

Tamil Cinema in the Twenty-First Century

Caste, Gender, and Technology

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>List of tables</i>	x
<i>List of contributors</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
<i>Foreword: A refreshing look at Tamil cinema</i>	xv
Introduction: Tamil cinema in the twenty-first century: continuities and changes	1
SELVARAJ VELAYUTHAM AND VIJAY DEVADAS	
PART 1	
Caste	17
1 Contested narratives: Filmic representations of North Chennai in contemporary Tamil cinema	19
KARTHIKEYAN DAMODARAN AND HUGO GORRINGE	
2 Conscripts of cinema: The dangerous and deviant Third Wave	36
DICKENS LEONARD	
3 Being Dalit, being Tamil: The politics of <i>Kabali</i> and <i>Kaala</i>	52
KARTHICK RAM MANOHARAN	
PART 2	
Gender	67
4 When Madhi dances like Dhanush: Gender representations in <i>Irudhi Suttru</i>	69
SHAKILA ZAMBOULINGAME	

2 Conscripts of cinema

The dangerous and deviant Third Wave

Dickens Leonard

This chapter seeks to study a component of popular contemporary Tamil cinema, especially foregrounding the films that represent Madurai in the first decade of this century. With a special focus on *Kadhal* (Love, 2004), *Veyil* (Torrid Sun, 2006), *Paruthiveeran* (Cotton Champ, 2007), and *Subramaniapuram* (2008), it examines whether, and how, they offer ‘new’ ways to understand contemporary Tamil and Indian cinema. Such films are often described as part of a ‘New Wave’ (Anand 2005; Sebastian 2008) that successfully produced the ‘new Madurai genre’ (Hariharan 2011). They definitely are new in that new faces that don Tamil cinema also dawned with them. They are also new in terms of their realistic and tragic depiction of violence and caste bigotry in Madurai, though there has been a critical conduit from earlier films.

Importantly, these films entail, to use a hackneyed term, certain markers of difference as well. From 2004 onwards, there is a steady but sure failure of heroic mega budget films in Tamil. Krishnan terms this trend as the death of the ‘type-hero film’, whereas low-budget, award-winning, ‘alternative’ as well as ‘popular’ productions create a new trend in contemporary Tamil cinema (2010A, 6–11). This could be seen as an extension of the ‘nativity films’ of the late 1970s, where rural contextualisation was treated as an ‘ideological investment centered on the rurality of its plot-events and roles’ (Kaali 2000, 168–9). In fact, in the late 1990s, directors such as Bala, Cheran, and Thangar Bachan had made films that portrayed rustic and marginal lives but relatively ‘alternative and realistic’ depictions. Though many studies have theorised ‘Dravidian cinema’ and there are also many articles on individual films later, very few scholars have worked on Tamil cinema after the 1980s, particularly foregrounding caste and criminality in the Tamil contemporary films (Devadas and Velayutham 2008). This is perhaps a Third Wave which offers new ways to understand Madurai and contemporary Tamil cinema.

The new Madurai genre

Madurai is the third-largest city in Tamil Nadu and one of its oldest. In the screen history of Tamil cinema, Madurai has played an important yet changing role as a narrative space. The mythological films such as *Avaiyaar* (1953), *Poompuhar*

(1964), and *Thiruvillaiyadal* (1965) depict Madurai as a centre of literary activity and temple town in the 1950s. In the historical films such as *Madurai Veeran* (Madurai Hero, 1957) and *Madurayai Meeta Sundara Pandiyan* (Sundarapandiyan Who Freed Madurai, 1978), M.G. Ramachandran acts as the Madurai hero who secures and protects it as a separate region from external forces. Later 'Dravidian' cinema uses Madurai as a narrative space for political articulation. Director Barathi Raja in the 1980s set Madurai village as an actual rustic space to narrate his stories. Madurai-based popular films after *Devar Magan* (Son of a Devar, 1992) predominantly narrate and depict a particular caste culture as the actual culture of Madurai.¹

In the early 2000s, *Kadhal*, *Veyil*, *Paruthiveeran*, and *Subramaniapuram* set Madurai as an actual narrative space in their films, where caste and criminality participate discursively. The representations of the rustic milieu, Madurai dialect and dress code, folk performances and spectacle spaces, caste articulation, and childhood as a flashback are significant pointers that distinguish them from other filmic trends. They were at once celebrated as box-office hits as well as critically acclaimed award-winners.² These films, therefore, could be seen as destabilising and critiquing the neat homogeneities that cinemas in India have hitherto constructed. I do not, however, describe these films as 'New Wave' because the term particularly refers to a global phenomenon on which there exists a canonical body of work. New Wave as a blanket term refers to *La Nouvelle Vague* coined by critics for a group of French film-makers of the late 1950s and 1960s, influenced by Italian neo-realism and popular Hollywood cinema.

A New Wave is usually a historical moment within a national cinema. The most famous example is the French New Wave (*La Nouvelle Vague*), essentially a group of young critics turned film-makers who broke with the past traditions and made exciting, experimental, and innovating films. Although never a formally organised movement, New Wave film-makers were generally linked by their self-conscious rejection of classical cinematic form and their spirit of youthful iconoclasm. New Wave is also an example of European art cinema. Many also engaged in their work with the social and political upheavals of the era, making their radical experiments with editing, visual style, and narrative part of a general break with the conservative paradigm.

New Wave in India is seen as a specific genre which is known for its serious content, realism, and naturalism, with an eye on the sociopolitical climate of the times.³ They are specifically regarded as 'new cinemas', which are thematically different, and they produce 'micro-narratives' of the nation – alternative and minority stories – which are generally excluded by the 'Bollywood film representations' (Devasundaram 2018, 1).⁴ Since New Wave Indian cinema has a particular history in India, the term does not qualify to describe the present phenomenon in Tamil cinema as well, even though *Kadhal*, *Veyil*, *Paruthiveeran*, and *Subramaniapuram* are 'offbeat' and different. In want of a better term, I demarcate the selected films as significantly belonging to the Third Wave,⁵ since Tamil cinema can be categorised into three waves.

The two waves and the conscripting Third Wave

Dravidian cinema in the 1960s is the First Wave, where political address, spectator identification, star/fandom, and linguistic reorganisation at a historical juncture necessitated a new way to understand and conceptualise Tamil cinema (Baskaran 2009). The First Wave directly contests Indian cinema that ideologically constructed a ‘national’ audience. The Second Wave refers to a shift in the relationship between Tamil cinema and Bombay cinema in the 1990s with the emergence of directors Mani Ratnam and S. Shankar in the context of ‘Mandal, *Mandir* and Market’.⁶ Various studies of these films identify a negotiation for a new space for the ‘Tamilian’ with respect to the Indian nation-state, as an entity who is reconfigured onto the global arena (Vasudevan 2000; Prasad 2004; Rajadhyaksha 2009).⁷ Such films in a highly globalised context were seen to work as a conduit between ‘Tamil-ness’ and new trans-regional national elite at par with its global counterparts. The Second Wave addressed the aesthetic differences that marked Tamil cinema and aligned its stylistic form closer to the Hindi cinema. Apparently, two waves of studies on particular films such as *Parasakthi* (1952) and *Roja* (Rose 1992) represent the two waves as a phenomenon distinctly (Pandian 1992, 2005; Chakravarthy and Pandian 1994; Pandian and Krishnan 2006; Niranjana 1994a, 1994b).

As the Third Wave is marked by the recurrence of dangerous and deviant heroes and the excess of casteist articulations within Madurai as a visual-narrative space, it signifies an apparent detour (Leonard 2015). The Third Wave films raise different questions to Indian cinema in general and Tamil cinema in particular. The film narratives, in fact, contest the construction of the homogeneous ‘ethno-specific’ Tamil state/nation. If Dravidian cinema interrupted the ‘Indian’ cinema’s project of discursively constructing a sense of a national people through the cinematic medium, the Third Wave offers a different version of the ‘ethno-specific’ Tamil country. At the same time, it deconstructs the urban, professional, and cosmopolitan secular-spectatorial address that the Second Wave constructed. Hence, the Third Wave finds its currency in its critique of the First and Second Waves.

A ‘new’ trend was established by rebel directors such as Barathi Raja, Bhagyaraj, Balachander, and Balu Mahendra way back in the late 1970s but for a short period.⁸ Kaali describes films by the above directors as belonging to the ‘neo-nativity film’ genre, where the hero was reconstituted in the rustic space (2000, 168–90). This was most probably caused when the film industry that relied on the star system found itself at a loss as M.G. Ramachandran entered into full-time party politics. Moreover, during the emergency in India – 18-month time period from 1975 to 1977 – the political dream of a Tamil nation almost shattered and the Dravidian parties moved their gear into electoral politics.

Thus, these new genres had already contested the earlier Dravidian iconography. Kaali posits that one of the salient features of the ‘neo-nativity film’ is a certain displacement of a narrational agency from the hero to the village as a collective actant, where the portrayal of the village changed and there was greater care for verisimilitude and details. Shooting in actual exterior locations became

a dominant film-making practice during this time. But this phenomenon is only seen as an intervention after which the star system was revived by Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan.

The Third Wave, however, particularly deals with criminality and caste, and they could be categorically described as Con-Scripts: ‘Con’ as in convicts and also conned; ‘scripts’, of course, refer to film script/scripting. The term ‘con-script’ refers to someone who is compulsorily enrolled or drafted for service. The phrase ‘conscripts of civilization’ (Diamond 1974: 151) refers to the ‘primitive’ cultures that engage in the ‘civilization’ project becoming ‘conscripts of civilization, not volunteers’ (Asad 1992, 333). But such cinematic representations also reveal the ambiguity and ambivalence with regard to prevalent notions of caste and criminality (Dhareshwar 1993). Perhaps, the criminal and caste subjects also become, in and through these representations, ‘conscripts of modernity’ (Scott 2004, 98–131), who are coerced into civilisation but continue as corrosive objects and agents (Ansari 2001). Could identities and spaces marked by caste and crime become conscripts of modern cinema itself?

Conscripted representations were indeed inaugurated in the early 2000s by director Bala who arguably ‘re-wrote the Tamil hero’ (‘Exclusive’ 2009). He is acknowledged to have initiated an avant-garde trend in characterisation, spatial representation, and film narrative. All his films depicted tragic ends with deviant characters as protagonists, such as a college rowdy who goes mad (*Sethu* 1999), a henchman who is killed by his mother (*Nandha* 2001), the relationship between a scavenger, a cannabis dealer and a small-time crook (*Pithamagan* 2003), and an *agora* (*Naan Kadavul* 2009).

It can be argued that the Third Wave films, like *Kadhal*, *Veyil*, *Paruthiveeran*, and *Subramaniapuram*, can be seen as an extension of the ‘neo-nativity film’ as well as director Bala’s trend in contemporary Tamil cinema. The recurrence of conscripted heroes and the excess of casteist articulations within Madurai as a narrative space raise specific questions seeking different interpretations. Theoretical categories such as Indian citizen-spectator, secular-modern identification, and the Dravidian/Tamil heroic subject have all undergone considerable alteration in these films.

Thus, the Third Wave indicates a momentous intervention in understanding Indian cinema in general and Tamil cinema in particular. With the release of *Kadhal*, *Veyil*, *Paruthiveeran*, and *Subramaniapuram*, not only is there a slow but an absolute death of the ‘type-hero’ in Tamil cinema, but these films also actualise the Madurai region as a cinematic imaginary through its authenticity markers, like dialect and cultural practices explicitly, which earlier films constructed as a ‘trope’ (Krishnan 2008, 140). The characterisation and setting in the Third Wave films naturalise the markers as actuality. For instance, *Kadhal* and *Subramaniapuram* open with shots that contextualise the screen space as Madurai. Shot sequences depict the city’s landmarks as the credits run before the story begins. The narrative space is contextualised in actuality by depicting the consensual notions of culture and through a loud display of cultural markers like dress, food, and, most significantly, the dialect.

Beyond the ‘type-hero’ and the ‘neo-nativity’ film

Tamil cinema devised the ‘type-hero’ as one of the popular images in its screen history.⁹ Usually, popular Tamil cinema is male hero-centric. A greater part of the frames centre around the hero. The ‘type-hero’ substantiates heroism in popular film narratives. ‘Hero-ness’ is ideally composed and influenced by the sociopolitical as well as the historicity of a genre (Maderya 2010, 1–6). Usually, ‘hero-ness’ in popular Tamil movie is demonstrated through the hero’s ‘modern’ as well as ‘traditional’ attitude towards women, education, and exhibitions of physical prowess. These qualities are usually idealised through contrast with the villain and the sidekick. Worship of the mother, care for his sister, and faithfulness towards his wife are intrinsic to the ideal image. The ability to physically vanquish the wrongdoer and protect the family is a crucial aspect of the hero-ideal. This reminds us of the folk heroes of the countryside who are remembered from generation to generation through popular heroic ballads.¹⁰ This reconfiguration of the rustic hero is not a new phenomenon in Tamil cinema.

By the 1970s–1980s, the male protagonist, in the neo-nativity films, evidenced arrested development, mental inadequacy, and physical failure; and he needed to be supported by a dominant female character (Kaali 2000). The heroic subjects in *Kadhal*, *Veyil*, *Paruthiveeran*, and *Subramaniapuram* are different representations; perhaps they are extensions of the neo-native rustic hero. Like the neo-native heroes, they offer diverse identifications to the audience, as they are not, of course, citizen-spectator identifications. They are unlike *Roja*’s urbane hero – a representative of the ‘Indian secular’ – with whose desire the state’s interest and the Hindu patriarchal culture coincide.¹¹ The heroic subjects, like the neo-nativity heroes, are dysfunctional ‘non-heroic’ representations.

However, their tragic portrayals symbolise a site of fragmentation of the homogenised citizen-subject identity (that went into construction), which is particularly intercepted by markers of caste and criminality. Murugan (Barath) in *Kadhal*, Murugesan (Pasupathy) in *Veyil*, Veera (Karthi) and Sevvazhai (Saravanan) in *Paruthiveeran*, and Azhagar (Jai) and Parama (Sasi Kumar) in *Subramaniapuram* are exemplary characters, who are beyond type or neo-native heroes. As they are represented as dangerous and deviant and their portrayals raise different questions, they can arguably belong to another genre as well. Beyond the typical and the neo-native heroes, they act as conscripts of cinema; and they question spectatorial identification and the processes by which not only individual subjectivities are constituted, but also entire communities are made and unmade.

Dangerous and deviant heroes as conscripts of cinema

The heroes of the selected films, namely, Murugan – *Kadhal*, Murugasen – *Veyil*, Veera – *Paruthiveeran*, and Azhagar and Parama – *Subramaniapuram*, are emblematic of deviance and danger. They are rowdy sheeters, who are unemployed and vagrant, at once getting into disputes when getting drunk. Their bodies are marked by ‘excess’ that resist normative transformation into citizen-subjects.

They are also subjects where the camera locks caste into their identities, especially when their romantic escapades end in violent trauma. Their representations provide the citizen-spectator a dangerous/deviant 'other' as an identification to (dis)engage with. Through exclusion, they signify the reconfiguration of the Madurai hero as a conscripted subject. Hence, as outlaws, their deaths and murders are unaccountable by law. Their murders are mutilations which erase them from the cinematic social-imaginary.

In *Kadhal*, Murugan is central to the romance plot. However, the story is specifically about his failed aspirations. The progression of the narrative action is also the regression towards his breakdown. Murugan becomes insane at the end of the movie. His degeneration into deviance is signified by loss: devoid of a home, without familial and friendly relationships, lack of material support, and plummet from a social standing. Murugan's earlier image of a diligent mechanic in charge of a shop, who is respected in the town for his work ethic, is in stark contrast to the latter one into which he plunges. The loss of supportive spaces – familial, material, and social – is critical to his devolution into dysfunctionality.

Murugan, son of a 'lower'-caste widow, lives with his mother in a slum, works as a mechanic but falls for an 'upper'-caste girl. This would problematise the caste-ridden structures in Madurai. The movie, however, portrays that this yearning when realised in the city loosens the shackles of caste ascription. A glimpse of this vision is evident when Murugan and Aishwarya get married in Chennai city. Murugan's aspiration receives support from the displaced, mansion-dwelling, working-class collective in the city despite caste/class differences. The collective support in Chennai is in stark contrast to the collective opposition in Madurai. The movie depicts a spatial binary on screen – Chennai as the urban pedestal of 'modern' governance and Madurai as its 'other space', where caste is produced as a spectacle (Leonard 2015).

Unlike Murugan who is devoid of any collective in Madurai, Chennai city offers a working-class collective for his friend Stephen (Sukumar). Even when Stephen comes to Madurai, he is a fragment of the 'modern-economic-urbane' marker who is embodied by 'branded' shirts, pants, and goggles. His demeanour symbolises a remarkable/marketable difference from Murugan in Madurai, who is marked by dirt, greased outfits, overgrown nails, and unruly hair. Though Stephen as a hawker exemplifies incessant industriousness in the city, just like Murugan as a mechanic in Madurai, his subjectivity is mutually constructed and mediated by the urban, displaced, working-class collective, who then go on to help Murugan and Aishwarya at times of violent crisis.

The individual aspirations of a poor, 'lower'-caste youth are particularly razed by dominant caste agents of power in Madurai. The absolute degeneration of Murugan – the hero – into madness is depicted as an effect of this. The decisive moment of this erasure, in the movie, is the scene where the dominant caste collective accuses Murugan and Aishwarya of transgressing the caste boundaries. The fact that the heroic subject is made mentally insane through the articulation of caste bigotry is an important facet to understand the problems of spectator identification/citizen-subject. Murugan's deviance is structurally located in his

caste status according to the cinematic apparatus. Hence, his caste-located body becomes a conscript of cinema.

Murugesan, in *Veyil*, is an extension of Murugan. He is a prodigal son of the working-class, yet dominant intermediary caste, father Sivanandy Devar (Ravi Mariya). As an adolescent, Murugesan falls in love with *Thalaivar* (MGR's cinematic image) cinema. Later, as an adult, he falls in love with a girl outside his caste. On both occasions, he is opposed vehemently by the dominant members of the village/society. As a runaway kid, it is the cinema theatre – the 'modern' entertainment space – that becomes his alternative home. Working as a projectionist, the theatre at once stands for 'the smallest parcel' of his world as well as the totality of the world which is projected there.

Murugesan's aspirations were to earn money and return home to prove his family that he has not wasted his life. However, he becomes a conscripted subject when he returns to his family after many years. As a testimony of failure, Murugesan is considered a deviance – a crisis in the patriarchal/casteist set-up – as he had emasculated his role as the eldest son of the family. Murugesan is a binary of his younger brother Kathir (Barath), who single-handedly runs an advertisement agency and becomes the backbone of the family. Kathir supports his sisters to study and is successful in his romance. In comparison to Murugesan, he serves as the popular ideal hero of Tamil cinema.

However, Murugesan narrates the story and is therefore central to the film narrative. His failure as a son, brother, and lover is a critique of the responsible, family man as the heroic subject. His character embodies deviance in the 'modern' familial set-up as he swerves from the consensual norm. He is disrespected by his father, misunderstood by his sisters, and displaced inside the family. Murugesan fails to resuscitate the roles he lost as a deviant subject. Only through his death, the family recognises/relocates his place within the home. At the movie's end, he positions himself, through his death/erasure, as a 'lost' member of the family in the death anniversary poster. The fact that the family's patriarch Sivanandy Devar recognises Murugesan after his death is probably because of the sacrificial element that is implicit in his erasure. Murugesan is not necessarily remembered because he is killed as a 'dysfunctional' member of the family, but his death is a sacrifice which saved Kathir, his brother, the sole breadwinner of the family. That is, perhaps, more important than his erasure itself.

Interestingly, Murugesan's deviance is centred on his lack of control over his pleasures and instinct. He seems to give way to his instinctual drives right from his young age. For instance, as a young boy, he prefers to play *bambaram*¹² along with his friends and then sell goat's blood, which is his errand. He bunks school for a show at the cinema house; he gets down from the lorry, on the way to Madras, later Chennai, when he sees *Thalaivar*'s poster near a cinema theatre; and he decides to have consensual pre-marital sex with his lover during work hours at the theatre. In all these critical moments of the narrative, Murugesan loses control over his instinctual desires. Loss of control over pleasure in the 'modern' spaces – school and workplace (cinema theatre) – steers Murugesan's conscripted

character towards his death. The representation of Murugesan as the narrator of the story is a critique of the popular Tamil hero.

However, Veera's (*Paruthiveeran*) conscription is marked by his lawless attitude and excessive violence. His aspiration, in today's world, serves as a critique of the 'modern' citizen-subject and the danger it implies. He wishes to be a rowdy in Madras city under the vigilant lens of the media against and within the 'modern' judiciary-legal code. The criminality and violence, that he is part of, challenge the police. It is not contained by it. In fact, *Paruthiyur* exemplifies decentralised despotism. The articulation of caste bigotry by the dominant members in *Paruthiyur* makes him a defying 'dangerous individual' who is justified to be killed. His uncle Kazhuvathevan (Ponvannan) despises him for being an offspring of an inter-caste marriage. The markers of a criminal, as well as an inter-caste orphan, make him excluded within the village. Veera is a doubly marked figure. He is represented as a conspicuous, inappropriate figure cast out by juridico-legal codes of the modern state as well as by the normative cultural codes of the village.

For instance, under the surveillance of a battery of police, Veera enters the screen dramatically. Amidst drum beats, clad in white dhoti and shirt, with the ash mark on his forehead, he comes dancing to tunes completely engrossed until he is identified and stopped by the police. He is inspected thoroughly. His attire is soiled; his face and mane are smeared with colours. His façade is transformed, and he is 're-signified'. As if trying to play according to the re-signified image, he attempts murder at the village festival. Dirtied and knife-held, Veera performs his act violently in front of the village gathering. The villagers accuse the mere presence of his body of making the festive occasion in the village vulnerable to violence.

Veera is 'dysfunctionally' dangerous. He is not a productive member of the family or the village community. He is depicted as a burden and a danger to the village community due to his violent and criminal acts. Veera's state of being is perhaps linked to the mark he bears. His mother's tribe had the stain of a de-notified past, that of a criminal tribe's mark. Veera ascribes the identity of a criminal who is a habitual offender according to the law. He is socially ousted by the dominant members of the village. The 'Criminal Tribes Act' (1871) was extended to the Madras Presidency in 1911. Later, it was repealed. The former 'criminal tribes' were de-notified, and the act was replaced as the 'Habitual Offenders Act' (1952) of the Government of India. The former 'criminal tribes' became habitual offenders in the eyes of the state. The movie significantly documents the scenarios and mindsets left behind by the act in rural Tamil Nadu.

Veera's body, other than being violent and lawless, is also significantly a marker of caste defiance. Defiance and deviance are overlapped in the representation of Veera as a dangerous, conscripted individual. Veera's inter-caste status is portrayed as a significant troublemaker to the village collective. Being an orphan/criminal/inter-caste, he is seen at the site of liminality. He is expunged from the caste society and juridico-legal code while being marked through it. As an outlaw, he is excluded from the protection of the law. As an inter-caste, he is located outside the caste structures.

Azhagar and Parama (*Subramaniapuram*) are conscripted heroes too. They are seen as wastrels by their family members. Azhagar's mother reprimands him for not working and earning like others. Parama is disliked by his brother's family. They are mired by a passion towards violence, chivalry, and arrogance. As henchmen, they are used by politicians and criminals. In due course, they are betrayed and murdered. Azhagar and Parama in *Subramaniapuram* exemplify as dangerous rowdy sheeters. They are referents of the most hardened and desperate criminals whose record is kept in a police station. As an inappropriate figure in the Indian modern urban space, they represent the 'reified, estranged figure of modernity' (Dhareshwar and Srivatsan 1996, 201–31).

They are also *lumpen* figures – the subhuman 'other' from whom the global middle class differentiates oneself.¹³ The movie portrays that they are present due to the criminalisation of politics. Defined by the law and society as dangerous individuals, they are marked by their 'excessive' bodies that do not incorporate. They are present in spaces that are always and already criminalised. They are a threat to the upper caste/middle-class, familial/social space. Hence, they are wiped out from the social-imaginary. Though Azhagar and Parama are all functionally able bodied, they perish to hatred, revenge, and betrayal in the gory drama, while Dumka – a differently abled orphan – limps to 'functionality' on screen.

The village collective is not a homogeneous, bound entity. Fissures infest the village, even as violence is often masked and anonymous. For instance, the 'profane' henchmen of *Subramaniapuram*, in anonymity, direct their vengeance on the committee chairman on a celebratory night at the village fest for his 'noble' hypocrisy. And they pick up a bloody fight at the cinema theatre, which is immediately prone to group clashes. It is never a homogeneous fan collective. It is an excellent example to understand that though the village stands as a collective, the fissures and differences constitute it in the Third Wave – especially when dangerous and deviant heroes conscript Madurai.

Madurai in the Third Wave

Madurai provides meaning as an 'Other space' (Foucault 1986), as these films contain the expressive bodies of subaltern/lower caste and rowdies as conscripts within yet outside. It is a spectacle space that signifies decentralised despotism, yet these films imply that the familial space ought to be barricaded from the dangerous/deviant individuals who spatially comprise caste and criminality. Hence, these films constitute an altogether ingenious spectatorial address that contests the First and Second Waves.

Although these films destabilise dominant spectatorial address, the tragic ends attempt a shift towards the security of the familial space. Their erasures seem to recover the lost familial space back to the 'modern' Indian state. Though the films dislocate the domestic, familial space – for instance, the helpless, 'lower'-caste Murugan in *Kadhal*; a displaced, vulnerable Murugesan in *Veyil*; an orphan/criminal/inter-caste Veera in *Paruthiveeran*; and the careless rowdy sheeters in *Subramaniapuram* – the deaths relocate the systemic (casteist) structure. They do

not destabilise the caste order within the narrative space, though the films seem to have a realist caste critique in its narrative, as they actually express a melodramatic mode of address (Chakravarthy 2010, 12–21). The tragic ends of these films uphold the structure of casteist patriarchy indeed, and they preserve the absolute control and purity of the familial space in the social-imaginary that it represents. I extend this hypothesis to reflect that though these films portray caste and criminal spaces to destabilise them, they indirectly protect them.

For instance, *Veyil*'s opening scenes depict the villain rearing pigs in a pen. This is in contrast to Sivanandy Devar's – Murugesan's father – vocational space. He is a butcher who sells goat meat. Though both spaces depict an occupational association, the cultural connotations they raise are caste–conflict binaries. *Veyil* contains villainy at a culturally 'lower'-caste space. This recurs in *Paruthiveeran* as well. Kazhuvathevan supplies goat meat to hotels, wine shops, and festivals. His domestic space also converts into an occupational space. However, the *Kurathi*'s (the *Kurava* tribe grandmother of Veera) business is stamped by her outcaste/exterior status. Even the policemen mark the ascribed identity over her crime. Her domestic space is signified by the presence of a pig pen and gambling toddy drinkers. Profanity is contained in her space as a contrast to the *Oor*.

Kazhuvathevan's business network is depicted as an 'upper'-caste network. This is similar to the business and governmental network of Aishwarya's father in *Kadhal*. The actuality of Madurai space appears to be marked by caste identity in the Third Wave. *Paruthiyur* and *Subramaniapuram* as rustic spaces entail caste purity. In fact, the erasure of the 'profane' subjects, from the narrative, appears to entitle the sacredness of rustic space. For instance, Kurathi lives outside *Paruthiyur*, on the outskirts, where the illicit toddy business happens. *Kadhal* Murugan as an outcaste is ideally enclosed-off in his actual presence at the *Cheri*, where his house is coded with an ambedkarite blue. Thus, he is thrashed like a stray dog in the outskirts. *Kurathi* is also killed outside the *Oor*, and Veera's parents are killed in an accident on the outskirts. Veera is beaten to death at the village periphery. Azhagar and Parama are murdered outside *Subramaniapuram*.

The Third Wave apparently constructs the defying 'profane' subjects in outcaste spaces, outside the *Oor* and *Puram* of Madurai. In fact, they eliminate the dangerous subjects and construct the rustic space as a caste 'pure' space.¹⁴ Apparently, these films 'implement *Manu dharma* treatment to the caste defying subjects in these spaces' (Shrirasa 2010; Chandran 2010). For instance, the women protagonists actively desire the 'lower'-caste men in these select films, while they intervene with casteist patriarchy. Yet, in their individual struggles, they fail to the dominant structures of the caste collective. The films represent them as failures of an individual woman's aspiration against casteist patriarchy. The strong, expressive women portrayals intercede with patriarchy at moments only to be erased (*Kadhal*, *Veyil*, and *Paruthiveeran*) or made use of by others (*Subramaniapuram*). The films protect the caste purity by repudiating the mixture of blood between caste-defying individuals. The caste structures within the film narrative protect the women as sacred objects of caste purity as they repudiate the women subjects from marrying 'other/outcaste' men.

Cinema participates in this discourse where the sociopolitical structures protect land and property through caste-marital alliance. The narrative and characterisation do not disturb or displace the dominant caste structures. In fact, they recover and uphold them. The films offer sympathies and individual rescuers as a response to this recovery. The camera acts as a cultural apparatus that profess the security of property through caste marriage alliances. For instance, Murugan and Aishwarya; Murugesan and Thangam; Veera and Muthazhagu; Azhagar and Tulasi: their love affairs are punished horrendously. Their tragic ends are bloody mutilations as they are linked to the articulation of caste norms as an actual culture in the Madurai genre.¹⁵

Conclusion

Murugan, Murugesan, Veeran, Azhagar, and Parama are losers in that they are portrayed as deviant. They are a constant intrusion to the protection of the caste spaces. At the moment of their deaths, they are portrayed as unproductive members of the family and as dangerous individuals to the social-imaginary. In sum, it is explicitly caste that makes them 'dysfunctional' and felonious. Their deaths are indicators of terrible violence, and they, as individuals, are outside the protection of modern law. They are killed by individuals or collectives who are not particularly accountable to the law. For instance, all the protagonists are killed or attacked by men from the influential dominant collective. The murders of Veera, Murugesan, Azhagar and Parama, and Murugan are bloody mutilations. Murugesan is slashed by knives; Veera is beaten to death; Azhagar and Parama are betrayed and butchered to death. Their bodies and minds are fragmented. Though Murugan is trounced, his life is spared and he goes insane. They are de figured and erased from the secular-modern 'Indian' social-imaginary.

However, the Third Wave heroes are not unlikely and situational heroes, who are deviant because of certain deficiencies, be they physical, psychological, or sociocultural. More likely, the Third Wave heroes' deviance is defiance itself in that the spectator-subject is given to understand that they are not amenable to civilisation and citizenship. They are represented as vile conscripts or infestations whose unruly acts are well within the purview of the state while they themselves remain beyond its pale, unworthy of salvation. This spatial discourse, however, dangerously justifies the reproduction of caste through contemporary cinematic cultures and has indeed impressed upon a wave of films on Madurai in the early twenty-first century. 'Madurai-formula films' are also 'deleterious consequences of a culture that emphasizes masculine caste pride and celebrates caste honor and violence' (Damodaran and Gorringe 2017).

In other words, they are left alone to protect themselves against the carnage. Though they embody excessive caste and crime, they remain as 'no bodies' when defined by caste norms and legal apparatus. They are excluded as well as included by the same norm. As heroic subjects, they pose a challenge to the narrative of the citizen-subject. The films provide the citizen-spectator a danger-ous/deviant 'other' as an identification to disengage with. Through exclusion,

they signify the reconfiguration of the Madurai hero as a conscripted heroic subject.

Indeed, while the ‘new Madurai genre’ articulates caste as an ‘other’ of the Indian modern, it also protects, at the same time, the casteist norms in their recurring narratives. These films reproduce Madurai by reconstituting the conscripted hero in the caste and criminal spaces (Leonard 2015). The depiction of caste norms, as the actual culture of Madurai, in these films goes on to constitute the common sense of caste (Damodaran and Gorringer 2017). The ‘othering’, thus, is based on this overlap, so much so, murders, honour killings, political caste alliances, statements, and activities that are considered normalised and generalised seem to be produced through cinematic cultures. However, the spectre of caste in the twenty-first-century Tamil cinema is slowly but powerfully exorcised by the relentless efforts of directors such as Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj, who counter these waves to rescript the emergence of a ‘Casteless Collective’.

Plot summaries

Kadhal (Love, 2004) is a tragic-romance about an inter-caste love affair that is set in Madurai city. The film captures the travails of runaway lovers and their ‘secured’ return homeward. The narrative constructs Madurai as an entity steeped in caste conflict and violence. The slang and cultural practices portrayed differentiate this film from other contemporary films. *Kadhal* also attempts to naturalise itself by proclaiming that it is no make-believe but a real story. This naturalisation is also more effective as a new cluster of actors, unfamiliar and unknown, add ‘authenticity’ to their roles – reportedly, some of them were just picked off the street.

Veyil (Torrid Sun, 2006) is a tragic-romance set in a village near Madurai. The protagonist and narrator Murugesan highlights the historic changes that have undergone over a period of time in the place he lives in. Unlike other popular films, this one distinctively presents the narrative of a wretched, prodigal son’s life through a confessional mode. The film presents Madurai as a bloody locale of violent business deals. The police and systems of justice are shockingly absent from the whole narrative. The experiments in the narrative mode, such as childhood memories as flashbacks and ‘unusual’ characterisation, mark this film as different from others. The film depicts cinema theatre as a spectacle space.

Paruthiveeran (Cotton Champ, 2007) is a tragic-romance set in Paruthiyur, a village near Madurai. The film portrays the love affair between the daughter of the village chief – a dominant caste patriarch – and her cousin, a seasoned rowdy who is of mixed birth. The village is represented as a space of caste/clan violence, bigotry, and brash slipshod indolence. The folk performances within the film are famously rendered in a ‘documentary’ mode, further signifying the rustic difference from an urban lifestyle. Combined with the flashback narrative mode, it is an excellent example of ‘ethnographic realism’.

Subramaniapuram (2008) is a racy thriller that recounts the tragic encounters of three young rowdy sheeters. The film depicts the Madurai town of the 1980s and

the party politics that individuals and families are caught up in. *Subramaniapuram* portrays the lives of five henchmen who are used by their powerful acquaintances and friends. The new shades in characterisation of these henchmen clearly distinguish them from the type-heroes earlier popular Tamil films created. Cine-fan culture and village fest recur as spectacle spaces. The narration is predominantly through the flashback mode.

Notes

- 1 Films such as *Ghilli* (Risk Taker, 2004), *Red* (2004), *Virumaandi* (2004), *Kadhal* (2004), *Veyil* (2006), *Sandaikkozhi* (Battle Rooster, 2006), *Paruthiveeran* (2007), *Subramaniapuram* (2008), *Vennila Kabbadi Kuzhu* (White Moon Kabaddi Team, 2009), *Goripalayam* (2009), and *Aadukalam* (Playground, 2011).
- 2 Incidentally, *Kadhal* and *Veyil* were produced by the famous director S. Shankar. Balaji Sakthivel and Vasantha Balan worked as assistants in his earlier films. These films were Shankar's premier productions. *Paruthiveeran*'s producer K.E. Gnavelraja is related to actor Karthi's family (Karthi is brother to better-known actor Surya and son to veteran actor Sivakumar). The movie was dropped many times before it was completed, with the aid of its director Ameer Sultan. *Subramaniapuram* was produced by its director Sasi Kumar. All four films were not produced by big, established production houses but by individuals relatively new to the industry. The economic and production aspect of the 'New Wave' trend is an interesting phenomenon to study. Apparently, this is similar to the crisis in the mid-1970s where it manifested at the economic aspect of film production as well. Kaali states that film-making activity went down considerably as the leading production companies experienced considerable setbacks and opted either to close down business or cease active work temporarily. It is also noted that when MGR announced his return to film in the late 1980s, the whole situation had changed so drastically that he had to review his decision and give up his acting profession completely (2000, 169).
- 3 The films of the likes of *Apu Trilogy* (Bengali) by Satyajit Ray, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Bengali) by Ghatak, and *Do Bigha Zameen* (Hindi) by Bimal Roy were the ones which created a wave of new cinema.
- 4 Devasundaram interestingly distinguishes the new cinemas as *indies* (2018, 1). Such an argument however cannot hold contiguous because post-1990s, perhaps, 'Bollywoodization of Indian cinema' (Rajadhyaksha 2008) has affected all the major film industries. Thus, one may argue that instead of a structural departure from earlier modes of film-making, what we also witness are waves of movement across the time period, and there are multiple responses even within the same industry.
- 5 Though the phrase 'Third Wave' tempts one to reflect on the alternative 'third front' in Indian politics, unfortunately I do not use this particular phrase with such a connotation.
- 6 This refers to the period where the rise of caste and religious movements shifted attention to identity politics as well as to the economic reforms of 1991 that sparked off major debate over the future of state-led development, liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation (Hardgrave and Kochanek 2008, 197).
- 7 For a detailed account of the three waves, see my article that uses the concept *heterotopias* to analyse the recurrence of spectacle spaces in the construction of Madurai genre and the production of caste in contemporary films (Leonard 2015).
- 8 Similar films were also made in the other South Indian cinemas. An example is Bharathan in Malayalam, whose films were acclaimed for their 'realistic' portrayal of rural life in Kerala and were termed as 'middle of the road cinema', which took a middle path between art house and commercial cinema. Some of his early films include *Rathi Nirvedam* (1978), *Thakara* (1979), *Lorry* (1980), *Chaamaram* (1980), *Parankimala* (1981), *Marmaram* (1982), and *Ormakkayi* (1982).

- 9 Rajan Krishnan analyses the formation and death of the hero-types in Tamil cinema in a Tamil article. He gives the example of the cinematic image of MGR, which is distinguished as an 'adventurous type-hero' from the character hero/actor type, often portrayed by Sivaji Ganesan. Post-1970s, Rajini Kanth signified the 'angry young man' action hero image which was an extension of the 'adventurous type-hero.' Krishnan concurs that MGR was the most effective representative of the 'adventurous type-hero' from 1948 to 1977, and Rajini Kanth as the 'action type-hero' dominated the screen from 1984 to 2004 (Krishnan 2010A, 7-11).
- 10 For instance, Pandian discusses the folk ballads of Muthupattan, Chinnanadan, Chinnathambi, Jambulingam, and Madurai Veeran, to name but a few, who were essentially low-caste men, to argue MGR films have appropriated the ballads and reconstituted to construct the hero-ideal (Pandian 1989, 62-68).
- 11 See the academic debates for a whole year in 1994 on Mani Ratnam's *Roja* by Tejaswini Niranjana, Venkatesh Chakravarthy, and MSS Pandian, S.V. Srinivas, and Rustom Bharucha in *Economic & Political Weekly*. The movie received wide commercial and critical acclaim in 1992 immediately after the *Babri Masjid* demolition as it grabbed attention of the wider Indian audience. The movie deals with contemporary issues of separatism in Kashmir and wider notions of Indian nationalism. The academics critiqued the constructions the film posed to the questions: who is an Indian? What defines him/her? And what is the 'state' of the Indian nation?
- 12 *Bambaram* is a game played by spinning tops in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. It is also known as *Lattu* in Urdu. The game is more common amongst the boys.
- 13 The term *lumpen* refers to the category *lumpenproletariat* which is used in Marxian social theory. It situates the figure outside any social semiosis of class. A *lumpen* is precisely one whose relationship to money is unmediated by any value, any bonds of class solidarity, or ties of community (Stallybrass 1990, 65-94).
- 14 Valentine Daniel refers to *Oor* as the sacred geographical space marked by the temples of a village. The term *Oor* is defined in a person-centred manner: a place is named and referred to according to the people who populate it. *Oor* is where higher castes live, and therefore it is considered pure and respectable in contrast to a 'colony' or *cheri* (1987, 63-94).
- 15 Widespread criticism on these films appears in Tamil little magazines. For instance, Chandran comes down heavily on these films for being casteist. He equates these films to those of Mani Ratnam, Sankar, Kamal Hassan, and Selvaraghavan for its ideological currency (2010). Shrirasa analyses that how in recent filmic representations, Madurai comes to stand to signify Devar caste culture as the normative culture of Tamil Nadu. Apparently, he also observes that many producers and directors belong to the Devar community in the Tamil film industry, which is based in Chennai (2010).

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