



Research article

Resisting Oppression: A Dravidian Ideological Perspective of *Karnan* (2021) in Tamil Cinema

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Abstract

Cinema, beyond being a medium for entertainment, serves as a tool of expression on society's socioeconomic, political, and cultural dimensions, says Damodaran (2017). In that aspect, the Tamil movie *Karnan* (2021), directed by Mari Selvaraj, is a notable cinematic portrayal of caste oppression and resistance in Tamil Nadu. This research paper aims to examine the film *Karnan* in relation to Dravidian ideology. The study focuses on aspects such as the depiction of caste oppression and social justice, as it parallels the real-life struggles of Dalits. The study utilizes a Dravidian ideological framework to emphasize the film's portrayal of caste-based discrimination, state violence, and collective resistance. By employing a qualitative analysis approach, including critical discourse analysis, the study critically interprets how *Karnan* aligns with Dravidian principles like self-respect, social justice and anti-caste politics. The research findings reveal how it reinterprets mythology, critiques systemic oppression, and amplifies the voices of subaltern groups. This study, with the historical, socio-economic, and political contexts of *Karnan*, presents a compelling narrative that contests prevailing caste structures and underscores the fundamental values of the Dravidian movement.

Keywords: Dravidian Ideology, socio-economic Caste, *Karnan* movie, social justice, Tamil cinema

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1. Introduction

Dravidian ideology is deeply rooted in the Tamil language and culture and has had a profound impact on Tamil cinema and literature through various media, including print and visual. Periyar spearheaded the Dravidian movement, advocating ideas including caste abolition, women's rights, and anti-superstition (Chellapillai, 2022). The cultural revolution has helped Tamil Nadu to advance socially under Dravidian political parties (Panneerselvam, 2022). Various media, including Bharathidasan's poetry, support rationalism, women's education, and anti-superstition and have spread Dravidian principles (T. P. & Kavitha, 2022). With Periyar, figures such as C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi produced powerful movies like *Velaikkari* (1949) and *Parasakthi* (1952), which were instrumental in disseminating Dravidian ideology. Dravidian thought is a socio-political and cultural ideology that emerged in South India, primarily in Tamil Nadu, in the early 20th century as a reaction to caste oppression, linguistic hegemony, and the perceived dominance of North Indian (especially Brahminical and Sanskritic) culture. Rooted in rationalist, humanist, and egalitarian principles, it has profoundly shaped Tamil politics, identity, and cultural discourse. The two core elements are anti-Brahminism and pro-Tamil national sentiment. Those in power criticized these works, stressing the controversy and influence of Dravidian cinema (S. Natesan, 2021).

Reflecting and forming popular views of caste, class, and identity in cinema has been a tool for socio-political debate. Directed by Mari Selvaraj, *Karnan* (2021) is a moving film portrayal of caste-based persecution and resistance in Tamil Nadu. By stressing their battles against systematic prejudice, the story of the movie is firmly anchored in the actual experience of underprivileged populations. The 2021 film *Karnan* is a portrayal of Dalit struggles and resistance. *Karnan* critically engages with the ideological commitment of social justice, equality, self-respect, and anti-caste politics, harmonizing caste and self-determination for oppressed populations (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) research investigates *Karnan*, a powerful figure from a marginalized Dalit community, who rises up to fight against caste oppression, police brutality, and caste-based discrimination, and its interaction with the socio-political system. Norman Fairclough (1995), CDA lets one dissect power dynamics in language, images, and narratives to show how dominant ideas are contested by cinematic storytelling. Next, Mari Selvaraj, as a director and directorial style, uses symbolism, allegory, and visual metaphors to criticize institutional casteism, placing the film as an extension of Dravidian anti-caste activism (Pandian, 2007). Examining key scenes and conversations, this study aims to investigate *Karnan* both as a reflection of actual caste battles and as a cinematic tool for rebellion. The Dravidian movement, which emerged in the early 20th century, has played a crucial role in shaping Tamil Nadu's socio-political landscape, emphasizing rationalism, self-respect, and social justice (Aloysius, 1998). The Tamil film embodies ideological principles, portraying its protagonist as a modern-day anti-caste revolutionary who defies hierarchical oppression.

Tamil film and the Dravidian movement document the impact of Periyar and Dravidian on Tamil cinema from the beginning of the 1940s to 1960. Tamil films such as *Nalla Thambi* (1949), *Velaikkari* (1949), *Parasakthi* (1952), and *Thirumbippar* (1953) promoted anti-superstition, women's rights, and social reform messages authored by Dravidian party leaders, including CN

Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi. The film was both commercially and critically successful in disseminating Dravidian ideas to a broad audience. Through occasionally modified and popularized clichés like the generosity of Pereyra's legacy, Tamil Cinema and Dravidian Movement (2022), Tamil films kept investigating women's concerns and caste injustice.

2. Film summary

Directed by Mari Selvaraj, *Karnan* (2021) is a powerful socio-political drama set in rural Tamil Nadu. Through the journey of Karnan, a young man rises against the injustices faced by the Kodiyankulam village, and the film depicts the struggles of a marginalized Dalit community confronting systematic oppression, caste-based discrimination, and police brutality. It draws inspiration from real-life events like the (1995) Kodiyankulam police violence. Karnan's character is symbolic, drawing parallels with mythological and revolutionary figures who represent the voice of the oppressed and a call for social justice. The film criticizes the failure of state institutions, the silence of dominant castes and the resistance rooted in identity, dignity and collective memory. The movie creates a cinematic language that investigates societal inequity, resistance, caste and empowerment by combining realism with symbolism.

3. Materials and Methods

A qualitative analysis is employed to study narratives of caste conflict, state brutality and collective resistance. Similarly, other verbal and visual codes like dialogues, character depictions, symbolisms and visual metaphors are studied and examined through the same approach. The Discourse Analysis (CDA) method is employed to study how these features reflect the experiences of underprivileged people who have survived and question prevailing power structures.

4. Data Interpretation

4.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on Karnan (2021)

The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) technique of background is the interpretation of verbal and visual decoding in the context of neuroscience and interfaces, which refers to the process of identifying or reconstructing visual stimuli perceived by an individual based on their neural activity. This unique method of decoding Dravidian ideological perspectives can be applied to support self-respect, social justice and anti-caste politics.

5. Findings & Discussion

5.1 Part: 1 (Scene No: 1-5)

Karnan opens with a narration of the hero's younger sister as she dies on the way to the medical center, marking the first scene in the film. She passed away while taking her to the medical center due to a lack of proper bus services. This child's death reveals the socio-political condition of the voiceless oppressed caste and the powerlessness of the Dalit community in a society that is unjust

and unjustifiable. Dravidian movement critics expose caste-based discrimination and systematic neglect of Dalit existence, making it clear what a serious problem such social injustices are going to become in the future. A young person shuddering in pain died as a result of the "justification" of extending bus service to all members of the community because of caste. Karnan's younger sister's death, which remains unseen and unacknowledged, turns out to be a symbol of the silent lives that have been lost as a result of caste prejudice. The death of the Dalit child is not only a tragic event, but it is also a metaphorical representation of the ongoing marginalization that the Dalit community experiences when it comes to social inclusion. This habitual inactivity shows as a well-known societal order that denies respect and priority to Dalit existence.

The first scene of the film Karnan opens with the tragic passing of the hero's younger sister while being taken to a medical center. She succumbs to her condition due to the absence of proper bus services. This child's death starkly highlights the socio-political struggles of the voiceless, oppressed caste, exposing the powerlessness of Dalits in an unjust society. Critics of the movement bring attention to caste-based discrimination and the systemic neglect of Dalit existence, emphasizing the importance of social justice. The opening scene of Karnan vividly portrays childhood mortality, underscoring the precarious socio-political conditions endured by marginalized communities. The protagonist's sister's demise, attributed to inadequate public transportation, serves as a stark commentary on the inequitable societal structure. The term Dalit refers to marginalized communities in India, primarily those previously known as "untouchables" or "Harijans." It translates to "oppressed," "broken," or "crushed," symbolizing the historical and ongoing persecution these communities face due to the caste system. While Dalit is widely used, the official designation in India is "Scheduled Castes," which includes groups excluded from the traditional caste hierarchy.

Critics, particularly within the Dravidian movement, highlight instances of caste-based discrimination and the systemic marginalization of Dalit lives, emphasizing the urgent need for greater social justice. The denial of bus service to the entire community based on caste led to the tragic death of a young individual, writhing in pain. Karnan's younger sister's unnoticed and unacknowledged demise becomes a powerful symbol of the silent lives lost to caste prejudice.

Consistent with the ideological foundations of the Dravidian movement, this heartbreaking visual serves as a basis for analyzing social injustice. The child's death is not merely a tragic incident but a metaphorical reflection of the ongoing marginalization of the Dalit community. The inaction of public and state institutions underscores the powerlessness of Dalits within a casteist society. This habitual neglect manifests as a deeply ingrained societal order that systematically denies respect and priority to Dalit existence.



Figure:1 Karnan cuts the fish mid-air after eight years of celebration. Source: (Karnan, 2021, 00:15:02)

The visual narrative compels the audience to perceive caste as both institutionalized brutality and social marginalization. Emerging in Tamil Nadu as a radical response to Brahminical dominance, the Dravidian ideological movement advocates social justice, rationalism, and self-respect. Founded by philosopher E.V. Ramasamy and progressive politicians C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi, the movement has long fought to dismantle caste hierarchies. *Karnan* shifts the focus onto a society that systematically silences the oppressed, stripping them of both voice and agency, thereby embedding these themes into its cinematic language. The film itself embodies the Dravidian movement's vision of an egalitarian society. It asserts that only the lives of the oppressed are acknowledged, their voices amplified, and their histories liberated. The subdued yet persistent violence within the film transforms into a powerful outcry against oppression, turning *Karnan* into a visual manifesto for the ongoing relevance of the movement.

A striking example of institutional discrimination occurs when the bus never stops at the Podiyankulam settlement, despite frequently passing through the area, due to the absence of a designated bus stop. The lack of a bus stop highlights systemic neglect. Through subtle yet potent imagery, *Karnan* continuously exposes the structural injustice faced by the Dalit community, particularly following the tragic death of the young girl. One such moment is the depiction of Podiyankulam, where buses routinely pass by without halting. The villagers, especially the elderly and women, are forced to chase after moving buses, pleading with drivers to stop. This scene is not merely about transportation it is a glaring indicator of institutional negligence, reinforcing the entrenched societal order that disregards Dalit existence. The opening scene of *Karnan* carries profound symbolism, beginning with his determined sprint toward the eagle banner. The village deity ritual, where residents honour a faceless god, and the police's refusal to intervene in local conflicts further reinforce the film's themes of oppression and resistance. The significance of Karnan's run toward the eagle flag is deeply rooted in defiance, dignity, and self-assertion. The banner stands as a declaration that the community will no longer remain passive victims. His race toward it represents a young man's eagerness to challenge the status quo and reclaim his people's pride. This act becomes a powerful visual metaphor for the struggle against oppression and the reclaiming of identity.

The village deity ceremony, where worshippers venerate a faceless idol, also holds immense meaning. The deity's lack of distinct features reflects the loss of identity suffered by Dalit communities, an erasure so profound that even their gods are stripped of traits and form. This absence symbolizes society's denial of recognition and voice to the oppressed. However, the ritual itself embodies spiritual resistance and collective strength, demonstrating that faith becomes a tool for survival and solidarity. Meanwhile, the police's persistent refusal to engage in village conflicts highlights yet another layer of discrimination. Their apathy reveals the deeply ingrained prejudice within institutions that are supposed to uphold equality and justice. This negligence serves as an unspoken testament to systemic oppression, reinforcing the societal structures that continue to marginalize Dalits. The state, represented by the police, turns a blind eye to the suffering of the marginalized, reinforcing the notion that justice is selectively administered based on caste. By refusing to act, the authorities not only enable oppression but also implicitly justify the brutality endured by the local community.

Karnan is emotionally haunting and deeply symbolic. In a harrowing scene, a young girl lies dying in the middle of the road, convulsing and gasping for help as vehicles pass by indifferently. No one intervenes. The name of the village, Podiyankulam, appears only later, signifying a land forgotten by both the state and society. The director's powerful critique of caste-based social injustice and systemic neglect aligns with the Dravidian ideological movement, which has historically opposed Brahminical dominance, caste oppression, and the marginalization of non-Brahmin and Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu. In the film, the dying girl represents not only an individual tragedy but also a metaphor for an entire community voiceless, suffering, and left to perish in silence by a caste and an apathetic system. Director Mari Selvaraj's ideology is intricately woven into the fabric of the film from the very beginning. Through its visual narrative, *Karnan* challenges the silence of the state, the inaction of society, and the erasure of marginalized lives, just as Dravidian politics has long questioned centuries of hierarchical social structures and demanded radical equality.

5.2 Part: 2 (Scene No: 5-10)

The scene in which Karnan shatters the windows of the government bus marks a powerful turning point in the film. More than just an act of rebellion, it symbolizes the rupture between systemic oppression and caste-based neglect. The persistent refusal of buses to stop for the villagers of Podiyankulam represents the state machinery's continuous disregard for the needs of the oppressed, reinforcing their marginalization. It is a moment that signifies the end of silence and patience, an assertion that it is time to take a bold stance. This act of defiance arises from years of entrenched discrimination, where even fundamental rights such as transportation and utilities are systematically denied to the villagers. Karnan's violent action is not arbitrary; rather, it is an eruption of long-suppressed fury, built up over generations of humiliation and neglect.

The breaking of glass serves as a metaphor for dismantling the illusion of justice, exposing the stark realities of systemic inequity. The ethos of resistance and refusal to submit to unjust power is deeply rooted in Dravidian ideology, which challenges hierarchical structures and caste-based oppression. Through this act, Karnan channels the wrath and suffering of his people into a decisive response to their struggles. The impact of this moment is significant; it cultivates a sense of collective awareness among the villagers, urging them to reevaluate their social position. It

motivates them to resist subjugation and fight for their rights, inspiring a movement toward social change.



Figure 2: Caste discrimination and violence against the Podiyalkulam village. Source: (Karnan, 2021, 02:14:53)

One of the most intense and pivotal moments in *Karnan* is the police assault on the village of Podiyankulam. This scene lays bare the brutal reality of state power wielded against the unprotected and underprivileged, exposing the deep-rooted caste-based discrimination embedded within the social order. The violence is not merely physical. It is a symbolic effort to silence dissent and reinforce caste hierarchies through fear and punishment. The villagers, who are merely advocating for fundamental rights and social acceptance, are met with ruthless aggression. Their surroundings are destroyed, and women, children, and the elderly are brutally beaten, plunging the once-peaceful settlement into chaos. This stark depiction of caste prejudice reveals how institutions, theoretically meant to safeguard citizens, often become tools of systemic oppression. The police response to the village's resistance highlights a disturbing reality—Dalit assertiveness is frequently perceived as a threat to the prevailing social order, and the state machinery actively works to sustain such inequalities. The visual intensity of this scene reinforces a key critique of the Dravidian ideological movement: unless deeply ingrained caste structures within governance, policing, and public policy are dismantled, true equality remains unattainable.

Brimming with symbolic significance, the moment Karnan receives the sword marks a defining turning point in the story. The sword is not merely a weapon; it represents duty, defiance, and contemporary courage. By accepting it, Karnan symbolically embraces his role as a leader and defender of his people. This act signifies his transformation from an aimless young man into a revolutionary figure, ready to confront systemic injustice. His actions echo the legacy of Dalit leaders and warriors who have historically fought against caste-based oppression. The sword also serves as a metaphor for the spirit of the Dravidian movement, its commitment to self-respect, dignity, and the right to challenge unjust authority both ideologically and symbolically. Karnan's departure from the village carries profound emotional significance. His leaving is not an escape but a strategic necessity, taking the fight beyond his immediate community. He carries with him the dreams, struggles, and history of his people, while elders and family members bid him farewell with a mix of pride and sorrow. His departure marks a shift from localized resistance to a broader ideological movement aimed at confronting caste-based injustice on a societal scale.

Reflecting the Dravidian vision of social equity and justice, Karnan's journey is not merely personal but deeply political. His path signifies a movement seeking to dismantle repressive structures that have long stifled entire communities, advocating not just for individual liberation but for the collective emancipation of the oppressed.

5.3 Part: 3 (Scene No: 10-13)

Karnan reaches its dramatic climax when Karnan beheads the police officer, a powerful symbol of state authority and caste pride. This act of violence is deeply representative, marking the ultimate rejection of systemic cruelty and institutionalized domination. The police officer is not merely an individual but embodies a class that has long oppressed, silenced, and humiliated the impoverished. Karnan's action is not driven by blind rage but is a response born out of generations of accumulated injustice. His defiance echoes the voice of a community long denied justice, as it finally reclaim its dignity through resistance. This moment shatters the fear imposed by the state and asserts that oppression will no longer go unchallenged.



Figure 3: The Podiyankulam people pray for their savior. Source: (Karnan, 2021, 02:32:30)

The visual of smoke rising from the village is not merely a depiction of loss it symbolizes a turning point, where fear gives way to resistance and silence transforms into voice. This brutal climax in *Karnan* reinforces the core message of Dravidian ideology: meaningful change can only begin when the oppressed refuse to accept the structures that bind them and instead choose to fight back with pride, unity, and courage.

In the final scene, the village of Podiyankulam begins to rebuild, marking the emergence of hope from the ashes of destruction. Despite the trauma of violence and the pain of loss, the villagers come together with resilience and solidarity, reclaiming their land, their lives, and their dignity. The rebuilding of the village is not just an act of physical labor it is symbolic of social awareness. A once-silenced community now stands strong, embracing its identity and rights.

A significant afterthought reveals that a bus stop is finally deemed appropriate for the village, a small yet crucial step towards justice and recognition. This seemingly minor change underscores the transformative power of resistance, illustrating that even long-suppressed voices, when united, can challenge systemic oppression and bring about real change. The villagers stand united in strength, demonstrating that collective defiance can lead to progress. This conclusion aligns closely with Dravidian ideological perspectives, suggesting that rebellion against the status quo is not merely a struggle for survival but a means of creating a path for future generations. It is an assertion of self-respect, equality, and pride values that transcend the individual and aim to reshape society as a whole.

6. Conclusion

Tamil cinema serves as a powerful medium of social commentary and cultural resistance. It is not merely for entertainment but plays a crucial role in educating, enlightening and mobilizing society. The film industry reflects real-life incidents and brings representation to the struggles faced by marginalized communities. *Karnan*, in particular, becomes a cinematic voice for the oppressed, embodying the collective fight for space, respect and justice in an inherently unequal world. More than just a tale of rebellion, *Karnan* is a compelling cinematic discourse that explores ideological perspectives, the lived experience of caste oppression, institutional brutality, empathy and apathy. Through symbolism, meticulously constructed characters and psychological depth, the film portrays a community's transition from subjugation to resistance, marking a shift in oppositional politics. From the tragic death of the young girl left to suffer on the road to the symbolic act of smashing the bus window, *Karnan* builds an intense narrative of defiance. The retaliation at the police station and the brutal attack on the village elders expose the systemic violence endured by the people of Podiyankulam. The subsequent assault on the village by the police reveals the brutal lengths to which institutions go to suppress dissent and maintain caste-based dominance.

Karnan powerfully represents caste-based violence, discrimination, class struggle, identity and self-respect. The journey from loss to reconstruction mirrors the collective battle for dignity, justice and identity. The protagonist's arc reminds us that change begins with the rise of the marginalized, echoing the ideological movements that advocate self-respect, equality and the unwavering strength to resist oppression

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