

Inhabiting the Gaze: The Evolution of Dalit Consciousness in Vetrimaaran's Cinema

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Abstract: *This research article examines the filmography of Tamil director Vetrimaaran through the specific lens of Dalit consciousness. It posits that his directorial career charts a profound evolution, not merely in subject matter, but in narrative perspective itself. The paper argues that Vetrimaaran's cinematic gaze moves from an empathetic but external observation of subaltern lives in his early work, towards a deep and authentic inhabitation of a Dalit narrative standpoint in his later films, particularly Asuran. By employing close textual analysis informed by critical caste and standpoint theories, this study traces how his cinematic language— narrative structure, character psychology, and visual motifs—increasingly aligns with the subjective experience of Dalit life. The paper demonstrates that Vetrimaaran's later work transcends representation to articulate a consciousness forged by historical trauma, land-based struggle, and an unwavering assertion of dignity. This evolution from depicting Dalit lives to narrating from a Dalit consciousness marks a significant and complex contribution to contemporary Indian cinema.*

Keywords: *Vetrimaaran, Dalit Consciousness, Dalit Narrative, Standpoint Theory, Tamil Cinema, Caste*

Introduction

1.1. In Dalit Arts, Voice and Consciousness

The emergence of Dalit arts and literature in the 20th century was a revolutionary act of political protest, centered on the dual objectives of "bearing witness and giving voice," as Sharankumar Limbale (2004) has put it. This movement was more than a mere depiction of suffering; it was an assertion of a distinct Dalit consciousness—a subjective, political, and cultural awareness born from the lived experience of caste oppression. This consciousness flips the narrative from an upper-caste gaze to the subjectivity of the oppressed. It rejects "polluted" and "inferior," imposed identities and constructs a selfhood rooted in dignity, history, and resistance. The critical question in art is not just "are there Dalit lives shown?" but "from whose consciousness is the story told?"

1.2. Vetrimaaran's Lens: From Realism to Standpoint

Vetrimaaran, a defining auteur of contemporary Indian cinema, has built his reputation on a foundation of unflinching realism. His films are celebrated for their raw, immersive quality, plunging viewers into the worlds of marginalized communities. While his entire composition is concerned with power and powerlessness, this paper argues that his trajectory reveals a deliberate and deepening engagement with the challenge of cinematic perspective. As a nonDalit filmmaker, Vetrimaaran's journey is not one of innate expression but of a conscious effort to move his camera from the position of an empathetic observer to that of an intimate participant in the Dalit experience.

1.3. Thesis and Research Trajectory

This paper argues that the filmography of Vetrimaaran demonstrates a remarkable evolution in its capacity to channel Dalit consciousness. It traces his progression from depicting

subaltern struggle from a realist's distance to inhabiting a distinctly Dalit narrative standpoint that perceives and experiences the world through the historical and psychological lens of Dalit life. His cinematic grammar increasingly prioritizes the subjective reality of his Dalit characters, using non-linear narratives to represent memory and trauma, and visceral realism to convey the felt experience of humiliation and rage. This study will begin with a review of literature on Dalit consciousness and standpoint theory, followed by the methodology. The core analysis will then trace Vetrimaaran's evolving narrative perspective through four key phases of his work, culminating in a detailed reading of *Asuran* as the apex of his engagement with Dalit consciousness.

2. Literature Review

2.1.Theorizing Dalit Consciousness and Standpoint

The intellectual origins of Dalit consciousness can be traced to the philosophies of liberation and enlightenment that were enunciated by great social reformers like Jyotirao Phule and, most centrally, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The work of these thinkers has had a profound impact on the lives of millions. They have provided not just the foundation but also the building blocks for a political identity that is premised on the notions of self-respect and the so-called "annihilation of caste" (Ambedkar 2014). In what has been a cultural counteroffensive, Dalit literature has emerged as one of the primary vehicles for articulating and advancing the project of selfrepresentation.

One's social position as a Dalit provides a singular and even more magical coating from which to understand the choreography of caste society. Gopal Guru (2009) calls it "epistemic privilege," where a group of people or a community enjoys higher status or knowledge over other sections of society. The creative expression that comes from that magic coating isn't just testimony; it's theory, history, and philosophy.

2.2.The Dalit Narrative in Cinema: Absence and Assertion

Mainstream Indian cinema has for a long time been guilty of what one could call a "symbolic annihilation" of the Dalit (Gopal and Moorti 2008). When they appeared at all, Dalit characters were forced into the service of stereotypes—passive victims eternally waiting for an uppercaste savior, or objects of upper-caste pity. Authentic Dalit narratives, voices, and consciousness were nowhere to be found in this cinematic landscape. Tamil cinema, particularly in the last decade, has served as a powerful corrective to this history. It has created what some have begun to call a "Dalit cinematic gaze" (Yengde 2018) and marks a seismic shift in the cinematic portrayal of Dalits.

2.3.The New Dalit Cinematic Awareness: Ranjith and Selvaraj Filmmakers

Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj are the chief architects of this new cinematic awareness. They have set the standards for a cinema that is not solely about Dalits but is told from a distinctly Dalit perspective. Pa. Ranjith's films (*Kaala*, *Sarpatta Parambarai*) represent an aggregate, assertive public consciousness. They are a joyous celebration of Dalit culture, a reclamation of public space, and an unapologetic assertion of political power. Mari Selvaraj's films (*Pariyerum Perumal*, *Karnan*) articulate a deeply personal, poetic, and trauma-informed consciousness. They are lyrical explorations of the psychological wounds of the caste system, rich allegories of the depths of pain and the righteous anger it engenders. Pa. Ranjith represents the Dalit public sphere, Selvaraj inhabits the private one, with both mastering the art of Dalit selfhood.

3. Methodology

The methodology of this qualitative study is based on narrative and cinematic standpoint analysis. The main sources are some of the key films of Vetrimaaran, which are examined as

the cultural texts they are and that articulate a particular consciousness or perspective. The methodology synthesizes two levels of analysis:

1. Focalization and structure of the narrative: This involves a close reading of the narrative to determine 'who sees' and 'who speaks.' This part of the analysis centers on the narrative perspective, scrutinizing through whose consciousness the story is filtered—which includes dissecting the use of voice-over, flashbacks, and other structural devices. The core question is: Does the narrative structure in any way reflect the psychological state and historical memory of the characters, if they are indeed Dalit?
2. Embodiment of Cinema: This pertains to a formal analysis of how the language of film (cinematography, mise-en-scène, sound) is used to upon the standard of living and to fashion the notion of an embodied experience to subjective for the viewer. It investigates how angles of the camera align with a character's point of view, how design in production symbolizes their social world, and how sound design conveys their internal state (e.g., the amplification of a heartbeat in a moment of fear, or the use of a particular musical motif to signify a traumatic memory). This formal analysis is interpreted through the theoretical frameworks of Critical Caste Theory and Standpoint Theory. This allows the research to move beyond simply identifying themes and to instead analyze how the very form and structure of Vetrimaaran's films evolve to more closely articulate a Dalit consciousness.

4. Tracing the Arc of Consciousness: Vetrimaaran's Filmography

4.1. The Empathetic Outsider: Observing Subaltern Lives (Polladhavan & Aadukalam)

Vetrimaaran's initial cinematic ventures exhibited an animating concern for the disenfranchised. Yet, the framing of that concern tended to align with a rather conventional, if not wholly disengaged, documentary realism. The surveillance of the subjects—in this case, the "subaltern" of the film's pivotal historical moments—entails a kind of observational authority that has historically served not just to uplift marginalized figures but also, in the otherwise flowering of narrative cinema, to seep deeper into the consciousness at the film's center. The figures in the films retain such a hold on audacity that they demand a kind of riveting attention that is all too easy to slide past in a contemporary shorthand for realism. If Aadukalam displays an achievement in this regard, it might better be described as an unflinching look at the shakily stable world—that is, the subaltern. If the characters of Aadukalam (2011) were to somehow meet those of Polladhavan (2007), both sides would likely feel equally astonished and flabbergasted by the other.

4.2. Witness to the Machine: Documenting Oppression (Visaranai)

Visaranai (2015) stands as Vetrimaaran's most concentrated critique of the state. In this work, he documents a reality foundational to the Dalit experience: the unbridled violence of the state. The film's potency derives from its unflinching, procedural portrayal of torture. It is not a reprieve for the audience but rather a forcing of the brutal truth upon viewers, with the camera acting as a witnessing eye. There is no hand held or softening of the blow. Yet, while the film presents torture and the corrupt, odious system that permits it, there are aspects not shown. The viewer does not dive into the historical depths of what it means to be a victim and how state violence is an inherited social fact.

4.3. The Hold of the Narrative: The Crystallization of a Dalit Standpoint (Asuran)

Asuran (2019) is the film where Vetrimaaran's cinematic perspective makes a permanent shift from seeing to being. Here, the narrative almost completely fuses with the consciousness of its Dalit protagonist, Sivasamy. This is accomplished through several key strategies:

Memory and Trauma: The film's non-linear structure is not just a stylish choice; it represents Sivasamy's consciousness. The narrative lurches between the present flight and the past events that formed him. His trauma from the days of his youth as an activist is the key to understanding his deep-seated pacifism. The viewer experiences this past as a living, intrusive part of his present. We don't just hear about his past; we inhabit his memory of it.

The Articulation of Consciousness: One of the most famous closing speeches in cinematic history, Sivasamy's monologue to his son about the necessity of education, is the ultimate articulation of a consciousness that has been forged in the struggle against a relentless caste system. This is not a moral lesson that the director has tacked on to the end of the movie; rather, it is a piece of hard-earned wisdom that has been passed down from one generation to the next and that strikingly resembles a vision of liberation that the renowned scholar and activist Angela Davis once described as "a strategic, long-term plan for the movement." In its entirety, the film builds toward this moment when lived experience is elevated to the level of political philosophy.

4.4. The Politics of Perspective: Allyship and Awareness (Viduthalai Part 1)

In Viduthalai Part 1 (2023), Vetrimaaran directs his lens onto the very politics of awareness itself. The protagonist, Kumaresan, is not a member of the oppressed, indigenous community, but a low-ranking policeman—an officer of the state. The film's narrative is structured around his transformation of consciousness. He enters the conflict with a naive faith in the righteousness of the state, but through witnessing the brutal oppression of the local population (a clear stand-in for Dalit and Adivasi communities), his perspective is utterly shattered. This is a narrative about the education of an ally. By centering Kumaresan, Vetrimaaran gets to do something he hasn't done before: explore the uncomfortable process through which someone from a position of relative systemic privilege can come to understand the standpoint of the oppressed. This is a big, uncomfortable yet necessary conversation, and Vetrimaaran facilitates it with maturity and self-reflexivity.

5. Comparative Analysis: Modes of Dalit Consciousness

When one contrasts modes of consciousness with those contemporaries of his whom he has influenced, the achievement of Vetrimaaran in Asuran is clearer.

- Films like *Kaala* by Pa. Ranjith present a collective, public, and assertive consciousness. The perspective is of a community leader, reclaiming public space and political power. The consciousness is outward-focused, challenging the state and dominant society.
- Mari Selvaraj's films (like *Karnan*) convey a poetic, mythologized, and traumainformed consciousness. The perspective is deeply personal, almost lyrical, using allegory to express the profound psychological caste pain. The consciousness is inward, exploring depths of inherited trauma before it explodes into righteous fury.
- Unique aspect of Vetrimaaran's contribution in *Asuran* is the articulation of what we might call a historical, familial, and memory-driven consciousness. The standpoint is that of a father, and the narrative concerns the intergenerational transmission of trauma, memory, and resistance. It is less about a public political project or a poetic myth and more about the grim, grounded reality of a single family's fight for survival and dignity, where history is a wound that never heals.

6. Conclusion

Vetrimaaran's cinematic path charts a scholarly and artistic investigation of how best to portray the lives of the downtrodden. He has made a steady and resolute journey from the outer to the innermost sphere of representation—from the sensitive and insightful recording of subaltern existence to the profound and powerful inwardness of a narrative apparently told from a Dalit standpoint. His acclaimed earlier films mark him as a master of the realist aesthetic; the better part of his later career, capped by the blockbuster success of *Asuran*, reveals a deeper political and ethical commitment to placing front and center the probably never-to-be-sacred consciousness of those historically silenced. Use your camera, and it is a tool of seeing; learn to make it feel, and it is a conduit for the not always pleasant revelations of a specific, wellinformed, and historically vital perspective. His output, particularly when considered alongside the work of pathbreaking Dalit filmmakers such as Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj, casts a new hue over political cinema. It not only represents a potent, rather bleak, instance of how a nonDalit filmmaker can thoughtfully engage with Dalit politics but also serves as a model of deeper political outreach and engagement than exists in much contemporary regional or national cinema. If the measure of political cinema is the degree of its empathy and the comprehensiveness of its indictment—in other words, political cinema warrants the label because it can foreground not just the political but also the ethical, the artistic, and the aesthetic—it must reckon with Vetrimaaran at the very least.

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