

Power, Politics, and Identity: Subaltern Narratives in Pa Ranjith's 'Kaala'

VANATHU SURESH A.*
R. SUBRAMANI
M. BALASUBRAMANIYAN
Periyar University, India

ABSTRACT

Cinema is a major cultural medium through which power relations, social hierarchy, and marginalised forms of subalternity are represented. In Indian contemporary reality, there has been a marked move towards representing subaltern narrations beyond sympathetic representation, focusing on themes of subaltern agency and struggle for political legitimacy. Under this framework, *Kaala*, a Tamil film directed by Pa. Ranjith, is an important site to understand the subaltern political possibilities of cinematic form as a site of subaltern political expression itself. This paper aims to explore the way *Kaala* interprets subaltern narrations based on the tropes used in its narrative, its use of space, its mise en scene, its symbolism, its dialogical features, and its power relations. The paper has adopted a qualitative approach based on the theories of subalterns as well as film theory. The film is studied as a cultural text through a systematic analytical process, viewing the film many times, segmenting analytical blocks, theory-driven coding, and interpretative synthesis. The results reveal that *Kaala* utilizes cinematic form in the strategic mobilization of counter-hegemony in several ways, where non-linear narrative form emphasizes historical continuity of marginalization, spatial form affirms subaltern legitimacy, visual and symbolic form acknowledges collective dignity, dialogic form is concerned with refusal and resistance, while institutional form articulates exclusion. The study makes an important contribution to film and cultural studies, as it can be seen to show that subaltern agent is articulated within cinema form, beyond representation.

Keywords: *Subaltern narratives, Tamil cinema, cinematic form, power and resistance, Kaala.*

INTRODUCTION

Cinema has long functioned as a powerful cultural medium through which social hierarchies, political ideologies, and collective identities are produced, circulated, and contested. In the Indian context, cinema has played a decisive role in shaping social consciousness by mediating ideas of nation, culture, caste, and power. Indian cinema is widely recognised not merely as a site of entertainment but as a crucial cultural arena where class-caste relations, political ideologies, and hegemonic structures are negotiated and reproduced (Biswas & Banerjee, 2023; Chatterjee, 2023). Consequently, the representation of marginalised communities within cinema has emerged as a significant area of academic inquiry.

The concept of the subaltern remains central to contemporary analyses of marginalisation in postcolonial societies. Recent theoretical interventions emphasise that subalternity is not confined to economic deprivation but is produced through historical exclusion from political representation, cultural legitimacy, and epistemic authority (Bhambra, 2024; Thomas, 2018). Within this framework, caste operates as a fundamental structure of social inequality in India, shaping access to power, visibility, and voice. Cultural

*Corresponding author: ajrsuresheducation2@gmail.com

E-ISSN: 2289-1528

<https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2026-4203-11>

Received: 4 December 2024 | Accepted: 16 June 2026 | Published: 30 September 2026

representations play a decisive role in either reinforcing or challenging caste-based hierarchies by determining whose experiences are rendered visible and whose are silenced (Dhanda & Manoharan, 2022). The capacity of the subaltern to articulate political presence is therefore always mediated by dominant discursive structures that regulate representation and legitimacy (Spivak, 2023). Hence, the subaltern can never articulate his or her political presence outside the dominant structures of discourse that stipulate the norms of the day.

Within the domain of the study of films, subalternity has emerged in the form of the representation styles, narratives used in the films, and the visual presentation techniques used in the movies. The mainstream Indian films produced in the past generally depicted the scenes involving the marginalised sections in the form of reformist, melodramatic, or the “saviour” genre films that further reinforced the dominant ideologies in the society. Not only this, but these representation models have also depicted the Dalits and the working-class characters in the marginal sections or the victim roles in the past mainstream Indian movies. Studies have further indicated the major shift that the regional or the regional market-based Indian cinemas, especially the Tamil cinema, have achieved in the recent past by focusing on the subaltern style of depicting caste violence, institutional violence, and the subaltern style of depicting social exclusion.

Most notably, recent research suggests that the change does not only affect the content delivered in the narrative, but also the cinematic forms. Contemporary Tamil cinema has increasingly reconfigured visual language, spatial representation, and narrative organisation to articulate resistance, dignity, and collective agency (Rajapandian et al., 2021; Divya, 2024). These formal strategies challenge earlier representational conventions that either erased caste or reduced marginalised identities to moralised stereotypes. Anti-caste aesthetics in recent films are therefore understood as being embedded within cinematic form rather than conveyed solely through explicit ideological statements (Edachira, 2020).

Within this evolving cinematic landscape, the films of Pa. Ranjith occupy a distinctive and influential position. His cinema consistently centres Dalit and working-class communities while challenging dominant ideological, aesthetic, and narrative frameworks of Tamil cinema. Rather than privileging individual heroism or reformist morality, these films foreground collective struggle, spatial politics, and cultural assertion as modes of political resistance (Eswaran, 2023; Divya, 2024). The 2018 film *Kaala*, set in the socio-political context of Dharavi, Mumbai, exemplifies this approach by narrating conflicts surrounding land, urban redevelopment, and state power through the lived experiences of a marginalized community.

Existing scholarship on *Kaala* has largely focused on its ideological positioning and symbolic politics. The film has been examined as a counter-narrative that critiques Brahminical dominance, exclusionary nationalism, and neoliberal urban governance (Bharatvaraj, 2024). While such studies offer valuable insights into the film’s political orientation, they remain predominantly thematic, providing limited engagement with how cinematic form itself operates as a mode of subaltern political articulation. In film studies, narrative organisation, spatial configuration, mise-en-scene, and visual symbolism are increasingly recognised as central mechanisms through which power and resistance are communicated (Bose, 2025).

Situating itself within this scholarly gap, the present study examines *Kaala* as a cultural text that articulates subaltern narratives through cinematic form. Drawing on subaltern theory and film studies, the analysis focuses on how narrative organisation, spatial politics, visual aesthetics, dialogue, and symbolic systems function as counter-hegemonic strategies. Rather than treating the film as a realist reflection of social issues, this study approaches *Kaala*

as a form-driven political cinema that constructs subaltern agency through structure as much as through content. The primary objective is to demonstrate how cinematic form itself becomes a site of resistance, enabling the articulation of subaltern identity, dignity, and political legitimacy within contemporary Tamil cinema (Bhambra, 2024; Bose, 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW / RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Subaltern Theory and Cultural Representation

The concept of the subaltern has become a central idea in postcolonial and critical cultural studies. This approach is used to analyse power, marginalisation, and exclusion. Current research emphasises that subalternity isn't just about economic hardship. Instead, it arises from historical, cultural, and knowledge-based processes that deny political representation and social acceptance (Bhambra, 2024; Thomas, 2018).

In India, caste serves as a fundamental framework for subalternity, influencing the ability to be heard, seen, and hold institutional power. Cultural portrayals are significant in either reinforcing or contesting these hierarchies, as they dictate which experiences are deemed typical and which are pushed to the periphery (Dhanda & Manoharan, 2022).

Caste and Subaltern Narratives in Indian Cinema

Indian cinema has also been known for its engagement with the subjects of inequality, social justice, and marginalisation, although in ambivalent ways. Earlier mainstream Bollywood films dealt with reformist, melodramatic, or even saviour narratives of the dominant social groups, and the marginalised sections appeared as passive victims (Singh, 2021; Susairaj, 2020). However, these narratives, even with sympathetic portrayals of the victims, reinforced the caste status quo by negating the political agency of the characters of Dalit and working-class origins.

The studies currently conducted about Indian cinema have revealed a paradigmatic shift in Indian cinemas, especially in regional cinemas, in how caste and subalterns are viewed from the perspective of the subaltern. There was also a focus in studies such as Edachira (2020) and Gopalkrishnan (2019) about how contemporary Tamil cinema attempts to place the issues of caste oppression, violence, and marginality as systemic failures and not as the failures of individuals.

Scholars further observe that caste representation in cinema is closely tied to questions of ideology and power. Analyses of Indian cinema demonstrate how caste politics intersect with nationalism, Hindutva, and state power, revealing cinema as a site where ideological struggles are visually and narratively negotiated (Biswas & Banerjee, 2023; Chatterjee, 2023). These studies underscore the importance of examining not only what is represented but how representation itself is structured.

Tamil Cinema and Anti-Caste Aesthetics

Tamil cinema occupies a distinctive position in discussions of caste and subaltern representation due to its long engagement with social reform, Dravidian politics, and anti-caste discourse. Contemporary scholarship highlights that recent Tamil films move beyond symbolic inclusion of marginalised characters to articulate caste politics through narrative form, visual aesthetics, and spatial representation (Rajapandian et al., 2021). In Tamil cinema, anti-caste aesthetics are becoming part of the film's structure, rather than just being a separate ideological element (Edachira, 2020).

Studies on subaltern representation in Tamil cinema note the emergence of new character formations and visual strategies that challenge dominant caste imaginaries. The representation of marginalised masculinity, collective bodies, and wounded identities functions as a critique of institutional violence and social exclusion (Divya, 2024; Susairaj, 2021). These cinematic strategies foreground lived experience and collective memory as sources of political legitimacy, resisting individualised narratives of upliftment.

Pa. Ranjith, Kaala, and Subaltern Political Cinema

In the changing landscape of cinematic expression, the works of Pa. Ranjith have captured detailed academic discourse due to the clear engagement with the themes of caste, land, and political resistance. Pa. Ranjith's cinema is notable for "putting the Dalit folks and working classes centre stage, subverting the existing narrative and cinematic hierarchies in Tamil Cinema" (Eswaran, 2023; Divya, 2024). Rather than emphasizing the heroism of individuals, the works highlight the "collective struggles, spatial assertions, and cultural dignity as resistance."

Scholars have mainly analysed Kaala in terms of its political ideology or its politics of symbolism. For instance, the film has been analysed in terms of its Ambedkarite politics, countering Brahminism, Hindutva, neoliberal urbanism, and the like, with visual images of colour, territory, and the collective body interpreted in terms of its politics of resistance (Bharatvaraj, 2024). While these interpretations have been useful, they have been largely thematic with little attention being paid to the cinematic form in relation to subaltern politics.

Form, Narrative, and Symbolic Resistance

Recent research on film and cultural theory has highlighted the significance of film form in respect to political content. Narrative structure, spatial relationships, and symbolism can be regarded as a mechanism and processes through which political content is represented and challenged (Bose, 2025). The symbolic and ideological processes of political content enable resistance to be represented in more subtle forms of cultural practices rather than through didactic approaches (Herrero, 2021; Pugalendhi, 2025).

In semiotic analyses carried out on Dalit and Anti-Caste cinema, it is evident that visual metaphors, depiction of the body, and spaces play a crucial role as tools for symbolic resistance (Viduthalai et al., 2017). However, in the existing literature, attention is given to these factors individually without bringing them together with a wider lens for analysing cinematic forms.

Research Gap

The explored literature reveals a surge in scholarly literature on themes such as caste, subalternity, and political films in India, especially within Tamil cinema. However, there exist three major theoretical gaps within this body of literature. First, most scholarly works on Indian films have been more focused on ideological and thematic aspects than on cinematic form. Secondly, most existing scholarship on Kaala has been more focused on symbolic/ideological aspects than on addressing aspects related to cinematic form as a counter-hegemonic feature. Thirdly, the study of themes related to subalternity, and cinematic form is still in a developing stage. Keeping this in view, this research study focuses on a more holistic approach to understand Kaala's articulation of subalternity from a cinematic form point of view.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative methodological framework revolving around textual film criticism to examine subaltern politics in cinematic form. Qualitative textual analysis of culture, particularly as related to ideology, power, and the politics of representation, has been particularly suited to the study of cultural texts as there has been considerable emphasis given to the examination of meanings encoded or embedded in the narrative form, visual considerations, symbolism, and discourse as expressed through either dialogue or any form of textual expression. There has been considerable emphasis given to the examination of cinema as a culturally constructed form that communicates meanings and power relations as expressed (McKee, 2003).

The study is interpretative and theory-driven, and its methodology is heavily informed by subaltern studies and film theory in such a way that enables a nuanced engagement with the internal logic of a film text and its formal aesthetic, as is possible in an analysis of political meaning beyond a straightforward, represented form (Tomilson, 2007).

Data Source

The Tamil feature film *Kaala* (2018), directed by Pa. Ranjith, will serve as the principal data source for this study. This film was deliberately chosen for analysis due to its explicit exploration of themes including caste, class, land ownership, displacement, and the role of the state. The film represents the broader socio-political context of Dharavi, Mumbai, and hence offers a significant text to research the issues of subaltern identities, space, and the counter-hegemonic in the context of contemporary Indian cinema.

Secondary sources include academic writing about caste, subaltern studies, and Indian cinema, and these works are intended towards conceptual interpretation and analytical framing. These sources exist only with reference to the filmic text and interpretation and cannot be used independently.

Analytical Framework

Theoretically, the study is informed by subaltern studies and critical approaches to caste and culture. Subaltern theory provides the conceptual framework for analysing marginalisation, hegemony, and agency in cultural representation, particularly within postcolonial contexts where caste operates as a central structure of inequality (Thomas, 2018). This framework amplifies that subaltern agency often articulates in indirect ways through cultural form rather than explicit political discourse (Edachira, 2020).

Another area that provides further information pertains to anti-caste and Dalit cultural studies, which points to the ways in which film practice resists and contests dominant ideologies and aesthetics with regards to castes (Omvedt, 2006). These approaches allow to conduct research into the ways in which *Kaala* resists and asserts political power by using narration, space, symbolism, and dialogue.

Units of Analysis

To ensure analytical clarity and methodological consistency, the study identifies the following units of analysis:

1. Narrative structure and temporal organisation
2. Spatial configuration and power relations

3. Mise-en-scene and visual aesthetics
4. Symbolic systems and visual metaphors
5. Dialogue, silence, and counter-hegemonic speech
6. Representation of institutions and governance

These units are treated as interrelated components of cinematic form rather than isolated elements. Each unit contributes to the construction of subaltern discourse within the film text.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis is based on a clear, multi-step procedure that seeks transparency. Firstly, the film was viewed several times to develop extensive understanding of the film's content and progression. Initial viewings were for gaining a comprehensive understanding, and further viewings were for recognizing patterns of themes such as caste, power, and resistance.

Second, the film was divided into segments based on its significant transitions, spaces, symbols, and dialogues. Scenes dealing with the theme of subaltern were selected and categorized based on the predefined segments of analysis. Thirdly, a theory-informed analytical framework was designed drawing on subaltern theory and anti-caste cultural studies. This analytical framework informed understandings of narrative openness, spatial resistance, visual symbolism, collective agency, and institutional critique within the film.

Fourth, the existing scenes and sequences were carefully studied through textual reading, paying particular attention to the ways in which cinematic form expresses political meaning, with greater emphasis placed on interpretation than scene description (McKee, 2003). Finally, the results from individual units of analysis were synthesised to develop broader thematic understandings, which inform the Findings and Discussion sections of the research.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of the present study has been kept within textual analysis of one film and does not cover audience reception, interviews, and production aspects. Thus, the results and the analysis made can be said to be specific to the chosen film. They can be made general through the applications made and connected to wider theories of political cinema, caste representation, and subaltern art forms.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

In this section, the findings will be discussed, all of which have emerged from the results obtained through the use of qualitative textual analysis for *Kaala*, and aligned with the set units of analysis, to showcase how cinematic form, rather than content, acts as the main means by which subaltern identity, resistance, and political agency are expressed.

1. Narrative Structure and Temporal Organisation

The narrative of the film *Kaala* does not conform significantly to the linear narrative structure and the idea of resolution that are normally found within the mainstream cinema of India. Instead of moving towards a fixed resolution, the film moves through the open narrative structure, highlighting the theme of marginalisation within the narrative. The film maintains the interconnectedness of past marginalisations and the present marginalisations in the realm of land and power (Bose, 2025).

Temporality of this kind contests the dominant narrations of the idea of progress, in which the problem of social injustice is perceived or represented as isolated and resolvable through the actions of the individual. The narrative resistances in the film conform to the observations of scholars regarding the portrayal in political cinema not merely disturbing linear temporality but drawing attention to the historical accumulation in the notion of injustice (Thomas, 2018).

2. Spatial Configuration and Power Relations

Spatial representation emerges as a central site through which power relations are visualised and contested in *Kaala*. Dharavi is depicted not as a chaotic or marginal space but as a lived, organised, and morally grounded environment shaped by labour, social networks, and collective memory. Everyday activities are framed within shared spaces, visually reinforcing interdependence and communal presence (Damodaran & Gorringer, 2017).

In contrast, spaces associated with institutional authority—such as government offices, police stations, and political headquarters—are portrayed as rigid, hierarchical, and exclusionary. These spaces are characterised by restricted access, surveillance, and spatial segregation, symbolising structural dominance. This spatial contrast reinforces the idea that power operates through control of space and mobility. Such spatial politics resonate with studies that identify cinema as a key site for negotiating caste, land, and legitimacy through visual framing and spatial hierarchies (Rajapandian et al., 2021).

3. Mise-en-Scene and Visual Politics

The mise-en-scene of *Kaala* develops a specific visual politics that focuses on the idea of subaltern presence and dignity. Costume, colour, location, lighting, and the positioning of the body function together to distinguish the marginalised communities from the institution of authority. The repeated use of black garments creates a visual sign of the marginalised communities, re-signifying the colour from negativity to one of pride, resistance, and political affiliations (Edachira, 2020).

Group compositions are also more prominent in scenes that include the community, while authority figures tend to occupy individual rather than hierarchical places. These types of aesthetics, it could be said, also represent other aspects of the film within the context of anti-caste cinematic movements, wherein ideological issues clash within the imagery themselves as a means of representation (Herrero, 2021).

4. Symbolic Systems and Cultural Signifiers

Symbolism is seen as a vital system of semiology in which political meaning is expressed in *Kaala*, where a house, street, walls, and land serve as extensions of collective identity rather than material possessions, and demolition and eviction symbolize not just material but cultural loss as well (Pugalendhi, 2025).

It can be observed that the visual metaphor is consistently embedded in daily practices, transforming the ordinary spaces and objects to imbue resistance. The symbolic representation of resistance within everyday culture mirrors the scholarly investigations into the importance of visual metaphor and semiotic analysis in anti-caste and subalterns' cinematic works (Viduthalai et al., 2017).

5. Dialogues, Silence, and Counter-Hegemonic Speech

Dialogues in *Kaala* operate as markers of political confrontation and not as a means of narrative exposition. Third language discourse, or subaltern discourse, tends to be direct, unambiguous, and collective, and finds expression in terms of collective experiences of displacement and injustice. The protagonist's discourse is always embedded, never individualized, and never heroic authority either (Susairaj, 2021).

The interaction of representatives of the institution presents several characteristics of the contrast between natural and experiential language and the legal and procedural language of institutions. Strategic silence and non-compliance are discursive strategies of resistance to the dominant discursive power. The use of dialogic strategies follows patterns of the cultural practices of the subaltern, wherein silence and non-compliance are not attributes of docility but are political statements (Spivak, 2023).

6. Representation of Institutions and Social Order

The role of the state, police, and the political leadership is portrayed as mechanisms of regulation and displacement rather than protection. The government structures are therefore portrayed as procedural and disinterested. Their reality is reduced to administrative logic. Policing is portrayed as surveillance and coercion, thereby reinforcing alignment with the interests of the elite and the corporate sector (Dhanda & Manoharan, 2022).

On the other hand, community-based organisation reveals a new form of social order, unlike any other, where decision-making is collective. Here, authority is based on experience and historical existence, rather than legality. In this dichotomy of contrasting elements, their legitimacy is highlighted, along with the structural aspects of marginalisation. Such a form of representation resonates with studies on the governance structures related to the oppression of castes, as opposed to the individuals themselves (Chatterjee, 2023).

7. Summary of Findings

The findings demonstrate that *Kaala* articulates subaltern agency primarily through cinematic form. Narrative openness sustains historical continuity, spatial organisation visualises power relations, mise-en-scene constructs collective dignity, symbolic systems embed resistance within everyday life, dialogic strategies disrupt institutional discourse, and representations of governance expose structural exclusion. Together, these formal strategies produce a counter-hegemonic cinematic discourse that repositions marginalised communities as legitimate political subjects. These findings provide the analytical foundation for the Discussion section, where the relationship between cinematic form, subaltern theory, and political resistance is further interpreted.

DISCUSSION

This discussion interprets the findings through subaltern theory, anti-caste cultural studies, and film studies to explain how *Kaala* mobilises cinematic form as a counter-hegemonic political practice. Rather than locating resistance solely within narrative content or ideological messaging, the analysis demonstrates that political meaning in *Kaala* is embedded within cinematic structure itself. Narrative organisation, spatial politics, visual aesthetics, symbolism, dialogue, and representations of institutions collectively function as mechanisms through which subaltern agency is articulated.

Cinematic Form as Counter-Hegemonic Practice

Contemporary reinterpretations of subalternity emphasise that domination operates not only through coercive force but through cultural consent, symbolic authority, and representational control (Bhambra, 2024; Thomas, 2018). Interpreted within this framework, *Kaala* disrupts hegemonic narratives of development, legality, and governance by reconfiguring cinematic form to foreground subaltern legitimacy. The film challenges the common cinematic ideas of individualism. In these films, conflicting or opposing themes usually end with a moral agreement. In contrast, this film shows that collective struggle is a constant political reality.

This form-based strategy also resonates with studies advocating a cinematic provision that sustains an ideological apparatus, whereby power relations are negotiated in aesthetic and cinematic decisions (Biswas & Banerjee, 2023; Chatterjee, 2023). By using resistance in its structure, *Kaala* avoids the usual ways of representing things. These often include subaltern politics, either by ending the story or by presenting it as a reform.

Collective Agency and the Rejection of Individual Heroism

These findings illustrate a clear refusal of hero-centric narratives in favour of conceptualisations of political agency centered upon collective presence and collective action by *Kaala*. This is at odds with the more prominent cinematic narratives in the region, in a way that prioritises political change and in which hero-centric narratives are privileged. This is a representational form that aligns with concepts of post-modern Tamil cinema, in favour of a collective and caste-based narrative of resistance, as discussed by Divya (2024) and by Rajapandian et al. (2021).

Thus, by focusing upon community, rather than individuality, it supports a subaltern position, which thinks of resistance in terms of a socially embedded and historically developed process, rather than an event. Moreover, this collective form of resistance challenges dominant caste ideologies that emphasise individual leadership and recognition, challenging alternative notions of legitimacy and political action (Dhanda & Manoharan, 2022).

Spatial Resistance and the Politics of Place

The spatial representation of Dharavi functions as a critical site of resistance within *Kaala*. Rather than depicting informal settlements as illegal or disposable, the film constructs subaltern space as lived, organised, and morally legitimate. This is spatial politics that resists dominant urban imaginaries that define marginal spaces as impediments to growth. These representations speak to work on caste, land, and cinema that flags spatial control as a crucial strategy of domination and resistance (Damodaran & Gorringer, 2017).

Spatial thresholds—roadways, barricades, and redevelopment sites—are flashed here as zones of contested legitimacy, a signifier of larger struggles over citizenship and belonging. By reconfiguring cinematic space in this manner, *Kaala* visualises subaltern claims to land and presence, transforming space itself into a political argument (Rajapandian et al., 2021).

Narrative Temporality and Historical Consciousness

The absence of closure in the narrative in *Kaala* is a political stance that emphasizes the continuation of caste marginalization. Instead of resolving conflicts through narrative progression, the film maintains its openness, relating its contemporary conflicts with its history. This temporal strategy challenges dominant cinematic narratives that frame oppression as temporary or solvable within existing institutional frameworks.

Such narrative openness aligns with subaltern historiographic perspectives that emphasise fragmentation, repetition, and unresolved histories as central to marginalised experience (Thomas, 2018). By sustaining historical consciousness through cinematic form, Kaala resists the erasure of past violence and situates resistance within a continuum of collective memory.

Visual Aesthetics, Symbolism, and Anti-Caste Meaning

Visual aesthetics in Kaala operate as semiotic resources that articulate anti-caste politics. The re-signification of black as a marker of pride and solidarity exemplifies how dominant cultural codes are inverted through cinematic form (Edachira, 2020). Costume, colour, and group composition collectively construct a visual politics that foregrounds dignity and collective presence.

Symbolic systems in practices such as these also serve to further ground political meaning in culture. Material objects such as land, housing, and spaces are viewed as aspects that manifest as extensions of identity and belonging. Such symbolic forms of resistance are also like other areas of Dalit films and anti-caste films in the sense that they depict visual metaphors that combat hegemonic caste ideologies in society (Viduthalai et al., 2017; Pugalendhi, 2025).

Voice, Silence, and Discursive Resistance

Dialogic dimensions in the movie Kaala expose the modalities of subaltern voice creation through the employment of vernacular language, violation, and silence. Rather than articulating the lived experiences in institutional language, the film emphasizes morality based on collective memory (Susairaj, 2021). Silence and violation have been deployed as tools of subaltern resistance against dominant discourse.

This approach reflects important understandings of how the subaltern is represented, which challenges the idea that their voice and presence are easily understood. Since the form in which power is conveyed influences who matters because their words are listened to and accepted, silence has become a natural consequence in an oppressive society (Spivak, 2023). In Kaala's study, she avoids the individualistic approach by presenting voice in a group setting.

Institutions, Structural Violence, and Competing Legitimacies

The representation of institutions in Kaala foregrounds marginalisation as a structural condition embedded within governance systems rather than a consequence of individual failure. Law, policing, and political mediation appear procedural and detached, prioritising administrative logic over lived realities (Chatterjee, 2023). Such representations expose the role of institutions in sustaining caste-based exclusion.

In contrast, community-based organisation takes the form of an alternative moral and political order defined in terms of collective decision-making processes. This contrast points to the binary between different sources of legitimacy, legal-procedural and ethical-collective, and challenges dominant models of governing systems, which accords with analyses of caste oppression in terms of systematic approaches rather than those of discrimination (Dhanda & Manoharan, 2022).

Contribution to Subaltern and Film Studies

This study, through its combination of subalterns and form-oriented film criticism, also extends previous research on the topic of caste and political cinema in significant ways. This

examination also reveals that *Kaala* represents a form-oriented form of political cinema in which there is a sense of resistance in the form of structure itself.

This research endeavours to augment the existing discourse concerning the determinants of anti-caste art, political representation, and cinematic expression. The investigation will achieve this by analysing the diverse methodologies through which resistance is both depicted and generated within the medium of film. This will afford the scope to further inquire in relation to caste, space, and subaltern identity in the regional domains of Indian cinema.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how *Kaala* articulates subaltern narratives through cinematic form rather than relying solely on thematic or ideological content. By adopting a form-oriented analytical approach, the study demonstrates that narrative structure, spatial politics, visual aesthetics, symbolism, dialogue, and institutional representation function collectively as mechanisms of political resistance. The findings reveal that *Kaala* constructs subaltern agency not as an episodic or individualised phenomenon but as a sustained collective process grounded in lived experience and historical continuity.

The analysis shows that the film goes against common practices in cinema. These practices usually include a clear story structure, a definite ending, and the idea of the individual hero. Instead, the film focuses on an open-ended narrative, the importance of groups, and the use of space as ways to challenge the usual ways of showing progress, the law, and how society is organized. *Kaala*, through its portrayal of community, land, and daily cultural practices, reclaims a marginalized space, establishing it as a site of both legitimacy and political assertion, thereby challenging prevailing caste-based and state-driven narratives.

As *Kaala* installs its discourse of resistance in the structural form of the film, it illustrates a style or form-based approach to political cinema that goes beyond the content-based readings of caste representation in the film. The current research adds value to the subaltern or film studies literature with its focus on the way in which the structural form of the film functions as a site for counter hegemonic politics, articulating the notions of dignity, agency, or identity in contemporary Tamil cinema, thereby going beyond the existing literature on the politics of anti-caste aesthetics in cinema or film.

Though the research is specific and refers to textual analysis of the movie under focus, the implications tend to yield important theoretical implications that can create a paradigm change when understanding the scope of political cinema as a cultural practice. Future research can seek to apply the form-oriented approach to comparative studies of films within regions, filmmakers, or marginalized groups, which can create a wider scope to explore the role and implications of form in relation to the politics of resistance and subaltern identity.

BIODATA

Vanathu Suresh A. is a Research Scholar in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Periyar University, Salem, Tamil Nadu, India. His research interests include film studies, cinema and culture, subaltern studies, caste and media representation, and Tamil cinema. Email: ajrsuresheducation2@gmail.com

R. Subramani is a Professor in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Periyar University, Salem, Tamil Nadu, India. His research interests include communication studies, media and culture, political communication, and visual studies. Email: erasubramani@gmail.com

M. Balasubramaniyan is a Guest Faculty in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Periyar University, Salem, Tamil Nadu, India. His teaching and academic interests include journalism, mass communication, media studies, and communication research. Email: balaktv1973@gmail.com

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