'Karnan': The Social Commentary for Change

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Abstract— Gender and caste are two prominent social phenomena that significantly impact people's lives, opportunities, and social hierarchies in India. The Tamil film industry of late, has focused towards showcasing the strife between subaltern and dominant caste groups in the state of Tamil Nadu. Director Mari Selvaraj's sophomore venture, 'Karnan' has got a raging review from different corners of the world for its portrayal of the casteism driven violence in a region in southern Tamil Nadu. It is said the story is based on a real-time atrocity done to the Dalits not by an upper caste but by an economically settled backward community in the year 1995. This article aims to analyses the cinematic representation of the complex relationship between gender and caste and the multifaceted nature of the intersectionality of both as a potential form of privilege and disadvantage for the individuals involved. As a true analysis, it would inform policymakers, activists, and academics about the specific challenges faced by individuals at the intersections of gender and caste, that more inclusive and targeted interventions fostering social cohesion and equality may emerge within India or at the least in Tamil Nadu.
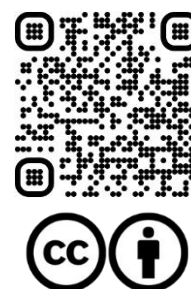
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I. INTRODUCTION

The film industry contributes greatly to the economy of a nation by providing employment opportunities, and more particularly through box office revenue. Its glamorous reputation apart, the industry maintains organized production and promotion systems to ensure success. As a medium for entertainment and communication, cinema holds immense influence in bridging gaps among diverse global audiences.

In India, Tamil cinema - commonly referred to as Kollywood - based out of Chennai plays a significant role in reflecting the realities of socio-political and cultural domains of Tamil Nadu. Not only does it serve as a channel for entertainment, but as a tool also for propagating various elements of society. Recently, there has been an apparent shift in approach within the Tamil film industry towards showcasing the narratives of subalterns over thatof dominant-intermediate caste groups in the state. Over the past two decades, directors like Pa.Ranjith have led the way with their progressive-political narratives while adopting Ambedkar and Periyar ideologies to pave new opportunities for Dalit-centric Tamil cinema. Similarly, director Mari Selvaraj's films Pariyerum Perumal (2018) and Karnan (2021) with their meticulous approach to subaltern narratives exemplify the casteist realities of Southern Tamil Nadu's towns like Thoothukudi and Tirunelveli which are yet to come out of the rural and feudal concepts of living.

II. INTERSECTIONALITY OF GENDER AND CASTE

Karnan is a thought-provoking film that brings the voice of subalterns in Tamil society. Director Mari Selvaraj's sophomore effort after his debut film Pariyerum Perumal (2018) is just as captivating. The film focuses on the Pallar community, also known as Devendrakula Vellalars, who are discriminated against by influential intermediate castes. Through various cinematic elements, Karnan aptly depicts the anthropological affiliation of this marginalized Dalit community in the locality. It is quite hypocritical how the southern regions of Tamil Nadu, particularly Madurai and Tirunelveli, have glorified the dominant-intermediate caste groups such as Thevar and romanticized their supposed heroism. However, a new wave of Dalit-centric films has barged in to the industry to highlight the socio-political elements that intersect the lives of ordinary men and women and their clan histories. While previous Madurai-centric films portrayed intermediate castes as dominating and

superior to oppressed ones Karnan takes a unique approach. This film brings untold stories of oppressed castes to light and finally exposes the negative sides of casteism that still exist in this region. It is time we started acknowledging the truth instead of hiding behind the false narratives portrayed in the yester yearfilms.

The film is an "epic" that takes us back to 1997 to narrate the tale of Karnan, a supposed hero who stood up against oppression. It tries to show how even the most subtle forms of oppression can exist and highlights how bureaucrats often support those who oppress others. The story revolves around 'Podiyankulam', where oppressed villagers are denied basic transportation by powerful individuals from neighboring Melur. This keeps them at the mercy of their oppressors. Things come to a Head-start when Karnan, a confident youth from Podiyankulam, takes matters into his own hands. As tensions rise and a bus isburnt, egoistic officer Kannapiran (Natty) and his police team respond with equal force. Karnan then starts a movement to fight against the oppression and demands justice for his people. He challenges the power of the oppressors and becomes their worst nightmare. The film shows how the oppressed can come together and fight against their oppressors, even if it takes sacrificing their lives.

By highlighting the struggles faced by women in a strongly patriarchal society, "Karnan" questions conventional gender roles and expectations. The film presents a dichotomy between the traditional image of the docile, submissive woman and the empowered, independent woman who defies societal norms. Characters like Draupathi and Kombodhi are portrayed as strong and resilient individuals who actively challenge oppressive structures, asserting their agency and challenging gendered expectations.

The character of Karnan, a young Dalit man, faces not only caste-based oppression but also gendered violence and discrimination.His struggle exemplifies the structural obstacles Dalit women encounter as they navigate through a society that pushes them to the margin.The brutal violence committed against women is depicted in the movie without reservation.The situation of the many women who are victimized by oppressive forces is depicted in Draupathi's character. Her personality emphasizes the pervasiveness of violence against women and the abusive cycles that patriarchal power structures support.The female characters are not passive victims in the movie; they actively resist and challenge their oppressors.Draupathi's solid strength in seeking justice for her people and Kombodhi's revolt against the oppressive system demonstrate the power of revolt and resilience. These characters represent the determined spirit of women who refuse to be silenced, despite the numerous obstacles they face.The movie breaks

stereotypes associated with women by showcasing their multifaceted nature.

Director Mari Selvaraj carefully sets up the milieu and introduces a cast of characters in the first half of his filmKarnan. It is a Tamil movie set in a fictional village named Podiyankulam, which is plagued by deep-rooted caste discrimination and social injustice. The story revolves around Karnan, a fearless and compassionate young man from a marginalized Dalit community, who becomes the symbol of resistance against oppression. The movie begins by introducing the stark contrast between the lives of the dominant upper-caste community and the marginalized Dalit community in Podiyankulam. The upper-caste villagers enjoy privilege and power, while the Dalits face discrimination, limited opportunities, and constant humiliation.

Karnan, played by the talented actor Dhanush, is introduced as a rebellious and spirited individual who refuses to accept the status quo. He is known for his courage and compassionate nature, often standing up against injustice, irrespective of the consequences. Karnan's mother, played by Lalitha, instills in him the values of bravery and resilience, urging him to fight for the rights of their community. One fateful day, Karnan witnesses an incident where an upper-caste man humiliates a young Dalit girl, Draupathi, portrayed by Rajisha Vijayan. Filled with rage, Karnan intervenes and protects Draupathi, earning her gratitude and respect. Draupathi, inspired by Karnan's fearlessness, becomes an integral part of his journey and an emblem of resistance herself. As Karnan and Draupathi grow closer, they realize the need to unite their community and challenge the oppressive system. Karnan rallies the marginalized villagers, encouraging them to fight for their dignity and rights. With the support of his loyal friends, including Kombodhi (played by Yogi Babu), Karnan leads a movement against the upper-caste villagers, demanding justice and equality.

However, their fight for justice is met with fierce opposition from the powerful upper-caste leaders who refuse to relinquish their control and privilege. The movie depicts several intense confrontations between Karnan and the antagonistic upper-caste figures, showcasing the immense struggle faced by the marginalized community in their battle for liberation. The narrative also explores the personal journeys of various characters affected by the deeply ingrained caste discrimination. It highlights the individual stories of oppression, resilience, and determination, portraying the multifaceted nature of the fight for justice.

As the resistance gains momentum, the upper-caste leaders' resort to violence and repression to crush Karnan and his supporters. The movie showcases harrowing scenes of

brutality and the sacrifices made by the marginalized community in their pursuit of freedom. Ultimately, Karnan's unwavering spirit and the collective strength of the marginalized villagers start to dismantle the oppressive structures that have plagued their lives for generations. The movie culminates in a powerful climax, where Karnan's resilience and the community's unity bring about a significant transformation in Podiyankulam. In the end, Karnan's struggle for justice and equality serves as a reminder of the resilience of the marginalized and their unyielding spirit in the face of adversity. The movie leaves the audience with a sense of hope, inspiring them to reflect on the deeply ingrained social inequities and the urgent need for societal change.

With its powerful storytelling, impactful performances, and thought-provoking narrative, Karnan stands as a cinematic masterpiece that sheds light on the intersectionality of gender, caste, class, and oppression. Unlike other Dalit-centric films, Karnan portrays the anti-hegemonic actions of Pallar families in Podhyankulam as Dalit retaliation against caste Hindus. The film depicts various oppression, repression, humiliation and hegemonic activities unleashed by the dominant middle caste in the fictional village of Merur near Podhyankulam, It serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing battle for social justice and equality, urging viewers to confront their own biases and actively participate in dismantling oppressive systems in society. One of the most striking aspects of the film is its use of music. Santhosh Narayanan's score is hauntingly beautiful and adds emotional depth to the story. The songs are also meaningful; perfectly capture the spirit of the film. What makes Mari Selvaraj's world even more immersive is how he incorporates animals, birds, insects - each seamlessly woven into the fabric of his story. From eagle chicks being stolen to stray dogs running around in the background, from cats scavenging for food to elephants joining in celebrations - these throwaway shots bring authenticity to the world-building that Mari Selvaraj achieves.

Karnan, the protagonist is portrayed as confident and ready to take revenge on the superiority and authority that has been imposed on his hometown. The way the film portrays caste icons and leaders of different castes is very unusual. The song "Kanda Vara sollunga" opens the film with a scene of a royal figure on a horse, two legs raised in the air and a sword in hand against a full moon. This picture shows Veeran Sundaralingam, a historical person who was a Poligar general and a leader of the Pallar community (Devendrakula Vellalars) during Veerapandiya Kattabomman's days. He was born on Chitra Pournami, the full moon day in the month of April. Similarly, a headless portrait of a man dressed in military uniform is carved on the village wall, where the head of his grandfather Yeman

is later carved in his honour. The show bears a close resemblance to the hostile status of the Saint Immanuel Sekaran, a devout pioneer and the caste icon among Pallars.

The producer of the film has used activities, such as Karnan's grandfather Jeeman breeding dark pigs to showcase the custom (culture) of pig breeding among the Pallar community. Posters of Seevalaper Pandi (1994) depicting the caste pride of the dominant middle caste groups in Tamil Nadu and Bharathi Kannamma (1997) depicting an impossible love between a middle-caste woman and a lower caste man underscore the director's focus on the oppressive caste system in existence. Inter-caste marriage, can also be interpreted to subtly represent the discussion of caste groups such as Thevars and Pallars in the story of the film. Although the posters are made visible to depict the same, hero worship, fandom and caste of pallars or devendrakula Vellalars are depicted in the posters and pictures of Prasanth displayed on walls, lamp-posts, almirahs and T-shirts in the film. Being a member of this particular community, Prasanth is considered a film icon and a well-known Pallar public figure.

The movie draws its stimulus from the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata, specifically the character of Karna. It is a fictional narrative set in a contemporary context.The film uses the character of Karnan as a symbol of resistance against subjugation and as a reflection of the struggles faced by marginalized communities. While the movie is not directly based on a historical event, it is deeply rooted in the social and political realities of India, where caste-based discrimination continues to be a significant issue. The movie serves as a powerful observation on the systemic oppression faced by Dalit communities and highlights the ongoing fight for equality and justice. The movie "Karnan" has symbolic character names that reflect the social dynamics and hierarchy within the story. Karnan by name is an archetype of oppressed individuals down the annals of history. However, the characterization has its own merit as the modern Karnan saves Draupati from being molested while the ancient Karnan backs his friend Duriyodhan.

The movie illustrates a societal structure of discrimination and oppression that has been ingrained over time and appears resistant to change, passed down from one generation to the next. Despite some resistance and efforts to subvert it, the movie implies that the oppressive structure endures and impacts the existence of marginalized groups. The film showcases the hardships encountered by the protagonist, Karnan, and his society as they battle the inequitable societal hierarchy. "Karnan" is a story that elucidates the persistence of societal levels and the battle for fairness in a system that appears to be unchangeable and long-lasting. Overall, the idea of the system being perennial and everlasting in "Karnan" signifies the ongoing battle

against social injustice and serves as a call for societal transformation.

The most grounded side of this film is the subject and the plot. It is woven in such a way by the screenwriter that the audience cannot look away from the screen. Individuals interface with each other. The entertainers in this film have acted enthusiastic. The Dalit consciousness that Periyar had established and reflected in Kabaali, Kala, and Asuran is being carried on in the succeeding Tamil films. The present film has embodied the anthropological reality of the Pallars and their social, political and cultural dimension. Furthermore, the film is assertive and contrasts with "Madurai genre films" which repeatedly present the middle castes as hegemonic, representing the sub-identity of the Pallars.

"Karnan" emotionally engaging and instigates a deep connection with the characters and their struggles. The actors' authentic and emotional performances are also noteworthy, especially Dhanush's portrayal of Karnan. His skillful depiction of the character's determination, fury, and vulnerability earned him critical acclaim. Furthermore, the supporting cast, including Rajisha Vijayan, Lal, and Yogi Babu, also add depth to their roles, further elevating the overall impact of the film.The visual aesthetics and cinematography of the film are praised for their raw and gritty appeal. The screenplay and dialogues are lauded for their impact and emotional depth. It sheds light on the struggles faced by marginalized communities and the need for societal change. The film is commended for its ability to evoke strong emotions and create a lasting impact.

III.   CONCLUSION

Karnan presents the reality of the caste spectrum between Hindus and Dalits and their long-standing caste oppression and violence. In addition, the film also reflects a collective anti-caste resistance that tries to find space for education, freedom and equality in an uncivilizedcasteist society. Overall, Karnan is a captivating and thought-provoking film that packs a punch. It is a reminder of the importance of fighting against oppression, no matter how challenging it may be. The film is a must-watch for anyone who appreciates quality cinema. It is a powerful portrayal of the struggles faced by marginalized communities and the importance of standing up for what is right. With exceptional performances, stunning visuals, and a memorable soundtrack, Karnan is a film that deserves all the accolades it has received. It is a shining example of how cinema can be used as a tool for social commentary and change.

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