

Gender, Identity, and Dalit Subjectivities in the Select Films of Pa. Ranjith: Towards Inclusive Representation

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to understand the importance of Gender roles in the movies directed by Pa. Ranjith. The paper examines the intersection of gender with caste, class, power & identity. While his work is widely recognized for its engagement with Dalit identity and resistance, this study highlights the nuanced portrayals of gender dynamics across films such as *Kabali*, *Kaala*, and *Sarpatta Parambarai*. The paper contends that male protagonists are portrayed not as hyper-dominant figures typical of mainstream Tamil cinema (Kollywood), but as characters defined by vulnerability, emotional complexity, and a sense of collective responsibility. The film presents female characters as morally grounded and politically conscious figures shaping the narrative through their agency that remains unevenly developed. The study adopts Sharmila Rege's Dalit feminist framework to unveil the nexus of caste, power, and social hierarchy in the film. Methodologically, the study undertakes a close textual analysis of select films, focusing on narrative structure, character development, dialogue, and visual representation to assess how gender identities are articulated. Situating gender within the specificity of caste-based oppression, the framework enables a culturally grounded analysis that transcends universalized feminist perspectives and provides a critical lens to interrogate the representation and narrative positioning of female characters. Through this approach, the study explores how Pa. Ranjith's film reconfigures dominant gender norms, contributing to alternative, socially rooted portrayals of gender and enriching discourses on caste, identity, and representation in contemporary Tamil cinema.

Keywords: Gender roles, Representation, Social Power, Dalit feminism, Tamil cinema.

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Introduction:

Mass Media or Cinema had been a strong, vibrant cultural and ideological apparatus; it transcends from being a mere flashy entertainment to a discursive space wherein ideologies, social identities, and power relations are contested and reconfigured. The paper investigates the representation of gender roles in Kollywood (Tamil Cinema), which had been very dear to the dominant, historically privileged narrative traditions and structures centering hegemonic masculinity, relegating women to the peripheral and stereotypical roles associated with domesticity, emotional subordination, and narrative marginalization. The narratives that stem out from dominant social hierarchies embedded with the nexus of class, caste, and gender over the period of time are legitimized by the majority lot. The films of Pa. Ranjith question, contest, and deconstructs the contemporary Tamil cinematic discourse through his assertive and conscious narrative or storytelling. This conscious technique of Pa. Ranjith is widely recognized by the Subaltern Studies Scholars or anti-caste academicians and scholars as reactionary politics and counter-culture narratives.

1.1) Tamil Cinema as Cultural Discourse:

Tamil cinema is not just an entertainment medium but a very strong, dynamic sociopolitical and ideological apparatus. The medium of cinema serves a pivotal cultural discourse that shapes Tamil identity, contesting caste hierarchies and patriarchy that is prevalent in the society.

The Tamil films language have the decisive ways of representing people, particular construction of social identities and the particular construction of social relations. These relations are strongly bonded with ideology and power discourses in visual text. These dominant narrative texts are the complex identity to produce meaning. This invisible textual sense is very crucial in representations of people identity, gender discourse, narrative elements, location, cast identity, socio-political and economic aspect itself. (Kopalakrishanan et al. 2016)

The film *Parasakthi* (1952), starring Sivaji Ganesan and written by M. Karunanidhi, serves as a landmark example of the proliferation of anti-Brahminical discourse through Tamil cinema. Dialogue and screenplay writers like C.N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, etc., succeeded in creating an anti-Brahminical wave among the masses, which led to their capturing political power in the state and defeating the Indian National Congress in Tamil Nadu. They viewed cinema as a powerful tool to propagate their ideologies to the masses, rather than just a leisure activity.

1.2) Caste and Patriarchy in Indian society:

It is very appropriate to mention that India is deeply entrenched in the caste system, and patriarchy is

a byproduct of that rigid caste system, which dictates the positioning of an individual in society based on their birth. There have been many reformers who wanted to really dismantle the caste system, but still, no one could completely discard or dissipate the notion of caste among the masses.

The role of caste can't be ignored because it is the root cause of Oppression of Indian women. There are several things that can differentiate the experience of women from one another. Women are always seen as an object that should follow the patriarchal structure of society. (Jangra and Chaudhary 2024)

Patriarchy in India stemmed from this framework of Caste and the traditional ritualistic social practices, which collectively shaped the gender roles, suppressing women's autonomy. Thus, reinforcing 'male authority' within the familial and also wider social structure. Here, it is very important to understand 'male authority' in this context, is the collective authority and not as a dominance exercised by an individual men but the institutional suppression of women by the rigid rules, norms, customs, and legal codes drafted by the Ancient Indian society, or in other words, Manu Laws, which prescribed gendered roles and led to the subordination of women in society. However, the contemporary Indian society has seen a transformation in gender relations through the struggles and resilience of some great social reformers like Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, E.V. Ramasamy, and many more feminist activists and reformers. The societal norm was so concrete that the legacy of the socio-cultural historical frameworks continues, and the South Indian (Tamil) films of the post-independent era do play a role in strengthening this framework via portraying women as gatekeepers of the patriarchy.

1.3) Emergence of Anti-caste Cinema:

The paper argues that anti-caste cinema and anti-Brahminical cinema are not the same, and it is very important to understand what anti-caste cinema is

Anti-caste cinema refuses the distance between the viewer and the cinema; it does not offer the Savarna gaze the comfort of detachment. The Savarna gaze cannot hold that mirror for too long. (Bag 2026)

This paper particularly deals with the films of Dalit Director Pa. Ranjith who belongs to the school of anti-caste cinema but even before that, there have been films that critiqued the caste system and engaged in caste questions from a 'savarna gaze'.

1.4) Methodological Framework and Research objectives:

This article examines the intersection of gender and anti-caste politics in the cinema of Pa. Ranjith. The paper investigates how his film contends dominant caste hierarchies and patriarchal structures through the reconstruction of Dalit masculinity, representation of women's agency, and the articulation of Dalit subjectivities. The films taken for the study are *Kabali* (2016), *Kaala* (2018), and *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021). This article applies an interdisciplinary theoretical framework based on the concepts of Intersectionality, Dalit feminism, and Hegemonic Masculinity. The paper emphasizes the nexus of caste, gender, labour, and identity, thus providing a critical lens for analysing Pa. Ranjith's restructuring of identity, resistance, and social justice in contemporary Tamil cinema.

1.5) Scope of the Study:

The paper explores the intersections of gender and anti-caste politics in the select films of Pa. Ranjith i.e. *Kabali* (2016), *Kaala* (2018), and *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021). It examines the ways in which these films highlight the Dalit subjectivities through the construction of Dalit Masculinity, women's agency, labour, and resistance. The paper seeks to understand how Pa. Ranjith's cinema questions the prevailing social hierarchies and thereby constructs an alternative or counter-narrative of resistance, dignity, and empowerment in his films. (detected as AI)

Gender and Anti-caste Politics in Tamil Cinema:

2.1) Representation of Caste in Mainstream Tamil Cinema

It is pertinent to understand who occupied the mainstream histories and literatures in Tamil Nadu and Tamil literatures, and who could afford to make plays and dramas that were later translated into Cinema. The Brahminical domination in the society reflected in the cinemas as we could see most of the films especially from the 1930's to 1950's where the cinema reiterated Hindu epics such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Puranic stories, devotional literature and portrayed the lives of Hindu saints and bhakti figures such as Nandanar and Thiru Gnana Sambandar and so on. In these films you could only see how the caste system is glorified and maintains the status quo in the Tamil cinema. There was no representation of the common folk, the structures of caste, and the pattern of violence against of women were not even thought about until 1950's.

2.2) Davidian Politics and Cinematic Influence:

Since the state was very active and propagating the ideals of the Self-Respect movement by Periyar, which evolved into the broader Dravidian Movement. Which critiqued the superstitions, the varna

system, and the faith in God. C. N. Annadurai, popularly known as Perarignar Anna, the founder of D.M.K., and M. Karunanidhi, popularly known as Kalaingar, these personalities earned their names for their rich literary craft. The film 'Parasakthi,' written by M. Karunanidhi, challenged the existing societal norms and conditions and was a strong propaganda for their political party. They viewed cinema as a medium to propagate their ideologies, and with the entry of M.G. Ramachandran, the actor later turned to a politician who had become the face of the Dravidian Cinema, which influenced the masses of the Tamil society towards them, and eventually they dismantled the Indian National Congress in Tamil Nadu and became the ruling government of Tamil Nadu. The paper aims to address the issue of the inappropriate and unacceptable representations of Subaltern subjects in their films. Dravidian cinema critiqued the notion of caste from a philosophical perspective. Perhaps during the 1950s to 1960s, Tamil cinema tackled the caste system in a subtle manner, which never questioned the social order based on caste through the lens of Ambedkar and Periyar. The paper seeks to address these lacunae in the writing and representation of Dalit subjects and assertive lead women characters by the progressive Dravidian movement or Cinema.

2.3) Stereotyping of Dalit communities

The second phase of Tamil cinema derailed from the notion of anti-Brahmanical discourse to a very toxic climate where films explicitly showcased the issues of caste in rural Tamil Nadu and viewed it from a feudal or intermediate caste mentality. The films normalized the upper-caste hegemony and portrayed Dalit characters as subservient caricatures, seeking dignity and self-respect at the hands of the upper caste. Some of the films that fuel caste pride and strengthen the caste division among the masses, at times provoking communal riots and conflicts, were *Chinna Gounder* (1991), *Ejamaan* (1992), *Thevar Magan* (1992), and so on.

The political climate in the 90s altered a few things. Mandal commission report on reservations for backward castes was being put forward actively during this time. As a result, the intermediate feudal castes were able to express some sort of victimization at the hands of other dominant castes, especially in the politics. This time saw a rise in identity politics and felt that it's a natural response against the Brahminical oppression to prop up their own identities. In that context caste supremacist attitudes that of a ruling class etc. forwarded by these films went unquestioned or even welcomed. (ET Docs 2014, 9: 10 – 9: 54)

Once again, it is very important to know during this Era who was controlling the Tamil Film Industry, the intermediate caste occupied perhaps replaced the Brahminical spaces and reproduced their lifestyle, which reinforces and glorifies the origin of their caste and their ancestors. Thus, making the

Dalits, Adivasis, and Women distant from the cinematic spaces or not given proper representation. It is always the person from a dominant intermediate caste who rescues the subaltern from their miseries, providing a heroic and glorifying plot to the movie.

2.4) *Traditional gender roles in Tamil cinema:*

The geographical location is also very important when it comes to films that perpetuate caste pride, since the film's success depends on the masses, and the Dalits, women, and Adivasis have almost lost hope in the mainstream film industry. And there was a proliferation of films praising their caste, idols, rituals, and history. Many scholars categorized these films as "*Madurai Formula Films*," or "*3M films (Murder, Mayhem, and Madurai)*."

These films, often based in Madurai, are defined by the glorification of the aruval (the sickle shaped machete) and a corresponding mythology of a society based on martial pride and caste honor. The films, explicitly or implicitly, celebrate caste dominance and become vehicles for, and expressions of, the assertion and pride of intermediate castes (Damodaran and Gorringe 2017)

The representation of women in Madurai Formula films is often informed by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, with female characters largely confined to secondary roles as dutiful daughters, obedient wives, romantic interests, or embodiments of familial honour. Within these narratives, women's agency is frequently subordinated to the preservation of masculine authority and collective honour, whereas the heroic male protagonist drives the plot and serves as the primary embodiment of courage, power, and caste pride. In films such as *Virumaandi* (2004), *Paruthiveeran* (2007), and *Subramaniapuram* (2008), questions of honour, kinship, and community reputation are tied to the regulation of women's choices and relationships. Moreover, these films associate masculinity with strength, leadership, and violence, whereas femininity is linked to care, sacrifice, and emotional labour. These kinds of representations of women reproduce conventional gender hierarchies and legitimize patriarchal authority. Despite the growing presence of women portrayed as independent and self-determining in contemporary Tamil cinema, traditional notions of gender continue to inform their representation, particularly in narratives set in rural settings and that engage with caste identities.

2.5) *Rise of Dalit Filmmakers:*

The rise of Dalit cinema constitutes a critical intervention in Tamil cinema's cultural and political sphere by foregrounding histories, experiences, and perspectives that have traditionally been excluded from the mainstream representation. Although, Dravidian cinema challenged Brahminical dominance

and articulated a discourse of social justice, its engagement with caste often remained limited, leaving Dalit experiences underrepresented. Consequently, Dalit communities were frequently rendered invisible or depicted through reductive and paternalistic frameworks that failed to acknowledge their agency and subjectivity. Dalit filmmakers began to foreground the voices, experiences, and cultural identities of marginalized communities. This shift was facilitated by broader social transformations, including the Dalit political movements and the new cultural platforms that enabled marginalized communities to articulate their experiences.

Tamil cinemas normally represent a cosmopolitan city like Chennai, which mostly has meat-eating population as a city of *idli*, *dosa*, *filter coffee* and *carnatic music*. The culture of indigenous settlers, working castes and those who live in auto-constructed spaces (Dalit colonies), is omitted from the mainstream Tamil films. The absence of hip-hop, beef stalls and football grounds which are integral to the Chennai's poorer sections are natural in the Tamil films. While the city gets development in the international arena, the cultures of the indigenous-oppressed are getting degraded by the monopolization of the Brahmin culture (Pranav, 2018) (Arthi and Rao 2019)

Pa. Ranjith's film *Madras* was widely regarded for its nuanced portrayal of North Chennai, which was mostly stereotyped or marginalized in the mainstream Tamil cinema. The film foregrounds local culture, political consciousness, and everyday social realities through its authentic depiction of urban life. *Madras* challenged dominant cinematic narratives and expanded the possibilities of representation in Tamil cinema.

2.6) *Anti-caste aesthetics in contemporary cinema:*

The Dalit filmmakers created a cinematic space that challenges the historical marginalization of the oppressed communities within mainstream Tamil cinema. By employing innovative narrative forms, symbolic visual imagery, culturally rooted representations, and political critique, these films offer alternative understandings of caste and social justice. The films of Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj exemplify this shift in contemporary Tamil cinema, in which Pa. Ranjith employs the star image of Rajinikanth (Actor) to articulate themes of dignity, land rights, and resistance against social exclusion. The incorporation of Ambedkarite iconography, blue symbolism, Gaana music, and everyday cultural practices enables the film to formulate an alternative visual politics that centres subaltern presence and self-representation. This aesthetic strategy reflects a broader commitment to interrogating the interlocking hierarchies of caste, class, and gender while envisioning more inclusive forms of social and political belonging. His films position women as agents of social and political change, moving

beyond conventional portrayals that confine them to the roles of silent spectators or love interests. Such representation underscores the nature of anti-caste politics, gender justice, and broader struggles for social equality, fostering a more inclusive cinematic discourse.

contemporary Dalit presence in film-making and the employment of anti-caste aesthetics in cinema not only critique mainstream cinema but also affect the medium itself, through an affective expressive aesthetics that is at once political and poetic. Thus, anti-caste aesthetics in cinema takes inspiration from, yet goes beyond, the already available category of Dalit aesthetics(Edachira 2020)

The films taken for discussion in this paper are *Kabali* (2016), *Kaala* (2018), and *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021) which collectively demonstrate how anti-caste aesthetics can function as a mode of cultural resistance by foregrounding subaltern identities, contending caste hierarchies, and reimagining the question of representation, dignity, and social justice in contemporary Tamil cinema.

Reconstructing Masculinity in *Kabali* and *Kaala*

3.1) Dalit Masculinity versus Dominant Caste Masculinity:

The mainstream Tamil Cinema has historically celebrated forms of masculinity rooted in physical aggression, caste pride, territorial dominance, and patriarchal authority. Their roles are confined to the domestic sphere, representing them as mothers, wives, sisters, or romantic interests, whose primary purpose is to support the male protagonist. Ranjith's protagonists derive their strength from emotional bonds, collective responsibility, and a commitment to social justice.

3.2) Family, Dignity, and Political Identity:

Pa. Ranjith, in his films *Kaala* and *Kabali*, subverts mainstream masculinity's representation by grounding it in family, dignity, and political consciousness. The conventional mainstream Tamil cinema protagonist's familial roles reinstate patriarchal authority, whereas Ranjith's protagonists are spirited to confront problems through the emotional bonds they receive from their loved ones, and through a collective responsibility to abolish the evils and a commitment to social justice. The family operates not only as a private institution but also as a socio-political space where identity, dignity, and belonging are constructed and contested. Through the fusion of personal and political, positioning individual struggles as catalysts for collective resistance and social action.

3.3) *Emotional vulnerability in Male protagonists:*

Director. Pa Ranjith's portrayal of emotionally expressive male protagonists contests the normative masculine ideal prevalent in mainstream Tamil cinema, which traditionally associate's masculinity with emotional restraint and suppression of grief, fear, and affection. Conversely, Ranjith departs from his convention by depicting *Kabali* and *Kaala* as emotionally complex figures, demonstrating that expression of love, grief, and vulnerability coexist with their political agency and leadership. In the film *Kabali* (2016), the protagonist's enduring grief over the presumed loss of his wife Kumudhavalli, occupies a central place in the narrative. Kabali's memories of Kumudhavalli reveal a deeply affectionate and vulnerable side of his character. Kabali's emotional attachment to her continues to shape his identity even after years of separation and imprisonment. Kumudhavalli is not merely a romantic figure but an emotional anchor whose ideals of dignity, education, and self-respect influence Kabali's political consciousness. Similarly, *Kaala* (2018) presents a protagonist whose masculinity is grounded in emotional relationships and community bonds. His interactions with his family, friends, and former lover Zareena reveal dimensions of care and affection that are rarely foregrounded in conventional heroic narratives. Kaala's expressions of concern, disappointment, and grief towards the suffering of his community underscore his emotional sensitivity and empathy. These moments humanize the protagonist by portraying him as a leader who is deeply affected by the struggles of those around. Such a representation challenges the dominant cinematic expectation that masculinity must be grounded in emotional detachment and stoicism.

3.4) *Resistance against Feudal and Capitalist oppression:*

The article argues that Pa. Ranjith extends his anti-caste discourse by foregrounding the obstruction of feudal and capitalist forms of oppression. In the film *Kabali*, Pa. Ranjith portrays the exploitation and marginalization of Tamil plantation workers in Malaysia by the feudal lords, simultaneously challenging the socio-economic structures that deny dignity and mobility for the oppressed communities. The protagonist of the film doesn't question the antagonist as an individual but critiques the regressive ideologies and systems of labour exploitation, class inequality, and caste-based exclusion. In the film *Kaala*, the conflict or the confrontation of the whole film revolves around the aspect of ownership and the land rights of the people living in chawls of Dharavi. Here, the protagonist fights against the capitalist interests of the politician *Hari Dada* (*Nana Patekar*), who seeks to transform Dharavi through large-scale redevelopment projects by displacing the inhabitants of Dharavi in the name of Urban development. The film sharply examines the nexus between political power, capital, and social hierarchy, portraying land as a site of identity, survival, and resistance. Rather than portraying the Hero as an isolated individual, Ranjith situates him within a collective struggle that contests

the entrenched systems of exclusion, dispossession, and domination.

3.5) Redefinition of Heroism:

The contemporary anti-caste cinema challenges the dominant construction of 'Heroism' that has been a key element of the mainstream Tamil cinema. The Conventional Tamil cinema had constructed the 'Hero' as a dominant masculine figure who is bound to maintain the societal status quo, as in social hierarchies, safeguard familial prestige, and enjoy authority over others. On the contrary, Ranjith films redefine 'Heroism' by positioning it within the experiences and struggles of marginalized communities. In traditional mainstream Tamil cinema, the protagonists are portrayed as invincible individuals who seem separate from the pack (society). whereas Ranjith's protagonist emerges from the common man's struggle as a person questioning the systemic injustice and commits himself/herself for the progressive transformation of society and the emancipation of the oppressed communities. Their actions are motivated by the pursuit of dignity, equality, and resistance against systemic oppression rather than personal glory or revenge. The paper argues that his (Pa. Ranjith) films reconceptualize heroism by grounding it in community leadership, social justice, and political resistance, offering an alternative to the individualistic hero of mainstream cinema.

Women, Labour, and Resistance in Sarpatta Parambarai

4.1) Working-class identities:

The paper analyzes the very setting of the film Sarpatta Parambarai by Pa. Ranjith, the political tensions in North Chennai during the 1970's, and the socio-economic conditions of North Chennai through its realistic portrayal of working-class life. Although Ranjith and the Kollywood industry categorized the film as a sports drama, film scholars and critics claim that the film transcends the conventional notions of sports film. In the mainstream sports film, which revolves around the victory and redemption of the protagonist, the film locates its characters within a broader societal nexus of labour, poverty, and community relationships. Women, in this context marginalized women. Or Dalit women are crucial to this working-class environment, involving themselves in both paid and unpaid forms of labour which sustain households and communities. The film thus draws attention to the often- unacknowledged forms of labour that constitutes the base or the premise of working-class households and collective social existence.

4.2) Domestic labour and Emotional labour:

The film sheds light on the gendered division of labour within working-class households, where women are bound to the primary responsibility of domestic work, caregiving, emotional and practical management of family life. Alongside their domestic responsibilities, women bear the burden of sustaining the emotional well-being of their families during the times of uncertainty, economic crash and personal crisis. Although these contributions seldom receive recognition, they serve as an essential aspect of the labour that supports household survival and social reproduction. The film's portrayal of such a contribution highlights the gendered nature of labour within working-class communities and the often -unseen contributions of women to collective well-being.

4.3) Mariyamma as a politically significant character:

The character 'Mariyamma' in the film had been an integral role in the redemptive victory of Kabilan; she was not portrayed as a submissive or the conventional wife but a female role with a sound political understanding of how things work in the system and even sharply critiques Kabilan for associating Masculinity with his boxing career. Mariyamma actively negotiates the challenges posed by poverty, alcoholism, and social instability. Her oppositions to Kabilan's boxing stems from her awareness of the consequences such actions would have on family's stability. Her concerns extend beyond personal disappointment, reflecting a commitment to the welfare of the household and the future of her children. Through her determination, perseverance, and insistence on accountability, Mariyamma emerges as a figure who prioritize collective well-being over individual impulses, offering a grounded perspective on survival within a working-class community. Similarly, Kabilan's mother plays a significant role in shaping the family's moral and emotional foundation, refusing to accept her historically assigned subordinate status as a Dalit woman, asserting her identity as a resilient worker rather than a "slave" to dominant norms. She remains cautious about Kabilan's involvement in the sport and prioritizes the safety, ensuring that her identity and pride are not lost to patriarchal and caste humiliations. The women in the film operate as voices of reason. Thus, the film grants agency to a female character whose decisions influence the narrative and challenge conventional portrayals of passive femininity.

4.4) Boxing, masculinity, and Familial responsibility

In the film *Sarpatta Parambarai*, boxing occupies a central position in the formation of masculine identity and social status within the working-class community of North Chennai. The medium of sport operates as a pathway to recognition, dignity, and community respect, and not just an individual achievement of an athlete. Kabilan's aspirations for self-worth and social mobility are closely tied to his boxing career. In doing so, the film questions established ideals of masculinity, arguing that

manhood cannot be reduced to displays of strength, status, or competitive success. The film consistently explores the tensions between individual aspirations and familial responsibilities. Followed by his suspension by his coach Rangan, who disowns him because of his actions, Kabilan becomes increasingly consumed by frustration and despair, which leads to alcoholism and withdrawal from his family responsibilities and duties as a father, husband, and son. Through this trajectory, the film examines the consequences of neglecting familial responsibility in pursuit of personal frustrations. His eventful transformation of returning back to the boxing stage, is equally translated in his rekindled commitment to his role as a husband, father, and son. The film situates masculinity within the framework of care, accountability, and collective well-being. The film *Sarpatta Parambarai* derails from the conventional or dominant cinematic representations that equate “HEROISM” with physical prowess or individual achievement and declares that masculine identity is shaped as much by one’s responsibility towards family and community by becoming successful in the public sphere.

Sarpatta Parambarai shifts the focus from the exterior boxing ring to the interiority of Kabilan when he is devastated by the hostility of upper-caste rivals and fellow competitors, falls prey to their evil designs, and becomes an alcoholic. Ranjith’s intervention allows Kabilan to reflect on and recover his boxing skills by training under an icon from an equally oppressed fisherfolk community (Eswaran 2023)

4.5) *Community women as stabilizing forces:*

Women in Pa. Ranjith’s film serve as crucial figures in sustaining families, communities, and collective forms of resistance. While women may not always be positioned at the forefront of political movements or public conflicts, their contributions remain crucial to the preservation, resilience, and continuity of marginalized communities. They provide the social basis upon which the politically charged movements and the quest for collective identities are built. In the world of Pa Ranjith characters such as *kalaiarasi* in *Madras*, *Kumudhavalli*, *Yogi* in *Kabali*, *Selvi*, *Puyal* in *Kaala*, and *Bhakiyam*, *Mariyamma* in *Sarpatta Parambarai*

Ranjith’s Alternative Gender Politics

5.1) *Difference from mainstream Tamil cinema Directors:*

Pa. Ranjith’s representation of gender departs from that of conventional, traditional, or, in other words, many mainstream Tamil cinema Directors. The mainstream Tamil film industry prioritizes male protagonists and relegates women to roles such as submissive, soft-spoken love interests, dutiful

wives, or sacrificial mothers. Thereby assigning substantial narrative space to female characters, Ranjith emphasizes their role in shaping the social and political realities of the communities they inhabit, rather than confining or relegating them to the periphery or secondary positions. Female characters in Ranjith's films are endowed with meaningful agency and play a significant role in shaping the narrative. They become active participants in the struggle, be it political, societal, or familial, rather than conventional passive female characters who are portrayed just as submissive, dependent on the hero's journey in the film. Ranjith's emphasis on gender relations is notable since the traditional Mainstream Tamil Cinema reinforces patriarchal notions and reiterates the gender divisions through the glorification of male dominance, aggression, and authority. In contrast to that, Ranjith portrays masculinity that foregrounds responsibility, caregiving, and accountability towards family and society. It is very evident from his male protagonists like *Kaali*, *Kaala*, and so on, who are defined by their ability to engage with collective struggles and social obligation rather than mere physical strength and heroic achievement. He situates gender within the broader structures of caste and class, unlike the mainstream cinematic narratives that treat gender as an isolated category. He offers a more layered understanding of women's experiences, female characters such as *Kalaiarasi*, *Kumudhavalli*, *Selvi*, *Mariyamma*, and so reflect the realities of labour, social exclusion, and caste oppression that inform the lives of marginalized communities. Thus, Pa. Ranjith transcends the conventional cinematic representations of women by creating a space where questions of gender are closely connected to the issue of social justice and collective resistance. Thereby, formulating a framework for understanding gender, one that challenges dominant cinematic traditions and widens the possibilities of representation within contemporary Tamil cinema.

5.2) Representation of women as politically aware individuals:

The critical analysis of the select films reveal that Pa. Ranjith's film portrays women as politically aware and conscious individuals whose engagement with social realities extends beyond the confines of the domestic sphere. The women actively negotiate issues relating to caste, class, labour and community welfare rather than being detached from the social realities like the women in mainstream Tamil cinema. They internalized the political consciousness through their day-to-day realities, questioning the structures of exclusion and inequality. Characters such as *Kalaiarasi*, *Kumudhavalli*, *Selvi*, and *Mariyamma* demonstrate varying forms of social and political awareness. Ranjith films ensure that the intervention of such a strong female character influences the protagonist's decisions and the lives of those around them, and contributes to the collective well-being of their communities. Their contributions frequently provide a counterpoint to the actions of male protagonists, emphasizing accountability, ethical conduct, and commitment to the community. Furthermore, the study explores

that the female characters serve more than just as an emotional support system within the narrative. Their characters demonstrate an ability to understand and negotiate complex social conditions, to them with agency and conviction. In doing so, the article opines that Ranjith's films broaden the scope of women's representation in Tamil cinema by acknowledging their role as active participants in the development of community life and social transformation.

5.3) *Critique of Toxic Masculinity*

The paper can be read as Ranjith's sharp critique of dominant forms of masculinity that are rooted in aggression, control, and patriarchal authority. R.W. Connell's concept of *hegemonic masculinity* provides a useful framework for understanding this critique, as it refers to dominant masculine norms that reinforce structures of male power and gender inequality. Traditional Tamil cinema celebrated such masculine ideals through heroes embodying physical strength, aggression, and unquestioned authority, whereas Ranjith subverts these norms by exposing their social and emotional consequences in his films. The film *Sarpatta Parambarai* was a standard example to understand the bandwidth of hegemonic masculinity, where Kabilan's suspension from boxing leads to alcoholism, frustration, and neglect of familial responsibilities. Kabilan's experience highlights the precarious nature of masculine ideals that equate self-worth with achievement and social recognition, revealing their potential destructive consequences. Apparently, *Kabali* and *Kaala* deviate from conventional hero-centered narratives by showcasing protagonists whose authority derives from their commitment to community welfare and collective upliftment rather than domination and power.

Hegemonic masculinity may include celebrating and enjoying media violence (Hollywood "action" movies, Kung Fu movies, etc.), employing practitioners of violence (soldiers, police, thugs), creating impunity, and supporting the institutional conditions of violence. (Connell 2014)

Michael Kimmel argues that dominant forms of masculinity are sustained through the pursuit of power, control, and social validation. Ranjith's film contests these assumptions by centering responsibility, emotional vulnerability, and accountability as essential aspects of masculine identity. The interventions of female characters such as *Kumudhavalli*, *Selvi*, and *Mariyamma* question patriarchal attitudes and practices, simultaneously promoting more equitable interpersonal and community relationships. Furthermore, Ranjith's all-male characters confront the social and personal consequences of their decisions, thereby reconsidering and renegotiating established notions of manhood and embracing forms of masculinity rooted in care, responsibility, and community welfare. Accordingly, his films reject hegemonic or toxic forms of masculinity and promote gender relations based on mutual

respect, emotional awareness, and social accountability.

5.4) *Love, Marriage, and Partnership in Ranjith Films:*

The study further highlights that Pa. Ranjith's films depart from conventional representations of romance in Tamil cinema by portraying intimate relationships as sites of mutual support, negotiation, and shared responsibility. He consciously situates the intimate relationships within the broader frameworks that critique the notions of caste, class, labour, and community life. The notable scholar Anthony Giddens (1990a) argued that "modern social life is reflexive because of social practices that are continuously evaluated and modified in response to new information, thus changing the nature of the practices. (p. 38)." His emphasis on communication, reciprocity, and emotional equality as the foundations of modern intimate partnerships. Thus, love and marriage are represented as a social relationship constructed by questioning family, labour, community, and collective survival. Female characters such as *Kalaiarasi*, *Kumudhavalli*, *Selvi*, and *Mariyamma* engage actively and play a pivotal role in shaping the protagonist and his surroundings, rather than merely being a dependent, passive companion in conventional Tamil cinema. Their portrayal strongly contests traditional gendered assumptions by depicting intimate relationships as sites for negotiation and mutual responsibility rather than fierce male dominance. This representation echoes bell hooks' conception of love as an ethical practice rooted in care, trust, commitment, and responsibility. In his films, the trajectory of love seems to be controlled by the dialogue and reciprocity of the couples rather than through patriarchal norms or possessiveness. Love serves as a space through which individuals learn accountability, solidarity, and respect for one another. It also contributes to the characters' personal and political development.

5.5) *Dalit Feminism and Cinematic Politics:*

Ranjith has been very vocal about the ideologies and political stance in his films. He played a pivotal role in spreading awareness of Dalit feminism through his films, contesting the mainstream narratives that conveniently omitted the topic in theirs. He actually did pay tribute to contemporary Dalit feminists like Bama (produced her documentary), Sukirtharani (used her poem in his film *Natchathiram Nagargiradhu*, Umadhevi (poet and lyricist) and so on. There is an erasure of Dalit women in the mainstream Tamil cinema, by stereotyping them as victims, mute supporters or used for comic relief. These representations strengthen the already established patriarchal ideologies and the dominant caste mindset by refusing Dalit women independent agency and political subjectivity. Dalit feminists harshly critique the patriarchal and caste-centered films and their role in the invisibilization of Dalit women's experiences and voices through the mainstream film medium. Scholars like Sharmila Rege argue that the lived experience of Dalit women cannot be understood solely as an outcome of patri-

archy, but as the nexus of caste, class, and gender marginalization of Dalit women. The degree of oppression is higher when it comes to the Dalit women, since they have no established agency to raise their concerns and are vulnerable in the hands of casteist men and women. Thus, the Dalit feminist thought highlights the importance of analysing social inequalities through layered systems of power and control.

Sharmila Rege rightly pointed out that, “The dalit feminist standpoint emerges from the practices and struggles of dalit woman”. It is also a fact that dalit feminism originates in the works of dalit feminist intellectuals but it cannot be flourished if isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups. So it would be mistaken to Consider the initiatives of the dalit feminists as a separatist movement. (Mandal 2013)

The paper sheds light on Ranjith’s intervention in Tamil cinema through his alternative cinematic technique, which counters questions of caste, gender, and social justice. And substantiates the argument through his films, positioning female characters central to the family and community structures, importantly making decisions alongside their male protagonist. His films like *Madras*, *Kabali*, *Kaala*, *Natchathiram Nagargirathu*, *Sarpatta Parambarai*, and *Thangalan*, provide women with greater agency that is absent in mainstream conventional films.

Conclusion

The Study suggests that mainstream Tamil cinema has historically constructed masculinity through narratives deeply embedded in caste and patriarchal hierarchies. Within this narrative framework, dominant forms of masculinity have been associated with upper-caste identities, especially the physical strength of the male protagonist. While the mainstream film directors refuse to document the lived reality of Dalits and women, relegating them to the periphery in their films in a male-centered plot. Thus, the paper concludes that mainstream cinematic narratives played a significant role in strengthening societal divisions and gendered spaces among the people. The timely intervention of Pa. Ranjith’s films created a wave in mainstream Tamil cinema, where the plots revolve around the lived realities of Dalit subjects and their political and intellectual aspirations. His films contest the regressive, traditional mainstream representations of caste and masculinity and move away from the conventional mainstream narrative of celebrating the individual Heroism of the protagonist, instead emphasizing collective struggles for dignity, recognition, and social justice. Thus, the new wave of Tamil cinema or Dalit cinema offers an alternative understanding of masculinity rooted in political consciousness, community, and resistance. The paper highlights that Ranjith’s cinema widens the

scope of women's representation, especially Dalit women who were historically marginalized by this medium, and are portrayed as active participants in the familial, social, and political life of the male protagonist. Their very presence on the big screen emphasizes the importance of agency, collective action, and resistance in confronting caste-based oppression and social inequality. The paper concludes that through the framework of reflexive modernization, Pa Ranjith's film exposes how the ongoing identities and social relations are constantly questioned and reconfigured in response to changing social identities. His films encourage a critical engagement with established norms of masculinity and gender while foregrounding the nexus of caste, community, and power relations. In conclusion, this study argues that Pa. Ranjith's cinema language defies the caste-bound and patriarchal foundations in the conventional mainstream Tamil cinema by redefining both masculinity and women's agency. The paper ultimately argues that through the representation of Dalit men and women in Ranjith's films challenges the dominant construction of caste, gender, and masculinity and offers an inclusive vision of gender, identity, and social justice rooted in the lived experiences of marginalized communities in contemporary India.

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