

Paper

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Changing Roles of Dalit Women in Indian Cinema

Abstract

Representation of Dalit women has been grossly victimized in Indian cinema history. Social media plays a significant role in Dalit issues raised in the mainstream domain and substantially changes have been manifested. Dalit women's image in contemporary cinema is changing, but slow-paced. Many Dalit-Bahujan filmmakers are making movies about Dalit issues in regional and mainstream cinema industries from Dalit perspectives. In the south Indian cinema, Pa. Ranjit, Mari Selvaraj, Vetrimaaran, and in Marathi cinema, Nagraj Manjule, Bhaurao Karhade; in Hindi Neeraj Ghaywan and Nagraj Manjule are noted filmmakers. As well as non-Dalit filmmakers are Subhash Kapoor, Sarthak Dasgupta and T.J.Gnanavel. Over a past decade, Indian cinema has witnessed a substantial transformation in the way cinematic perspectives portray Dalit women in cinema. Dalit filmmakers' films portray that Dalit women are active, aggressive, more independent, and confident, awaked about rights, dignity, identity, and honor. They are adhered to ethics in construction of movies with respect to the female bodies and social life. Primarily focuses on the assertions to emancipation from caste and gendered inequalities rather than victimization. The article emphasizes on these changing roles of Dalit women portrayed in Indian cinema and their influence on the Brahmanical patriarchal society with the highlights of the representative Dalit filmmakers' films. The study deals with how the depiction of Dalit women are transformed from vulnerable to aggressive, negative to positive, passive to active, and casteless. The study incorporates feminist film theory to unravel the changing role of Dalit women in Indian cinema.

Keywords: Cinema, Representation, Dalit Women, Feminism, Subaltern, Transformation.

Introduction

Overviewed to Indian cinema history, Dalit women are often stereotyped portrayed as caste and gender victims, socially deprived, facing sexual assaults, and survivors through the dominant caste men's perspective. From *Achhut Kanya* (1936) to *Chauranga* (2014), such a legacy is a trend in the cinema industry established by dominant caste established filmmakers. Primarily in movies, men are portrayed as characters that are suitable for propelling society's ideas of masculinity, while being disabled, and being vulnerable, with misogynistic stereotypes are used to represent women (Biswal, 2017). One reason is that the producers are confident that crowds will pack theatres, and blockbusters will be well-liked. The lack of equality on and off-screen has

therefore brought attention to issues of gender stereotyping, the standard of media that the general public consumes, and the incorrect idea of a balanced society.

The mechanics of caste distinction in rural Indian society were closely examined in Frank Osten's *Achhut Kannya* (1936), even though Nitin Bose's *Chandidas* (1934) and V. Shantaram's *Dharmatma* (1935) only hinted at the sensitive subject. *Sujata* (1954) by Bimal Roy was another notable attempt to explore this subject. Other classic attempts to explore this theme was Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974), *Nishant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976), *Aarohan* (1982), *Mandi* (1983), Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980), and more recent movies Prakash Jha's *Aarakshaan* (2011), *Pareeksha* (2020), Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* (2019), *Madam Chief Minister* (2021) by Shubhash Kapoor, *The White Tiger* (2021) by Ramin Bahrani and remarkable movie *200 Halla Ho* (2021) by Sarthak Dasgupta. Some movies project the caste-gender intertwining in various regions of India. Notable among these are *Malapialla* (The Outcast Girl, Telegu, 1938), *Bharathi Kannamma* (Tamil, 1997), *Oruththi* (A Girl, Tamil, 2003), *Papilio Buddha* (The Malabar Banded Peacock Butterfly, Malayalam, 2013). Many others have attempted to reinvestigate the caste issues through the cinema.

Similarly, Nagraj Manjule's *Pistulya* (Marathi, 2009), *Fandry* (Marathi, 2014), *Sairat* (Marathi, 2020), *Pawasacha Nibandh* (Marathi, 2020) and *Jhund* (Hindi, 2022), have explored Dalit-Bahujan communities life and experiences. *Kabali* (Tamil, 2014), *Kaala* (Tamil, 2018), and *Sarpatta Parambarai* (Tamil, 2021) by Pa. Ranjit have built strong characters of deprived people. Mari Selvaraj's movies *Pariyerum Perumal* (Tamil, 2018) and *Karnan* (Tamil, 2019) constructed Dalit female and male characters as profoundly courageous and presented powerfully. Vetrimaan's movie *Asuran* (2019) remarked on the history of Indian cinema. And Filmmaker Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan* (Hindi, 2015) and *Geeli Pucchi* (Hindi, 2022) are among the less-than-stellar attempts. These Dalit-Bahujan film artists are re-constructing the Dalit characters through their perspectives. Suraj Yengde calls this filmmaking 'Dalit Cinema' (Yengde, 2018). Portraying Dalit lived experiences of 'being' and reifying them at the collective level, Dalits negotiate the meaning of collective victimhood in diverse artistic expressions. It further causes a radical transformation in the fundamental interpretation of their state of being the victims by expressing a sense of resistance (Vyas & Panda, 2019; Murthy, 2013). In contrast to earlier cinematic portrayals, which mostly portrayed Dalits as victims of violence and atrocities committed against lower caste people, the modern Dalit representation in Indian cinema has nuanced characteristics. This change has progressively occurred due to Dalit filmmakers entering the film industry. The study demonstrates how Dalit women's roles transform from victims vulnerable to aggression in to a strong self-sufficient personhood. How Dalit film artists are deliberately erasing the stereotypical portrayal of Dalit women through their cinema. Dalit filmmaker's Dalit women protagonists are neither social victims nor sexually assaulted by Savarna, but they are independent persons who fight for rights; are awakened and educated. The study examines the transformation of Dalit women's role in the cinema industry by Dalit-Bahujan filmmakers.

Transformations of roles

A duality in representation has resulted from the narrative technique, which was seen to be a crucial component of the success of Bollywood films, and has resulted in the depiction of women not only as the perfect wife and ideal mother but also as vamps and harlot (Manzar, & Aravind, 2019). In the last decade, Dalit women's roles have gradually transformed from victims to active, passive to aggressive with identity and honor in the Indian cinema industry. Two significant reasons are social media, and the entry of Dalit artists into the cinema industry. Savarna filmmakers have produced movies based on reality with their imaginary cinematic depiction of Dalit women through the male perspective. The scenario of stereotypical portrayal of Dalit women is still followed by contemporary non-Dalit filmmakers. Therefore, the scenario changes when Dalit filmmakers enter in the cinema industry. Pa. Ranjit, Mari Selvaraj, Vetrimaaran, and T.J.Gnanavel are in the South Indian cinema industry. In Marathi, Nagraj Manjule and Bhaurao Karhade are contributors to representing the accurate agency of subaltern Dalit women. Neeraj Ghaywan and Nagraj Manjule are in the Hindi cinema industry along with other famous non-Dalit filmmakers.

"The cinematic interventions of contemporary Dalit filmmakers in India, Nagraj Manjule and Pa Ranjith, among others, represent modes of resistant historiography, employed by Dalits, against the aesthetic regime of stereotypical representation, through innovative techniques in visuals, sound, music, and cinematography. These filmmakers not only disturb 'the unconscious of caste' through an explicit anti-caste aesthetics but also produce affective, expressive archives. In other words, they bring into presence what was previously impossible through the processes of denunciation (of casteist images) and innovation (of anti-caste aesthetics)".

(Manju Edachira, 2022, p.47)

In contrast to earlier cinematic portrayals, which mostly portrayed Dalits as victims of oppression and atrocities committed against other caste groups, the modern Dalit representation in Indian cinema has multifaceted characteristics. The new portrayal of Dalits in recent Hindi, Tamil, and Marathi films as well as on other over-the-top platforms, has gradually established them as members of a larger middle-class culture or as urban aspirants who want to lead regular, respectable lives in large cities. On the other hand, the new Dalit characters are portrayed as people who are unconcerned with the principles of social justice and mostly survive in cities as vagrants (Wankhede, 2022).

Dalit and non-Dalit filmmakers produce Dalit-oriented movies to construct and consume empowering messages that challenge hetero-patriarchal relationship beliefs. Works such as *Geeli Pucchi* (Hindi, 2021), *Madam Chief Minister* (Hindi, 2021), *200 Halla Ho* (Hindi, 2021),

Jhund (Hindi, 2022), *Kaala* (Tamil, 2018), *Sairat* (Marathi, 2016), and *Pavsacha Nibandh* (An Essay of the Rain, Marathi, 2022), *Jai Bhim* (Tamil, 2021) comprise of the Dalit-centric cinematic paradigm. Nagaraj Manjule's debut movie *Fandry* (Marathi, 2014) has depicted women characters working with male members. There appears no difference between men and women based on gender; in the household, females have similar status with men, and female characters are involved in financial decisions of homemaking and support. Even though they are more contributes to making home and being livelihood. Women are existing with men, working hard outside home as well as playing the role of homemakers. In the Dalit life, they are workers, house-makers, financial supporters and decision makers, more independent than Savarna females; they do not live in the *parda* (veil) under male dominance. Nagaraj Manjule's *Sairat* (Marathi, 2018), a blockbuster art piece, broke all Marathi film industry's financial records. The narratives of *Fandry* and *Sairat* demonstrate how caste consciousness can be portrayed by providing them an experiential framework (Ingle, 2018). This new era has started in the cinema industry about Dalit-Bahujan stories which have received massive popularity notwithstanding the language barriers. The female character is strong, aggressive, active, independent, and a confidante that had never been portrayed in cinema history (Moini, 2019). Manjule effectuated an intense, critically poised realism, which brought forth the poignancy of disquietude, caste atrocities, and humiliation of Dalit life (Ingle, 2018). *Pavsacha Nibandh* (An Essay of the Rain, Marathi, 2020) is short film that revolves around the schoolboy who has no *pucca* house. One day, the mother of the boy, while returning from the farm, finds her husband fallen under the tree. In the rain, she carries her dunked husband. She also collects water in pots as it enters in the shack from every side. The woman's character is self-independent, confident, supporting and parenting her drunkard husband, providing child education, and facing every trouble and solving every issue without fear, adhering to the larger fearlessness of Dalit-Bahujan women. Metaphorically and literally, in *Pavsacha Nibandh* (An Essay of the Rain), men depend on women. A tribal sportswoman Monica faces many issues, including identity and nationality. *Jhund* (2022) accurately portrays how deprived communities' women fight for rights. Finally, Monica enters the national football team to play for the country. A domestic victim Rajiya an minority woman have represented strong, active and independent character in *Jhund* by Nagaraj Manjule. Beyond the stereotypical depictions that limit women to domestic or caring tasks, their involvement in employment outside the home is being widely explored by Dalit filmmakers' movies. Their characters are bolder and more courageous in comparison to women belonging to the elitist or Brahmanical class (Moini, 2019).

Geeli Pucchi (2022) breaks down the traditional gender stereotypes of presenting Dalit women protagonists as victims of social discrimination and rape by Savarnas. The establishment of alternative cinema production is a significant initiative to erase the prejudiced stereotypical representation of Dalit women. It is part of the counter-cultural politics of Dalits, representing the Dalit culture and consciousness. The options created by initiating cinema production provide an opportunity to have options open and reject Brahmanical cinema aesthetics in popular cinema culture. Dalit filmmakers are responsible for making the cinema that would

bring social change by representing Dalit experiences accurately and authentically in their art. Dalit filmmakers seem to have less interest in the money business and are more focused on uplifting Dalit status in society through accurate representation of Dalit people and culture. They are interested in representing the excluded or marginalized communities more than any political and economic interest in making movies.

Kumudavalli is another strong woman character in the movie *Kabali* (Tamil, 2016) (give more details of Kumudavalli). Pa. Ranjit breaks the existing aesthetics and interpretations behind *Kabali* and brings the alternative into the language of anti-caste aesthetics, which was an impossibility before. In *Kaala* (Tamil, 2018) an aggressive women character, Payal, is the girlfriend of Lenin Kaala's youngest son. She has an independent identity of a strong female activist instead of Lenin's girlfriend. Ranjith highlights their life, struggles, and celebrations. From the act of naming, these films offer an anti-caste aesthetic that is also an oppositional gaze to mainstream Indian cinema (Edachira, 2020). Dalit cinema takes enormous efforts to produce films that serve as role models for the Dalit community and work toward achieving equality and equitable society. Dalit protagonists face caste struggles and fight to annihilate gender discrimination and caste atrocities. In *Sarpatta Parambarai* (Tamil, 2021), Mariyamma is a strong role who fights to a rival gang, and supports her husband who was disappointed due to losing boxing matches. After frequently losing games, he becomes a drunkard, but Mariyamma does not give up on him. Mariyamma is an independent, courageous and supporter to husband women character depicted by Pa. Ranjit. Kema a female character in *Dhammam* (Tamil, 2022) depicting a curious girl. It has other shades of new Dalit generation depicted in the cinema who ask questions, is more awakened, educated and is an Ambedkarite. These are symbolic conflicts played on the screen between social and cultural norms that possess the potential to alter identity and its structures of reality (Rajan, & Venkatraman, 2017). In just ten years, Pa. Ranjith has put anti-caste politics in the front and centre of South Indian cinema, which previously normalized the glorification of dominant caste characters, and feudal society that they inhabit, their lives and culture. He successfully attempts to deconstruct the anti-caste, and cultural politics through cinema (Rajan, & Venkatraman, 2017; Naig, 2022).

Similar to the Dalit male aspirations to gain dignity and class mobility in urban life, the Dalit female characters are also shown as independent, rational, and ambitious agents, and are presented as a main protagonists (Wankhede, 2022; Kamble, & Biswal, 2022). Dalit film has established high standards for itself and has become a new wave of alternative cinema. It is important to emphasize alternative education, constitutional resolution, and empowerment, as well as the excessive celebration of violence, pride, and bigotry (Viduthalai, Divakar, & Natarajan, 2017). These alternative narratives prepare the ground for transformation by exposing the collective victimization arising from domination and invisibilized structural violence. South Indian feminist films: Over the past ten years, our films have become increasingly aware of the value of having strong female characters. As a result, powerful female characters have been portrayed in a wide range of movies that deal with different aspects of

women's life. When it comes to depicting female protagonists, Indian cinema does not confine itself to themes of marriage and motherhood alone. Using their own images of resistance, Dalits are able to register their existence and deconstruct the fragmentary, in fact a divided and shattered, picture of Hindu society through the use of visual imagery, which also helps to recognize the Dalits' invisibility. They extensively analyzed the visual arts utilized by Dalits in various contexts and has combined the voices of visuals in his work Dalit art and visual imagery (Thorat, 2012 & Tartakov, 2012). Indian cinema has attempted to be free from the religious respect for the high class, and upper caste norms, in order to provide a more pertinent voice to the voiceless, marginalized, oppressed communities (Sarker, 2017). Notably, some non-Dalit filmmakers have contributed to constructing accurate or non-prejudicial representations of Dalit women in the last decades. *Madam Chief Minister* (2021), *200 Halla Ho* (2021), and *Jai Bhim* (2021) have strong, aggressive, and active women characters portrayed as protagonists in the Indian cinema history. This is a substantial initiative of eras that largely witnessed the victimized image of Dalit women through the higher caste perspective. Selective new Savarna filmmakers endeavor to erase the stereotypical image of Dalit women by producing the alternative cinema. It gives a great time contributing to the unique structuring image of Dalit protagonists in Indian cinema.

The movie *Madam Chief Minister* (2021) is produced by Savarna filmmakers with different portrayal of Dalit women to early Indian cinema. It is a great endeavor for representation of Dalit women in Hindi cinema by Savarna filmmakers. The movie is based on the Dalit woman chief minister Mayawati, and also depicted confidant woman politician, representations Dalit-Bahujan majority population of India. Notably, Savarna imaginations to Dalit life and experiences have never justified to accurately portraying Dalit women's agency in cinema. They inappropriately have represented Dalit-Bahujan characters, their socio-political life and alternative cultural values. However, the transformation of Dalit women's agency in Indian cinema has been initiated by Dalit and non-Dalit filmmakers of recent times, which is aremarkable movement of the country's cinema history. Their movies contribute to breaking the stereotypical portrayal of Dalit women's agency that primly set up of victimhood image of Dalits in early cinema.

It is to be noted that another movie, *200 Halla Ho* (2021), is based on a real-life story from Maharashtra. Compared to the oppression and exploitation of upper-caste women, the exploitation of Dalit women is more intense and brutal because they are exploited at different levels at all stages of life. However, even then the film raises an important question that arises on the continuous portrayal of Dalit women as rape victims. The actual event-based movie represents the portrayal of Dalit women who raise their voices, fight for rights, using elements of violence and non-violence; legal and illegal. Such depiction of the women's has rarely been witnessed on cinema screen prior to *200 Halla Ho*. The victims also attack their rapist in the court to take revenge for their violence. For a decade they endured sexual violence, murders, and exploitations, and eventually use the weapon of violence for ending the era of

threat. "The narratives of Dalit women provide a unique concept of 'Indian intersectionality' where their social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and disadvantage, making them vulnerable to violence" (Sharma, 2022). From the Dalit feminist perspective, this event was remarkable and encouraging for Dalit movements to abolish all forms of oppression.

South Indian cinema has initiated to produce movies through the Dalit perspective. *Jai Bhim* (2021), is fundamentally based on an actual event as well; Sengeni's fight for justice. Her husband is murdered by police officers in judicial custody and the police declare that the accused is absconding from the jail. The story about the caste victims focuses on women's courageous fight against the entire police department through a liberal leftist lawyer. Eventually, she achieves justice through the 'Great Writ' of the habeas corpus case by a lawyer. *200 Halla Ho* (2021), *Madam Chief Minister* (2021) and *Jai Bhim* (2021) released in the same year on the ground of Dalit cinema and are commercially successful in India. This new path has been created by regional Dalit filmmakers from their several commercial success movies. Aforementioned non-Dalit filmmakers producing Dalit-centric movies do not seem to express sympathy towards Dalit protagonist and character. They have depicted strong, positive and heroic characters who were never portrayed previously in non-Dalit cinema. Women are portrayed in mainstream films as more autonomous, self-assured, and career-focused (Agarwal, 2014). In today's cinemas, the female protagonists are more than just the hero's prop. They have layers, gumption, and, most importantly, expanded screen time. When audiences want their fill of stories that empower women, they typically turn to popular Bollywood or Hindi movies. However, the importance of Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada language industries in southern India cannot be neglected. With the emergence of OTT and multiplex consumers as well as new wave directors, Indian cinema is exploring and experimenting, and as a result, a shift in the long-standing stereotyping of characters and themes has been transformed (Moini, 2019).

Conclusion

Subsequently Dalit women represented as social victims and rape victims through the Savarna perspective. There has been a long term stereotypical portrayal of Dalit women as characterless, voiceless, and more vulnerable in a society controlled by the dominant culture. This includes Dalit women's appearance, and presence, their character names, in persistent slavery and degradation at the hands of the Savarna. This made it easier to glorify upper-caste norms, mores, and beliefs, particularly those that brutally affect Dalit women. A stereotyped coding of the imagery of Dalit women from the early Indian cinemas' revealed that the representation of women, even when spoken to or spoken about, as both objects and subjects, was severely split along caste and gender lines. With the emergence of OTT and multiplex consumers as well as new wave directors, Indian cinema is exploring and experimenting, and as a result, a shift in the long-standing stereotyping of characters and themes has transformed.

Another important observation of this turn is that the women characters are courageous enough to speak against societal oppressions and prejudices; Dalit filmmakers are representing accurate agency of Dalit women in their cinema through their own perspective. They are contributing to destroy the existing degraded image of Dalit women in Indian cinema. Dalit women characters are now strong, confident, active, aggressive and more awakened and independent. From the last decade, anti-caste aesthetics and socio-cultural politics have entered the cinema industry to represent appropriate and effective portrayal of the subaltern Dalit women's agency in Indian cinema. Dalit cinema aims at strengthening the cultural and social polarization of women and regaining identity and dignity, among other goals. Dalit filmmakers' alternative representations in these places have proved to be a performative act; a resource to be used by the underprivileged. Dalit movies create a cinematography in which the subaltern Dalit can interface with the centre and frame inquiries about its existential status. The muted margins become performable and speakable in this way. As well as the neo-Savarna filmmakers have also taken the initiative to accurately, without prejudicial, represent Dalit women in their cinema. The Dalit female characters are shown as aspirations to gain dignity and class mobility in urban life; independent, rational, and ambitious agents, living their lives as main protagonists.

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