

# Symbolic Resistance: Visual Metaphors and Caste Critique in Mari Selvaraj's Cinema

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**Abstract:** *"Mari Selvaraj's films Karnan (2021), Maamannan (2023), and Pariyerum Perumal (2018) harness visual metaphors to critique caste oppression and power dynamics, embedding his work within political cinema. This study explores symbols like the bound donkey, the authoritative chair, and the tea glasses, which reveal systemic discrimination in everyday life. Through Neo-Realist authenticity, Structuralist decoding of allegories, and politically engaged storytelling, Selvaraj's metaphors expose and resist social hierarchies, offering a layered narrative of Dalit struggles and empowerment." A key focus is the use of tea glasses in Pariyerum Perumal as a metaphor for caste-based segregation, reflecting how everyday objects reinforce social hierarchies and exclusion. The act of serving tea in separate glasses to Dalits encapsulates the insidious nature of caste discrimination, illustrating the deep-rooted inequalities that persist in seemingly mundane interactions. By integrating metaphor analysis with key film theories, this study situates Selvaraj's work within Neo-Realism, Structuralist Film Theory, and Political Cinema. Through a Neo-Realist lens, his use of non-professional actors, real locations, and raw storytelling enhances the authenticity of Dalit narratives. Structuralist Film Theory helps decode recurring symbols and allegories, revealing how his films challenge dominant ideological structures. Meanwhile, Political Cinema frameworks highlight how his storytelling aligns with socially engaged filmmaking, using visual metaphors as tools of resistance and empowerment.*

**Keywords:** Caste Critique, Visual Metaphors, Symbolic Resistance, Indian Cinema, Tamil Cinema

## 1. Introduction

Cinema has long been a powerful medium for social commentary, with filmmakers using visual storytelling to challenge societal structures and injustices. In Indian cinema, caste-based discrimination remains a persistent theme, explored by directors who seek to highlight the struggles of marginalized communities. Among them, Mari Selvaraj has emerged as a significant voice in contemporary Tamil cinema, crafting films that critique caste oppression, power dynamics, and social resistance. His works *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), and *Maamannan* (2023) use striking visual metaphors to communicate deeper sociopolitical messages, making his films a compelling subject for academic analysis. Metaphors in cinema serve as a means of encoding complex themes into visually accessible narratives. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue in *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphors are not just linguistic expressions but cognitive structures that shape perception and experience. In film, visual metaphors amplify emotions, create subtext, and allow audiences to engage with themes on a symbolic level. Selvaraj's use of metaphorical imagery such as the bound donkey in *Karnan*, the authoritative chair in *Maamannan*, and the fate of Karuppi in *Pariyerum Perumal* functions as a visual critique of systemic oppression, reflecting both historical and contemporary struggles of the Dalit community. From a theoretical perspective, Selvaraj's films align with multiple film studies frameworks. André Bazin's (1967) *What is Cinema?* emphasizes realism as a crucial storytelling tool, a principle evident in Selvaraj's approach. His use of real locations, natural lighting, and raw performances aligns with Italian Neorealism, a movement that sought to depict the lives of ordinary people against the backdrop of social realities. Moreover, his symbolic imagery can be analyzed through Structuralist Film Theory, which deciphers how visual signs construct meaning within cinematic texts (Metz, 1974).

## 2. Literature Review

This study explores Mari Selvaraj's use of cinematic metaphors to critique caste oppression, power structures, and resistance in Tamil cinema. The literature reviewed below connects metaphor theory, caste representation in Indian cinema, and film theories that align with Selvaraj's visual storytelling approach. Metaphors in cinema serve as powerful narrative tools that encode deeper socio-political meanings, shaping audience perception and engagement. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors influence cognitive structures and extend beyond language into visual representation, which is evident in Mari Selvaraj's films, where symbols such as the bound donkey in *Karnan* (2021) reflect the systemic oppression of marginalized communities. Carroll (1996) discusses how subtext in films allows deeper audience interaction, a technique Selvaraj employs through recurring symbols like Karuppi in *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), where the dog's death metaphorically represents caste-based violence. Metz (1974) explores cinematic semiotics and how visual imagery constructs meaning, a concept mirrored in *Pariyerum Perumal*'s contrasting tea glasses, which subtly depict caste-based segregation. Bordwell and Thompson (2008) emphasize the role of mise-en-scène and cinematography in embedding metaphors, a method used by Selvaraj in framing *Karnan*'s act of breaking the donkey's bonds or *Maamannan*'s refusal to sit on the chair, reinforcing themes of resistance and dignity. Eisenstein (1949) highlights montage as a technique for constructing visual metaphors, evident in Selvaraj's films where oppressed characters are juxtaposed with caged animals, emphasizing their subjugation.

The portrayal of caste in Indian cinema has historically been limited with Dalits often misrepresented. Dickey (1993) notes that Tamil cinema has been dominated by upper-caste narratives, a norm challenged by Selvaraj, who centers Dalit

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protagonists in his films. Guru and Sarukkai (2012) discuss the exclusion of Dalit experiences from mainstream narratives, a gap filled by Selvaraj's metaphor-driven storytelling, particularly in *Pariyerum Perumal*. Raghavendra (2020) examines how filmmakers like Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj use cinema as a political assertion, moving beyond victimhood narratives to depict resistance, as seen in Karnan's violent uprising against systemic oppression. Baskaran (1996) critiques Tamil cinema's lack of Dalit-centric narratives, whereas *Pariyerum Perumal* and Karnan subvert this by visually illustrating caste oppression through recurring metaphors like bound animals, glass divisions, and segregated seating. Pandian (2019) explores how Tamil cinema has historically reinforced caste hierarchies, but Selvaraj challenges these structures by deconstructing power dynamics, as seen in Maamannan (2023), where the metaphor of the chair represents hierarchical dominance and struggle for equality.

Mari Selvaraj's films align with broader film theories related to realism, structuralism, and political cinema. Bazin (1967) asserts that realism fosters deeper social engagement, which Selvaraj achieves through raw cinematography and naturalistic performances, making metaphors like Karnan's liberation of the donkey feel immediate and impactful. Althusser (1971) examines media's role in reinforcing dominant ideologies, which Selvaraj disrupts by centering Dalit voices and using symbolic storytelling to expose oppression. Gramsci (1971) introduces the concept of cultural hegemony, where ruling classes maintain control, reflected in Maamannan's depiction of power struggles through the metaphor of the unoccupied chair. Spivak (1988) questions whether subaltern voices can be truly represented in dominant discourse; Selvaraj's work counters this erasure by giving Dalit characters agency and using visual metaphors to articulate their struggles. Mulvey (1975) critiques dominant film structures that reinforce power imbalances, a theory applicable to caste representation in Tamil cinema, where Selvaraj subverts traditional norms by forcing viewers to confront Dalit realities through evocative imagery.

### 3. Objectives of the study

- To identify the recurring metaphors in Mari Selvaraj's films and their significance in portraying caste oppression, power, and resistance.
- To analyze how visual metaphors such as animals, objects, and spatial elements contribute to the narrative structure and thematic depth of the films.
- To examine the representation of caste dynamics through symbolic imagery and how it challenges or reinforces existing socio-political structures in Tamil cinema.
- To explore the application of film theories such as semiotics, realism, and political cinema in interpreting the metaphorical storytelling in Mari Selvaraj's films.
- To compare the metaphorical representations in Selvaraj's films with traditional Tamil cinema's portrayal of caste and power structures.

### 4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the use of cinematic metaphors in Mari Selvaraj's films, focusing on their representation of caste, power, and resistance. The research is designed as a qualitative content analysis, allowing for a systematic examination of recurring visual metaphors and symbolic elements that contribute to the films' socio-political themes. Mari Selvaraj's prominence oeuvre *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), Karnan (2021), and Maamannan (2023) are selected based on their strong metaphorical storytelling and their portrayal of caste oppression and resistance. Data collection involves film scene analysis, where key scenes featuring strong metaphorical representations (such as Karuppi in *Pariyerum Perumal*, the bound donkey in Karnan, and the chair in Maamannan) are identified and examined. Additionally, visual and semiotic analysis is conducted to understand how *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, color, and framing reinforce metaphorical meanings. Important dialogues and recurring symbols are analyzed to explore their thematic significance. The study also considers audience reception by reviewing academic critiques, film reviews, and social media discussions to understand public interpretations of these metaphors. For data analysis, thematic coding is employed to categorize metaphors into themes such as oppression, power, and resistance. A semiotic and discourse analysis framework, drawing from film semiotics (Metz, 1974) and discourse theory (Foucault, 1972), is used to decode hidden meanings in the films' visual and narrative elements. A comparative analysis is also conducted, contrasting Selvaraj's metaphorical representations with traditional Tamil cinema's depiction of caste and power structures. Furthermore, film theories such as realism (Bazin, 1967), political cinema (Althusser, 1971), and hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) are applied to contextualize the findings within a broader theoretical framework.

### 5. Content Analysis

Mari Selvaraj's films, including *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), Karnan (2021), and Maamannan (2023), employ powerful cinematic metaphors to critique caste oppression, power structures, and social resistance. His unique storytelling blends realism, symbolism, and socio-political commentary, making his films a significant area of study for content analysis. Visual and narrative symbolism play a crucial role in his storytelling, with *Pariyerum Perumal* using the black dog Karuppi to represent the oppressed caste and their struggle against systemic violence, while Karnan features a donkey with tied legs as a metaphor for marginalized communities restricted by caste discrimination. Similarly, Maamannan uses the chair as a potent symbol of power and hierarchy, illustrating how caste-based oppression persists even within democratic structures.

*The Bound Donkey as a Metaphor for Oppression in Karnan (2021)**Fig -01 Karnan (2021)*

This frame from Karnan (2021) is rich in metaphorical significance, encapsulating the film's central theme of caste oppression and resistance. The image features Karnan (played by Dhanush) reaching out to a donkey, which serves as a recurring symbol throughout the film. The donkey, often depicted with its front legs tied in earlier scenes, represents the systemic restrictions placed upon marginalized communities, limiting their freedom and progress.

In the 2021 film Karnan, directed by Mari Selvaraj, the recurring image of a donkey with its front legs tied (Fig - 01) serves as a powerful metaphor for the oppression and restricted mobility of marginalized communities. This visual symbolizes how systemic barriers prevent certain groups from progressing, much like the bound donkey is hindered from moving freely. The protagonist, Karnan (played by

Dhanush), is deeply affected by this sight and takes action to free the animal, reflecting his desire to liberate his own community from societal constraints.

The film opens with a haunting scene where a young girl lies in the middle of a road, experiencing an epileptic fit, while vehicles pass by without offering assistance. This imagery sets the tone for the film's exploration of societal neglect and the struggle for recognition and mobility. Throughout the narrative, the bound donkey appears as a poignant symbol of the villagers' plight. Its tied legs represent the deliberate restrictions imposed upon the marginalized, limiting their freedom and opportunities. Karnan's act of freeing the donkey signifies a break from these oppressive constraints and a step towards self-determination and dignity for his community.

*The Chair as a Symbol of Power and Caste Hierarchy in Maamannan (2023)**Fig -02 Maamannan (2023)*

The scene from Maamannan (2023) (Fig - 02) is rich in metaphorical meaning, particularly in its depiction of power dynamics and caste hierarchy. The chair in the scene serves as a potent symbol of authority, with Rathnavelu (played by Fahadh Faasil) seated confidently, embodying the upper-caste oppressor who wields systemic control. In contrast, Maamannan (played by Vadivelu), despite holding an elected position, remains standing a striking visual metaphor for the deep-rooted oppression that continues to deny him equal status and respect.

Athiveeran (played by Udhayanidhi Stalin) stands beside Maamannan, his confrontational posture symbolizing a new wave of resistance against caste-based subjugation. His stance challenges the existing power structures, reflecting an urgent call for equality and justice. The presence of horses in the background further reinforces the metaphor, as horses are traditionally associated with dominance, power, and control. This imagery mirrors the way caste hierarchies' function, with those in power metaphorically "taming" and suppressing those beneath them.



*Karuppi as a Metaphor: Identity, Oppression, and Resistance in Pariyerum Perumal (2018)**Fig-03 Pariyerum Perumal (2018)*

Pariyerum Perumal (2018), directed by Mari Selvaraj, metaphors play a crucial role in conveying the film's powerful commentary on caste-based discrimination. The scene depicted in Fig - 03 captures a deeply emotional moment where the protagonist, Pariyan (played by Kathir), holds his pet dog, Karuppi, in the water. This visual composition is layered with metaphorical significance, reflecting themes of identity, oppression, and resistance.

Karuppi, a black dog, serves as a symbolic representation of Pariyan's identity and, more broadly, the marginalized Dalit community. The color black, often associated with negativity in dominant caste narratives, is reclaimed in the film as a symbol of resilience. Early in the film, Karuppi is brutally killed a foreshadowing of the systemic violence faced by

Pariyan and his community. The dog's murder is not just a personal loss; it mirrors the reality of how marginalized groups are targeted, silenced, and erased by oppressive social structures.

Water, another key metaphor in this scene, represents both purification and struggle. Pariyan's act of holding onto Karuppi in the water signifies his desperate attempt to preserve his identity amidst the societal forces that seek to erase it. Water, often used in rituals of purification, here carries a paradoxical meaning it is both a space of cleansing and a battleground for survival. The image of Pariyan submerging with Karuppi underscores his internal conflict and his resistance against a system designed to keep him submerged in oppression.

*Tea Glasses as a Metaphor for Caste Discrimination in Pariyerum Perumal (2018)**Fig -04 Pariyerum Perumal (2018)*

In Pariyerum Perumal (2018), Mari Selvaraj employs powerful visual metaphors to critique caste-based discrimination, and one of the most striking examples is the imagery of two partially consumed glasses of tea, as seen in Fig - 04. This seemingly simple composition holds deep socio-political significance, reflecting the entrenched inequalities and untouchability practices prevalent in Indian society. The two glasses symbolize the stark social divisions between caste groups. One glass contains tea with milk, while the other holds black tea an implicit representation of the hierarchical disparity in privileges. In many rural Indian tea stalls, Dalits are often served in separate glasses or are given black tea instead of milk tea, marking their exclusion

from the privileges enjoyed by the upper castes. The contrast between the two beverages subtly but effectively conveys the systemic segregation embedded in everyday life. The placement of the glasses on a rough outdoor surface, rather than being held by a person, reinforces the practice of untouchability, where Dalits are denied direct physical contact by caste Hindus. The act of placing their tea separately rather than serving it hand-to-hand highlights the continued existence of caste-based discrimination, even in mundane activities. Furthermore, the emptiness of both glasses adds another layer of meaning despite the differences in the beverages, and both glasses ultimately serve the same fundamental purpose of quenching thirst. This challenges the

irrationality of caste discrimination by emphasizing that all humans share the same basic needs and desires, regardless of societal-imposed divisions.

## 6. Limitation of the Study

This study has key limitations, including subjectivity in interpretation, as metaphor analysis varies by viewer perception. The limited scope of films focuses only on *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), Karnan (2021), and Maamannan (2023), without broader comparisons. The absence of empirical audience reception analysis restricts insights into diverse audience perspectives. Constraints in comparative analysis limit the study's ability to position Selvaraj's work within a wider cinematic context. Linguistic and cultural barriers may affect the full understanding of Tamil cultural nuances. Lastly, the lack of industry perspectives omits insights from filmmakers and critics on the intentional use of metaphors.

## 7. Scope of the Study

This study explores the use of cinematic metaphors in Mari Selvaraj's films, focusing on *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), Karnan (2021), and Maamannan (2023). It examines how Selvaraj employs visual symbolism, character arcs, and narrative structures to critique caste-based oppression, power hierarchies, and social resistance. The study also analyzes semiotic elements and film theories, linking them to broader discourses in Indian cinema. Additionally, it considers the impact of these metaphors on audience perception and their role in shaping discussions on caste and identity. This research contributes to the academic discourse on political cinema, visual communication, and representation in Tamil cinema.

## 8. Discussion

Mari Selvaraj's films serve as powerful socio-political texts that challenge dominant narratives of caste oppression through deeply layered cinematic metaphors. His works go beyond mere storytelling, using visual symbols, character arcs, and semiotic elements to critique social hierarchies. By analyzing his films Karnan (2021), Maamannan (2023), and *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), this study highlights how Selvaraj employs allegorical imagery, *mise-en-scène*, and narrative structures to reflect the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

## 9. Conclusion

This study critically examines the use of cinematic metaphors in Mari Selvaraj's films, focusing on how visual storytelling is employed to depict caste-based discrimination and social inequality. This study illuminates how Mari Selvaraj's films Karnan (2021), Maamannan (2023), and *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) employ cinematic metaphors to confront caste-based discrimination, offering a fresh lens on social inequality in Tamil cinema. Through symbols like the bound donkey and tea glasses, Mari Selvaraj crafts narratives that educate and challenge entrenched hierarchies, enriching media studies and cultural discourse. His approach not only

subverts traditional portrayals but also inspires dialogue on caste and identity, making his work a vital resource for scholars and filmmakers alike. By using symbols, *mise-en-scène*, and character interactions, Selvaraj creates a nuanced representation of marginalized communities, allowing viewers to engage with caste politics through visual semiotics rather than direct exposition. From an academic perspective, this study contributes to media studies, film semiotics, and cultural discourse by highlighting how Tamil cinema has evolved in its portrayal of caste. Unlike traditional mainstream representations, which either ignored or reinforced caste structures, Selvaraj's films subvert these narratives, offering a fresh, metaphor-driven approach to social critique. By analyzing these metaphors, this research provides a scholarly framework for understanding contemporary Tamil cinema's engagement with socio-political themes. Furthermore, this study is intended purely for educational purposes, aiming to enhance the understanding of film language, narrative techniques, and visual symbolism in addressing real-world issues. It does not seek to promote any political ideology or personal biases but rather to offer an objective academic exploration of film as a medium for social commentary. Future researchers can build upon this study by expanding the scope to include audience reception analysis, comparative studies with other regional cinemas, or exploring how Selvaraj's approach influences emerging filmmakers.

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**Dr. R. Pugalendhi** I am an academic and industry professional with over 20 years of experience in both teaching and the field of visual communication. Currently, I serve as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Visual Communication at **SATHYABAMA** Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai. I hold a Ph.D. in Visual Communication from Sathyabama University, along with a D.F.Tech & TVP in Sound Recording and Engineering from the Film & TV Institute of Tamil Nadu (FTIT-Chennai). Additionally, I have earned a B.Sc. in Visual Communication from Annamalai University and M.Sc. in Visual Communication from Bharathiyar University. Throughout my career, I have contributed to the academic community by publishing 30 research articles, including book chapters, and presenting my research at both national and international conferences. My research interests are in the intersection of media, technology, and communication, with a focus on advancing both theoretical and practical knowledge. I am also dedicated to continuous professional development and have successfully completed over 10 online courses through platforms such as SWAYAM and NPTEL. Additionally, I have participated in more than 20 Faculty Development Programs (FDPs), including the ATAL AICTE FDP, which has further enhanced my expertise in emerging technologies and pedagogical practices.