

A STUDY ON SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF DALIT IDENTITY

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Received: 13 Feb 2020

Accepted: 20 Feb 2020

Published: 29 Feb 2020

ABSTRACT

Cinema plays a vital role when it comes to building, shaping, reinforcing public opinion and perception. Cinema has a notable role in caste, politics in India. Movies have always been in a stable struggle to eliminate as well as to maintain the boundaries between the leading and the minorities. The outfit is one such element, which acts to characterize the formation of a community's image in people's minds. The properties used in the movies create symbolic representation. The movies selected for this research is *Kaala* (2018), and *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018). The analysis applied here is *mise-en-scene* analysis. For example in the movie *Kaala*, the scene where *Kaala* (leader of the community) talking with his wife, after a huge clash with enemies, the background properties show books of K. Daniel's creations (a dalit based short stories and novels) and *Raavana Kaviyum* (Epic of Raavan). In the movie *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Karuppi*, the black hunting dog in the first scene, is merely a symbol of dalit identity. *Karuppi* exemplifies how those held captive by the manacles of caste are oppressed by the more powerful in society. This research was conducted through content analysis method. The unit of study is scene by scene analysis.

KEYWORDS: Symbolic Representation, Dalit Identity, Tamil Cinema

INTRODUCTION

The cinema, let us remember, is one of the biggest influences in the modern world. There are many other things which influence people - books, newspapers and so on. But I think it is perfectly correct to say that the influence of the films in India is greater than the influence of newspapers and books combined. (Nehru on Social Issues, 1989)

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru

Cinema is a mass medium, and it stimulates experiences in its pursuit to put across ideas and perceptions (Acker, 1991). Film serves many purposes other than entertainment; like providing meaning and occasionally providing an awe of wonder and deep understanding of purpose of life (Axelson, 2017). Cinema is the only art, which made all the people of India regardless of class and caste come together and sit in one platform. Films have constantly struggled to eradicate the boundaries between the dominated and the dominant. Caste based films produced on the subject of Dalits and their struggles have given the downtrodden community visibility (Joshi, 2017).

Indian cinema has its own way of addressing caste issues in the films. In Indian Cinema, the issue of caste was seldom a prominent issue with most film-makers and rarely dealt with the seriousness and urgency it deserves. They very often projected the problem of the Dalit in the economic aspects and ignored the social and cultural aspects. The mainstream Indian cinematic sphere, with few exceptions, has been responsible for sustaining dominant caste hegemony.

Cinema in Tamil Nadu is an extremely influential medium and over the years, certain caste narratives have been created, sustained and glorified on the big screen. Tamil cinema has been the most socially and politically significant industries in the state; films form an integral part of the social, cultural and political life of the people here perhaps more than in any other region in India.

The cinema acts as an alternative public sphere providing space for multiple sections of the society to represent and assert one's identities. The movies do not simply choose the story from the Dalit life but utilize the Dalit culture and art extensively. Dalit movies can be traced as an extension of Dalit literature. As Greenwood et.al. (2014) suggests, movies play a significant role in social and emotional development on an emerging adult. Life lessons, character connections and social relationship of a movie are what stick in the mind of the audience. Dalit cinema has the potential to offer performatory resistance to the interwoven threads of the caste-capital nexus. By critiquing caste, gender, class and other forms of oppression, Dalit cinema could foreshadow a cohesive battle against hegemonic caste supremacy.

Caste has been a unique phenomenon of the Indian social structure from ancient times to the present. Caste is very prominent in the mainstream films - no matter whether it is 'art', 'commercial' or 'parallel'. It may not be very obvious that it is caste playing there. Caste system is deeply rooted with religious beliefs, which keep the system alive. Post-colonial period perpetuated the caste system and slowly it infiltrated into the films.

Movies are not explicit; the meanings they present might not be visible at plain sight. Cinema is used as a symbolic vehicle to provoke the un-guided masses towards an egalitarian system of society. Gopu Mohan of The New Indian Express noted that "young Tamil directors are defying tried-and tested formulas of filmmaking to tell stories the way they need to be told" and these "films are successful in the box office too". Against all odds of the dominant forms of production and reception, the films *Kaala* and *Pariyerum Perumal* has got many subaltern representative meanings that are to be closely viewed and observed and deciphered. This socially-specific cinema is representing the lives of the suppressed people across the world and not in a 'dominant reading' perspective but totally from a subaltern perspective.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of the study is to examine the symbolic representation of Dalit identities in two Tamil movies; *Kaala* and *Pariyerum Perumal* (God Who Mounts Horse) released on 2018. These films have symbolically represented the problems, issues and everyday struggles of the subaltern classes. The images, symbols and icons represented in these films are drawn from the 'equal-rights movements' across the world. The choice of selecting the dress, language, habits, set, properties, color, locations, and diversity of characters reflects the cultural and embodied lives of the marginalized communities. Specific scenes from the movies *Kaala* and *Pariyerum Perumal* are identified to discuss each of the elements. This paper focuses on interpreting these films with a subaltern cultural perspective and how these two films used as a symbolic vehicle to provoke the un-guided masses towards an egalitarian system of society.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

S. No	Authors	Context	Findings Relevant to the Study
1	(Craig, Maxine Leeds, 2002).	Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race. Oxford University Press.	The dominant constructed notion of the 'fair skin' as beauty was deconstructed in the movie with particular symbolic referents. Over and over in many movies, in brutal caricatures, physical attributes of dark skinned people were associated with negative character traits and low social positions.
2	Richard Rego (2011).	Kannada Films: Castesim in Girish Kasaravalli's Films.	Some of the themes which keep recurring in Girish Kasaravalli's films are casteism, women and identity, inter-relationships and violence done to elders. In three of his films: Ghatashraddha, Bannada Vesha and Thayi Saheba, Girish Kasaravalli critiques the practice of discrimination based on the caste system (also known by its more vicious practice called untouchability) in the Indian society. This article employs textual analysis to examine these three films to explore the practice of casteism in the Indian society as represented by him, and Kasaravalli's vision of his society and as a human being vis-à-vis the caste system.
3	Rajankurai, (2012).	Dalit Homicides as Celebration in Tamil Cinema: The Relentless Hegemony Continues in Digital Era Too.	As ever in the history of Tamil cinema, films that are portraying the life of Dalits and Dalit leaders had never been successful. That is why in the preview show of the movie <i>Unnai Pol Oruvan</i> , (<i>Someone Like You</i>) Jeyakanthan, the famous Tamil writer says to journalists and reporters, 'I know that the movie is totally against the taste and the mind set of Tamil audience, but you have come to encourage me and the film. I welcome you and you have come to do a duty that is a need of the time. This movie is a starting point?'
4	Shiva Thrishul Punyamurthy (2016).	Interpreting the Representational Meanings of a Movie from a Subaltern Perspective: A case Study of Kabali.	Challenging the established idioms of the cinema it de-established the conventional sign systems that have been constructed in cinema for long. It is extension of the subaltern social life, which is marked by the realities of caste and its hierarchical nature.
5	Benson Rajan and Shreya Venkatraman (2017).	Fabric-Rendered Identity: A Study of Dalit Representation in Pa. Ranjith's Attakathi, Madras and Kabali.	Dalit cinema in India has played the role of empowerment as well as been a resource for the establishment of the community's identity. In doing so, the filmmakers have often reinforced the notions and identity markers related to the Dalit community. This reinforcement stagnates their attempt to move beyond the established standards and markers of Dalit identity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Content Analysis

Kerlinger (1986) defined content analysis as a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. Kerlinger's definition involves three concepts that require elaboration.

First, content analysis is systematic. This means that the content to be analyzed is selected according to explicit and consistently applied rules; Sample selection must follow proper procedures, and each item must have an equal chance of being included in the analysis. Moreover, the evaluation process must be systematic; all content under consideration is to be treated in exactly the same manner. There must be uniformity in the coding and analysis procedures and in the length of time coders are exposed to the material.

Second, content analysis is objective; that is the researcher's personal idiosyncrasies and biases should not enter into the findings. It replicated by another researcher, the analysis should yield the same results. Operational definitions and rules for the classification of variables should be sufficiently explicit and comprehensive that other researchers who repeat the process will arrive at the same decisions.

Third, content analysis is quantitative. The goal of content analysis is the accurate representation of a body messages. Quantification is important in fulfilling that objective, because it aids researchers in the quest for precision. The statement "Seventy percent of all prime-time programs contain at least one act of violence" is more precise than "Most shows are violent". Additionally quantification allows researchers to summarize results and to report them succinctly.

Unit of Analysis

Unit of analysis is the smallest element of content analysis but also one of the most important. In written content, the unit of analysis might be a single word or symbol, a theme (a single assertion about one subject), or an entire article or story. In television and film analysis, units of analysis can be characters, acts, or entire programs. Specific rules and definitions are required for determining these units to ensure closer agreement among coders and fewer judgment calls. The unit of analysis taken for this research is:

- Dress
- Language
- Habits

Mise-en-scene Analysis

In French term, Mise-en-scene means "staging". Mise-en-scène - originally meant a director's staging of a play. It consists of major aspects of film making that are also components of staging a play: the setting; the subject of being filmed, usually actors or people as themselves; and the composition, the arrangement of the settings, lighting, and subjects. So expressive can mise-en-scene be that sometimes entire major scenes use only visuals to convey moods, characterizations, and meanings. Mise-en-scene can also be used amusingly to imitate human behavior outside the film, or to pay tribute to another film.

Deldjoo, Quadrana, Elahi, and Cremonesi (2017) studied about using mise-en-scène in visual features based on MPEG-7 for the movie recommendation. They found that the user's preferences on movies can be better described regarding the mise-en-scène features such as the visual aspects of a movie that characterize design, aesthetics, and style (including colors and textures). Moreover, Cowan (2015) said that the neglect of color in film studies is a curious one because colour becomes a constructive element of mise-en-scène, one that works alongside light, sound, acting, camera angle, framing, and editing. Color is an element, carefully considered by set designers, cinematographers, and directors

because color can create meaning, mood, sensation, or perceptual cues (Cowan, 2015).

Mise-en-scene analysis is applied in this paper to analyze specific scenes that are identified with the elements like setting, characters, composition in detail. This would help to explain the extent to which these elements combine to provide mood, meaning and value to the visuals. This will help the audience to have a better understanding of the film and add to the existing knowledge. Every scene that is possible for a mise-en-scene analysis is identified and analyzed in detail.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Kaala (2018)

'Kaala' tells the tale of a young TAMILIAN named Kaala, Karikalan from Tirunelveli, who becomes a big-shot don in Mumbai. Kaala's family had migrated from Tirunelveli, and is now settled in one of the biggest slums in the world - Dharavi in Mumbai. After his father's death, Kaala emerges as the slum lord and the saviour of the locals. He has a large family - a loving wife Selvi, four children and grandchildren, a relative and friend. Eventually, his old flame Zarina (Huma Qureshi) turns up and kindles a mature romance. But the politician - a powerful leader Hari Dada (Nana Patekar) who heads the real estate mafia - wants to demolish the slums and build a modern, digital Dharavi. The local police and the corrupt system are dancing to the tune of Hari Dada. The rivalry between Kaala and Hari goes back in time and both have scores to settle.

Pariyerum Perumal (2018)

Pariyan, who joins a law college, doesn't seem to understand many things. He doesn't get why his friends pretend to understand English or why it is a shame to demand the lecturer to switch to Tamil. He always learns things in a hard way. One such lesson he learns is that he shouldn't go to any upper-caste wedding. It takes four guys to beat him to a pulp and one guy to urinate all over him to teach him that.

The film is a series of humiliations Pariyan goes through to understand that his life is not the same as his friend Jo's (Anandi), an upper caste girl who actually invites him to the wedding out of love. Jo is one of the many who is ignorant of the discrimination that goes on around them. They are insulated from the ugly truth both by the perpetrators, who don't want to show their horrific faces and by the victims, who are just ashamed. The film is made to bring that truth out in the open.

Pariyan's story is intercut by portions of an ageing serial killer. He hunts down lower-caste guys if they fall in love with girls from upper castes. Not just killing; he does everything despicable to hold the caste pride high. In a scene, he is shaving off a girl's hair so that the guy who is after her would stop pursuing. And Pariyan ends up on his hit list, and what happens next makes up for the intense drama.

UNIT OF ANALYSIS

Dress

Dress	
<p>Pierson (2010) describes costumes as “the most easily noticeable aspect of mise-en-scene”. Costumes reveal a character’s personality, social status, or the era he or she belongs too. Clothes play a significant role in communicating messages (Hoffman, 1984) and Dr. Ambedkar’s dressing in western attire had come under fire for not being “culturally authentic” and unfit for a leader representing the poor (Jaoul, 2006). Kaala and Pariyerum Perumal have many frames dedicated to showing the color blue as the sign and clothes as the signifier. This color is seen as an important paradigm in the explicit representation of Dalit identity in films.</p>	
Kaala	Pariyerum Perumal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The colors black, red and blue dress used symbolically to depict the need for the unity of all the downtrodden classes and sections in the society. Black becomes the symbol of labor and revolt. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The song “Naan yaar” (Who am I?) stands out for its metaphors: Splashed with colours of blue, the song celebrates the deaths as martyrdom, thus spreading the blue revolution as a path towards social justice and equality.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The antagonist who vouches by ‘purity’ is always in speck-less white and a saffron scarf. The protagonist is not only proud of his name ‘Kaala’, black, but mostly in black attire or at times in blue, proudly flaunting his Dalit identity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Dress used in the song ‘Vanakkam Vanakkamunga’ captures the cultural vibrancy of a village and ‘dirt and dust filled scenes’ showing the life of a Dalit college student and his fellow community in a remote village.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A band of hip-hop performers dressed in denims singing about the need to fight injustice and upper-class aggression. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Costume of Pariyan’s Father who is a theater artiste performs as a female dancer at village music festivals captures the life and time.

Language

Language	
<p>Language is fundamental to cultural identity. An understanding of language as ‘open, dynamic, energetic, constantly evolving and personal’ (Shohamy, 2007:5) encompasses the rich complexities of communication. In actual language use, it is not the case that it is the only forms of language that convey meaning. It is language in its cultural context that creates meaning: creating and interpreting meaning is done within a cultural framework.</p> <p>Language determines the way a person views the world. Language is one training tool of the mind. Studying the functional relationships between language and other mental operations increases one's knowledge about the way people think. Language is created and shaped by the needs of a culture as it changes. This means that language and culture are fluid, shifting to reflect one another and the changing landscape of the world.</p>	
Kaala	Pariyerum Perumal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A voiceover in the film intones: ‘<i>Kaala na karuppu... kaalan... karikaalan... sanda pottu kaakuravan</i> [Kaala (in Hindi) means black... kaalan or karikaalan (a celebrated king of the Chola dynasty is the warrior who protects).’ The film’s finale is rousing - an uprising of Dalits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Law College principal, while giving admission to Pariyan tells him to concentrate on studies. Pariyan tells, “I will become a Dr.” The principal responds that “this is a law college and you can’t become a doctor here but an advocate,” Pariyan replies: “I did not mean the doctor who treats with an injection, but meant that I want to become Dr. Ambedkar”.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kaala tells: "Uzhaippin vannam Karuppe (The color of the working class is black)." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “They own all the land and fields and we have nothing.” Pariyan tells his friend while they are washing their hands near the waterhole, a set of dominant-caste youth approach to use it.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women speak about their sexual needs in a riotous stretch, 'Ithula Muththam Suththam' (There's no room for kissing). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The female protagonist Jo, tells Pariyan that Law college books are also available in Tamil; he responds as, "That is more than enough for me! Now I can even teach others".
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An old-aged resident from Dharavi says, Saagarathukulla Nallaa Kaal Neetti Padukka Oru Veedu Venum' (Before I die, I need where I can stretch my legs freely and sleep peacefully). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pariyan's college principal who is also a Dalit understands the problems he had undergone and advises him to fight back, as he feels 'It would be better to die while hitting back and fighting dominant forces but not by committing suicide'.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ambedkar's slogan "Educate! Agitate!! Organise!!!" used in a song Katravai, Patravai (Educate, Agitate). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perumal tells Jo's father that "Don't think you are saving your honor by doing all these. It is my alms to your life."

Habits

Habits	
<p>The American Journal of Psychology (1903) defines a "habit, from the standpoint of psychology, [as] a more or less fixed way of thinking, willing, or feeling acquired through previous repetition of a mental experience." Habitual behavior often goes unnoticed in persons exhibiting it, because a person does not need to engage in self-analysis when undertaking routine tasks.</p>	
Kaala	Pariyerum Perumal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There's an 'A-1 Beef Shop' signboard right opposite <i>Kaala's</i> home in Dharavi. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classrooms depicted as a spaces of Discrimination.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A small Ayyanar temple under a tree reveals the cultural background of Dharavi people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pariyan's father who performs as a female dancer in village music festivals reveals the effeminacy associated with the profession.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Romance that takes place while characters are stepping out to defecate in the open or wait for their turn in the long lines for community toilets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Caste murders committed by an old man claims as a sacrificial offering to the lineage god.

MISE-EN-SCENE ANALYSIS

Kaala

Setting and Props

To depict the suppressed majority of this country who are deprived of land, education and resources but continue to organize and fight, Mumbai's Dharavi (the largest slum in Asia) has been chosen as the location where the story takes place.



Figure 1

The images of Buddha, Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, were dexterously used in the movie, adorning the walls. All these

personalities are the icons of the human rights, who fought against the oppression and tyranny of the social and political systems at various geographic locations in the world. (Figure.1). It attempted to deconstruct the dominant social construction of images by placing the images of these personalities in the movie.



Figure 2

Paintings of Buddha, Mahatma Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar on the wall is represented in a song (Figure.2). Not just this, there is also a 'Periyar Chowk' near this locality, portraits of Iyothee Thasar, Marx, Lenin, and a small statue of Bali Raja near Kaala's house, small flags of the Oppressed Republican Party with an Ashoka Chakra in the centre, and a beef shop with small green flags nearby.

In a scene, there is a photo of Wangari Maathai on the wall, who is a social activist in Kenya, created the Green Belt Movement, and also has a feminist militia and the first African woman of the Nobel Prize-winning woman.

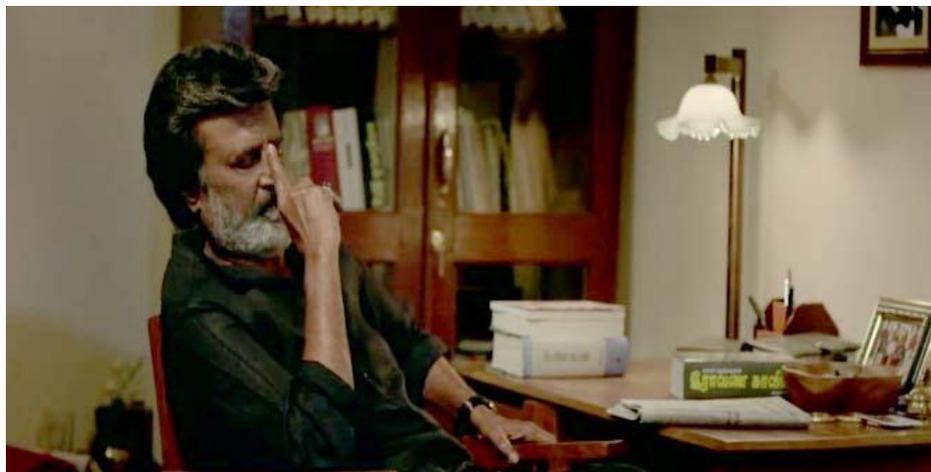


Figure 3

While Kaala is in his room sitting and laughing around the political codes filled with laughter, there is a Dalit literature 'K. Daniels Creations' on the table (Figure.3). This book contains stories about the life of Dalits living in Sri Lanka. Likewise, the Dravidian political conception is also on the table with the "Ravana Epic" written during the period of activism against Aryan literary culture. On the other hand, Marx's major political-economic booklet "Capital", the Communist texts of Chinese Communist leader Mao and the Russian Communist Revolutionary Trotsky's self-titled "My Life" are also in the background. In the same frame, there is a photo of Marxist philosopher Karl Marx in the wall.



Figure 4

The usage of the luxury sofas in many scenes is a symbolic representation of power, where the protagonist always occupies it. Each time, the Kaala character occupying that luxury sofa shows the 'occupy power' attitude of the subaltern (Figure.4).

Characters

The protagonist is not only proud of his name 'Kaala', black, but is mostly in black attire or at times in blue, proudly flaunting his Dalit identity.

Various scenes speak aloud the rights and power of women. The scenes of protest and in particular the scene where a woman leads goes for a lathi, rather than her trousers, when the police try to make her shame by disrobing, this speaks volumes to audience.

One lady recalls, how she fell in love with her husband when she was standing in a public toilet queue. Zarina (Huma Qureshi), while remembering her days in Dharavi, also identifies the same public toilet queue as one of the spots where she and Kaala exchanged loving gazes. This uninhibited portrayal is how the Director attempts to refine the Dalit stereotypes that audiences are usually accustomed in Tamil cinema.

Composition



Figure 5

When the antagonist tries to break the unity of the slum-dwellers by cutting off all the essential services and trying to incite communal riots, the hero counters it by appealing to the working class identity that subsumes their all other identities. He reminds them of the weapon in their hands, their labor power, and calls them to strike work. The colors black, red and blue are used symbolically to depict the need for the unity of all the downtrodden classes and sections in the society (Figure.5).

Pariyerum Perumal

Setting and Props



Figure 6



Figure 7

The images of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, is dexterously used in the movie, adorning the principal's table (Figure.6).The song "Naan yaar" (Who am I?) in the film stands out for its metaphors: it reflects not only the trauma and mental agony of the protagonist who faces all the humiliation based on his identity but also the prevailing social prejudices. Through quick cut shots, it highlights Rohith Vemula's suicide, Ilavarasan's death, and the practice of double tumbler system, inability to pull the Kandadevi temple car, the Keezhvenmani killings, the Tamirabarani massacre, sewer deaths and spatial discrimination in the form of separate habitations outside village proper. Splashed with colors of blue, the song celebrates these deaths as martyrdom, thus spreading the blue revolution as a path towards social justice and equality.

The background art works on the wall depicts the inner feelings of Parian, like scorpion biting, snake holding the guy, and animals protect from reaching a boy and girl (Figure.7).



Figure 8

“Red has many meaning. Youth can make it more meaningful” This quote of Che Guevara displayed in red color on the college wall (Figure 8).

Close-up shots of the colored wristbands are used as a form of identification by respective caste students. Railway track are central to the movie - shown as a weapon to murder Dalits, and as a site of suicide for upper castes.

Characters



Figure 9

Karuppi, the black hunting dog, is merely a symbol. From its free-spirited roaming of the countryside –being tied down to the railway tracks and crushed by the roaring wheels of a train, Karuppi exemplifies how those held captive by the manacles of caste are oppressed by the more powerful in society. The dog also used as a symbol of saving and helping Pariyan in a background art of “Naan Yaar” song (Figure.9).



Figure 10

Many characters in the film are a symbol. RK Raja's character is the code of slaughtered slavery by shame. The code of conservative karate Venkatesan represents the caste hegemony. In a bus, an old caste Hindu man prefers to stand, rather than to sit next to a Dalit. Another scene reveals how seating in a classroom is also invisibly marked by/with caste. A Dalit is murdered for swimming in a public pond. A police officer, who is the custodian of the law, is shown holding on to his caste pride and humiliating Dalits, who question him (Figure.10).

Composition



Figure 11

The Composition to portray the symbols is easy to grasp. For example, when Perumal chooses to sit in the front row instead of the last bench and an elite-caste boy challenges him (Figure.11).



Figure 12

The film ends with a beautiful scene, metaphorically indicating the need for a debate through those two tumblers, juxtaposed to each other and markedly separated by a jasmine flower. The glass tea tumblers are still remnants symbolising the longstanding caste discrimination in Tamil Nadu, where members of the marginalized castes are served in different tumblers (Figure.12).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper emphasizes the role of mise-en-scene elements such as dress, language and habits, in understanding the symbolic representation of Dalit identity in the films *Kaala* and *Pariyerum Perumal*. Tamil cinema is unspooling a new genre of films, all directed by mostly young filmmakers, that are filling theatres across the state and putting Dalits centre stage. These films are not aimed at naming and shaming any particular community. They only describe the injustice meted out to the oppressed castes and the opportunities denied to them. These films are not about violence and counter-violence, but an invitation for dialogue between the oppressor and the oppressed.

In general, the films that represent Dalit identities mostly picturize atrocities or torture. They do not address the challenge, of how to bring out the 'invisible' casteism through the medium of cinema. It is relatively easy to show torture. But other forms of caste discrimination that exist within the system may not be quite visible. It is not only about making of film on caste, but to learn how to watch those issues in the language of cinema.

This study reveals that, these films develop the culture of 'seeing caste'. The symbolic representation of Dalit identities, addresses the issues that have been systematically silenced in mainstream Tamil cinema.

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