
**"Caste in the Frame: Dalit Resistance and Realism in Mari Selvaraj's
Pariyerum Perumal"**

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Abstract

This article explores the historical and contemporary struggles of Dalit communities in India, tracing their systemic exclusion under the Hindu caste system and their evolving resistance through reform, literature, and art. Anchored in the philosophies of Jyotirao Phule, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, and B.R. Ambedkar, the study examines how calls for education, self-respect, and annihilation of caste shaped Dalit consciousness. The discussion extends to Dalit autobiographies, poetry, and modern cultural expressions such as rap, Gaana music, and cinema as sites of assertion and identity. Central to this analysis is Mari Selvaraj's film *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), which critiques caste-based oppression through a politically charged narrative that draws upon Ambedkarite thought, Gramscian counter-hegemony, Foucauldian power structures, Bazin's cinematic realism, and postcolonial/subaltern theory. Through symbols, semiotics, and realism, the film foregrounds the everyday violence of untouchability while offering counter-narratives of resistance, dignity, and emancipation. By situating the film within global discourses on social justice and human rights, this study highlights how regional Tamil cinema resonates beyond its cultural boundaries, establishing Dalit experiences as central to contemporary debates on identity, power, and equality.

Dalits are the communities in India who have historically been oppressed, excluded, and marginalized under the caste system; particularly labeled as "Untouchables" in Hindu society. The Hindu caste system, as described in Manusmriti and other Brahmanical texts, divided society into four Varnas: Brahmins (priests, scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (servants). Dalits were placed outside this system (called *Avarnas* or *Ati-Shudras*) and treated as outcastes, assigned to jobs such as manual scavenging, cremating the dead, Leatherwork, and cleaning toilets.

For the first time, Jyotirao Phule (Social reformer) used *the term "Dalit"* to refer to the oppressed castes. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, though he used terms like "Untouchables" and "Scheduled Castes" in legal contexts, inspired Dalit consciousness. The term gained wide political use in the 1970s with the rise of the Dalit Panthers movement (inspired by the Black Panthers in U.S.), who declared: "Dalit is not a caste; it is a symbol of revolt."

The cause of revolt is untouchability. It is rooted in many ways, and they occur in every aspect of life: from birth to death, from education to employment, from homes to temples. Untouchability, though abolished legally, is still practiced socially. Many opposed, revolted, and agitated against the untouchability.

Jyotirao Phule, a social reformer who fought against Brahmanical dominance, supported education for Dalits and women. *“What sort of God would create a religion in which one man becomes another’s slave?”* He exposed how rituals and scriptures were used to legitimize inequality and exclude Dalits from education, temples, and dignity.

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, Radical anti-caste leader and founder of the Self-Respect Movement. He called for the annihilation of Brahmanism, caste hierarchy and encouraged inter-caste marriages, rational thinking, and temple entry movements. *“If you want to abolish untouchability, you must first destroy the caste system. If you want to destroy the caste system, you must destroy the authority of the Vedas and the Shastras.”* For Periyar, real reform meant rejecting religious texts and rituals that justified inequality.

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is an economist, scholar, social reformer, and the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. He dedicated his life to fighting against untouchability, caste discrimination, and Brahminical dominance. *“It is no use telling me that this or that text condemns untouchability. What I want to see is not condemnation, but destruction.”* Means mere token reform or sympathy is not enough, Ambedkar demands complete abolition of untouchability.

Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, a landmark Dalit autobiography, deals with the experiences of humiliation in school, home, and society. Bama Faustina’s *Karukku* (1992), an autobiographical novel, brought out the Intersection of caste, gender, and religion (as a Dalit Christian). Namdeo Dhasal, known for Raw street-style poetry and political fury. His famous poem *Golpitha* recited urban poverty, sexuality, and violence. Sharankumar Limbale, a Dalit Theorist, proposed a theory titled *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. His autobiography *Akkarmashi* (The Outcaste), discusses the mixed-caste identity and inner conflicts. Urmila Pawar, a Dalit feminist writer. Her autobiography, *The Weave of My Life* (*Aaydan*), spoke about Dalit women’s struggle for identity.

Sumeet Samos, a Dalit rapper, writer, and scholar known for Dalit hip-hop tracks, memoir, *is affiliated* with modern Dalit assertion through rap and English education, Caste in elite institutions (like JNU and Oxford), and Street poetry meets academic resistance. **Gana Stephen is a Grassroots Gaana singer known for singing about Dalit history, local issues, and identity. Isaivani** (The Gaana Queen) sings about **gender inequality, caste discrimination, and urban struggles**. Mari Selvaraj, a filmmaker who directed the cinema *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), is a powerful work of **Dalit cinema** that explores **caste oppression, resistance, dignity, and systemic violence**.

*The present study tries to analyze, particularly, how Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* represents caste-based discrimination and untouchability through its narrative and characters. And also, what cinematic techniques does Mari Selvaraj use in *Pariyerum Perumal* to construct a realistic and politically charged portrayal of Dalit experience?*

The purpose of this study is to bring international attention to the film *Pariyerum Perumal* by Mari Selvaraj through the medium of English literary analysis. Although the film is rooted in regional Tamil culture and language, it powerfully critiques caste-based discrimination and a social issue with global resonance. By examining the film through a literary and theoretical lens in English, this study seeks to bridge regional cinema with global discourses on social justice, identity, and human rights.

The theoretical backdrop of *Pariyerum Perumal* by Mari Selvaraj draws from a mix of Dalit discourse, postcolonial theory, Gramscian counter-hegemony, Foucauldian power relations, and cinematic realism.

Ambedkarite Thought and Dalit Discourse

At the core, the film is deeply Ambedkarite, reflecting the ideas of social justice, annihilation of caste, dignity, and resistance. B.R. Ambedkar's influence: The protagonist's name, *Pariyan*, refers to a marginalized community. The film portrays his struggle for education and self-respect, mirroring Ambedkar's life and critique of Brahmanical dominance. It emphasizes education as empowerment, a key pillar of Ambedkar's philosophy. The film critiques untouchability, caste hierarchies, and the concepts of ritual purity/pollution, aligning with Ambedkar's arguments in *Annihilation of Caste*. At one *Scene in the film*, Pariyan's humiliation at the college toilet and his silence speak volumes about the normalized caste violence. But as the film progresses, he resists silently, echoing Ambedkar's idea that **self-realization is the key to emancipation**.

Gramscian Counter-Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony is the dominance of ruling-class ideologies, which finds a parallel in the way dominant caste norms are subtly enforced in the film. Selvaraj demonstrates how caste ideology is normalized through language, institutions (such as colleges), and interpersonal relations (e.g., Jo's family vs. Pariyan). *Pariyerum Perumal* becomes a site of counter-hegemonic resistance, offering a subaltern narrative that challenges the "common sense" caste privilege. The college environment in *Pariyerum Perumal* reflects ideological dominance: English-speaking students, Brahminical cultural codes, and upper-caste faculty represent the **hegemonic narrative** of what is "civilized," "modern," and "acceptable."

Foucauldian Power Structures

Michel Foucault's ideas on power, surveillance, and control are evident in how dominant castes exercise covert discipline. Characters like Jo's father represent institutionalized caste authority, maintaining order through biopolitics and deciding who gets to live, speak, or succeed. The film depicts how caste power operates not only physically but psychologically as internalized fear, shame, or silence. *For example*, Pariyan is constantly watched, laughed at, questioned, and "put in place" by his peers and teachers. This echoes

Foucault's concept of the **Panopticon**, a mechanism of control where subjects internalize surveillance and adjust their behavior.

Bazin's Cinematic Realism

André Bazin's idea of cinema as a mirror of reality is central to Selvaraj's visual style. The film avoids dramatic excess or fantasy. Instead, it offers long takes, naturalistic lighting, and location shooting. The realism deepens the viewer's empathy and understanding of Dalit experiences, which are often erased or misrepresented in mainstream Tamil cinema. *In the movie*, the college campus, temple, and fields aren't romanticized or overly stylized. They depict the environment as it is, reflecting the real textures of Dalit life, which aligns with Bazin's belief in the ontological truth of the image.

Postcolonial and Subaltern Theory

Drawing from theorists like Gayatri Spivak and Ranajit Guha, the film addresses the voice of the subaltern. The Dalit protagonist is not merely a victim, but a thinking, feeling, and resisting agent. The character of Karuppi (the dog) serves as a symbolic subaltern and voiceless yet central figure who embodies vulnerability and loyalty. We can also see the Brahminical dominance in education, cultural capital (like fluency in English), and control over space mirrors colonial hierarchies. The **upper castes become internal colonizers**, and the Dalit body becomes the **colonized subject**.

Symbolism and Semiotics

The film uses semiotic theory (Barthes) to layer meaning through recurring symbols: Karuppi's unjust death at the beginning sets the emotional tone, representing how caste society treats Dalits as expendable, forgotten. Karuppi haunts Pariyan throughout the film, symbolizing **unresolved grief, trauma, and resistance**. The **railway track** is a recurring space of caste violence in the movie and a liminal zone where boundaries are crossed and punished. It's the site of multiple caste attacks, a **transitional space** between rural and urban, between tradition and aspiration. It reflects the **danger of movement and mobility** for Dalits; upward mobility is punished. Semiotic reading: **Tracks as a symbol** of India's modernity intersecting with its **feudal caste legacy**.

In semiotic terms, **language is a system of signs** that communicates who belongs and who doesn't. In *Pariyerum Perumal*, **English becomes a symbol of class, caste, and social power**. **Pariyan's struggle with English** is symbolic of **Dalit exclusion from institutional and cultural capital**. English becomes a gatekeeper of success. It is a **symbolic barrier** between the oppressed and the privileged. It signifies the postcolonial tension between **access to modernity** and **deep-rooted discrimination**.

Although law College is supposed to represent justice **and equality**, the college functions as a space of **institutionalized caste discrimination**. The campus, professors, and curriculum are shown as **sites of subtle violence**. The **law (symbol of justice)** is being used to exclude and humiliate. This contradiction **exposes how caste corrupts even the most "rational" institutions** in postcolonial India.

Jo's father, a silent figure of caste dominance, uses a **blade** to threaten and harm. Pariyan is soft-spoken, but his violence is **cold, calculated, and silent**, symbolizing how **dominant caste power is hidden beneath civility**. The weapon isn't loud or dramatic, but it's **small, precise, and intimate**, mirroring the **everyday violence of caste**. In caste logic, **ritual purity and pollution** are central. The film references **toilets, bathing, and water**, often associated with **humiliation and marginality**: Pariyan being humiliated near the college toilet and beaten mirrors the **Brahminical anxiety over pollution**. Water is shown both as a **site of exclusion** and a space for **mental cleansing** (as in his moments of reflection).

Mari Selvaraj fuses critical theory with cinematic realism, crafting *Pariyerum Perumal* as both a political text and an aesthetic intervention. The film doesn't just tell a story; it performs ideological resistance by making the audience question deeply rooted caste structures.

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