

## Rage and Resilience: Unveiling Marginalized Voices through Ponni's Defiance in Saani Kayidham

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the representation of women's resistance in south Indian cinema, with a focus on giving voice to marginalized women as portrayed in the film Saani Kayidham. It centers on the themes of systemic oppression, Justice, and human rights. The chapter also examines how the film depicts the struggles of the protagonist, Ponni. The film narrates Ponni's journey as she defies societal and institutional barriers to avenge the brutal crimes committed against her and her family. Despite enduring profound emotional, social, and physical trauma, Ponni emerges as a resilient figure, challenging the social upheavals rooted in caste-based discrimination and gender bias.

Saani Kayidham presents a compelling critique of a society structured by caste, creed, and status-based judgments of marginalized communities. These structures and constructs perpetuate dehumanization and systemic violence against them. The researcher employs the theoretical framework of intersectionality to highlight the devastating consequences of caste, and class inequities in Southern India. The film effectively portrays the intersection of caste, gender, and socio-economic oppression. This analysis emphasizes the transitional role of Indian cinema in portraying the plight of women's resilience and resistance. Ponni's resilience and rage serves as a powerful commentary on women's safety and the systemic failures of Justice. This chapter also engrossed with the experiences of women who face multiple forms of discrimination, calling for societal introspection and systemic change.

**Keywords:** Women's Resistance, Resilience, Intersectionality, Systemic oppression and Violence, Dehumanization and Social Justice

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Films in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century were more male centric and female were given a role to beautify the body for the audience. Filmmakers now are exploring diverse narratives that highlight the complexity and agency of the female characters in real lives. Traditionally, they were depicted more in traditional roles emphasizing potent psychological facts like self-sacrificing, family oriented and the purity of their character. The woman characters shown more generous by having immense kindness, and innate selflessness and were more pleasing.

### 2. EVOLUTION OF TAMIL CINEMA

The First Tamil Truth movie was released in Tamil Nadu by Mr. Nataraja Mudaliar. The film was a hit at the time. With this success, various Tamil movies were made. Keechaka Vadham was the first silent Tamil Film in Tamil Cinema. Kalidas became the first talking film released in the year 1931. It was a commercially successful movie in those days. Film is an important art of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The film reflects society through audio and video tools. Society follows the norms which are political, economic, and cultural aspects.

According to C.S. Lakshmi, in Tamil society, Good women are those who endure a high degree of chastity, knowledge, and motherhood, whereas bad women are those who are talkative, impulsive, and glamorous. Many of the Tamil films portray women who are educated and rich as arrogant and bad. This helps us to come with an opinion that film plays a role in stopping the economic growth of women.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Agarwal (2014) observed that over past decades, Indian film has witnessed a significant transformation in the way women are portrayed through films. Contemporary films portray women as more independent, confident and career-oriented. This article deals with the fast-changing role of women portrayed in Indian film and its influence on the patriarchal Indian society with a focus on some representative Kollywood films.

The Film communicates not only ideas but also portrays the representation of different types of human beings male or female. Male characters are portrayed as independent whereas female characters are always rely upon others and portrayed as subordinates to women and housewives. Motherhood, as an emotion and a relationship, has undergone profound transformations over time. Traditionally defined by biological connections, the concept of mothering has expanded to include social, cultural, and emotional dimensions that transcend genetics. In contemporary discourse, motherhood is no longer confined to the conventional image of a biological caregiver but is instead recognized as a complex and layered role shaped by love, nurture, and commitment. Tamil cinema, with its rich storytelling tradition, has played a crucial role in reshaping these narratives, offering diverse representations of motherhood over the decades.

Historically, Tamil films have portrayed mothers as self-sacrificing figures, embodying love, patience, and resilience. The 1950s and 60s were dominated by films such as *Pasamalar* (1961), where the motherly figure was glorified as the moral compass of the family. The idealized mother was often a widow or a suffering woman who prioritized her children's needs above her own.

Mothers in the past occupied rigid roles within the domestic sphere, primarily responsible for caregiving, child-rearing, and household management. The emotional labour of motherhood was deeply intertwined with gender expectations, reinforcing the idea that a woman's primary identity was tied to her ability to bear and nurture children.

With changing societal structures, increasing gender equality, and evolving family dynamics, the definition of motherhood in Tamil films has expanded. Women today balance multiple roles as professionals, caregivers, educators, and leaders. The contemporary mother is no longer just a nurturer but also an individual with aspirations, autonomy, and agency.

Movies like *Kannathil Muthamittal* (2002) explore adoption, emphasizing that motherhood is about emotional bonding rather than biological ties. *Raatchasi* (2019) presents a motherly figure in a professional setting, showcasing a school principal who nurtures and disciplines students like a mother.

Single mothers, working mothers, and adoptive mothers challenge the traditional notions of maternal identity. Films like *36 Vayadhinile* (2015) depict the struggles and empowerment of a woman rediscovering her identity beyond being a mother.

The idea of mothering has grown to include non-biological caregivers such as adoptive mothers, stepmothers, foster mothers, and even grandmothers who take on parental responsibilities. The emotional connection between a mother and child is often stronger than biological ties, emphasizing that motherhood is more about care, love, and support than mere childbirth.

In *Kannathil Muthamittal*, the protagonist, played by Simran, raises an adopted child with unconditional love, while the biological mother's journey adds emotional depth to the narrative. In contrast, *Deiva Thirumagal* (2011) highlights a father's motherly role, redefining gender norms in parenting.

Moreover, community-based mothering, where women collectively raise and nurture children, highlights the social nature of maternal roles. Teachers, mentors, and guardians often assume motherly responsibilities, showcasing the breadth of mothering beyond traditional definitions. Films like *Raatchasi* and *Snegithiye* (2000) explore these themes through their narratives.

Cinema, literature, and media play a crucial role in reshaping perceptions of motherhood. Films such as *Moondram Pirai* (1982) and *Raja Rani* (2013) depict unconventional maternal figures who redefine caregiving. Women in these narratives are not only biological mothers but also foster figures who provide emotional security and guidance.

Tamil television serials also reflect these changing dynamics, portraying women who struggle with, reject, or redefine motherhood on their own terms. Strong female leads who prioritize personal growth while embracing maternal responsibilities challenge outdated stereotypes and advocate for a more inclusive definition of mothering.

In many Tamil films, mothers have acted as voices of resistance, using their maternal role to challenge patriarchal structures. The mother characters in *Aruvi* (2016) and *Peranbu* (2018) redefine maternal resilience by resisting societal stigmas around disability and independence. These films highlight how motherhood can be a tool of subversion rather than mere submission to societal norms.

Furthermore, characters like *Kaala's* (2018) Selvi, played by Eswari Rao, embody maternal strength that extends beyond nurturing to include political and social resistance. These portrayals signify that the mother is not just a passive figure of love and sacrifice but an active participant in dismantling oppressive power structures.

#### 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Theory of Intersectionality is originated in Black Feminism and Critical Race Theory. Intersectionality has become a " Travelling Theory". In Tamil literature, writers like Ambai and Sivashankari explore the challenges and triumphs of non-traditional mothers, further reinforcing the theme of resistance in maternal narratives.

Intersectionality challenges the idea of a good mother or a single ideal way of being a mother. The experiences of Intersectionality and Motherhood highlights the challenges faced by a marginalized mother. Intersectionality-informed intervention design may encourage reflection on the diversity of women and birthing. People in terms of pathways to pregnancy, unique healthcare needs and life circumstances.

Motherhood can be seen as an identity that intersects with other social identities such as race, class, and gender. This perspective highlights how these identities shape a mother's experiences and opportunities.

Some of the Tamil movies, where the women characters made history. Ex: Sarita as Kannama in *Agni Saatchi*. Tammannah as Subhashini in *Dharmadurai* (2016). This role visualizes the suffering womanhood, she is not happy with her husband. Being a mother in order to take revenge of her husband's cruelty, she marries Dharmadurai and leads her life. As a mother she transforms herself into a woman of wisdom. She shatters the inequality and break through the marriage problem. The outstanding woman shackles the patriarchal husband, and she builds her own space for her peace and well-being.

## 5. THE VICTIMS OF MARGINALIZATION

The movie *Saani Kayidham* is divided into four parts. The first part is titled as "The Land and its people". It mainly reflects upon the discrimination faced by the lower class community. This part begins with a group of men sitting in front of a factory and fighting over some property issues. A man named Anbu comes out of a toilets as it is dirty. Maari was called to clean the toilets infuriated him and he attacks the owner of the mill. Since, because he is supporting an old man to contest elections, there people are discriminated. Unnecessarily, they take ponni in the fight saying Maari is so relaxed because of his wife is a police. Maari explains this fight to ponni, but Ponni consoled him and advised him to get the job again as they have a family responsibility to take care of a girl child. Ponni compels him to get back to the job even if he has to apologize to the factory owners. This throws light into the light of women belonging to the lower caste. Eventhough Ponni is a police woman, she is afraid to ask her husband to fight back or file a complaint against those people who torture them on the basis of caste.

Steve Crabtree and Faith Nsubgwa have brought attention to the fact that women in many third world countries do not feel safe. They argue that women in many third world countries do not feel safe. They argue that women in these nations are often hesitant to seek help from the justice system due to concerns about the passive treatment of men from marginalized communities. As a result, women from these marginalized groups may be reluctant to engage with the legal systems for fear that their male counterparts will face harsh consequences even if they are provided with the facility to therapeutic programme after these punishments (Good Mark 47, Ptacek 68)

Maari was infuriated because of Mani's disrespectful words towards Ponni. This enrages Maari and he spits on mani's face. To revenge this act of Maari, Mani calls for a police officer named Deva a superior officer to Ponni. Deva calls Ponni to the spot in the context of settling a dispute. It is actually Mani's Plan. Anbu and his men brutally beats her up, do the sexual assaults. Sangayya and Dhanam waits for Ponni to come and pick her. But, they waited for a long time. She didn't reach home for a very long time. So, Sangayya took Dhanam to her house and made her sleep next to her drunken father. Sangayya waited for Ponni, meanwhile mani and his gang reach there to burn down Maari's house. They beat sangayya till he falls unconscious and burn the house with Maari and Dhanam sleeping inside. The poor father and the daughter were burnt to death. Sangayya couldn't help, He was helpless and shouted for help. The Superior police constable helped the culprits to exploit her on false pretenses. Ponni seeks justice for her husband and her daughter's death. But, the culprits use their influence and gets a minor sentence. They hide themselves in order to escape from the minor sentence.

Ponni teams up with her half-brother Sangayya to take revenge on the upper caste landlords.

Sangayya, the kind-hearted person wants to reconcile with Ponni as he has also suffered like her in his past.

The duo managed to hunt down and kill the culprits. Giri was killed by his relative due to an inheritance dispute. His Son Sudalai was escaped and survived from being killed.

Sangayya wanted Sudalai to be taken care of. But, Ponni denied because she was suspecting sudalai was also involved in the assault in that fateful night.

But, Sangayya supported Sudalai on that cause, and convinced Ponni to take care of him. Ponni and Sangayya started the mission by killing the culprits one by one. The death was as brutal as Ponni's husband and daughter's death.

Sharmila Trege, in her work *Dalit Women Talk* differently. A Critique of Difference and towards a Dalit Feminist Stand point states, "An Analysis of the practices of Violence against women by Caste would reveal that while the incidence of dowry deaths and violent controls and regulations on the mobility and sexuality by the family are frequent among the dominant upper caste Dalit women are more likely to face the collective and public threat of Rape, sexual assault, and physical violence at the work place and in the public" (78).

She holds the view that women face interesting forms of discrimination based on gender, caste, tribe and rurality which create complex systems of oppression. Among these dalit women are particularly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation by not only upper caste men but also men from the same Dalit community. As a result, Women face several layers of marginalization's based on caste, class and gender.

Ruth Manorama, a feministic critic affirms, Today Dalit women, who constitute the major working force are thrice alienated oppressed on the basis of class, caste and Gender. Guru emphasizes "The caste factor has also taken an account which makes sexual violence against Dalit or Tribal Women much more severe in terms of intensity and Magnitude" (49). Marxist Critics view revenge as a response to class struggle and say that revenge narratives often depict the oppressed rising against unjust systems. It can also critique capitalist exploitation. How revenge is used as a tool of rebellion against the ruling class. Ponni a police constable represents a traditional mother figure bound by duty and familial responsibility. Her transformation from Maa to Mom mirrors the destruction of maternal identity in response to systemic violence.

Traditional Tamil Cinema often glorifies the "Sacrificial Mother", but *Saani Kayidham* subverts this trope. Ponni's vengeance challenges the patriarchal expectation that women should endure suffering silently. Her transformation aligns with the feminist reading of Medea, where revenge becomes a tool of agency rather than just destruction. The Film exposes

the intersection of caste, oppression, and gender violence. Ponni, belonging to a lower caste is violated not just as a woman, but as the representation of caste subjugation. The Journey from Maa to Mom (a culturally rich emotional role to Mom (a more neutral detached identity) reflects Ponni's erasure of traditional femininity. She becomes neither a grieving mother nor a righteous avenger, but a product of a brutal world that offers no justice.

## 6. SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ANALYSIS:

Caste is understood as a socio-psychological phenomenon that has an immense influence on many spheres of human social existence. The Dalits denoting the scheduled tribes/ castes who form major subaltern communities in India are constant victims of casteist oppression and harassment in different socio-political arenas. The routine acts of caste violence and sexual harassment operate on grounds of caste impunity. Dalit men and women experience torture and brutality from the dominant class who have granted themselves the legal immunity to "attack and destroy Dalits and adivasis" (Geetha 2013, 16). Such inhumane practices reinforce the caste class divide including gender relations. The Dalit struggle therefore is about gaining Personal and political dignity.

The film viscerally portrays caste not just as a social stratification, but as a psychological reality that infiltrates every aspect of human existence. Ponni's lower-caste identity becomes the basis for systemic discrimination within the police force and in society at large. She is not just ignored but deliberately denied justice, which echoes Geetha's observation of caste impunity where dominant caste men exercise unchecked power and violence over Dalits.

Historian Yengkhom (2012) rightly points out that the routine racial attacks, physical torture, rape and caste-based police violence in India are a "never-ending nightmare" for many minorities and oppressed groups. Ponni's journey is emblematic as the Dalit struggle for *personal and political dignity*. Her transformation from a law-abiding constable to a woman bent on revenge highlights the failure of state institutions to protect Dalits and reflects the alienation they face from justice and law. Ponni's vengeance is not just personal; it is deeply political, mirroring the larger subaltern fight against systemic caste violence and state apathy.

The lower social, political, and economic status of Dalit women makes them undergo the rigidities of double patriarchal oppression. One is intrinsic patriarchy which is the oppression of Dalit women by men in their community. The second is the extrinsic patriarchy which is the oppression and exploitation of Dalit women by the men of dominant castes. They suffer the constant threats of sexual exploitation and rape. Uma Chakravarti proclaims, "Upper Caste men have had sexual access to lower caste women, an aspect of material power they have over the lower castes" (2018: 81). Ponni is oppressed on both fronts within her own family and community where her opinions are disregarded, and more viciously, by the upper-caste men who treat her body and life as dispensable. Her sexual and social identity is constantly violated an embodiment of Uma Chakravarti's notion of upper-caste men having sexual access to lower-caste women as a form of material and patriarchal power.

In *Saani Kaayidham*, the rape and murder of Ponni's husband and daughter symbolize the calculated cruelty rooted in caste supremacy and patriarchal domination. This deliberate targeting of Dalit families is what Hengkhom refers to as a "never-ending nightmare"—a cycle of violence that is both normalized and institutionally supported.

In conclusion, the research paper has explored that *Saani Kayidham* marks a significant departure from the stereotypical representation of Dalit women and portrays them with voices. It is not just a revenge drama; it is a cinematic articulation of Dalit subaltern resistance. It exposes the deeply entrenched caste hierarchies, the failure of legal justice systems, and the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression. Through Ponni, the film enacts the struggle for reclaiming dignity and justice when institutions fail, rebellion becomes the only language left for the oppressed. Motherhood is an ever-changing, deeply emotional, and socially constructed experience. No longer bound by biology, it stands as a testament to the power of love, nurture, and human connection. As we move forward, embracing the diversity of mothering experiences will pave the way for a more inclusive and compassionate understanding of what it means to be a mother in Tamil cinema and society at large. More significantly, the mother's voice will continue to be an essential tool for resistance, dissent, and social transformation.

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