

# A Study of Cultural Invasion: A Subaltern Perspective through the Movie Kabali

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## ABSTRACT

This article concentrates on how cinema is used to spread an ideology. Indian cinema, known for its diversity and vibrancy, has witnessed several films that have left an indelible mark on both the industry and the audience. Among these, "Kabali" stands tall as a cinematic masterpiece that transcended regional boundaries and garnered international acclaim. The movie was released across the globe in July 2016. The challenges, problems, and daily battles of the subaltern classes are depicted clearly in this movie. The movie conveys to the audience that the "culture invasion" and the need for education must be extremely careful. It means that caste should be annihilated. This movie has visuals, images, symbols of culture and icons from the world's 'equal rights movements.' This film aims to legitimize their places in the mainstream media by the subaltern classes. Additionally, the movie exemplifies on how Malaysian Tamilians fight against Malaysian authoritarianism and the discrimination as they endure from China, as well as the internal splits of castes of Malaysia. The entire film expresses the togetherness of Tamilians. The structural use of semiotics in this film shall be discussed with respect to the subordinate classes.

**Keywords:** Cinema, Subaltern Classes, Education, Cultural Invasion, Semiotics

## INTRODUCTION

Movies are one of the most effective ways to reach a larger audience. It plays the finest part of all the media in conveying the message with its audio-visual and representational capabilities to its audience. While criticizing a social system, commending a cultural system, films always perform wonderful work in promoting change. This cinema serves as an alternative public place to represent and reinforce one's identity in many sectors of society. As Bywater says,

Film criticism, then, is a process that gives value to the reader and writer for beyond the scope of the immediate film or films under discussion, far beyond any influences on the making of future films. It is a process that encourages clear thinking, the weighing of alternatives, the evaluation of the evidence and the risk of having to defend the judgment publicly. It is an area where there are no easy answers, only myriad fascinating questions. It is site, an occasion, an act, a practice where we learn, as in all of life, that there is always more to a subject than meets the eye. (Bywater, 2009, p.xv)<sup>1</sup>

The cinema's visual narrative shows the choices, lives and identities of the individuals. It has numerous subordinates and representational meanings that should be thoroughly studied and observed in relation to all possible dominant production and reception patterns. This social film represents the life of the oppressed worldwide and not from a 'dominantly interpreted' perspective but completely from is an instrument which was directed by the victim himself against the Indian repressive social structure. The visuals, shots, pictures, frames, spots, scenes, and conversations depict the cultural and economic life of underprivileged communities. The main objective of this study is the interpretation of the film with a subaltern perspective, as

<sup>1</sup> Bywater, Tim. *Introduction to film criticism: Major critical approaches to narrative film*. (Pearson Education India, 2009).

Carroll puts it, 'Film disseminates ideology'. (Carroll, 1985)<sup>2</sup> This cinema is intended to be interpreted very thoroughly, because of the star, value of the protagonist, who has been portrayed as the leader of Dalit and the rescuer of low-caste communities, in the movie<sup>3</sup>. Indian cinema has often been a medium for exploring societal issues and reflecting cultural contexts. "Kabali" takes this tradition to new heights by combining superstar Rajinikanth's magnetic presence with a socially pertinent narrative. The film's exploration of identity, community struggles, and cinematic craftsmanship makes it an intriguing subject for comprehensive analysis.

This article uses a semiotic analysis. The opportunity to understand the culture of the subordinate, the cuisine traditions, authenticity and loyalty are depicted in the film. The characters have been studied as representation modes and explained their identity. It is about the people who are active members of the Bahujan movement in a half-structured way or non-standards. The purpose of the study is to see the film that represents in the political movement in the society<sup>4</sup>.

### The Directors' Role

Pa. Ranjith started to obsess over everything, from the movie "Madras" to the "Kabali," wondering how everything got started. As soon as Rajini announced that he would be working with Ranjith on his upcoming film, many members of the casteist movement began to lose their minds. The posters started appearing sometime later after that. In one of the scenes, Rajini was seen breaking the shackles, in another, he was seen climbing out of a hole, and in yet another, he was shown sitting on a couch with his legs crossed while donning a coat and suit. All of these things were emblematic of a guy who belonged to the Dalit caste and was striving to stop his subjugation, climb out of the dungeon he had been forcibly thrown into, and establish himself as a successful member of society. After that, the teaser appeared. The meaning behind the film's eponymous title, Kabali, was not difficult to deduce. Kabali is a term given to a large number of Dalits. In movies, a comedic character of lesser social standing sometimes goes by the name Kabali. But in this movie, Ranjith subverts that image by having Rajini declare in the trailer that he is no longer the sort of goon who would accept instructions and stoop down like a slave since he has evolved beyond that persona. Kabali is able to retaliate. Then the singing started up again. Songs were themselves a kind of revolutionary art. It made the point very apparent what was being referred to.

The song lyrics in the movie such as "Neruppu da, nerungu da paapom, nerunguna poskkura kootam – I am a fire, if you dare, try approaching me, if you try to approach our group will destroy you". "Metukudiyin Koopadu ini naatukula kekkadhu – The rants of the elite shall not be heard hereafter". "Ulagam Oru vanukka Uzhaipavan yaar? Vidai Tharuvaan Kabali than Kalagam seidhu aandayarin kathai mudippaan" – Is the world for one man? Who is the laborer? Kabali will give the answer. He will do a revolt and end the tyranny of the ruling class". "Parayisai adithittu paatu kattu" – Lets play the parai drum and sing songs.

In contemporary culture, everyone is aware of the existence of caste; in fact, we are all aware of it. Despite this, those who gain from caste often deny its existence, and those who feel guilty about their participation in caste may do so intentionally. Therefore, every casteist was aware of the significance of the situation. After the songs and teaser had been out, they displayed their disapproval against Ranjith. The movie was then screened.

Before we go on to the movie itself, we should begin by expressing our gratitude to Rajinikanth for agreeing to appear in this movie and playing the part of Kabali, a Dalit. He delivered the lines as though he really felt what he was saying. According to the interviews that Ranjith provided, it would seem that Rajini did not have any issues with any of the Dalit-assertive conversations, particularly the one that focused on Ambedkar. In point of fact, it would seem that he was really enthused about the discussions. To your credit, Sir. It takes a lot of guts for a guy of such stature and with such a large following all over the globe to have voiced such defiant

<sup>2</sup> Carroll, Noël. "The Power of Movies." (*Daedalus*, 1985),79-103.

<sup>3</sup>Pa. Ranjith, Is Kabali a Dalit Movie? An interview with Kabali director Pa. Ranjith, News18 Tamilnadu, YouTube, 26 July 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDs9Z7SP4J>> [ accessed 23 July 2022]

<sup>4</sup> Thinkal Menon, 'Kabali movie review, Times of India (2016) <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/tamil/movie-reviews/kabali/movie-review/53335675.cms>> [accessed 28 July 2022]

sentences, particularly to include the name of Ambedkar in his film. This man absolutely deserves praise for what he did. To the best of my knowledge, the name Ambedkar has not been mentioned in any of the films produced by the Tamil film industry. Kamal Haasan, on the other hand, is a progressive actor who has been active reciting Bharathiyaar. Or engaging in the production of films like Thevar Magan and Sabash Naidu that glorify caste.

### **Subaltern Realities and Historical Consciousness**

"Kabali," a film directed by Pa. Ranjith and starring Rajinikanth, goes beyond its cinematic allure to illuminate the subaltern perspective. The movie not only tells a compelling story but also acts as a mirror to society, reflecting the struggles, aspirations, and agency of marginalized communities. This analysis delves deeper into the subaltern narratives woven into "Kabali," emphasizing its portrayal of social hierarchies, historical consciousness, and the role of resistance.

"Kabali" is not just a tale of a gangster's rise; it is an exploration of historical consciousness within the subaltern context. The film uses flashback sequences to provide insight into Kabali's past as a plantation worker, revealing the exploitation and discrimination faced by Tamil laborers. The film highlights the roots of present-day subaltern struggles by delving into history, allowing viewers to connect the dots between past and present.

The movie's approach to historical consciousness mirrors subaltern historiography's emphasis on reclaiming hidden narratives and questioning dominant historical accounts. Kabali's journey is a manifestation of this collective memory, propelling the subaltern to confront their history and seek justice.

### **Socio-economic Struggle**

The film's title begins by giving a glimpse into the sculpted image of laborers of the lower class. In the pattern of a visual presentation of the film, the title reiterates the audience that the film speaks about subaltern people. It describes their cultural practices, challenges to different types of oppression, and socioeconomic struggle against political powers in detail. Beverley clearly explicated in his essay about cultural practices and connected to Benjamin's aphorism as,

We know something about the nature of this problem. There is not, outside of human discourse itself, a level of social facticity that can guarantee the truth of this or that representation, given that the facts of memory are not essences prior to representation, but rather themselves the consequence of struggles to represent and over representation. That is the meaning of Benjamin's aphorism "Even the dead are not safe": even the memory of the past is conjunctural, relative, perishable. Testimonio is both an art and a strategy of subaltern memory. (Beverley, 1999, p.96)<sup>5</sup>

This symbol, as just an image of a delegate, plays a vital role of the process through which meaning is formed and transferred among people of the culture. From the beginning of Tamil cinema<sup>6</sup>, the name 'Kabali' was used to refer to a lower-class Dalit goon or a comic protagonist. But this screenplay change that he is not a goon who bends his back and to obey the commands, but rather the new 'Kabali' who hits him back.

### **Class Struggle and Empowerment**

At its core, "Kabali" is a story of the oppressed challenging the structures of power. The film vividly portrays the struggles of the working class against oppressive systems that exploit them. The Malaysian Tamil community, represented by Kabali's character, faces marginalization due to their ethnicity and socioeconomic background. The film's portrayal of Kabali's rise from a laborer to a gangster echoes the aspirations of the

<sup>5</sup> Beverley, John. *Subalternity and representation*. (Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Velayutham, Selvaraj (ed) (2008): "The Diaspora and the Global Circulation of Tamil Cinema," in *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film Industry*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 172–188.

marginalized to break free from systemic constraints.

"Kabali" also explores the intricacies of empowerment. As Kabali rises to prominence, he becomes a symbol of resistance for his community. His actions inspire others to unite and assert their rights. This portrayal of empowerment aligns with subaltern perspectives, which emphasize agency and resistance against oppression.

### Ideological Interpretations

The film, as a text, can tell more than what one assumes, something fresh can be always said, only because symbols are the basic foundation for an analysis that leads to an endless chain of gradual repercussions. For multiple interpretations text is more or less open. Film spreads ideological information. Pa. Ranjith<sup>7</sup>, the film's director, is highly inspired and motivated by scholars, activists and intellectuals from the university used the celluloid medium to spread the principles of these organizational intellectuals as he expresses in an interview with Dushara Vijayan. In India's subaltern class, these socio-cultural leaders fought a battle against atrocities, inhumanity, numerous discriminations, and forced economic hardship. In the following three phrases, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, described the essential nature of this movement: education, agitation and organization. The movie selectively follows these three main concepts<sup>8</sup>.

There are overt and covert allusions made in the film to Ambedkar and Ambedkarite political ideology as well as caste. A strong anti-caste awareness may be seen in Kabali. The clearest example of this is when he discusses the reasons why he loves to dress in a three-piece suit even in the summer. When he speaks of his marriage to his wife, who had to overcome opposition from her family, he brings up caste as a barrier that they had to overcome.

In spite of the fact that caste serves as the foundation for India's social hierarchy, the caste system is seldom shown in films created in India. This should not come as a surprise given that the majority of movie producers and directors in films in all languages belong to upper-castes. Because those who belong to upper castes are seen to be on the "good side" of the caste system, the invisibilization of caste works in their benefit. Amitabh Bachchan asserts to this as,

As one can see, aarakshan [reservation] for upper caste characters was near total in his films. And his directors too –from the Chopras and the Desais to the Mehrahs and the Mukherjees and the Sippy to the Sens and the Tandon and now the Jhas– were all upper caste or from brahminized upper shudra castes. And the writers credited with creating the 'angry young man', Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar: neither was from a lower caste or lower class background. While the former claimed an aristocratic lineage, and was reportedly called 'Prince' in his early days as an actor by his fellow actors etc, the latter was from a family of illustrious scholars, theologians and poets.

### Subalternity in the Movie

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, traces the word 'Subaltern' back to the beginning of the 20th century. It referred to people of "inferior rank," the downtrodden, the disadvantaged, the lower - class, the exploited, the frail, or anyone without political and economic power who is subject towards the ruling classes' dominance, which tries to deny the fundamental rights of participation, as active members of the same nation, in shaping local history and culture. In descriptive words, the subaltern is defined by means of a certain marginalized subject in any specific cultural or social setting<sup>9</sup>. The class is an economic status in India, whereas caste is a social rank. The poorer classes constitute the majority of the population<sup>10</sup>. Through cleverly organized film

<sup>7</sup> Arun Venkatraman, 'Kabali movie review: Pa. Ranjith's attempt to take a god and give us a man', Deccan Chronicle (2016) <<https://www.deccanchronicle.com/entertainment/movie-reviews/220716/kabali-movie-review-pa-ranjiths-attempt-to-take-a-god-and-give-us-a-man.html>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

<sup>8</sup> Ambedkar's demand for 'separate settlement. *Journal of Law and Conflict Resolution*, 3(9) (November, 2011), 151-168,

<sup>9</sup> Guha, Ranajit, ed. *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History*. Vol. 6. Oxford University Press, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> McNally, Mark, ed. *Antonio Gramsci*. (Springer, 2015).

narrative, it signifies the actual identity of their lifestyles as a unique piece denoting the culture, heritage, socioeconomic status, and their conflicts with the dominant upper-class system of film representation.

### Character Interpretation

The protagonist can be compared to Dr. B.R.Ambedkar. The protagonist and the other characters play important roles in the film as leaders of the elder generation as well as the modern age respectively in their pursuit of political power. The strong, extraordinary oratory and inspiring personality admires the protagonist in the struggle for the community. Their talk in the film depicts Dr. B.R Amedkar and Kanshiram's oratory talents, which have an immense influence on the lives of the elderly. Kanishiram organise and lead all victims of the system to education and political power. The main character advances morality and ideas. He is following Dr. B.R.Ambedkar's formula of "Educate, Agitate and organize." The only variance between Dr.B.R.Ambedkar and the protagonist is an activist as well as an academic. He is more like a pragmatist who successfully applied Dr. Ambekdar's ideas<sup>11</sup>. His ideas can be supported through Mishra's quotes as,

An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for covering carrying over a change taking place in one part to other parts. In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. (Mishra, 2010, p.62)<sup>12</sup>

An Islamic named Amir depicted the character of a close- aid the protagonist in the film. He is Kabili's friend and consultant. The close bond between both the 'Muslim' and the 'Dalit' depicts the two cultural and historical links. This film seems to be the rescuer of the faint masses of these two stereotypical identities.

### Dominant Representation

The prevailing concept of 'fair complexion' as attractiveness was dismantled with special symbolic references in the movie. 'In numerous films the physical characteristics of dark-skinned individuals have been connected with bad qualities and poor social positions over and over in harsh caricatures. These racist ideas produced social hierarchies based on apparent disparities in physicality. The film stresses the beauty of being black, in opposition to the hegemonic prevailing image of white skin as heroic and lovely. The wife tells her dark-skinned spouse that she loves to apply his skin color to her whole body, explicating the depths of her feelings for him and his 'black' skin tone. This film shows the self-expression of the black skin, which is freshly displayed. The film dismantled numerous stereotypes on different levels. The subaltern individuals who talk 'hardly' are fundamentally as hostile, disappointing and aggressive. While challenging this preconception, the film portrayed them as a vehicle of truth and dedication. Outside of this image, the film discusses how women's bodies undergo obsessive appearance.

### Attitude of Subaltern

The pictures of Buddha, Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, Nelson Mandela and Chinua Achebe have been used skillfully to decorate the walls of the film. These people, who come from various parts and backgrounds of the world, have fought for the suppression and tyranny of the political and social systems. It is a recommendation for the Bahujans to raise a voice against all sorts of prejudice and step up to the cause of humanity<sup>13</sup>. The link between the "Black culture" and the "Bahujan culture" is enormous. The film depicts India's lower caste leaders such as Phule, Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, and African and American superior leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr. or Chinua Achebe, which mean 'suppression' theory is global. It tried, by putting pictures from these figures in the film, to conceive the dominant social image construction. In numerous situations, the use of luxurious sofas is a metaphorical symbol of the power that continually occupies the protagonist.

<sup>11</sup> Ambedkar, B.R. *What Congress and Gandhi have done to Untouchables* (Gautam Book Center 1945).

<sup>12</sup> Mishra, Shewta N., ed. *Socio-Economic and Political Vision of Dr. BR Ambedkar*. (Concept Publishing Company, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Guru, Gopal, and V. Geetha. "New phase of Dalit Bahujan intellectual activity."(*Economic and political weekly*, 2000),130-134.

One of the songs depicts the body of the personality of Michael Jackson in the film. The ‘cultural vehicle of communication’ from songs and dance was utilized by black pop singer Michael Jackson to revolutionize the society. A message of resistance, agency and tolerance articulates Jackson's own body. His passionate cries encompass a history of discrimination, struggle and the wish to have freedom to form a united world community.

### **Bahujan Culture**

The film contradicts and rejects the noble premise that the culture can be produced solely by the dominating classes. The film depicts, unlike the Brahmanic manner of devotion to God, the cultural tradition of excluded communities<sup>14</sup>. Dalit-Bahujans' cooking traditions were shown of a restaurant in the residence of Amir. The characters debate the habits of meat eating, which indicate that a goat's meat is excellent. As Nisha point outs the culture of Bahujan as,

Bahujan comes from Buddha’s “Bahujan hitay, bahujan sukhay”. Bahujan (Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes) is a political identity that Saheb Kanshi Ram, a name to reckon with, since Ambedkar, in Bahujan movement; essentially a ‘self-respect’ movement unified the 85% of marginalized people of India into one identity. He converted Buddha’s social, material and spiritual philosophy into a political identity. But the same Bahujans’s lives operate under the hegemony of 15% upper castes in India – in the ascending order of caste varna it would be Vaishya, Kshatriya and at the top, Brahmins. These twice born castes fill almost all the positions of power in the government, law & order, judiciary, academia, media, art and cinema besides business and religion. (Nisha, 2018.p.3)<sup>15</sup>

Historically, the Islamic people and the Dalits have in their amicable relationship this same culinary practice. In a scene, the hero and his spouse walk to the temple to make a small offering to the God. The whole town is strongly linked with the Dalit Bahujan's cultural customs. As Marcus Garvey says, ‘A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots’ (Garvey, 2004)<sup>16</sup>. The director displays the Bahujans' indigenous culture, where animal sacrifices and massive sounds and drumbeats occur here, as opposed to the temple in a so-called 'pure' region, with its tranquil and calm ambience. The God is the egalitarian gypsy God, Madurai Veeran. This God is not the racial god of Brahmanic culture.

### **Subaltern Nature of Existence**

The film chronicles the adaptability of the subordinate classes. They fight hard for education, to acquire respectable employment and to achieve sophisticated livelihoods despite their poverty and poor economic standing. The flexibility is that in inhuman situations it is possible to carry out physical sweating and is sufficiently qualified to function in elegant air conditioning rooms.

In the first phases of the film, the protagonist, a plantation worker, becomes a “big shot” in the entire country and boldly claims he can do 'class' and 'mass work.' The clothing style of B.R.Ambedkar's style refers to the symbolic meaning of a character dressed in a three-piece suit. Suits are a hallmark of rebellion and a code of clothing self-formation. This declaration is an opposition to the subordinate nature of life. It is used to distort authority, position and social standing. It works as an instrument of resistance to the oppressive Brahmanic mindset. It implies that the lower castes' low social standing must be transformed into dignified and respectful situations. It is an attempt to achieve equality in terms of respect, decency, and friendliness.

The protagonist claims in the climax that he was not a leader of the clan but was born to rule the people. He

<sup>14</sup> Ilaiah, Kancha. *Post Hindu India: A discourse on Dalit-Bahujan socio-spiritual and scientific revolution*. (Sage Publications, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Nisha, Jyoti. "Gender Media Culture: Term Paper School of Media and Cultural Studies, (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Garvey, Marcus, and Bob Blaisdell. *Selected writings and speeches of Marcus Garvey*. (Courier Corporation, 2004).

says, ‘If it is a problem in my progress, then I progress surely more than you, I will get educated, I will wear coat and suit, I sit with my legs crossed in front you, stylishly’<sup>1</sup>[emphases added]. These debates are all about some caste-based groups that saw themselves as ruling clans that have fashionably dressed, wearing jeans and coolers against Dalit boys, and who are supposedly responsible in India for the surge in caste violence<sup>17</sup>.

### Complex Relationships

The film goes beyond the usual dichotomy of hero and villain, revealing the complexities of human relationships within subaltern communities. Kabali's relationship with his wife, Kumudhavalli (played by Radhika Apte), offers a nuanced glimpse into the challenges faced by subaltern women. Kumudhavalli's struggles reflect the burdens placed on women within marginalized communities, often carrying the weight of their families and the broader community. This movie subverts cinematic norms by presenting Rajinikanth in a role that is atypical for him. It challenges the commercial expectations of a Rajinikanth film by focusing on social issues rather than sensationalism. This shift allows the film to address subaltern concerns without compromising on its mainstream appeal.

### CONCLUSION

The movie de-establishes the traditional sign systems, which were long built in the cinema, by defying the accepted idioms of cinema. It is an extended social existence, which is characterized by caste realities and their social character. This film has developed specific ways of representing caste, class and gender combinations. Also, it is not surprising that there are just a few castes and vocational groups. Under the practice of cultural hegemony, Dalits and some other subaltern groups became invisible<sup>18</sup>.

In the realm of Indian cinema, "Kabali" stands as a remarkable testament to the power of storytelling, social commentary, and star charisma. It took the larger-than-life persona of Rajinikanth and merged it with a narrative that delved into the struggles of a marginalized community, effectively bridging the gap between entertainment and societal reflection. The film's global resonance is a testament to its universal themes, touching hearts across borders and cultures. "Kabali" transcended language barriers and became a cultural touchstone, fostering discussions about identity, justice, and the importance of standing up against oppression.

By seamlessly blending Rajinikanth's iconic style with a socially relevant narrative, "Kabali" set a new benchmark for Indian cinema, challenging filmmakers to think beyond mere entertainment and engage with the pressing issues of the world. Its impact continues to reverberate, inspiring both filmmakers and audiences to appreciate the transformative power of cinema. As time goes on, "Kabali" will be remembered not only for its charismatic performances and stylish presentation but also for its bold endeavor to shine a spotlight on social inequality. It will remain a shining example of how cinema can serve as a mirror to society, urging us to introspect, question, and ultimately, strive for a more just and equitable world.

<sup>17</sup> Chatterjee, Partha: “Caste and Subaltern Consciousness,” *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Ranajit Guha (ed), New Delhi (Oxford University Press, 1994) 169–209

<sup>18</sup> Desai, Manan. "Caste in black and white: Dalit identity and the translation of African American literature." (*Comparative Literature*, 2015): 94-113.

<sup>1</sup> My translation