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FILM AS PHILOSOPHY: A CASE STUDY OF THE TAMIL MOVIE PARIYERUM PERUMAL

Dr. K. S.Krithika

Assistant Professor

Department of Visual Communication
Pondicherry University Community College
Pondicherry, India

Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the Tamil Movie Pariyerum Perumal from a philosophical point of view. Not all films have philosophical significance. As an unavoidable cultural form, movies have raised questions about inequalities and immoralities in the society from the early years of cinema. The representation of caste will be subtle and subliminally conveyed in Tamil commercial cinema, without any apprehension for the discriminatory practices in many cases. But this film asks heady questions about caste, class and gender constructs. There is a recent trend set for narratives that are anti-caste and issues allied with caste discrimination in Tamil film industry. The critical reception of Pariyerum Perumal is one of the big reasons for this trend in the Tamil Film industry after 2018. To the audience, when the cost of the process of civilizing people is presented through the fate of two human beings it would be easier to connect with the idea than when it is presented as abstract philosophical ideas in a discussion.

Keywords: Pariyerum Perumal, Philosophical Significance, Discriminatory Practices.

Introduction

This paper is an analysis of the Tamil Movie Pariyerum Perumal from a philosophical point of view. This is a dark, ruminating, dramatic film that invokes many questions on caste and gender paradigms. What makes this film remarkable is that the main conflict that the film deals with is about caste and in the process of delineating the social constructs, the narrative centres around philosophical questions like nature of personhood, the basics of morality, discrimination, etc. Not all films have philosophical significance like this one. These kinds of films can do philosophy pretty much in the same way as a philosophical text. A predominant art of the twentieth century that film is, started as a pure medium of entertainment. But it has been quite consciously used by many serious film makers to ask pertinent questions to the society. As an unavoidable cultural form, movies have raised questions about inequalities and immoralities in the society. This movie asks heady questions about caste, class and gender constructs.

A serious film like this had only two shows in a day in one theatre in Pondicherry, India. Whereas, pure entertainers or commercial films usually have four to six screenings per day and are released in many theatres. This has been the case for many art films like the Tamil film Merkku Thodarchi Malai, which had only one show in the weekdays' afternoon. There are positive implications of films of this kind and the ensuing popular culture that these films like Pariyerum Perumal, Jai Bhim, Karnan, Asuran, Kabali and Kaala create in the society.

This film is a hard hitting, commercial drama on caste discrimination released in the year 2018. Disturbing realities of caste have been recorded quite blatantly. The similarities drawn between the hero Pariyerum Perumal played by actor Kathir and his dog in terms of their poor treatment and helplessness endured in the name of caste is heart wrenching. The story revolves around the humiliation that Pariyan (short form for the name) goes through in the hands of caste Hindus with or without his interest for the upper caste girl Jothi Mahalakshmi, played by the actor Anandhi. A persistent effort by the hero to come up in life is recorded in the movie. Mari Selvaraj, the director of the film, records a vast array of discriminative practices of caste in rural and semi urban areas. The overarching story is that of the struggle of the protagonist, Pariyerum Perumal, who belongs to the section of the society that is categorized as lower caste and untouchable. The whole story is about a progressive development that eventuates after a challenging ordeal sustained by Pariyan because of the self-conscious existence of the group of antagonists, who are the upper caste people.

The film records the bloody, horrific realities of honour killing. There is a facile optimism in the climax, which may not easily be conceivable in reality. The narrative justifies suffering as a necessary cost of progress for the protagonist in the minds of the audience. The innocent protagonist suffers from the beginning to the end. This film discusses the philosophical issues of discrimination and torture to the subaltern. We see the circumstances inspired by religious institutions in the name of caste and the lawlessness that results out of it. The hero Pariyan stands as a testament to the difficulties endured by the people of the lower, under privileged sections of the society who are discriminated in the name of caste. There is a constant conflict between the people



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belonging to the upper and lower castes. Real incidents of discrimination are discussed from the beginning to the end of the movie, through dialogues and visuals.

Policies that differentiate and disadvantage people unjustly on account of their membership to a group is morally objectionable. The ethics of discrimination are answered through one man's trials through those discriminatory practices in the movie. There are various art films that indulge in such ethical, philosophical arguments. But, *Pariyerum Perumal* adopts a genre that places it clearly in the category of mainstream commercial cinema. So, the reason for a study on this film is to state that philosophical discussions need not necessarily be restricted to art films per se. The usage of popular cinema to raise pertinent philosophical questions is an important step towards progressive cinema and a rational society.

Literature Review

As per the data published by the newspaper, *The Hindu*, “a significant proportion of Bollywood movies in year 2013 and 2014 had lead characters with upper caste Hindu names. There is an explicit discrimination in the names of heroes in Bollywood Hindi movies. Lead characters are always Hindu Brahmins and rarely do they show OBC and Dalit characters. In year 2014, only two films had lead characters with backward caste names. There are OBC or Dalit names in the movies, only if the story is about inter-caste love or marriages”.

“Acts or practices that impose a relative disadvantage on persons belonging to a particular social group is defined as discrimination by philosophers. Intentional disadvantaging of innocent people is the clearest form of discrimination”, according to Kaufman, 2019.

Tamil Cinema and Caste

How Tamil cinema has been handling the reality of caste is the most important question here. Before 1950's, the lead characters of many of the Tamil films would have an upper caste Hindu name. Rarely do commercial films cover discriminatory caste practices and honour killings that has centuries old history all over India and particularly in the state of Tamil Nadu, in this case. One such film before the 50's is *Nallathambi* released in the year 1949. The lead role was played by the actor – comedian N.S.Krishnan, who is popularly known as *Kalaivaanar*. He is a rationalist who used comedy and satire to ask pertinent questions to the society. In this movie, he performs a stage show of a Dalit boy returning to India after his studies, which represents the life of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar. There were movies that questioned the 'Devadasi' system and also movies like '*Madurai Veeran*' (1956), in which the popular actor M.G.Ramachandran casted as an untouchable is slapped for touching the Princess while rescuing her.

Other than some movies of those times, the representation of caste will be subtle and subliminally conveyed in Tamil commercial cinema, without any apprehension for the discriminatory practices in many cases. Especially, movies of the 90's like *Devar magan*, *Chinna Gounder*, *Ejamaan*, *Naattamai*, etc. movies like *Sandakozhi*, *Singam*, etc. of the 2000's, glorify the intermediate castes. These movies normalize caste practices and discrimination rather than questioning or condemning the act.

Though the main narratives of many of the Tamil movies were glorifying caste, artists of the 40's and 50's like M.R Radha, comedians like N.S.Krishnan and comedians Goundamani and Vivek of the 90's were always conveying rational anti-caste ideas through their comedies. The contributions of Dravidian politicians to Tamil film industry and Tamil society has to be mentioned undeniably, as we discuss about rational and socially revolutionary movies.

A semiotic analysis of *Pariyerum Perumal*

Many of the scenes in the film are visual narratives of events that happened in India because of the strong rooting to the caste system. The dialogue by the hero in the denouement stating, “As long as you people want us to live like dogs, our lives will never change”, reveals the truth of discrimination and suppression that are prevalent even now. The film does not maintain a heroic, macho image for the protagonist like most movies. But as the story transpires, we see the gradual change in the hero from a timid young boy to a rugged fighter. The story details the heroes' experiences that push him from his innocent self into an angry young man. The poor socio-economic situation and the conditions of the Dalit settlements in the outskirts are recorded authentically.

In denouement, as the camera slowly pans from the characters and zooms the two cups placed on the stone table with some tea left in the cups, in that visual imagery is implicit a sad history of the discriminatory two tumbler system in India. The practice is still prevalent in many parts of the country.



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The enormous use of Dutch angles and top angles depict the helpless situation in which the hero is placed in many of the scenes where he is beaten up and insulted by the upper caste classmates and other members of the caste. The camera and make up for characters, location and art design for the song 'Karuppi' are symbolic representations of the distressing situation in which the lead character is positioned. The visualization of the song depicts him being a prisoner of his circumstances, without any fault of his.

Music

The musical score by Santhosh Narayanan is intense, rustic and emotive. It adds another dimension to the film. The earthy nature of the songs used in the movies gives us a sense of the community the story is based on. This community which is deserted from the businesses of the semi urban or other main rural set up is explicit in the songs. The songs and community relationship backdrop gives us a grasp of the reason for the humble nature of the protagonist and provides a justification for the narrative. The music and the lyrics are designed to depict the culturally and socially specific circumstances in which the narrative is placed.

Discussion and Conclusion

Many fictional films like *Asuran*, *Jai Bhim*, *Karnan*, *Natchathiram* *Nagargirathu*, *Kabali*, *Kaala*, *Peraanmai* embody ideas much in the way that *Pariyerum Perumal* does. These films providing vivid imageries of the violence and discrimination meted out to the people belonging to the sections of the society that are branded as untouchables. But, *Pariyerum Perumal* is one of the most successful movies in handling caste as the main conflict of the movie. This success inspired many directors to base their narrative in the same concept of caste discrimination. That is the significant reason for studying this film.

The ideas that these films convey are far reaching than an abstract philosophical debate on caste discrimination. Philosophy with an empirical content presented by the films is so very effective than philosophical debates. Films with philosophical implications are an interesting way to use the medium. Another undeniable fact is that the Gen'Z' and millennials prefer films and Digital media more. The increasing unwillingness among this generation to read deeper, difficult texts, is another reason why commercial films should be considered as a vehicle for philosophical discussion. The accessibility and viewing habits of films has made film studies a serious academic discipline. In most cities, watching movies in a multiplex is one of the oft repeated recreational practices in many families. Film viewing has become both expensive and inexpensive in the last decade. With the arrival of swanky multiplexes and the multiplex audience, cinema viewing experience has become a luxury. At the same time, the boom in digital platforms and OTT has made cinema viewing inexpensive. With this rising number of audiences for films, film medium should be considered as a serious means to communicate serious philosophical thoughts.

In the last five years, there has been a trend for narratives that are anti-caste and issues allied with caste discrimination in the Tamil film industry. The critical reception of *Pariyerum Perumal* is one of the big reasons for this trend in the Tamil Film industry, after its release in 2018. Directors like SP Jananathan, Pa.Ranjith, Mari Selvaraj, Vetrimaran are making bold attempts in handling caste issues. Director, Pa.Ranjith is seen to be spear heading the movement by touching on caste inequalities in the movies that he directs and also by producing movies that deal with the same ideology. This new trend has pooled in a stream of films into this philosophical discussion. There are several films that may contain philosophical concepts without intending to do that. But *Pariyerum Perumal* is a very serious attempt to philosophise films, just as the Tamil movie *Parasakthi* did in the year 1952.

The story of the defeat of the hero all through the movie except at the end, demonstrates the human cost of the civilizing process. To the audience, when the cost of the process of civilizing people is presented through the fate of two human beings, it would be easier to connect with the idea, than, when it is presented as abstract ideas in a discussion. This film touches on philosophical concepts and ideas in the garb of human relationships.

The disturbing realities of caste has been recorded in Tamil Cinema before, but not quite blatantly as this film does. Also, providing a commercially profitable business for a film dealing with this concept is not common. Having said that one cannot certainly negate the contributions of movies like *Bharathi Kannamma* (1997), *Iraniyan* (1999), *Peraanmai* (2009) or *Gouravam* (2013). But the success of '*Pariyerum Perumal*' did act as a springboard for many other anti-caste movies in Tamil, after its release. This movie records the atrocities that have happened, are happening and will continue to happen in the name of 'caste'. Movies like this come with a deeper agenda and are more than mere entertainment. The philosophical aspects of this film give rise to serious, social and intellectual questions. Aspirational films like this allows us to understand and question the basic underlying philosophy of life practices.



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