

The Wound That Does Not Close: Caste Hegemony, Collective Trauma, and the Symbolic Universe of Mari Selvaraj

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Abstract—Mari Selvaraj has emerged as one of the most significant voices in contemporary Tamil cinema. Across five films—*Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), *Maamannan* (2023), *Vaazhai* (2024), and *Bison Kaalamaadan* (2025)—he constructs a sustained, deeply personal cinematic universe that maps the psychic, social, and historical wounds of caste oppression in southern Tamil Nadu. This paper applies Trauma Theory, as elaborated by Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Ron Eyerman, alongside New Historicism, to examine how Selvaraj translates lived Dalit experience into mythic, symbolic film language. Special attention is paid to the recurring motif of animals—dogs, donkeys, pigs, cows, and bison—as totemic figures that incarnate both the suffering and the latent force of the oppressed. The paper also analyses how Selvaraj fuses folk religion, mythology, and Ambedkarite ideology to produce films that are simultaneously a dirge and a declaration. By situating his work within the broader tradition of Dalit and anti-caste cinema in India, including the films of Pa. Ranjith and Nagraj Manjule, this paper argues that Selvaraj’s oeuvre constitutes what may be called a ‘cinema of assertion’: a body of work in which trauma is neither resolved nor aestheticised for the comfort of upper-caste viewers, but is instead weaponised into cultural and political resistance.

Index Terms—Dalit cinema, caste hegemony, trauma, New Historicism, animal totemism, Ambedkarite ideology, Tamil cinema

I. Introduction

When Tamil Nadu’s cinegoers walked into theatres on 28th September 2018 to watch *Pariyerum Perumal*, few expected the quiet debut film produced by Pa. Ranjith under his Neelam Cultural Centre banner to alter the landscape of Tamil cinema so decisively. Directed by Mari Selvaraj, a first-time filmmaker from Puliankulam, a remote hamlet in Thoothukudi district, the film arrived at a moment when caste violence was invisibilized within mainstream Tamil cinema’s grammar of romance, comedy, and hero-worship. It quietly, insistently refused to look away.

Selvaraj acknowledged the autobiographical roots of his cinema: “My film is a story about life’s experiences. I cannot fix a genre to my film, the audience can decide whether *Karnan* is about caste, state power or about a family” (Shanmugam). In an interview with VM Riyaz, Selvaraj says that “in both *Karnan* and *Pariyerum Perumal*, 70% of the life shown is what I have experienced” (*Manorama Online*). This confession of autobiography is not incidental but foundational as it places Selvaraj within a tradition of witnessing-as-

filmmaking that parallels what Cathy Caruth describes as the compulsion of the traumatised subject to return and retell what cannot be fully assimilated into consciousness.

Over five films released between 2018 and 2025, Selvaraj has built what can be called a ‘Selvaraj Cinematic Universe’ connected not by characters but by geography-villages within ‘10 to 15 km of each other’ in Thoothukudi district and by an ideological and emotional thread that insists on the reality of caste, the dignity of the oppressed, and the inevitability of assertion. His films collectively constitute an act of what Ron Eyerman calls “cultural trauma”- the process by which a marginalised community transforms historical suffering into collective identity and political consciousness (Eyerman 1).

This paper analyzes the five films as texts through the interrelated lenses of Trauma Theory and New Historicism. While Trauma Theory allows us to decode the psychological and aesthetic strategies by which Selvaraj represents suffering that is, to use Caruth’s phrase, “unclaimed” by hegemonic discourse (Caruth 4), New Historicism as developed by Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose situates the films within the material conditions of caste hegemony in post-Independence India, reading them as texts that are simultaneously produced by and in resistance against the ideological structures they portray. The paper also analyses Selvaraj’s distinctive use of animals as totemic symbols, his deployment of folk and classical mythology, and his engagement with the political philosophy of B. R. Ambedkar, whose thought permeates the films even when his name is seldom spoken.

II. Theoretical Framework: Trauma, New Historicism, and Caste

Trauma theory, as developed in the 1990s by scholars at Yale University, Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman, and Dominick LaCapra, draws on Freudian psychoanalysis to analyze the ways in which catastrophic events resist straightforward narration and instead return in fragmented, oblique, and symptomatic forms. As Caruth argues in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), “the oscillation between crises of death and the correlative crises of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” marks the traumatic text (Caruth 7). Trauma, in this formulation, is not simply an event but a mode of belatedness: the wound that cannot be processed at the time of its occurrence persists and returns, demanding to be witnessed.

The application of trauma theory to Dalit cinema requires certain adjustments. As Thenmozhi Soundararajan has argued in *The Trauma of Caste* (2022), caste operates as what Eduardo Duran called a “soul wound”, an injury not merely to individuals but to entire communities across generations: “So too with Brahminism. Caste is a soul wound. Untreated soul wounds become the work of the next generation, and the next. We just keep passing the violence on [...] This is the heart of historical trauma” (Soundararajan qtd. in Springer 22). What distinguishes caste trauma from other forms of historical trauma is its simultaneity: it is not an event safely located in the past but an ongoing, everyday structure of humiliation, exclusion, and violence. Selvaraj’s

cinema is distinguished precisely by its insistence on representing caste not as a thing of the past but as *present tense*.

Judith Herman's formulation in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) is also instructive. Herman argues that recovery from trauma requires three stages: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life (Herman 155). Selvaraj's films particularly *Pariyerum Perumal* and *Vaazhai* refuse the neat resolution that Herman's therapeutic model implies. Safety is never fully established; mourning is perpetually interrupted by new violence; and reconnection is conditional on the continuing reality of caste. The films thereby challenge the very premise that trauma can be 'healed' within a system that continues to produce it.

New Historicism, as articulated by Stephen Greenblatt, insists that literary and, by extension, cinematic texts are not autonomous aesthetic objects but are embedded in the power relations of the historical moment in which they are produced and consumed. Greenblatt's concept of "self-fashioning" (1980) is useful here: in Selvaraj's films, Dalit characters are perpetually engaged in a process of fashioning an identity under conditions-caste hierarchy, state power, economic dependence-that seek to unmake them. New Historicism's refusal to separate text from context is essential to reading Selvaraj's cinema, since each film is meticulously located in a specific historical moment and geography.

Selvaraj's films are grounded in actual historical events. *Karnan* is based on the Kodyankulam Dalit village police crackdown of 1995; the railway track motif in *Pariyerum Perumal* invokes the 2013 death of Dalit youth Ilavarasan; *Bison Kaalamaadan* follows the life of real kabaddi player Manathi Ganesan. As film critic Sowmya Rajendran notes, "the lines remind one of Ilavarasan, a Dalit youth who married a woman from a dominant caste and was found dead on the railway track, and the trajectory of the plot affirms that this is no coincidence" (Rajendran). New Historicism's methodology of reading texts against their historical conditions allows us to see how Selvaraj transforms specific historical traumas into mythic narratives of collective assertion.

Louis Montrose's reformulation of New Historicism emphasises the "historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (Montrose 20). Selvaraj's films perform precisely this double operation: they historicize the myth (the Mahabharata's Karnan becomes a Dalit villager in 1990s Thoothukudi) and they mythologise the historical (the Kodyankulam riots become a cosmic battle between the oppressed and state power). This dialectic between myth and history is the structural engine of his cinema.

III. **Pariyerum Perumal: The Dog, the Railway Track, and the Wound That Does Not Close**

Mari Selvaraj's debut feature *Pariyerum Perumal* (*The God on a Horse*) centres on Pariyan, a young Dalit man from Puliyamkulam who enrolls in a law college in Tirunelveli, where he falls into an impossible friendship with Jyothi Mahalakshmi, a woman from the dominant intermediary caste. The film has been described as "one of the most talked about and hard-hitting films on the ugliness of caste prejudice" (The

Federal) and as a work that “does not descend into violence in the end to tie up the knots” (The Federal)-an observation confirmed by Selvaraj himself: “I did not know the end of violence. I tussled with this question” (The Federal).

The film opens with a scene that functions both as pastoral idyll and as the announcement of a wound: Pariyan and his friends bathe in a pond with their dogs. When a group of upper-caste men arrives, the Dalits quietly withdraw-a gesture of habitual, unquestioned deference. What follows is a founding act of violence: the upper-caste men urinate into the pond. As Malarazhagan in *Global Dravidian* notes, “in that artistic shot it is very clear there is no other water source for miles but still the upper caste men are assertive to defile the water just because it is used by Dalits” (Global Dravidian). The scene encapsulates the logic of caste: it is not about resources but about power—the compulsion to mark, defile, and remind.

The most celebrated symbolic figure in *Pariyerum Perumal* is Karuppi, the black hunting dog owned by Pariyan. Selvaraj has stated that “the film centers around the dog Karuppi, where she goes and what she does” (The News Minute). Karuppi is killed within the film’s first fifteen minutes, tied to a railway track by upper-caste men and run over by a train. The manner of her death immediately invokes the real-world deaths of Dalit youth on Tamil Nadu’s railway tracks-deaths passed off as suicides but widely understood as caste pride killings (honour killings).

The symbolism of Karuppi has been extensively commented upon. Film critic Jai Arjun Singh compares Karuppi to the dog in Samuel Fuller’s 1982 film *White Dog*: “If the dog in Samuel Fuller’s *White Dog* stood for an incurable strain of racism (the film centres on a dog that has been conditioned to attack black people), Karuppi, glowing blue in her apparitional state, stands for the oppressed” (Jabberwock). A. Vanathu Suresh and R. Subramani confirms that “symbolism in the film, such as the character Karuppi, conveys deeper meanings of oppression and resilience” (Suresh 22).

In his analysis, Gurumurthy encapsulates the symbolic logic precisely: “Karuppi is not just a dog. She is a metaphor for every oppressed soul out there. Karuppi is an innocent dog that doesn’t know the difference between various castes or religions. Yet, it is a victim of the cruel caste system prevalent in the society” (Behindwoods). Crucially, Karuppi does not vanish after her death. She returns as a spectral, blue-luminous presence throughout the film, appearing beside Pariyan in the song “Naan Yaar” when he is bound to a chair, her wounds visible but her presence protective. This apparitional return is a profoundly traumatic structure. In Caruth’s framework, trauma returns not as a full memory but as a haunting-a repetition that testifies to what could not be fully witnessed or assimilated. Karuppi’s blue ghost is Selvaraj’s cinematic equivalent of the traumatic return: the wound that keeps coming back not merely to mourn but to witness and, ultimately, to protect. The dog is both victim and guardian spirit, a totem in the anthropological sense, an animal whose killing binds the community together in grief and whose spirit continues to mediate between the living and the dead.

The racial encoding of the dog's colour is also significant. Karuppi means 'the black one' in Tamil, a name that immediately codes the dog within the chromatic politics of caste, where darkness is associated with low caste identity. Pariyan himself is dark-skinned. As the *Global Dravidian* analysis notes, "Karuppi is the symbol of victims and Pariyan is their alter ego that survived" (Global Dravidian). Dog and man are doubles; the dog's fate is what threatens the man.

Beyond the figure of Karuppi, *Pariyerum Perumal* is structured by a series of mundane objects and spaces that become sites of caste inscription. The most powerful of these is the tea glass-the separate, smaller glass in which Dalit customers are served tea at roadside stalls. The film's climax, where the tea glass becomes a figure of both humiliation and defiance, has been described as 'iconic' by numerous critics. A. Vanathu Suresh and R. Subramani state that the film "sparks crucial dialogues on caste prejudice, violence, and the pressing need for societal transformation" (Suresh 28).

Pugalendhi R. in his paper *Symbolic Resistance* observes that "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" (182). This observation places Selvaraj squarely within what the New Historicist would call the 'circulation of social energy', the way in which everyday objects are saturated with the power relations of the society that produces them.

The railway track itself operates as an overdetermined site in the film. It is where Karuppi dies; it is where an unconscious, beaten Pariyan is later left to die; and it is the recurring site of real-world Dalit deaths across Tamil Nadu. Selvaraj told *The Federal*: "For many years, the railway track has been the hotspot for honour killing. People know about it only now but over the years many young innocents have died on these railway tracks" (The Federal). The railway track in the film thus condenses historical trauma-the specific, repeated crime of caste murder-into a single visual symbol that returns again and again with the logic of traumatic repetition.

In its refusal of the cathartic resolution typical of mainstream Tamil cinema-the hero's revenge, the villain's defeat-*Pariyerum Perumal* aligns itself with what film critic Jai Arjun Singh calls the tradition of Indian anti-caste films that "suggested that things might never meaningfully improve for society's most downtrodden-or that if change has to come, it must be swift and anarchic" (Jabberwock). The comparison to Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016) is instructive: in all three films, the upper-caste world reasserts itself at the film's climax with a violence that cannot be aesthetically contained. The audience is not permitted the luxury of resolution.

IV. Karnan: The Donkey, the Sword, and the Mythologised Uprising

Karnan, produced by Kalaipuli S. Thanu and starring Dhanush in the title role, marks a significant escalation in Selvaraj's cinematic ambition. Where *Pariyerum Perumal* was intimate and restrained, *Karnan*

is operatic, a film of sweeping visual imagery, mass scenes of collective violence, and an audacious fusion of mythology, folk religion, and historical fact. Set in the fictional village of Podiyankulam in the 1990s, (based on the Kodiyankulam police crackdown of 1995) the film follows Karnan as he leads his village in an uprising against systematic police brutality and caste-based exclusion.

The structural mythology of the film is the *Mahabharata* specifically, the figure of Karna, the tragic warrior born to Kunti and the sun god Surya, raised by a charioteer's family, denied his royal identity by the caste hierarchy of the epic, and ultimately killed because of who he is rather than what he has done. As film critic Sowmya Rajendran notes, "Karnan is the tragic hero of the *Mahabharata*, the son of Surya and the eldest of the Pandavas who is denied his rightful place because of circumstances" (The News Minute). In Selvaraj's rewriting, however, the question of 'rightful place' is itself interrogated: "But what does a 'rightful place' in a caste society mean? It means pushing down others in a brutal hierarchy to secure your own position. It is this understanding that permeates Mari Selvaraj's *Karnan*" (The News Minute).

The *Mahabharata* overlay is fused with a second mythological substrate: the Arthurian legend of Excalibur. In the film's opening scene, Karnan pulls a sword from a fish-an act that simultaneously invokes Arthur's drawing of the sword from the stone and the local folk tradition of the ancestral sword as collective property. Karnan is merely the custodian of a collective property, the sword doesn't give any power or right. In fact, throughout the film we see him sharing it with others. This is a crucial distinction from both the *Mahabharata* original and the Arthurian tradition: where both valorize individual heroism authorized by divine election, Selvaraj's version insists on the collectivity of resistance. The sword belongs to the village, not to the warrior.

The most powerful recurring animal symbol in *Karnan* is the donkey, a small, underfed animal whose front legs are bound together to prevent it from running away. The bound donkey appears repeatedly in the film's first half, each time visible in the background of village life, ignored by everyone except Karnan, who is consistently disturbed by its captivity. As Sowmya Rajendran writes: "In the village of Podiyankulam, a little donkey hops on the road, its front legs tied with a rope. Nobody takes notice of it. They understand that the donkey's legs have been tied to prevent it from running, going where its heart takes it. It's normal to treat it that way, the people believe. But not Karnan" (The News Minute).

The symbolism is elaborated in the film's visual language with considerable care. Selvaraj "also frequently shows us shots of human legs, starting from the beginning when a child lies writhing on the road in the middle of an epileptic fit. There are no ropes around the legs of his people but Karnan, the hero of this Kurukshetra, can clearly see them" (The News Minute). The donkey's bound legs are a visible externalisation of an invisible bondage-the bondage of caste, which is not marked on the body but which constrains every movement of the people of Podiyankulam. The bound donkey is a totem of the pre-uprising state: the community before it has found its power.

In “Inverted Archetypes: A Mythopoetic Reading of Mari Selvaraj’s *Karnan*,” Alisha Oli Mohammed notes that “symbols like sword, elephant, donkey, eagle, Clan-god Kattu Pechi and stone-throwing act are inverted in the film” (5). The inversion is systematic: in Hindu mythology, the donkey is associated with the goddess Shitala and with the low status of domestic labour. In Selvaraj’s film, the donkey is not reduced to its cultural associations of stupidity and servitude. As Sowmya Rajendran notes, “the general perception is that the donkey, known to be a beast of burden and closely associated with the working class, is a stupid creature. However, in reality, the donkey possesses an excellent memory and is an intelligent animal. When it is set free, the little donkey in Podiyankulam knows exactly where it wants to go” (Rajendran).

The donkey’s liberation is one of the film’s most quietly devastating images. As Karnan and his community make their stand, the donkey is freed, and it runs-runs to the top of a rocky hillock, where a small girl who functions as the village’s supernatural guardian angel watches over the scene of uprising. The juxtaposition creates an image of collective liberation: the individual animal and the communal spirit rise together. Baradwaj Rangan, in his blog, captures this precisely: “One of my favourites is the donkey with the tied up front limbs. And the beautiful, perfect frame we get as the just then freed donkey runs up over the rocky hillock to join the little girl-deity (again, someone symbolic) who is cherishing as she witnesses Karnan getting unleashed” (Rangan).

The donkey is contrasted throughout the film with a horse-the animal of the dominant caste, of speed, of freedom, of military power. There were “two other symbolisms used repeatedly by the Director-the first was a famished donkey with its forelegs tied together to indicate the villagers being submissive to their oppressors; the second was to show the opposite, a horse waiting to fly across the dry lands when the hero and the villagers shed their fears and turn around to face their enemies” (Venkatarangan). The donkey-to-horse trajectory is the trajectory of the film’s narrative: from enforced servility to claimed assertion.

Alongside the donkey and the sword, *Karnan* deploys a distinctive folk cosmology. The village deity of Podiyankulam is a headless statue-a figure that, in one of the film’s most arresting images, appears to Karnan in a dream before the climactic battle, restoring its head. Ashutosh Mohan analysis interprets this as a statement about the relationship between divine authority and earthly suffering: “By using the device of a dream, Mari Selvaraj connects the religious and psychological. A lofty god in the sky is replaced by one that is a kind of collective conscience. It’s as if injustices of the past can be forgotten but never erased permanently from the mind” (Mohan).

The headless deity is a figure from Dalit folk religion, a category of subaltern spirituality that operates outside and often in opposition to Brahminical Hinduism. The gods of Podiyankulam are, as Ashutosh Mohan notes, “as humble and practical as the people” (Mohan). They do not promise otherworldly salvation but offer earthly solidarity. The small girl who appears throughout the film carrying a clay head of the deity and wandering the margins of the village’s confrontations is simultaneously a child, a ghost, a divine messenger, and a

personification of communal memory. Her function is to bear witness: she is the community's traumatic memory made visible.

V. Maamannan: Dogs, Pigs, and the Politics of Electoral Caste

Maamannan represents a shift in Selvaraj's method. Where *Pariyerum Perumal* and *Karnan* were set in the pre-liberalisation 1990s, *Maamannan* is set in the contemporary period of electoral caste politics, where the machinery of democracy has been captured by caste hierarchies rather than dismantled by them. Starring Vadivelu as the titular Dalit MLA Maamannan, Udhayanidhi Stalin as his rebellious son Athiveeran, and Fahadh Faasil as the dominant-caste antagonist Rathnavel, the film maps the psychic costs of working within the system for a Dalit politician who has survived by accommodation.

The film opens, as Sneha Jaiswal notes, "with a sleek shot of the state assembly, emblematic of its plot's primary theme-power politics. Next, we see a pack of dogs leaving a house, juxtaposed by pigs in a pen somewhere else" (Jaiswal). This opening montage announces the film's central animal allegory: dogs for the dominant caste (Rathnavel explicitly refers to the lower caste as "the dogs I have kept"), pigs for the oppressed. The historical and cultural resonance of the pig in caste symbolism is considerable-pigs are associated with untouchability and with the scavenging labour historically imposed on Dalit castes. By making Athiveeran a pig-raiser, Selvaraj inverts this stigma: the pig becomes a sign of the protagonist's roots, his pride, and ultimately his power.

In *Maamannan*, Selvaraj reverses the valence of the dog symbol from *Pariyerum Perumal*. Where Karuppi was a victim-the dog as embodiment of the powerless and the innocent-the dogs of *Maamannan* are weapons of the powerful. Rathnavel keeps hunting dogs; they are instruments of surveillance, pursuit, and violence. The contrast with Athiveeran's pigs-collective, stigmatized, but ultimately dangerous when cornered-is methodical. As Siddharthen R observes: "Rathnavelu owns hunting dogs, while Athiveeran raises pigs. Through the historically associated stigma of pigs, it becomes evident that this choice serves as an allegory, representing the oppressed rising against their oppressors" (Siddharthen).

This reversal demonstrates Selvaraj's increasing sophistication as a symbolic thinker. In *Pariyerum Perumal*, the animal is a victim; in *Karnan*, the animal (the donkey) is a figure of liberation; in *Maamannan*, the animal is differentiated between oppressors and oppressed, and the oppressed animal carries the potential for retributive violence. The trajectory maps a political development: from mourning, through assertion, to a recognition of the structural conditions that make violence inevitable.

Rathnavel, the film's upper-caste villain, is one of Selvaraj's most carefully crafted antagonists. His relationship to the dogs he keeps is not merely allegorical: he is a man who has internalized caste hierarchy so thoroughly that he cannot conceive of any relationship except one of master and servant, owner and animal. His violence against Maamannan including a deeply humiliating incident of caste-coded disrespect that drives

the film's narrative is not aberrant but systemic: it is what the system has authorized him to do, and what it will protect him for doing. As *Onmanorama* notes, "Fahadh Faasil's character is often portrayed in shots where he looks down upon others, symbolizing his position of privilege and superiority. On the other hand, Vadivelu's character is consistently shown crouched with folded hands, reflecting the power dynamics at play" (Onmanorama).

One of the film's most acclaimed sequences is the interval block, in which Maamannan, the accommodating, compromising Dalit politician who has spent his career absorbing humiliations in exchange for political survival, finally arrives at a moment of recognition: he sees himself, and what has been done to him, clearly. The review of *Maamannan* in *Just for Movie Freaks* describes this as "his awakening and realization of his own mistreatment, brilliantly depicted in a remarkable interval block" (Siddharthen). In trauma-theoretic terms, this is the moment of what Herman calls "remembrance and mourning" the stage at which the traumatised subject turns to face what has been endured, as a necessary precondition for action.

The film's engagement with the cultural politics of Dalit assertion is also illuminated by a comparison Siddharthen R makes with Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012): "I once read that Quentin Tarantino was enraged by the final act of *Roots*, where the main character chooses not to retaliate against his slave master. In *Django Unchained*, Tarantino rectifies this by giving the protagonist a chance for revenge. Similarly, Udhayanidhi Stalin's character, Athiveeran, relentlessly fights back against those who oppose him and his father; reflecting the director's unyielding battle against caste discrimination" (Siddharthen). The comparison illuminates both the films' strengths and their potential limitations: revenge as narrative resolution can provide catharsis but cannot substitute for structural transformation.

VI. Vaazhai: Childhood, Labour, and the Banana as Symbol of Extractive Caste

Vaazhai marks a different kind of return in Selvaraj's filmography-a return to childhood, to the village of his birth, and to a mode of autobiographical filmmaking that is more intimate and less mythically inflected than *Karnan*. The film follows twelve-year-old Sivanandhan and his family as they labor in a banana plantation during school holidays-work that the boy dreads but cannot refuse, since it is the economic lifeblood of a community with no other recourse. In "Caste and Cinema: A Study of *Vaazhi* by Mari Selvaraj," Muthuvel V and Keerthana S read the movie as a systematic deployment of the banana plantain as caste symbol: "The director has made sure that the theme of the vaazhai plantain has been a constant companion in the movie. The fruit of the vaazhai is the symbol of the Dalits and their effort that is in need of exploitation. *Vaazhai* has a vulnerable and disposable stem" (IJHSSM). The banana plant-which flowers once, is harvested, and the stem is then cut down-becomes a figure for the Dalit labourer: productive, essential, and disposable. The labour of the banana harvest is not merely economic but caste-coded: it is work that the dominant castes do not do, precisely because its performance marks those who do it.

The film's use of Ambedkarite ideology is subtler than in *Karnan* or *Maamannan*. The character of Kani, played by Kalaiyarasan, is described as "deeply rooted in Ambedkarite ideology, which Selvaraj subtly infuses throughout the film" (Shailesh). Kani is a socialist activist who provides the children with an ideological framework for understanding their condition-a counterpoint to the resigned acceptance of their parents' generation. The figure of the activist-educator is a recurring type in Dalit literature and cinema: the one who has found a language for the wound, and who returns to the community to share it.

Mari Selvaraj lost his elder sister in 1999 when a banana truck overturned and crushed her. This biographical fact illuminates the film's emotional register: *Vaazhai* is not merely a film about child labour and caste but an act of mourning-a brother's elegy for a sister, and a filmmaker's memorial to a community's vanished childhood. Trauma theory's concept of "postmemory"-Marianne Hirsch's term for the creative inheritance of parental or ancestral trauma-is applicable here: Selvaraj's cinema constitutes a cultural practice by which the traumatic experiences of his community are transformed into art and thus transmitted to future generations.

VII. **Bison Kaalamaadan: The Beast as Athlete, the Sport as Battleground**

Bison Kaalamaadan is Selvaraj's most recent film and, in the view of several critics, his most mature. Based on the life of kabaddi player Manathi Ganesan, the film follows Kittan as he pursues his dream of representing India in the 1994 Asian Games, while navigating a web of caste violence, family honour feuds, and institutional exclusion. The film was described by The Commune as "a deeply rooted, emotionally stirring tale that looks caste, conflict, and identity straight in the eye-without flinching, without sermonizing" (The Commune). The review in Rotten Tomatoes notes that the film "bears the signature stamp of its accomplished creator" while being "not among its director's finest works" (Rotten Tomatoes), suggesting a critical reception that recognises both the film's ambition and its occasional structural overreach.

The film's title announces its central totem: the bison. As the review in The Commune observes, "like every Mari Selvaraj film, animals in *Bison Kaalamaadan* carry deep symbolic weight. From Karuppi the dog in *Pariyerum Perumal* to the tied donkey in *Karnan*, the pigs in *Maamannan*, and the cow that wanders into a banana plantation in *Vaazhai*, Mari has always used animals as living metaphors-pivots that elevate the story, heighten the tension, and mirror the human condition. In *Bison*, it is a goat that pisses inside a bus" (The Commune). The bison-the Kaalamaadan or 'time-killer'-is a figure of raw, uncontainable force: an animal that does not conform to the enclosures built for it.

Selvaraj's use of kabaddi as the film's central sport is not incidental. Kabaddi is a traditional South Asian contact sport with deep roots in rural Tamil culture, a game of breath-holding raids and physical resistance that has historically been associated with the lower castes. As Bharathy Singaravel, in the News Minute, observes: "Who has the privilege to single-mindedly focus on their passion and who is forced to take on entrenched and imagined hierarchies of worth, while fighting for their dreams? Kittan doesn't care about the

sociopolitical storm whirling around him” (Singaravel). The film poses the question of Dalit aspiration with uncomfortable directness: even in the ostensibly level playing field of sport, caste asserts itself through exclusion, sabotage, and the denial of opportunity.

Ameer plays Pandiaraja, a Dalit figure who has challenged caste injustice, locked in a feud with a dominant-caste landlord, Kandasamy. This feud, inherited from an older generation, bleeds into Kittan’s life with the logic of what trauma theory calls “transgenerational transmission”: the wound is passed down without the next generation having consented to inherit it. The review in Singaravel further notes that “men from Kandasamy’s community repeatedly place hurdles in Kittan’s path, always reducing him to his caste identity when all he cares about is kabaddi” (Singaravel). Kittan’s singular devotion to his sport is continually interrupted by the social condition he was born into-the classic structure of Dalit aspiration in a caste society.

The theological dimensions of the bison symbol are explored at length in “Bison Kaalamaan: Why This Is The Best Spiritual Movie This Deepavali Season” published in *Swarajya Magazine*, which reads the film as unexpectedly imbued with Vedic symbolism: “At every pivotal point in the narrative, the divine energy of Kaalamaan is movingly and powerfully invoked to manifest this struggle for liberation. It is a fascinating paradox that such potent spiritual symbolism should emerge from the work of director Mari Selvaraj, a self-professed rationalist who has described his people’s spiritual expressions as manifestations of righteous anger rather than ontological reality” (Neelakandan). The essay concludes that “the collective memory of Indian culture-the primordial symbol of the Divine Bull-has surfaced through the mind of an artist fiercely committed to his medium of expression and his genuine storytelling” (Neelakandan).

This reading illuminates something important about Selvaraj’s relationship to mythology and folk religion across his filmography. He does not deploy these systems as a believer but as a cultural anthropologist-as someone who understands that myth is the archive in which a community stores its deepest fears, desires, and aspirations. The bison is simultaneously a real animal in a Tamil village, a kabaddi metaphor for the relentless raider, and an invocation of the Nandi-the divine bull of Shiva-reinterpreted as a symbol of Dalit strength rather than Brahminical sanctity.

Selvaraj described all his films as kinda sequels to one another, given how *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Karnan* and *Bison Kaalamaan* take place in villages within 10-15 km of each other, yet have their own diverse stories to tell. The films together constitute what might be called a “cinema of assertion”-a body of work that circles the same wounded geography, each time finding new names and forms for the same underlying historical trauma of caste, and each time insisting, with greater force, that this trauma demands not merely witness but response.

VIII. The Zoology of Caste: A Cross-Film Reading of Selvaraj's Animal Totems

Viewed across five films, Selvaraj's use of animals constitutes a systematic symbolic vocabulary, borrowing from Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology, a 'totemism' of caste. For Lévi-Strauss, totemic animals function as a classificatory system: they permit a society to think through its social distinctions and hierarchies via the medium of natural differences (Lévi-Strauss 89). Selvaraj deploys animals in a precisely analogous way but he does so in order to critique and subvert caste hierarchy, not to naturalize it.

The trajectory of his animal symbols follows a discernible political arc: Karuppi (*Pariyerum Perumal*) is a victim killed, mourned, and then resurrected as a spectral guardian. The donkey (*Karnan*) begins as a figure of enforced servility and ends as a figure of liberation. The pigs and dogs (*Maamannan*) are differentiated along caste lines: the dominant caste's hunting dogs versus the oppressed community's stigmatised pigs and the narrative moves towards a reversal of the power relation between them. The cow (*Vaazhai*) wandering through the banana plantation suggests the incommensurability of two economies-the cow belongs to a world of sacred abundance, the plantation to one of exploitative labour. The bison (*Bison Kaalamaadan*) represents the fullest articulation of the oppressed subject's power: no longer victim, no longer struggling for freedom, but charging.

This zoological arc is also an arc of consciousness-from innocence through bondage through awakening to assertion. It maps, in symbolic terms, what B. R. Ambedkar identified as the fundamental political task of the Dalit community: the annihilation of the internalised consciousness of inferiority, and its replacement with a consciousness of dignity, rights, and solidarity. Selvaraj's animals are not merely metaphors for oppression; they are, across the five films, a progressive model of Dalit political development.

The strategy of using animals also has a defensive artistic function. As the paper "Symbolic Resistance: Visual Metaphors and Caste Critique in Mari Selvaraj's Cinema" observes, Selvaraj's "metaphors expose and resist social hierarchies, offering a layered narrative of Dalit struggles and empowerment" (Pugalendhi). The animal metaphor permits Selvaraj to say things that direct representation might make too uncomfortable for mainstream audiences and, crucially, for mainstream distributors and censors. As he himself has acknowledged, several scenes in *Karnan* were cut during censorship. The animal totem is a way of protecting the truth by encoding it.

IX. Caste Hegemony and Its Representations: A New Historicist Reading

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony-the process by which the dominant class secures the consent of the dominated to its own domination, through cultural rather than purely coercive means-is essential to understanding the caste relations represented in Selvaraj's films. In each film, the dominant caste does not simply impose its power through force; it does so through a complex web of cultural norms, ritual obligations,

spatial arrangements, and forms of address that make hierarchy appear natural, inevitable, and even morally legitimate.

In *Pariyerum Perumal*, the hegemony of caste operates through the everyday: the separate tea glass, the compulsory deference at the water's edge, the expectation that Pariyan will withdraw before the upper-caste men arrive. These are not dramatic acts of violence but the unnoticed machinery of normalization-what Drishya on Dalit cinema describes as caste's "long, lethal tendrils" that are "seemingly inescapable. Like an invisible predator, it stalks Dalits and follows them wherever they go" (Drishya). In *Maamannan*, hegemony has achieved its most sophisticated form: the Dalit politician who has internalised the hierarchy to the point where he polices his own community on behalf of the dominant caste.

The New Historicist concept of "containment and subversion" (Greenblatt) is useful here. Greenblatt argued that cultural texts often simultaneously express subversive energies and contain them within structures that ultimately reinforce hegemony. Selvaraj's films constantly flirt with this tension: does the dramatic uprising in *Karnan* constitute genuine subversion, or is it ultimately contained by the film's narrative closure? Does *Maamannan*'s electoral resolution offer genuine liberation, or does it reinscribe the oppressed within the very political system that has been shaped by caste hierarchy? Selvaraj's films are powerful precisely because they do not resolve this tension; they hold it open, refusing the comfort of either despair or redemption.

The comparative frame of anti-caste cinema is essential here. Pa. Ranjith, Selvaraj's mentor and the producer of *Pariyerum Perumal* has described his own cinema as attempting to depict "Dalits as assertive and complex individuals, challenging established caste hierarchies" (Bunkar). In "The Routledge companion to caste and cinema in India; exploring alternative voices, suppressed gazes, and caste dynamics in film" Neeraj Bunker notes that "Dalit filmmakers such as Pa. Ranjith and Nagraj Manjule depict Dalits as assertive and complex individuals, challenging established caste hierarchies" in contrast to the historical norm in which "Indian filmmakers, predominantly from the upper caste, have historically portrayed Dalit characters, often reinforcing stereotypes of marginality and victimization" (Bunkar). Selvaraj's films extend and deepen this tradition: his protagonists are not simply assertive but profoundly interior, traversing not just external confrontations but the psychological landscape of the traumatised self.

X. Dalit Aesthetics and the Politics of Form

Selvaraj's formal choices-his use of music, colour, costume, and cinematographic language-constitute what might be called a Dalit aesthetics: a set of formal strategies that are inseparable from the political content of his films. The music of Santhosh Narayanan (*Pariyerum Perumal*, *Karnan*, *Vaazhai*) is central to this aesthetic. Narayanan's scores draw on Dalit folk music traditions, particularly the parai drum tradition, blending them with orchestral, electronic, and Carnatic elements to create soundscapes that are simultaneously of the community and transcendent of it. The song "Karuppi" from *Pariyerum Perumal*-a dirge for the dead

dog that is simultaneously a lament for Dalit lives lost on railway tracks-is one of the most formally remarkable pieces in recent Tamil film music.

The use of blue as a colour of liberation across Selvaraj's cinema is also significant. As *The Wire* analysis of the *Dhadak 2* remake notes, "both are shown in blue, running together, a visual metaphor for resistance" in the "Naan Yaar" song sequence from *Pariyerum Perumal* (*The Wire*). Blue, the colour of Ambedkar's followers, the colour of the Buddha's robes in neo-Buddhist Dalit iconography is deployed throughout the films as a chromatic signature of resistance and dignity. Karuppi's ghost glows blue; in her apparitional form, she is not merely a dead dog but a resurrected spirit of Dalit assertion.

The Dalit folk performance traditions deployed in the films-the parai drum, the dhapaan koothu dance, the funeral ritual are also political assertions. As *The Wire* notes, "Karuppi's funeral ceremony includes the parai (a traditional one-sided circular drum usually made of calf skin) and the dhapaan koothu (a folk dance performed by Dalits at mournings and celebrations)" (*The Wire*). These are not picturesque ethnographic details but claims: Dalit culture has its own aesthetic traditions, its own ceremonial vocabulary, its own forms of mourning and celebration and these traditions are worthy of cinematic representation on their own terms, not merely as the backdrop for upper-caste narratives of reform.

XI. Selvaraj in Context: Anti-Caste Cinema and Its Traditions

To situate Selvaraj's cinema in tradition, it is useful to triangulate it with two other major filmmakers of anti-caste cinema: Nagraj Manjule in Marathi and Pa. Ranjith in Tamil. Manjule's *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016) provide the closest formal parallels to *Pariyerum Perumal*: both are set in rural Maharashtra, both centre on the impossible love between a Dalit protagonist and an upper-caste woman, and both refuse the happy ending with a violence that implicates the audience. Jai Arjun Singh's essay notes that *Pariyerum Perumal* "is in some ways gentler and more sanguine than those films" (Jabberwock)-Selvaraj's refusal of explicit retributive violence distinguishes his aesthetic from the more confrontational mode of Manjule's *Sairat*, whose final scene remains one of the most disturbing in contemporary Indian cinema.

Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* (2018) and *Kabali* (2016) are also significant comparators. Ranjith's films, as one analysis notes, "showcase the oppressed as powerful and challenging the mainstream"-they are films of Dalit power rather than Dalit trauma (*The News Minute*). Selvaraj's cinema is in dialogue with but distinct from Ranjith's: where Ranjith celebrates Dalit political power through the genre vocabulary of the mass action film, Selvaraj is more interested in the interior cost of living under caste-the psychic damage, the habituated deference, the ways in which the hegemony of caste burrows into the self.

The New Wave of Dalit cinema in India has also been shaped by the work of earlier filmmakers: Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980), Ketan Mehta's *Bhavni Bhavai* (1980), and the realist tradition of parallel Indian cinema in the 1970s and 80s. As Jai Arjun Singh notes, these films "suggested that things might never

meaningfully improve for society's most downtrodden" (Jabberwock). Selvaraj's films inherit this pessimism but complicate it: they are not simply films of hopelessness, but films of what might be called "tragic assertion"-the insistence on dignity even in the full knowledge of the costs that assertion will exact.

Dalit literature, particularly the autobiographical tradition of writers such as Bama, Sharankumar Limbale, and Daya Pawar, provides another essential context for Selvaraj's cinema. Bama's *Karukku* (1992), perhaps the most celebrated Dalit autobiography in Tamil, shares with Selvaraj's films the strategy of building a political argument through the accumulation of lived, bodily, everyday experience.

XII. Conclusion: A Cinema of Assertion

Writing in the late critic Venkat Swaminathan's spirit, the *Swarajya* essay on *Bison* observes that "great art must journey from the particular to the universal, from the cluttered and specific to a truth that contains all. Mari Selvaraj's artistic odyssey, fuelled by a righteous anger against prevailing socio-political structures, is a testament to this very pursuit" (Swarajya). This paper has tried to trace that odyssey across five films, reading them through the interrelated frameworks of Trauma Theory and New Historicism, and attending particularly to the animal totems, mythic symbols, and folk cosmologies that constitute Selvaraj's distinctive cinematic language.

Across *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Karnan*, *Maamannan*, *Vaazhai*, and *Bison Kaalamaadan*, Selvaraj has constructed a cinema that is, in the deepest sense, an act of witness: a sustained, formally inventive, emotionally devastating account of what it has cost and continues to cost to be Dalit in Tamil Nadu. His films are saturated with historical trauma-the specific, repeated, socially sanctioned traumas of caste-but they refuse the passivity that trauma can induce. Instead, they transform mourning into assertion, and assertion into a call for structural change.

His use of animal totems from Karuppi's blue ghost to the freed donkey of Podiyankulam to the charging bison of *Bison Kaalamaadan* constitutes a progressive symbolic vocabulary of Dalit political development. His deployment of mythological frameworks-the *Mahabharata*, the Arthurian legend, Dalit folk religion-insists that the oppressed have access to the same mythic resources that hegemonic culture has historically monopolised, and that those resources can be redeployed from the perspective of the subaltern. His formal choices-colour, music, cinematographic rhythm, the refusal of cathartic resolution-constitute a Dalit aesthetics that makes the experience of caste available to audiences who might otherwise prefer not to know.

In the interview with *Scroll.in*, Selvaraj spoke of his ambition at the time of *Pariyerum Perumal*: "I want to use art to generate a debate" (Scroll.in). Eight years and five films later, that debate is ongoing-in cinemas, in academic journals, in the streets, and in the corridors of Tamil Nadu's contentious and caste-saturated political life. That a filmmaker from a rustic caste ridden village in Thoothukudi, drawing on the specific textures of his own wounded biography, has managed to make Tamil Nadu-and by extension, India-look at itself in the

mirror, is itself an act of the most profound assertion. As Selvaraj himself told *Film Companion*: “We think we live in a liberal and progressive society. But there’s an ugly side to it. We don’t like to discuss issues when they don’t affect us directly” (Film Companion). His cinema makes it impossible to look away.

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