

A Voice for the Voiceless: A Subaltern Reading of Vetrimaaran's *Asuran* (2019)

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Sageedevic. K*MA.English 2nd Yr**Pondicherry University***Abstract**

*This paper is a subaltern reading of *Asuran* (2019), placing the film within the critical discourse of the subaltern studies and Dalit aesthetics. Based on Antonio Gramsci's idea of the subaltern; Ranajit Guha's critique of elite historiography and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theoretical intervention within the idea of representation in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Based on these theoretical frameworks, the paper analyzes *Asuran* in terms of dominion of caste through land acquisition, institutional complicity and everyday terror. It suggests that the movie functions as a subaltern text because it focuses on Dalit lived experience, disrupting and destabilizing hegemonic discourses of order and justice, and acts as a site of agency not just by means of vengeance, but also through educating and raising political awareness. Even though the movie is on the verge of romanticizing violence, it is eventually able to assert the subaltern voice that represents the livelihood of the Dalit people. To be a process of transitioning from violence to socio-political awareness.*

Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Dalit Aesthetics, *Asuran*, Tamil Cinema, Hegemony, Vetrimaaran.

Introduction

Throughout history, Indian popular cinema has either rejected the representation of the subaltern populations or transformed them into mere folly of the society, as a comic relief or a sideline character that acts as the foil characters to elevate heroism of the film's protagonists. However, over the last few years, Tamil films have started challenging the concept of caste as a destructive force of social existence. Vetrimaaran, Pa. Ranjith, and Mari Selvaraj are filmmakers who have shifted the camera to focus on land, labor, and dignity, and of caste oppression, they perceive caste based hegemony as not merely a social noise, but as the grammar of Tamil rural culture.

Asuran (2019) is a reenactment of the outcomes of modes of Dalit assertion in a caste-organized rural setting, directed by Vetrimaaran and based on the novel *Vekkai* by Poomani. The story is set around the Dalit agricultural laborer Sivasami and his family who falls victim to the violence after they refuse to embrace the displacement of the land and confront the domination of the caste system, which is dominated by the upper caste. Switching between the past and present, the film traces the afterlife of the process of humiliation, the

banality of evil, and the instability of the legal framework concerning the oppressed. *Asuran* is read in this paper as a cinematic subaltern text that deconstructs the meta narratives of harmony in the countryside and recenter Dalit agency.

Theoretical Framework

The term ‘subaltern’ is a social term, which was coined by Antonio Gramsci as part of political terminology, and is attributed to social classes that are designated in an institutional sense as they were deprived of having a voice in institutions and being visible hegemonically.

Subalternity is not just poverty or marginality, it is the state of being structured orally, governed, and imprisoned. The Subaltern Studies group, led by Ranajit Guha, made attempts to reclaim the history of peasantry and other marginalised groups that were not addressed or culturally formed by colonial archives and nationalist narratives in India. The intervention made by Guha was to demonstrate that subaltern politics have their rationalities and structures and that the elite historiography often looks at the subaltern as an object of history and not as a subject of history. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, She posits that on many occasions, subaltern speech is often perceived through institutional structures, such as, academic speech, legal speech, colonial speech, patriarchal speech, which intercepts, appropriates or erases the articulation of the subaltern. As applied to the case of the cinema, these theoretical discussions pose a major question, namely, does the film such as *Asuran* only show subaltern suffering that becomes mere mass consumption, or does it create spaces in which subaltern subjectivity can surface as a political, institutional, and the ethical subject.

Socio-Historical Context

The caste society does not always have the land as just property. It is status, power and the right to occupy space with the absence of fear. Traditionally land and local institutions have remained controlled by upper castes and Dalit communities have been placed as dependent labourers, not only in terms of economics but also social codes of conduct that govern dignity, movement and even speech. Alienation of land then becomes a way of committing inter-generational caste disparity.

It is on this terrain that *Asuran* (2019) locates its warfare. The hostilities of the landlords do not occur because of an individual rivalry, but they are caused by a danger of Dalit independence. The fact that the family of Sivasami claims rights over ancestral land is unbearable since it touches on the caste common sense, the type of unwritten law that property and power should not be taken out of place by the place of hierarchy. The resultant violence is to be understood as structural enforcement: as a spectacle aimed at regaining domination by way of fear.

Subaltern Space and Politics of Location

In *Asuran* (2019), the film’s spatial arrangements serve as visual sociology. There are contrasts again and again in the film: The houses of landlords, built in the form of a fortified palace of power and an inherited authority. The Dalit colony, presented as dysfunctional, being subject to attack and arbitrary murder. The place itself is something that has been built as a conflicted memory and identity archive instead of being a place of indifference. The repetition of the scenery where the violence occurs around the riverbank becomes of particular importance. It works like a border-zone: not formally, but not beyond the control of caste. This liminality points to one of the main subaltern conditions, oppression is not localized on official locations such as police posts or judicial courts, it tracks bodies into common geographical locations making even geography a map of vulnerability.

Order by Coercion and the State

One of *Asuran*'s greatest strengths is the fact that it does not presuppose the state to be a neutral judge. The police are not represented as law bearers but as a caste force. In arrests, false cases, intimidation and custodial violence, legality is exposed as caste discipline. The concept of dominance without hegemony introduced by Guha also comes in handy here since power exists not simply because it is morally acceptable by the oppressed but rather due to the high cost of resistance due to oppression. The movie offers the idea that when the state intrudes into the rural life, it is not an act of justice but rather a regulated containment and institutional affirmation of the fact that Dalit bodies can be made to suffer without penalty.

Violence or Resistance?

This is what has created controversy in *Asuran* (2019), mostly due to the manner in which it enacts violence. The retaliation carried out by Sivasami could be interpreted in two contradicting forms: The glorification of vengeance as something that is uncomfortable to repeat the cultural stereotypes of the Dalit rage as being overly strong or primitive. Being a historically generated reaction, it arose as an institutional outlet is closed and existence is no longer possible without resistance.

Subalternity, the violence of the film cannot be understood as a reflection of personal temperament rather this is a symptom of politics. Under conditions of alignment of law to caste power, and with habitual humiliation, a kind of resistance tends to take other forms, the morality of which is derided by mainstream measures, but which disregards the circumstances that lead to it. In this respect the film shows that violence is the side effect of systemic injustice, not the other characteristic of the oppressed.

Education as a Transition out of Survival to Transformation

Noticeably, *Asuran* (2019) does not conclude with a glorified triumph of violence as an answer. Rather, it looks towards education as a more lasting way of achieving emancipation. The pressure of Sivasami to have his younger son learn is what puts the conflict in the framework of intergenerationality: it is necessary not merely to survive the present but to demolish the apparatus of reproducing subalternity. This focus aligns very well with the Dalit political philosophy, especially, the Ambedkarite idea of education as a tool to combat reproduction of castes. In this way, the film speculates on agency as transcending rebellion; it is consciousness-building, an effort to cease defensive reactive response and begin planned social mobility and political expression.

Feminine Difference and the Politics of Vision

Although *Asuran* (2019) anticipates the Dalit oppression, it is mostly tied to the destiny of one of the male main characters. The wife of Sivasami and other women in the picture hold a position of survival, sorrow and mute work. Their manoeuvrability and their interiority are comparatively underdeveloped as their affliction is obvious. The critique of Spivak finds its application here because subaltern women tend to have the dual status of marginalization in that they are not only oppressed by their caste/class but are also constituted by a patriarchal discourse of representation. Even a cinematic progressive is capable of reproducing this asymmetry by giving a narrative complexity to the male gender and the female gender is seen as an entity of pain or of moral pressure. *Asuran* points to the oppression of women but he does not engage the agency of women as speaking subjects comprehensively.

Dalit Aesthetics

The matter is important as well as the content of subaltern cinema. The mundane *mise-en-scene*, rough surface, and a lack of glamorization of brutality are all elements of Vetrimaaran realist aesthetics that are in opposition to the sentimental and the spectacular conventions of caste violence that neutralize this kind of violence; the usual elements of mainstream film. The cathartic relief is minimized by the modest tone of the melodramatic in the instrumental passages to make the spectators face violence as a social reality and not as amusement. There is also the political role of language. Dialects and rhythms in speech oppose normal, elite Tamil and assert subaltern cultural particularity. *Asuran* (2019) is not, in this sense, some sort of inclusion of Dalit characters, but a sensory world that makes sense of subaltern experience.

Can the Subaltern Speak?

Spivak does not allow answering her question with yes. *Asuran* (2019) remains a mainstream film object, constructed by business models and commercialized film authorship. However, it carries a big displacement as well: Dalit subjectivity is placed in the center of the narration instead of acting as the background. Sivasami is not a glorified hero; he is a product of the past, failure as well as unrealized ethical decisions. Its subaltern seriousness is reinforced by the film that does not squash him as either innocent or evil. In this way, *Asuran* (2019) is not able to evade mediation, but can argue effectively against silence through obliging caste violence and Dalit insistence into the limelight, a field in which these realities have mostly been raised or made innocent.

Conclusion

Asuran (2019) is an intervention with caste and power in the context of Tamil movies. It provokes hegemonic histories of denying countryside conflict, routine humiliation, and the role of state in violence, showing rural society as fundamentally harmonious, and caste as peripheral.

Although it treads the dangerous path of incarnating retaliatory violence, the film, nonetheless, ends up directing revenge aside to education and political awareness as some of the transformational means.

As a subaltern text of cinema, *Asuran* (2019) fails to mere present suffering, but challenges the forms of fabricating suffering and reveals the coercive relations that perpetuate caste order. Thus, it becomes a part of the ever-growing range of words of Dalit and subaltern aesthetics in Indian cinema today.

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