



Haunted Ecologies: Memory, Displacement, and Subaltern Landscapes in Mari Selvaraj's Cinema

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Abstract— This paper interrogates the spectral entanglements of memory, ecological degradation, and subaltern subjectivity in Mari Selvaraj's cinema, positioning his films as potent interventions in Tamil Nadu's cultural and political landscapes. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism (Nixon's *Slow Violence*, 2011; DeLoughrey & Handley's *Postcolonial Ecologies*, 2011), subaltern studies (Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 1988; Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 1983), and multidirectional memory theory (Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory*, 2009), it explores how Selvaraj constructs "haunted ecologies"—spaces where environmental destruction and caste violence produce geographies of dispossession and amnesia. These resonate with Avery Gordon's notion of haunting as a sociopolitical condition (*Ghostly Matters*, 1997), where repressed histories persist spectrally. Through close analysis of *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Karnan*, and *Vazhai*, the paper shows how Selvaraj's landscapes—rivers, ruins, fields—become living archives of caste atrocity and resistance. His films frame caste as both social and ecological, echoing Anupama Rao's *The Caste Question* (2009) and David Mosse's *The Rule of Water* (2003). Disrupting linear historiography and nationalist imaginaries, Selvaraj's cinema offers a counter-cartography of memory grounded in Dalit epistemologies. By employing nonlinear and cyclical temporalities, his films enact a radical politics of remembrance where reclaiming subaltern landscapes aligns with justice, dignity, and ecological wholeness—contributing to a postcolonial aesthetic imperative to reimagine futures through unresolved past specters.



Keywords— Memory, Ecological degradation, Subaltern subjectivity, Dalit cinema, Postcolonial ecocriticism

I. INTRODUCTION

In the fraught and deeply contested socio-political terrain of contemporary Tamil Nadu, cinema transcends mere artistic expression or popular entertainment to emerge as a critical site for the articulation of collective memory, subaltern resistance, and cultural intervention. The cinematic oeuvre of Mari Selvaraj—exemplified by *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), and *Vazhai* (2024)—engages profoundly with the spectral entanglements of ecological devastation, caste-based violence, and subaltern subjectivity. His films reconceptualize the Tamil landscape not as a passive, inert backdrop but as a palimpsest imbued with layered

historical trauma, mnemonic sedimentation, and embodied socio-political narratives. Here, rivers, fields, and ruins are more than mere physical sites; they emerge as living, breathing archives of systemic oppression, caste atrocity, and enduring modes of resistance. This study interrogates how Selvaraj's work articulates the concept of "haunted ecologies," a complex spatial metaphor that denotes sites where environmental degradation and caste violence coalesce to produce geographies fraught with dispossession, erasure, silencing, and a pervasive sense of historical amnesia that haunts both the land and its peoples.

The theoretical architecture underpinning this inquiry is firmly situated at the intersection of postcolonial ecocriticism, subaltern studies, and critical memory theory, thereby fostering a richly multidimensional analytical framework. Postcolonial ecocriticism, as elaborated by Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), offers a crucial lens to illuminate the deferred, dispersed, and often invisible nature of ecological violence that disproportionately impacts marginalized and dispossessed communities. Nixon's concept of "slow violence" foregrounds a protracted form of environmental harm that unfolds incrementally and remains occluded in dominant environmental narratives, often overshadowed by spectacular, immediate disasters. This slow violence intersects profoundly with caste and class oppression in India, where environmental degradation is not an isolated phenomenon but is embedded within broader structures of inequality and exclusion. Complementing this perspective, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley's *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011) challenge Eurocentric and anthropocentric environmental discourses by foregrounding the colonial and imperial legacies inscribed within contemporary ecological crises. They emphasize the inseparability of environmental degradation from intersecting social hierarchies such as race, caste, gender, and class, underscoring the need for a decolonial ecological ethics attentive to marginalized subjectivities.

Simultaneously, subaltern studies theorists Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (*Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 1988) and Ranajit Guha (*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, 1983) provide indispensable theoretical tools to unravel the mechanisms of marginalization, silencing, and epistemic violence faced by Dalit and other subaltern communities. Their pioneering scholarship unveils the pervasive silencing embedded in hegemonic historiography, which systematically occludes subaltern voices and renders invisible the quotidian violences and subtle forms of resistance that characterize lived subaltern realities. These foundational insights allow for a critical interrogation of the politics of representation and historical erasure within both state-sanctioned narratives and cultural productions.

Building upon these, Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory (*Multidirectional Memory*, 2009) expands the analytic horizon by reconceptualizing memory as a dynamic, interactive, and non-competitive space. Rothberg's framework emphasizes the interconnectedness and cross-pollination of diverse histories of trauma—colonialism, caste oppression, ecological devastation—where memories intersect, overlap, and enter into productive dialogue rather than compete or negate each

other. This multidirectionality challenges monolithic and linear historiographies, offering instead a pluralistic, dialogic conception of collective remembrance that enables solidarity across distinct struggles and geographies of suffering.

Avery Gordon's seminal sociological theorization of haunting in *Ghostly Matters* (1997) proves particularly salient in conceptualizing Selvaraj's notion of "haunted ecologies." Gordon articulates haunting as a persistent sociopolitical condition in which spectral presences embody repressed histories, unacknowledged injustices, and enduring structural violences that reverberate beyond their immediate temporal and spatial contexts. Haunting is neither purely metaphorical nor abstract but materializes concretely within lived environments as traces, absences, spectral disruptions, and affective residues that unsettle dominant epistemologies and official histories. This understanding of haunting as a form of social and environmental trauma provides a powerful theoretical lens for examining how Selvaraj's cinematic landscapes manifest spectrality as both aesthetic and political intervention.

The emphasis on landscapes as active mnemonic agents finds consonance with critical interventions by Anupama Rao in *The Caste Question* (2009), which interrogates caste as a deeply entrenched socio-ecological formation inseparable from land, labor, and ecological relations. Similarly, David Mosse's *The Rule of Water* (2003) intricately examines the intersection of caste, ecology, and statecraft within South Indian agrarian contexts, elucidating how water politics and environmental management are inextricably bound to caste hierarchies and social power structures. Selvaraj's films enter into dialogue with such scholarship by refusing sanitized, teleological, and linear historiographies or nationalist imaginaries that often mask caste violence and ecological exploitation. Instead, they generate a counter-cartography of memory—an insurgent spatial narrative—that centers Dalit epistemologies, embodied histories, and demands for spatial justice.

Moreover, Selvaraj's deliberate deployment of nonlinear, cyclical, and mythic temporalities resonates with indigenous ontologies, subaltern cosmologies, and alternative conceptions of time that destabilize dominant Western teleological and progressivist narratives of history. These narrative strategies facilitate a radical politics of remembrance, where the reclamation and reinhabitation of subaltern landscapes become inseparable from the pursuit of justice, dignity, and ecological wholeness. His films enact an urgent postcolonial aesthetic intervention—one that exposes the unresolved specters

haunting both the land and its inhabitants, while imaginatively reconfiguring futures shaped by ethical remembrance, mnemonic resistance, and decolonial hope. Through this cinematic praxis, Selvaraj opens crucial pathways for reckoning with the past's enduring legacies and envisioning transformative futures anchored in ecological justice and subaltern dignity.

In sum, this research focuses on cinematic interventions of Mari Selvaraj reveal memory in postcolonial Tamil Nadu as a profoundly contested and dynamic terrain, shaped by entrenched power asymmetries, caste hierarchies, and ecological violences. His films illuminate the complex interplay between multidirectional memory and spectral haunting, foregrounding how histories of caste oppression and environmental degradation intersect, resist erasure, and are continually negotiated through subaltern epistemologies. By unsettling dominant nationalist historiographies and linear temporalities, Selvaraj's work embodies the contradictions, silences, and ruptures inherent in collective remembrance within postcolonial and post conflict contexts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mari Selvaraj's oeuvre occupies a critical nexus at the intersection of postcolonial ecocriticism, subaltern studies, and memory theory, articulating a profound interrogation of the spectral entanglements of memory, ecological degradation, and subaltern subjectivity within the fraught socio-political topography of contemporary Tamil Nadu. His cinematic corpus—exemplified by *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), and the *Vazhai* (2024)—emerges as an incisive cultural praxis that subverts hegemonic narratives through a complex, multi-layered aesthetic that reconfigures space, time, and historical consciousness.

Rob Nixon's seminal concept of *slow violence* (2011), delineated in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, foregrounds the protracted, often imperceptible devastation wrought upon marginalized ecologies and communities, underscoring the asymmetries of environmental harm as an insidious form of structural violence. In consonance, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley's *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011) extends this critique by illuminating the entanglements of colonial legacies, environmental degradation, and cultural memory. Selvaraj's cinematic landscapes become embodiments of Nixon's slow violence, dramatizing ecological degradation not as an abstract backdrop but as an active agent in the spectral geographies of caste oppression. The "haunted ecologies" he constructs are emblematic of spaces where the corporeal and the spectral coalesce, rendering visible the latent violences inscribed upon rivers, ruins, and

fields—landscapes that palpably archive histories of dispossession and environmental desecration.

The theoretical scaffolding of subaltern studies—anchored in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's provocative inquiry in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) and Ranajit Guha's incisive *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* (1983)—informs Selvaraj's interrogation of caste subjugation. His films articulate the often effaced voices and experiences of Dalit communities, dramatizing their struggle against systemic violence and epistemic marginalization. This cinematic reclamation resonates deeply with Anupama Rao's *The Caste Question* (2009), which provocatively situates caste as an ecological as well as a socio-political matrix, and David Mosse's ethnographic work *The Rule of Water* (2003), which elucidates caste's permeation into control over natural resources and spatial hierarchies. Selvaraj's portrayal of rivers, fields, and wastelands as sites of caste-inflected violence and resilience advances a nuanced ecological dimension to caste critique, challenging reductive dichotomies between nature and society.

Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* (2009) destabilizes monolithic historiographies by advocating for a polyvalent, dialogic memory framework where traumas intersect, inform, and resist hierarchical historicism. Selvaraj's cinematic narrative strategies resonate with Rothberg's vision through their employment of nonlinear and cyclical temporalities, facilitating a radical politics of remembrance that refuses closure and linear historicity. Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* (1997) further enriches this paradigm by conceptualizing haunting as a sociopolitical phenomenon in which suppressed histories endure spectrally, compelling recognition and redress. The "haunted ecologies" in Selvaraj's films perform this spectral labor—manifesting as geographies haunted by caste atrocities that persist across temporal fissures. For instance, *Pariyerum Perumal*'s river landscapes and *Karnan*'s and *vazhai*'s rural terrains serve as palimpsests where collective trauma, memory, and resistance are inscribed and reactivated, thereby producing cinematic counter-archives that contest dominant nationalist and caste hegemonies.

Selvaraj's films instantiate a counter-cartographic practice, mapping subaltern geographies through the prism of Dalit epistemologies that articulate a politics of spatial and temporal reclamation. By disrupting nationalist imaginaries and linear historiographies, his cinema enacts a recuperative aesthetic that aligns ecological wholeness with social justice and dignified subjecthood. These cinematic landscapes transcend mere representational functions, becoming sites of epistemic insurgency where

memory, ecology, and caste resistance converge to reimagine futures—anchored in unresolved specters of the past. This approach contributes to a burgeoning postcolonial aesthetic imperative that insists on the coexistence of past violences and future possibilities, demanding an ethical and political engagement with the spectral residues that haunt the present.

Taken together, these theoretical and cultural texts reveal memory not as a static archive of the past but as an active, contested, and often antagonistic process—one deeply implicated in questions of power, identity, and justice. In postcolonial and post-conflict settings, memory emerges as both a medium of historical reckoning and a terrain of struggle, where competing narratives vie to shape the future through the lens of the past.

In conclusion, memory in postcolonial and post-conflict contexts is deeply contested, shaped by power imbalances and the struggle for recognition. The interaction between multidirectional memory and memory antagonism highlights the complexities of collective remembrance, where historical traumas are negotiated, resisted, and transformed. Through the lens of literature and film, these tensions are vividly portrayed, offering a nuanced understanding of the emotional, ethical, and political dimensions of memory work. This body of scholarship underscores the need to expand memory studies beyond the boundaries of traditional nation-building frameworks, embracing the fractured and often contradictory nature of remembering in a postcolonial, post-imperial world.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that synthesizes critical theoretical exposition with close textual and visual analysis of Mari Selvaraj's films—*Pariyerum Perumal*, *Karnan*, and *Vazhai*—to unpack the spectral entanglements of memory, ecological degradation, and subaltern subjectivity. Rooted in the converging fields of postcolonial ecocriticism, subaltern studies, and memory theory, the research framework foregrounds the theoretical insights of key thinkers such as Rob Nixon, Gayatri Spivak, Michael Rothberg, and Avery Gordon. Their works provide conceptual tools to interrogate how Selvaraj's cinema articulates “haunted ecologies” where caste violence and environmental destruction intertwine to produce sites of dispossession and spectral memory.

The study begins with a comprehensive review of existing literature across memory studies, postcolonial theory, and ecological criticism to establish a robust conceptual framework. This includes engaging with multidirectional memory theory to explore how Selvaraj's films employ

nonlinear and cyclical temporalities that disrupt dominant linear historiographies and nationalist imaginaries. Building on Avery Gordon's notion of haunting as a sociopolitical condition, the research investigates the persistence of repressed histories and their cinematic manifestation as spectral geographies of caste atrocity.

Primary data collection centers on close reading and visual analysis of Selvaraj's cinematic texts, scrutinizing how landscapes—rivers, fields, ruins—function as living archives and counter-cartographies of caste violence and resistance. These analyses focus on the films' formal strategies, narrative structures, and symbolic motifs to unravel how ecological and social violences are intertwined and represented. The study also considers Dalit epistemologies, drawing on Anupama Rao and David Mosse's work, to frame caste as both an ecological and social phenomenon.

A comparative lens is applied to assess how Selvaraj's intervention resonates within broader postcolonial and subaltern artistic practices, especially in relation to the politics of memory, justice, and ecological wholeness. Additionally, discourse analysis is employed to examine the language and visual rhetoric of both dominant and counter-narratives within the films, revealing how power relations and systemic marginalization are articulated and contested.

By integrating these methodological tools, this study seeks to illuminate the multifaceted dynamics of memory, power, and ecological subjectivity in Selvaraj's cinema. It contributes to contemporary scholarship by offering new insights into how postcolonial aesthetic interventions can enact radical politics of remembrance that challenge historical amnesia, reclaim subaltern spaces, and envision transformative futures grounded in justice and dignity.

IV. ANALYSIS

This research paper undertakes a rigorous and incisive critique of Mari Selvaraj's cinematic oeuvre—*Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), and *Vazhai* (2024)—situating these films within the intricate socio-political and ecological matrix of contemporary Tamil Nadu. Selvaraj's cinema transcends the realm of mere artistic expression or popular entertainment to emerge as a formidable cultural intervention that destabilizes entrenched architectures of caste subjugation, ecological devastation, and contested collective memory. His cinematic praxis embodies a trenchant counter-narrative, one that amplifies marginalized subjectivities while compelling a critical reimagining of historical injustices and environmental ethics.

At the heart of this investigation is the conceptual innovation of “haunted ecologies,” a spatial and metaphorical paradigm that radically reconceptualizes landscape in Selvaraj’s films. Drawing on Avery Gordon’s theory of haunting, these ecological spaces—rivers, fields, ruins—transcend their conventional cinematic function as mere settings, instead serving as palimpsests saturated with historical trauma, systemic violence, and mnemonic sedimentation. The spectral imprints of caste atrocities and ecological degradation linger within these terrains, rendering them active, co-constitutive agents in the dialectics of oppression and resistance. Such a framework disrupts reductive binaries between nature and society, foregrounding the environment as inseparable from caste violence and subaltern histories, thereby cultivating a holistic socio-ecological understanding that aligns with contemporary postcolonial and ecological critiques.

The study’s theoretical scaffolding is notably interdisciplinary, weaving together the profound insights of postcolonial ecocriticism, subaltern studies, and critical memory theory to forge a multifaceted analytical lens. Rob Nixon’s exposition of “slow violence” illuminates how environmental harm operates gradually, invisibly, and cumulatively—often disproportionately impacting marginalized Dalit communities who inhabit ecologically fragile landscapes. Nixon’s articulation of slow violence as an insidious, protracted form of harm reveals how ecological degradation is not merely collateral damage but deeply entangled with colonial legacies and caste hierarchies. This perspective is complemented by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley’s decolonial ecocritical interventions, which critique dominant environmental discourses for their erasure of subaltern ecological knowledge and histories, underscoring the inseparability of environmental and caste justice in Tamil Nadu’s socio-political terrain.

Simultaneously, the intellectual lineage of subaltern studies provides indispensable tools for decoding the mechanisms of epistemic silencing and resistance inscribed within Selvaraj’s narratives. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s seminal interrogation of whether *the subaltern can speak* foregrounds the structural exclusion of Dalit voices from hegemonic historiographies and cultural representations, compelling the films to create discursive and affective spaces wherein subaltern subjectivities are voiced and visibilized. Ranajit Guha’s historicization of peasant insurgencies further situates Selvaraj’s cinematic depictions within long trajectories of caste-based resistance, emphasizing the films’ engagement with embodied political struggle against systemic violence.

Critical memory theory, particularly Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory, enriches this analysis by revealing how Selvaraj’s films orchestrate a dynamic interplay of overlapping and intersecting memories. Rothberg’s framework rejects zero-sum memory politics in favor of dialogic mnemonic exchanges that foster solidarities across distinct modalities of trauma—colonial, caste, and ecological. This Multidirectionality destabilizes linear, nationalist historiographies and reclaims subaltern pasts, enabling a collective reckoning that traverses temporal and spatial boundaries. Complementing this, Avery Gordon’s notion of haunting evokes memory as a spectral presence that transcends temporal linearity, enabling a confrontation with persistent social wounds that resist closure or forgetting.

Selvaraj’s cinematic language is marked by deliberate formal strategies—nonlinear temporality, mythopoeic symbolism, and counter-cartographic spatialities—that collectively subvert hegemonic nationalist and teleological historical narratives. These devices generate a polyphonic space in which subaltern epistemologies resurface, historical amnesia is contested, and counter-memories emerge. His films perform what can be termed “mnemonic resistance,” recuperating the embodied experiences and historical violences of Dalit communities, inscribing them into the cultural archive in ways that defy erasure and marginalization. Drawing on the scholarship of Anupama Rao and David Mosse, the analysis foregrounds caste as both an ecological and socio-political matrix, emphasizing how Selvaraj’s counter-histories illuminate the inextricable intertwining of environmental degradation and caste oppression—thus underscoring the necessity of an integrative approach to social and ecological justice.

In summation, this research contends that Mari Selvaraj’s cinematic corpus embodies a radical postcolonial aesthetic praxis that exposes the enduring legacies of caste violence and environmental exploitation, while simultaneously envisioning emancipatory futures premised on ecological justice, spatial dignity, and ethical remembrance. Through the interlocking theoretical prisms of haunting, slow violence, subalternity, and multidirectional memory, Selvaraj’s films transcend conventional narrative forms to become transformative acts of historical reckoning and political intervention. They demand socio-ecological emancipation and reparative solidarity, positioning cinema not merely as cultural production but as a vital modality of resistance and collective healing.

V. CONCLUSION

Mari Selvaraj’s films—*Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), and *Vazhai* (2024)—offer a significant

intervention into the intertwined issues of caste, ecology, and collective memory in contemporary Tamil Nadu. Moving beyond mere artistic expression, his cinema confronts entrenched caste oppression and ecological degradation by reimagining landscapes as “haunted ecologies,” where histories of violence and trauma persist and resist erasure. This approach challenges traditional separations between nature and society, highlighting the inseparability of environmental harm and social injustice experienced by marginalized Dalit communities.

Using an interdisciplinary framework that integrates postcolonial ecocriticism, subaltern studies, and critical memory theory, this research has shown how Selvaraj's films engage with concepts like slow violence, epistemic silencing, and multidirectional memory. His narratives reveal how ecological damage is deeply linked with caste hierarchies and colonial legacies, while providing space for subaltern voices often excluded from dominant histories. Formal cinematic techniques such as nonlinear temporality and mythopoetic symbolism enable a powerful mnemonic resistance, recovering embodied experiences of caste and environmental violence within a shared cultural archive.

Ultimately, Selvaraj's cinema transcends storytelling to become a site of radical postcolonial praxis, imagining futures grounded in ecological justice, spatial dignity, and ethical remembrance. By advocating reparative solidarity and collective healing, his films highlight cinema's role as a tool of socio-ecological resistance and transformation. This study underscores the necessity of addressing caste and environmental oppression as interlinked struggles and calls for continued scholarly attention to the intersections of film, memory, activism, and justice in postcolonial contexts.

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