the Indian mythological narrative of Ramayan in the movie and turns it on its head by subverting caste in all its sense and sensibilities. The movie is a voice for the oppressed Dalits narrated through the oppressed, making the rendition real. *Kaala* employs popular devices including casting a popular actor like Rajinikanth to challenge the established notions of formulaic Indian cinema in general and Tamil cinema in particular.

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