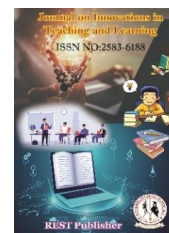




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From the Personal to the Political: Social Activism in Tamil Cinematic Storytelling

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolution of socially responsible storytelling in Tamil cinema through a comparative analysis of the films of two directors, K. Balachander and Mari Selvaraj, who are united by their commitment to social critique but separated by generations. It contextualizes their works within the socio-political landscapes of Tamil Nadu to understand how cinema functions as a medium for social awareness and reform. Balachander's films from the 1970s, through nuanced, introspective narratives and symbolic storytelling, address middle-class anxieties, gender roles, and ethical conflicts; they emphasize individual struggles within societal structures. In contrast, Mari Selvaraj's contemporary cinema employs a more confrontational and political approach, directly addressing caste oppression, structural violence, and collective resistance. By employing qualitative thematic, narrative, and symbolic analysis within the frameworks of social responsibility theory and cultivation theory, this study reveals a shift in Tamil cinema from individual-centric social inquiry to a more collective political consciousness. This shift reflects the changing sensibilities of the audience and the evolving role of cinema as a tool for social change and activism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tamil film has been a reflection of society since a long time, reflecting its values, struggles, and aspirations. From the socially aware films of K. Balachander in the 1970s to the political films of Mari Selvaraj in the 21st century, film has been a platform for discussing issues of caste, gender, class, and identity. Balachander's stories tend to discuss middle-class issues, gender dynamics, and ethics with subtle social commentary, whereas Selvaraj tackles caste domination and structural injustice directly, portraying marginalized voices raw and unflinchingly. This research contextualizes their works against the backdrop of Tamil Nadu's socio-political landscape and chronicles the development of storytelling from personal struggles towards collective opposition.

Aim of the Study

To track and critically evaluate the development of socially aware narrative in Tamil cinema through a study of how K. Balachander and Mari Selvaraj deploy narrative strategies, representation of characters, and cinematic means to address

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social concerns including caste, gender, and identity.

Scope of the Study

This research is centred on chosen works of K. Balachander (1970s) and Mari Selvaraj (2010s–2020s) and deals with narrative structure, themes, symbolism, and representation of caste and gender. It is based on an understanding of the impact of socio-political contexts upon film narration and is not concerned with the technicalities of filmmaking (e.g., cinematography, editing).

Objectives

- To track the development of socially responsible storytelling in Tamil cinema through the films of K. Balachander and Mari Selvaraj.
- To analyze the ways in which socio-political environments influence their thematic preoccupations and narrative strategies.
- To contrast the portrayal of caste, gender, and identity in their films, emphasizing changes in cinematic style and audience reception.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study design is Qualitative, interpretive, and comparative analysis of the chosen films. The Primary Sources include the Tamil films titled *Aval Oru Thodarkathai* (1974), *Apoorva Raagangal* (1975) by K. Balachander and *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021) by Mari Selvaraj. The Secondary Sources includes Film reviews, scholarly articles, director interviews, critical essays, books on Tamil cinema and caste/gender representation.

Data Analysis Methods Thematic analysis

The Figure 1 shows indicates the thematic analysis to identify recurring social issues.

Narrative analysis

The Figure 2 shows indicates the narrative analysis to examine structure, perspective, and character development.

Symbolic interpretation

The Figure 3 shows indicates the symbolic interpretation of visual metaphors and cinematic techniques

Theoretical Framework

This study applies Social Responsibility Theory and Cultivation Theory to account for the way Tamil cinema constructs social consciousness. K. Balachander's films such as *Apoorva Raagangal* and *Aval Oru Thodarkathai* addressed women's independence and social duplicity, whereas Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* and *Karnan* draw attention to caste injustice. Both the directors employ cinema as reform, and exposure to their stories on multiple occasions makes progressive representations of women and underprivileged groups the norm, gradually influencing audience attitudes.

Conceptual Framework The study is based on the understanding that cinema is not just entertainment, but a socially constructed medium that can:

- Challenge hegemonic ideologies
- Amplify marginalized voices
- Shape public discourse

By comparing Balachander's middle-class, eager emotional introspection with Selvaraj's assertive, pioneering caste narratives, the study locates storytelling as an instrument of gradual social inquiry (1970s) versus political activism and consciousness (2020s).

Thematic Analysis

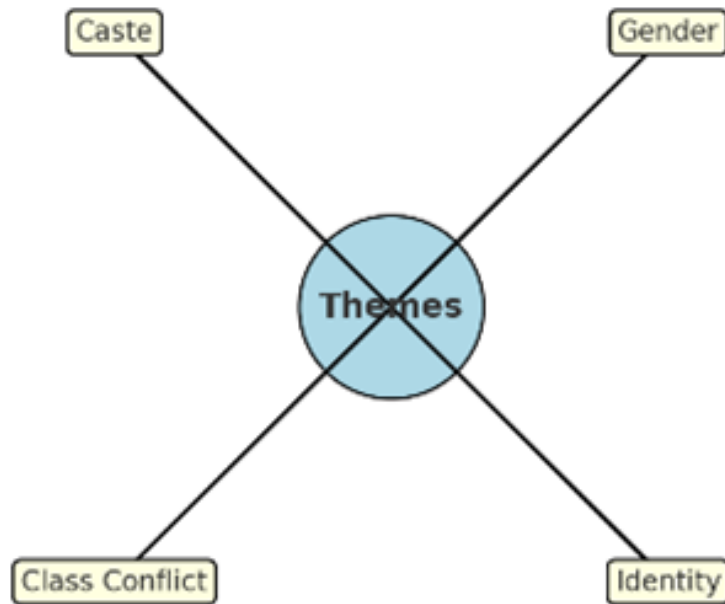


FIGURE 1. Thematic Analysis

Analysis

This chapter provides a detailed content analysis of four selected Tamil films directed by K. Balachander and Mari Selvaraj, with a focus on how each director uses storytelling to address social issues. The analysis is structured around key themes, character representations, narrative strategies, and symbolic elements used in the films.

Part I: K. Balachander's Films

1. Apoorva Raagangal (1975)

- **Themes:** Brings to light unconventional romantic relationships and subverts societal expectations of age and gender in love. Critiques middle-class Tamil conservative morality.
- **Character Representation:** Prasanna and Bhagyalakshmi are characters who resist normative expectations. The women are emotionally sophisticated but still have autonomy limited by societal norms.
- **Narrative Style:** Experimental and non-linear, mirroring uncertainty in relationships. Uncovers no definite resolution, leaving the audience to think about societal restraints.
- **Symbolism:** Music (Ragas) symbolizes the emotional and generational discord. The "off-key tune" is used as a symbol for unconventional love tales.

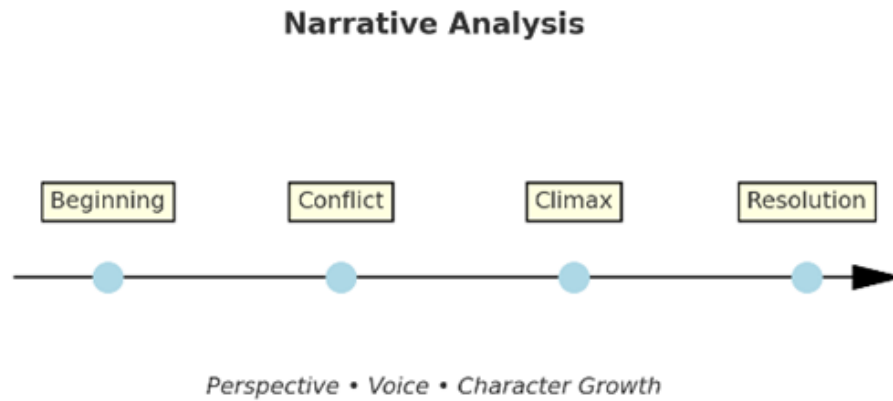


FIGURE 2. Narrative Analysis

2. Aval Oru Thodarkathai (1974)

- Themes: It is based on working-class struggles and the weight of family obligations on women. The movie deals with gender roles and economic survival.
- Character Representation: Kavitha is the ideal of a self-sacrificing woman sustaining an irresponsible family. She represents the cultural expectations of women as caregivers and moral centres.
- Narrative Style: Linear narrative with sharp character development. The story values duty over personal happiness.
- Symbolism: Trains, transitions, and pauses represent delays and lost opportunities of life, particularly for women. The title ("A Continuing Story") represents the ongoing drudgery of women.

Part II: Mari Selvaraj's Films

3. Pariyerum Perumal (2018)

- Themes: Addresses caste-based discrimination in education, inter-caste relationships, and institutionalized violence against Dalits.
- Character Representation: The Dalit young man Pariyan is depicted as intelligent, emotional, and resilient. Jo symbolizes the unconscious privilege of dominant castes.
- Narrative Style: Realistic and realistic, gradually turning from personal experience towards a systemic criticism.
- Symbolism: Karuppi, the dog, represents the innocence and victimhood of the Dalit community. Classrooms and water taps represent denied entry and exclusion.

4. Karnan (2021)

- Themes: Influenced by authentic caste violence, the film dwells on collective resistance, dignity, and rebellion of oppressed masses.
- Character Representation: Karnan is a mythical hero representing courage, trauma, and leadership of oppressed. The entire village symbolizes unity as strength.
- Narrative Style: Builds mythically with heavy allegorical weight. Follows a linear but emotionally intense structure ending in both loss and freedom.
- Symbolism: The chained horse, limping donkey, sword, and the burning bus, all symbolize oppression, resistance,

Symbolic Interpretation

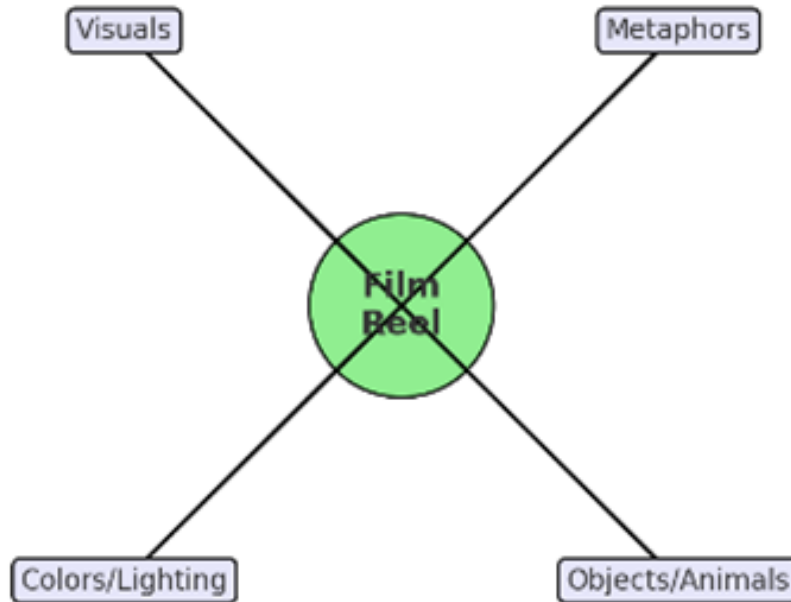


FIGURE 3. Symbolic Interpretation

and reclamation of dignity.

Part III: Comparative Table

The table 1 shows narrates the comparison K Balachander and Mari Selvaraj films regarding the of the Key themes, focus, tone, character types, narrative style, symbolism, view of social change and audience target

Findings

1. Themes:

- Balachander prioritized gender norms, family duties, and moral questioning.
- Mari Selvaraj highlights caste oppression, systemic violence, and mass resistance.

2. Narrative Style:

- Balachander utilized subtle, character-oriented, often open-ended storylines.
- Mari Selvaraj utilizes realism and allegory with direct, emotionally powerful storytelling.

3. Representation:

- Balachander provided women emotional depth but often within societal limit.
- Mari Selvaraj presents Dalit characters as politically conscious, survivable, and pivotal to the story.

TABLE 1. Comparison of Themes and Narrative Approaches

S. No.	Aspect	K. Balachander	Mari Selvaraj
1	Key Themes	Gender roles, moral dilemmas, family obligations	Caste oppression, identity politics, collective resistance
2	Focus	Urban middle-class issues	Rural, caste-marginalized communities
3	Tone	Reflective, introspective, emotionally restrained	Confrontational, raw, and emotionally charged
4	Character Types	Emotionally complex but constrained by social roles	Politically aware, assertive, and symbolic of larger struggles
5	Narrative Style	Subtle, open-ended, character-driven	Direct, dramatic, rooted in realism and oral tradition
6	Symbolism	Music, trains, subtle metaphors	Animals, broken bodies, weapons, folklore imagery
7	View of Social Change	Quiet individual resistance or moral questioning	Collective uprising and political assertion
8	Audience Target	Urban middle class, educated viewers	Marginalized communities, socially conscious younger audience

4.Symbolism:

- Balachander used music, trains, and metaphors.
- Selvaraj employs animals, broken bodies, folklore, and mythic symbol.

3. RESULTS

The comparative analysis reveals distinctly a change in the approach of Tamil cinema towards social issues. From implicit critique (Balachander's period) — targeting urban middle-class morality and slow-mounting questioning of norms. To outspoken assertion (Selvaraj's period) — openly confronting caste hierarchies and raising marginalized voices. This change reflects cinema's increasingly dynamic role as a platform for political consciousness and social change.

4. CONCLUSION

While K. Balachander utilized subtle narrative turns and incremental character development to challenge gender and social norms, Mari Selvaraj utilizes visually charged, emotionally intense, and politically provocative storytelling to challenge caste-based oppression in a direct manner. The transition from individual self-reflection to collective resistance demonstrates an increasing radicalization and politicization of Tamil cinema as a means to effect social change.

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