SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:**8.337(SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 8, Issue-11(November);2026**

From Vekkai to Asuran: Adaptation, Anti-Caste Aesthetics and the Politics of Caste Violence

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Article Received: 09/10/2026
Article Accepted:11/11/2026
Published Online:12/11/2026
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.11.124

Abstract:

This paper examines the adaptation of Poomani's Tamil novel *Vekkai* (1982) into Vetrimaaran's film *Asuran* (2019) as a case study in the politics of Dalit cinematic representation. Reading the film through the operations of reduction, addition and variation that govern the movement from page to screen, and alongside recent criticism on anti-caste aesthetics in Tamil cinema, it argues that the adaptation performs an ideological relocation rather than a simple transfer of content. Where the novel centres on an adolescent killer who gives himself up to the court, the film rebuilds the narrative around the father, converting literary introspection into an audio-visual economy of symbol, silence and restrained violence. The paper shows how the electrified fence, the use of colour, the reclaiming of the title term and the organisation of sound produce an aesthetic that contests the sensory order of caste, and how the closing turn towards education and the refusal of revenge at once consolidates and limits that project. It concludes that *Asuran* should be read as an independent work negotiating between the commercial mainstream and Dalit political demand, and that its formal choices, rather than its proximity to the source novel, are what give it political force.

Keywords: Vekkai; Asuran; ecranisation; anti-caste aesthetics; Dalit cinema; adaptation; Tamil cinema; caste violence

Introduction

Indian cinema is the largest film-producing industry in the world, and for most of its history its treatment of caste has been evasive. Caste has been routinely dissolved into more comfortable categories such as poverty, orphanhood or rural hardship, with the consequence that popular film has tended to present structural discrimination as individual misfortune.

Against this background, the last two decades have seen the consolidation of a Dalit cinema made by Dalit filmmakers and concerned with Dalit subjectivities, a cinema that treats caste not as background detail but as the organising grammar of social life. This development is uneven, commercially fragile and constantly negotiating with the industrial mainstream, yet it has produced a visible repertoire of films in Tamil, Marathi, Malayalam and Hindi that openly stage caste relations and refuse the consolation of the victim plot.

Tamil cinema has been central to this shift. A younger generation of directors has placed caste at the centre of commercial narrative, and films such as *Asuran*, *Karnan* and *Maamannan* have become reference points in public argument about caste in the state. This paper takes *Asuran*, written and directed by Vetrimaaran and released in 2019, as its object, but it approaches the film from a direction that has received less attention than its politics of representation: the direction of adaptation. *Asuran* is based on *Vekkai*, a novel by Poomani that appeared in 1982 and that reached English readers in 2019 as *Heat*, translated by N. Kalyan Raman. The film therefore sits at the intersection of two histories, the history of Tamil Dalit writing and the history of Tamil popular film, and it is at that intersection that its choices become legible.

The argument advanced here is threefold. First, the movement from novel to film is best described not as loss or gain but as a deliberate redistribution of emphasis, in which the interior life of a child murderer is exchanged for the public life of a father who has learned to survive. Second, this redistribution is carried out through a recognisable set of adaptive operations that can be analysed systematically as reduction, addition and variation. Third, the film's political force lies in its aesthetic decisions, in the way it organises images, sounds and bodies, rather than in any measurable proximity to Poomani's prose. The discussion proceeds through the publication and translation history of the novel, an account of the adaptive operations at work in the film, an analysis of its anti-caste visual grammar, and a critical reading of its resolution in education and the refusal of revenge.

A note on method is necessary before proceeding. The comparison developed below is not a fidelity test. It does not ask whether Vetrimaaran was faithful to Poomani, and it does not treat the novel as a standard against which the film must be measured. It asks instead what the film selected, what it invented, and what those selections made possible in the political climate of the late 2010s, when Tamil cinema had become one of the few national platforms on which caste could be named directly.

Vekkai, Heat and the Conditions of Adaptation

Vekkai belongs to the formative period of modern Tamil Dalit writing. Its author, Poomani, is a novelist from the southern districts whose fiction returns repeatedly to the agrarian caste order, to the labouring body and to the small negotiations through which a subordinate household survives. *Vekkai* is his most widely discussed work, and its architecture is stark. The central act belongs to a child: "A fifteen-year-old boy Chidambaram

murders Vadakkuran. Seven days after the murder, he surrenders himself to the court." (Nirmaladevi)

That sentence also indicates what kind of book *Vekkai* is. The murder is given from the outset; the narrative interest lies elsewhere, in the social and psychological pressures that make a boy into a killer, in the texture of a village where land, caste and kinship are inseparable, and in the slow reasoning by which the reader is brought to understand an act that the law will only ever record as crime. The novel's question is not who did it but how a child comes to occupy the position of murderer, and the answer it builds is dense, retrospective and inward.

The novel's passage into English came late. The film is described in the critical literature as being "based on Poomani's novel Vekkai, published in 1982 and translated into English thirty-seven years after its writing as Heat by N. Kalyan Raman" ((Espña) and Herrero 41), and the same account notes that the film goes beyond the mere portrait of a child murderer in order to explore the more complicated landscape that surrounds the murder. Thirty-seven years separate the Tamil original from its anglophone afterlife, and the film arrived in the year of the translation. The proximity is not accidental in its effects. It produced a short and dense conjuncture in which a 1982 text, a 2019 translation and a 2019 blockbuster began to circulate together, allowing readers and viewers to encounter the source and its adaptation almost simultaneously, and allowing the film to be received as a commentary on a novel that many of its spectators had not read and would now be able to read.

This conjuncture matters for interpretation. Adaptation studies has long warned against evaluating a film by its closeness to a literary original, and the warning is especially relevant when the original is a text in a language that most of the film's audience does not read. To treat *Asuran* as a failed or successful copy of *Vekkai* would be to ignore what the film does with its material and to privilege a comparison that the majority of spectators cannot perform. What is more, the two works do not address the same question. The novel asks how a particular boy becomes a killer; the film asks what a community does with the memory of its own dead, and what a father is willing to sacrifice so that a second son may live.

Ecranisation: Reduction, Addition and Variation

The most systematic account of the relation between the two texts organises it under three operations: "Reduction, Addition, and Variation" (Sumithra*). The scheme is useful because it replaces vague talk of fidelity with concrete description, and it can be applied to *Asuran* almost clause by clause.

Reduction names the compression of the source. The novel's multiple narrative threads, its extended back stories and its philosophical detours are streamlined in the film into a chase structure, in which a father and a son move across a river and through fields while hired hunters close in, and in which the past arrives as a long flashback rather than as

free indirect narration. The film opens with violence and holds the audience with forward momentum, postponing explanation until the second half. What is lost is the density of introspection and the slow accumulation of ordinary detail; what is gained is urgency, and a shape that a two-and-a-half-hour commercial film can sustain.

Addition works in the opposite direction. The film introduces dimensions that a novel cannot possess: an image track that can hold a face in close-up, a sound design that thickens emotional stakes, a score that moves between folk voices and international instrumentation, and a visual vocabulary of framing, lighting and slow motion. It also expands the family. The relations between the father, his wife and their two sons receive a weight that the novel distributes differently, and these additions are not decorative. They convert an account of one boy's crime into an account of a household living under permanent threat, and they make the caste question legible as a question about what a family is permitted to keep: land, water, dignity, children. The famous mid-film sequence in which the father explains his own past to his son is an addition of exactly this kind, a long narrative block that exists so that the audience may arrive at the father's choices from the inside.

Variation is the most consequential of the three operations. The boy who kills in the novel becomes, in the film, the son who witnesses, while the father becomes the protagonist, a man who has already killed, already surrendered, already been punished and already rebuilt a life. This is a variation not only of character but of narrative centre, and it changes the emotional temperature of the story. A child's act invites judgment; a father's inheritance invites identification. The spectator is no longer asked to understand how a boy becomes a murderer but to consider what a man has had to become in order to keep a family alive, and the moral weight shifts accordingly from the crime to the conditions that produced it.

It should be stressed that these three operations are not neutral instruments. Each of them carries an implicit argument. The reduction of the novel's interiority implies that the visual medium can say with an image what prose says with a paragraph; the additions imply that a family is the proper unit through which structural violence becomes intelligible; and the variation implies that the relevant subject of caste violence is not the exceptional child but the ordinary adult who has learned to absorb it. Taken together, the operations produce a film that is less an illustration of *Vekkai* than a reconsideration of its central question in the light of a different medium, a different star and a different decade.

The Grammar of Anti-Caste Aesthetics

The politics of the film cannot be separated from its style. Recent criticism has identified in contemporary Tamil political cinema a deliberate use of violence as expressive form, noting that "Films such as Asuran, Karnan, and Mamannan use an aesthetic of violence to articulate and validate the suppressed rage of the Dalit community" (B). *Asuran* participates in that tendency. Its fight sequences are prolonged, stylised and often slowed down, so that the camera dwells on impact and on the body of the avenger, and the viewer is invited to take pleasure in a reversal of the usual distribution of force.

Yet the film also distinguishes between violence as spectacle and violence as last resort. In the forest encounter the father defeats a group of hired hunters without killing any of them, and the resolution explicitly refuses the logic of revenge. The aesthetic of rage is staged and then contained, a manoeuvre that gives the film its emotional charge while keeping it inside the bounds of a star vehicle intended for family audiences. This containment is not simply timidity. It is the condition under which a mass Tamil film could say what *Asuran* says about landlords, police complicity and the theft of Dalit land, and any assessment of the film's politics has to reckon with that trade-off.

Where the film is most inventive is in its use of objects. The electrified fence that separates the landlord's fields from those of the Dalit hamlet is the clearest example. As one analysis observes, "the barbed wires stand as the symbol for untouchability, which a wild/stray animal can cross but not men from Dalit community nor their pets" ((Espña) and Herrero 41). The point is made through action rather than statement. A wild pig crosses the boundary and escapes; the family dog follows and is electrocuted. The sequence lasts a few minutes and contains no speech about caste, yet it establishes the entire social geography of the film, in which mobility is a privilege enforced by current.

Colour operates in the same register. The men of the landlord's household are dressed in white, a visual convention that signals ritual purity and economic command, while the father wears a blue turban, a colour associated in Dalit political culture with liberation. Naming is similarly reclaimed. The title term, *asuran*, means demon, and the film attaches it to a Dalit man who refuses the submissiveness expected of him, so that an insult is converted into a description of endurance and capacity. Sound does comparable work, since the film alternates between sequences stripped of music altogether and sequences carried by a song that repeatedly commands its addressee to rise, addressing him by the film's title. The refusal of score in moments of grief and its aggressive return in moments of resistance produce a rhythm that is itself an argument about when Dalit life is permitted to be loud.

These choices belong to a wider industrial shift in which the Dalit has moved from margin to centre. As one account of Tamil cinema notes, "The recent phase not only addresses the caste issues explicitly but lets the Dalit occupy the centre stage" (Chatterjee). This is a commercial as well as a political fact, since recent Tamil anti-caste films "have achieved commercial success by creating a circuit of alternative socialities in the film business" (Jaikumar and Mini) while insisting on a radical reorganisation of caste and class relations. The formal solutions of *Asuran*, the fence, the turban, the reclaimed insult, the silence before the song, are the compromise formations that allow both ambitions to be pursued at once. They are legible to an audience raised on masala convention and they carry a meaning that the same audience cannot mistake.

Education, Family and the Refusal of Revenge

The film's ethical programme is concentrated in its final sequence. Before entering the court, the father instructs his son to study, and the advice is framed as the one inheritance

that cannot be confiscated: land can be seized, money can be taken, the body can be broken, but learning remains. The instruction is recognisably Ambedkarite in its emphasis on education as the instrument of emancipation, and it gives the film an ending that is unusual for its genre. The enemy is not destroyed in a final confrontation; the conflict between the two villages is halted by agreement; the father goes to prison so that his son may go to school. Revenge is named, dramatised and then declined.

This resolution has real force, and it also has limits. By placing liberation in schooling and in individual self-improvement, the film displaces the question of collective political action onto a project of personal cultivation. The landlord's power is exposed as illegal and brutal, and the machinery of law and police is shown to be complicit, yet the answer proposed is the moral and educational ascent of one family rather than the transformation of the structure that produced the conflict. The fire in the flashback, in which villagers are burnt alive in their huts, cannot be answered by study; it can only be remembered, and the film works to convert that memory into a reason to send a boy to school. What the film does achieve, and what distinguishes it from the mainstream tradition it enters, is a redistribution of heroic agency. As one reader of the film puts it, this was "a rare instance in Indian cinema where a Dalit protagonist took centre stage in an act of resistance, without being saved by the very forces that enact the violence" (Mandal 6). The Dalit hero is not rescued by a benevolent landlord, a reforming officer or a saintly outsider. He is the one who acts, who protects, who negotiates with the lawyer and who finally chooses the terms of his own surrender. The women of the household carry a comparable weight, so that resistance in the film is not an exclusively masculine prerogative, and the family emerges as the smallest unit in which dignity can be defended when the state has withdrawn.

The film therefore holds two positions at once. It insists that caste is a structure enforced by land, water, fences and police, and it also proposes that the way out runs through a school. The tension between these positions is not resolved by the ending, and it does not need to be. It is the tension that makes the film arguable, and it is the reason the film continues to be discussed a decade after its release, long after its plot has been absorbed into the ordinary repertoire of Tamil popular culture.

Conclusion

Asuran is not a transcription of *Vekkai*, and it should not be judged as one. Read through the operations of reduction, addition and variation, the film emerges as a deliberate reconstruction in which the introspective account of a boy's crime becomes a public account of a father's inheritance, and in which literary interiority is exchanged for an audio-visual grammar of fence, colour, silence and song. That grammar is the film's real political instrument. It allows caste to be shown as a structure that regulates movement, dress, water, sound and grief, and it allows a Dalit family to occupy the screen with the fullness that mainstream cinema has generally reserved for others.

The cost of this achievement is visible in the resolution. The turn to education and the explicit refusal of revenge give the film its moral authority and its wide acceptability, but they also translate a structural problem into a biographical solution. The rage of the novel, the rage of a boy who has watched his brother killed and has decided that the law is not available to him, is domesticated into a father's advice. What remains, and what makes the adaptation worth sustained attention, is the film's capacity to make that domestication visible as a choice rather than as a natural outcome.

In that sense *Asuran* does what the most interesting adaptations do. It does not reproduce its source; it argues with it, and in arguing it produces a new object with its own politics, its own audience and its own afterlife. The study of Dalit cinema is still at an early stage, and the adaptation of Dalit literature into film is one of its least examined areas. *Vekkai* and *Asuran*, read together, show why that area deserves attention: the passage from page to screen is also a passage between readerships, and in that passage the political meaning of a story can be strengthened, softened or redirected without a single word of the original being reproduced.

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