IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Truth In Fiction: Unveiling Social Injustice

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ABSTRACT

Paavai Kathakal, when interpreted through the lens of subaltern theory, reveals the unheard and unseen narratives of women, marginalized castes, and religious minorities in Indian society. This paper aims to explore the intersectionality of caste, religion, and gender within the cinematic framework of Paavai Kathakal. Situating it within the broader socio-political context of India over the last two decades. The narrative structure, characterization, and visual symbolism, the film is analyzed as a voice for the voiceless, representing women from Dalit, Adivasi, and minority communities who navigate layers of oppression. The paper further evaluates the gendered portrayal of morality and victimhood, exposing how women's bodies often become sites of caste and communal violence. Through a subaltern lens, Paavai Kathakal not only critiques hegemonic narratives but also reconstructs alternative histories that challenge dominant cultural ideologies. Society, as reflected in the film, often disguises systemic oppression as cultural values or moral duty. From a subaltern perspective, the anthology becomes a space of resistance — not just storytelling but truth-telling — offering alternative histories where the marginalized attempt to reclaim their narrative. Drawing on Spivak's critical question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", this paper argues that *Paava Kadhaigal* answers through cinema: the subaltern speaks, bleeds, resists — and demands to be heard.We aim to prove how social injustice rooted in caste and societal norms oppresses marginalized voices, limiting freedom, love, and identity.

Introduction

Cinema has long been seen as a mirror and a social constructor, influencing ideas of identity, power, and belonging while also reflecting cultural reality. Caste, class, religion, and gender issues have always been present in Indian cinema in particular, whether overtly or covertly incorporated into storylines. In this light, the movie *Paavai Kathakal* becomes a powerful cultural document that provides a rich environment for critical investigation into the real-life realities of the marginalised and subaltern. The film acts as a discourse that addresses societal hierarchies, patriarchal conventions, and the deeply ingrained caste and religious identity structures in South India, rather than just being an entertaining film. The subaltern studies framework, which was developed by academics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha, highlights the significance of reclaiming voices that have been historically marginalised or eliminated within prevailing narratives. Applying this interpretation to Paavai Kathakal entails uncovering the nuanced ways that repressed subjectivities and marginalised caste identities are given—or denied—space in cinematic representation. By evoking the word "kathakal" (tales), the title itself alludes to narrative plurality and implies that the stories of oppressed

people and women are essential to its telling. However, it is impossible to separate how these stories are portrayed from the patriarchal and caste systems that define the lives of its characters. In the Indian sociocultural environment, caste, religion, and gender rarely operate as distinct categories; instead, they interact to create particular kinds of oppression and resistance. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw's conceptualisation, intersectionality offers a key tool for examining the ways in which power structures overlap and produce particular kinds of marginalisation for people who are at a crossroads. In Paavai Kathakal, the intersections of caste-based hierarchies, religious identity, and patriarchal control are not abstract concerns but deeply embodied realities that shape the trajectories of the characters. For instance, women from marginalised castes face stigma and exclusion based on caste and religious conservatism, in addition to the violence of gendered oppression. These complex experiences are emphasised by the film's storytelling techniques, which include the use of symbolism, silences, and traditional traditions. The testimonies of the women in Paavai Kathakal are collective expressions of systematic brutality and resiliency rather than merely personal accounts. They shed light on how patriarchy and caste work together to restrict social mobility, control desire, and police women's autonomy. The movie also reveals how marginalised characters negotiate, resist, and rethink their roles within repressive systems, opening up areas of agency in the process. This study attempts to shed light on how cinema becomes a platform for expressing the suppressed histories of the oppressed by analysing Paavai Kathakal from the prisms of intersectionality and subaltern studies. It examines how gender, caste, and religion are etched onto narratives and bodies, and how these inscriptions influence resistance and oppression. In the end, this analysis places the movie in the context of larger discussions concerning voice, representation, and power in Indian cultural discourse, emphasising the necessity of critically examining cinema as a medium for both promoting and subverting prevailing beliefs.

Analysis

The Tamil anthology film *Paava Kadhaigal* (2020) presents four narratives centered on the concept of honour and the devastating violence it produces. Directed by Sudha Kongara, Vignesh Shivan, Gautham Vasudev Menon, and Vetrimaaran, the anthology interrogates caste, patriarchy, and gender regulation within Indian society. Far from being isolated tales of personal tragedy, these stories dramatize the structural mechanisms that silence women, minorities, and queer individuals. When read through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theorization of the subaltern, Judith Butler's ideas on gender performativity and precarity, Uma Chakravarti's feminist analysis of caste, and B. R. Ambedkar's critique of endogamy, *Paava Kadhaigal* emerges as a cinematic text that reveals how subaltern voices are systematically erased in the name of caste honour.

Spivak's question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—provides a starting point for understanding the position of women and minorities in these films. For Spivak, the subaltern is not simply the oppressed, but those whose voices are not recognized within dominant discourse. She writes: "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears" (102). This disappearance is vividly dramatized in the anthology, where women who attempt to choose love, trans persons who assert identity, and children who suffer violence are all silenced, their lives overwritten by the demands of caste and patriarchy.

Judith Butler's work on gender further illuminates the stories. Butler insists that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame" (43). In *Paava Kadhaigal*, women are expected to perform chastity, obedience, and silence, while men perform authority and control. Those who deviate—whether by loving across caste, expressing queer desire, or failing to embody the "pure" body demanded by honour—are punished. Butler's later work on precarious lives also becomes relevant: "There are lives that will not be recognized as lives; there are lives that are already lost and forgotten, that will never be grieved" (38). The anthology's victims are precisely such ungrievable lives, whose deaths are normalized by society's obsession with honour.

The first film, Sudha Kongara's *Thangam*, portrays Sathar, a Muslim transwoman whose existence unsettles heteronormative and caste-based social order. Sathar's love for her childhood friend Saravanan is tender yet tragic, as Saravanan is in love with Sathar's sister. A key scene shows Sathar

walking through her village applying lipstick, met with laughter and ridicule. This moment embodies Butler's claim that gender is not innate but performed, and that deviation from normative performance invites punishment. Sathar insists on living as a woman, yet her community refuses to recognize her identity, casting her instead as a source of shame. Spivak's argument that "the subaltern cannot speak" resonates here: Sathar articulates her desires, but her voice is not heard; she is spoken for as an embarrassment, a problem to be erased. Her eventual death—brutally beaten and abandoned—is treated without public mourning, dramatizing Butler's idea of ungrievability. Sathar is marginalized not only by gender but also by religion, showing how caste, gender, and minority status intersect to produce a doubly silenced subaltern.

The second narrative, Vignesh Shivan's *Love Panna Uttranum*, examines caste honour and the silencing of women's choices. The story follows twin sisters, Aadhilakshmi and Jothilakshmi, daughters of a powerful politician. In public, their father preaches equality and justice, but in private, he enforces caste endogamy with violence. When one daughter falls in love with a lower-caste man, she is murdered to protect family honour. In one striking dialogue, the father declares: *"Naama caste-eh kettu ponaal, enna save pannaalum kidaikkadhu"* ("If our caste dignity is lost, nothing can save us"). His words illustrate Uma Chakravarti's thesis that "the control of women's sexuality is central to the maintenance of caste" (579). The daughter's voice is extinguished; her love is never recognized as legitimate. Spivak notes that the subaltern woman "is even more deeply in shadow" (102), and this daughter exemplifies that erasure. Her desire is erased by her father's authority, her body sacrificed to preserve the symbolic purity of caste. The film also critiques the hypocrisy of political rhetoric: public claims of equality collapse under the private demands of endogamy, proving Ambedkar's warning that caste survives precisely because of its regulation of marriage , (17).

The third film, Gautham Menon's *Vaanmagal*, moves away from inter-caste relationships to explore sexual violence and the silence of shame. A middle-class family is shattered when their young daughter is sexually assaulted. Instead of seeking justice, the parents are consumed with fear of dishonour. In one poignant moment, the father laments, *"Yen veetuku ippadi aachu?"* ("Why has this happened to our family?"), framing the assault as a stigma upon the household rather than an injustice against the child. The girl herself remains silent, her trauma narrated through her parents' anxiety. Spivak's question again surfaces: "Can the subaltern speak?" The child cannot; her voice is subsumed under the family's concern for reputation. Butler's notion of precarious lives helps explain her erasure: her individuality is denied, her suffering unacknowledged, as if her violated body makes her unworthy of recognition. This story critiques not only the perpetrators of violence but also the family's complicity in silencing the victim, exposing how patriarchal society treats survivors as bearers of shame rather than subjects of justice.

The anthology culminates in Vetrimaaran's *Oor Iravu*, the most devastating of the four. Sumathi, a young woman who marries a Dalit man against her family's wishes, returns home pregnant after her father's reconciliation. The domestic setting, with its muted colours and claustrophobic interiors, lulls the audience into a false sense of warmth. Yet in the climax, her father poisons her food, killing both her and her unborn child. His justification is chilling: *"Naama saagurathukku munnaadi caste-a saapudama irukanum"* ("Before we die, our caste must remain unsullied"). His reasoning echoes Ambedkar's insistence that caste sustains itself through strict endogamy, even at the cost of human life. Sumathi's murder is a literalization of Spivak's claim: "The subaltern cannot speak; she is spoken for" (104). She chooses love, she asserts her agency, yet her father rewrites her existence as dishonourable and eliminates her. Butler's notion of precarity also becomes literal: her life is in her father's hands, reduced to a means of preserving caste. The use of silence in this climax—the absence of background music, the quiet poisoning—underscores the suffocation of subaltern voices within the intimate sphere of family.

Taken together, these four narratives illustrate how caste patriarchy sustains itself by silencing subalterns. The anthology shows that honour is not a cultural value but a weapon. Women's bodies, queer identities, and children's lives become battlegrounds for maintaining caste and patriarchal order. Sathar is erased for refusing normative gender performance; the daughter in *Love Panna Uttranum* is silenced for desiring across caste lines; the child in *Vaanmagal* is muted by shame; and Sumathi in *Oor Iravu* is sacrificed to preserve caste purity. In each case, speech is denied, life is rendered precarious, and grief is foreclosed.

Cinematically, *Paava Kadhaigal* reinforces these themes through its formal choices. The muted palettes of *Oor Iravu* evoke suffocation, while the ironic dialogues of *Love Panna Uttranum* expose political hypocrisy. Close-ups on women's faces in *Vaanmagal* highlight the tension between interior suffering and social silence. In *Thangam*, Sathar's performances of femininity are framed both lovingly and cruelly, underscoring how gender performance can be a site of both joy and violence. These choices ensure that the films are not simply narrating oppression but embodying it through cinematic language.

The anthology thus becomes a commentary on broader structures. Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak is dramatized across different identities—woman, transwoman, child, Dalit. Butler's theory of gender performativity explains why deviation from the script of chastity and obedience results in death. Chakravarti's analysis of Brahmanical patriarchy clarifies why women's sexuality is so central to caste control. Ambedkar's warning that caste survives through endogamy is confirmed in the stories of honour killings. By weaving these theoretical insights into its cinematic narratives, *Paava Kadhaigal* exposes honour as a mask for systemic violence.

Conclusion

The anthology *Paava Kadhaigal* emerges as one of the most poignant cinematic interventions in contemporary Tamil cinema, weaving together narratives that highlight the intersections of caste, gender, and subaltern identities. By foregrounding stories of individuals who remain trapped within oppressive structures of patriarchy and caste hierarchy, the film does not merely narrate tragedies—it exposes systemic violence that continues to shape lived realities in India. Each story becomes a microcosm of social injustice, where personal aspirations, love, and freedom are sacrificed at the altar of societal norms. This anthology thus reaffirms Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's observation that the subaltern is often denied a voice, especially when it comes to women who are doubly marginalized by both gender and caste (Spivak, 1988).

The persistence of caste violence, as shown in the anthology, demonstrates how deeply entrenched notions of purity, honor, and social order continue to operate. For instance, the narratives that deal with inter-caste relationships reveal how love becomes a political act, challenging the invisible yet powerful boundaries drawn by caste society. The brutal outcomes of these relationships underscore how caste operates not merely as a social identity but as a mechanism of control that dictates who can desire whom, and who has the right to live. The film also resonates with B. R. Ambedkar's critique of caste as a structure designed to perpetuate inequality and exclusion, one that denies individuals the fundamental right to equality.

Gender discrimination, equally, is at the center of *Paava Kadhaigal*. The women in these narratives occupy a space of double subjugation: they are marginalized as women in a patriarchal order and further silenced as subaltern subjects within casteist frameworks. Their struggles highlight how patriarchal control extends beyond domestic boundaries into the larger cultural and social spheres. Honor killings, sexual violence, and familial oppression are framed as instruments of maintaining a rigid moral order, but in essence, they become mechanisms of silencing women's agency. Judith Butler's argument on gender performativity is relevant here, as these narratives show how societal expectations of gender roles are enforced with violence when transgressed.

The anthology also forces the audience to confront uncomfortable truths about complicity and silence. It is not only the overt oppressors who perpetuate discrimination, but also the passive acceptance of regressive practices by families and communities. This reflects Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, where domination is sustained not only through coercion but also through cultural consent. By portraying ordinary people who normalize violence in the name of tradition, the film reveals how hegemonic power is maintained.

Ultimately, *Paava Kadhaigal* does not offer easy resolutions. Its conclusion is unsettling, leaving viewers with lingering questions about morality, justice, and humanity. In doing so, it pushes the boundaries of cinematic storytelling by serving as a mirror to society's darkest corners. It reminds us that caste and gender-based violence are not relics of the past but pressing realities that demand urgent social reform. The anthology insists that the discourse on subalternity must move beyond academic spaces into collective consciousness, fostering empathy, awareness, and resistance.

In conclusion, *Paava Kadhaigal* becomes more than a collection of stories—it is a testimony to the lived experiences of those rendered invisible by caste and patriarchy. By situating gender and caste oppression within the framework of subaltern studies, the film underscores the necessity of listening to silenced voices, challenging systemic violence, and envisioning a more equitable future. Its raw narratives serve as a reminder that true social progress can only be measured by the dismantling of structures that deny dignity, equality, and freedom to the marginalized. The anthology, therefore, stands as both a cultural critique and a call to action: to acknowledge, resist, and ultimately transform the oppressive realities of caste and gender discrimination.

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