

## Negotiating Voice and Silence: Subaltern Agency in Mari Selvaraj's *Maamannan*

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**Abstract:** This research paper examines the politics of voice and silence in the movie *Maamannan*, directed by Mari Selvaraj. The theoretical lens of Subaltern Studies is used to explore how the film presents subaltern agency within the structures of caste-based power. Employing qualitative textual and visual analysis, the paper highlights the important narrative moments, spatial orders, body language, pauses, and symbolic imagery to demonstrate how silence functions not merely as forced marginalization but as a tactical mode of resistance. The movie challenges contemporary movies by presenting the lead characters not as mere victims of oppression and voiceless within the dominant power hierarchy. The movie shows how subalterns can use silence not only as a sign of exclusion but as a form of dignity and democratic participation. Through his deft presentation, Mari Selvaraj highlights how movies can create new spaces for the Subalterns to voice their feelings, assert themselves, and rise to high positions of leadership. The research paper applies the theoretical insights of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Antonio Gramsci to redefine subaltern speech as both a visible presence and a meaningful form of political action.

**Keywords:** *Subaltern Agency, Voice, Silence, Resistance, Caste Representation.*

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### Introduction

Mari Selvaraj's film *Maamannan* highlights caste and politics as the main themes of its fascinating narration. The movie does not just present the subaltern as silent victims but shows their empowerment within the existing rigid caste hierarchies, enthusiastically joining the mainstream politics with tremendous confidence and dignity. Mari Selvaraj, through the movie, has portrayed caste not as a social issue but as a political issue (Rangan, 2023). Though critics have highlighted several limitations of the film, many critics have agreed to regard this movie as a discussion of social empowerment through democratic and constitutional means.

This research paper explores how *Maamannan* uses different cinematic elements such as narrative structure, sound design, and performance to rethink silence as a powerful form of dignity and political action. The research paper projects that the silence found in the film is not the direct result of exclusion but the lack of political empowerment. The silence in the characters becomes a strategic and embodied form of resistance that eventually leads to claims for political power and representation. The research paper examines the subaltern characters' movement from silent suffering to political empowerment through their bold and active participation in politics. The film thereby presents a detailed discussion about subaltern agency (Guha, 1982). The research also draws insights from Subaltern Studies and several eminent Indian scholars to understand the issues of representation, agency, and the relationship between everyday lived experiences of

the marginalised and the organized political action (Chakrabarty, 2000).

#### Subaltern Studies and Perspectives on Caste and Agency:

The Subaltern Studies group brought an important change in the way South Asian history is written. Instead of focusing only on elites and dominant groups, they tried to highlight the experiences and actions of ordinary and marginalized people. Scholars like Ranajit Guha paved the way for the representation of those voices that were historically ignored in the mainstream records (Spivak, 1988). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her popular essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" states that the voices of the subaltern are mostly represented through a few intellectuals and institutions, which in reality distort the silence of the real and felt experience. Her work raises important questions about who has the right to speak for the oppressed and how scholars can represent subaltern experiences without repeating forms of intellectual domination (Spivak, 1988).

Indian scholars like Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty elaborated on these ideas by analysing how politics and society work in tandem in the Indian society. Dipesh Chakrabarty's concept of "provincializing Europe" raises questions pertaining to the incorporation of Western theories as universal or standard frameworks. (Chakrabarty, 2000). Chatterjee's idea of "political society" helps researchers to understand how marginalized subaltern groups negotiate with state-run institutions to get some kind of recognition and legitimacy within the existing formal political systems (Chatterjee, 2004).

Subaltern scholars like Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd and Gopal Guru point out in their works that the caste system existing in India must be central to any discussion of subaltern politics. Their work emphasizes lived experiences, political struggles, and the ethical claims of Dalit communities (Ilaiah, 1996). By doing so, they challenge theoretical discussions that ignore the deep influence of caste in shaping social and political life.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

This paper uses three theoretical approaches to guide the analysis.

First, the research takes insights from Subaltern Studies, which focuses on the felt experiences of oppressed or marginalized communities rather than the narratives of dominant oppressors or elites (Guha, 1982). This approach helps the research commence from the perspective of those who are socially and politically subjugated and subordinated.

Second, the research paper uses Gayatri Spivak's idea of representation to find out how the voices of marginalized people are presented in the chosen movie *Maamannan*. It pays attention to how cinema as a medium can either silence, reshape, or enable subaltern expression (Spivak, 1988).

Third, the study uses Antonio Gramsci's ideas of hegemony and counter-hegemony. These ideas help explain how marginalized groups challenge dominant power structures. Gramsci's ideas show how cultural leadership, political participation, and involvement in the mainstream institutions can become ways for the marginalised or subaltern communities to make their presence felt and demand recognition for their rights (Gramsci, 1971).

With the three chosen insights, the research paper observes silence as a result of marginalisation and also as a possible strategic response from the Subalterns that can eventually lead them to active political participation and gain institutional power.

### **Methodology**

The qualitative research adopts a close analysis of a few pertinent scenes from the selected movie *Maamannan*. The paper studies in detail the plot of the movie and the visual elements that support expressing the themes of the movie. The study closely examines several important elements of the film to understand how meaning is created. It first observes the narrative turning points, which are essential elements in the plot where the marginalised characters experience changes in power and develop a firm sense of agency. The analysis also examines the use of space, tracing the manner in which the film presents public and private locations and how these spaces reflect social hierarchies, power structures and conflict. The paper also focuses on the characters' body language and expressions that include gestures, facial expressions, and pauses. The study of these provides more meaning and expresses the lived emotions and the shifting of power between the protagonist and the antagonist. The research also studies symbolic imageries present in the movie, such as animals, objects, costumes, and visual settings. They provide deeper meanings related to Subaltern identity and social status. Together, these elements help reveal how the film communicates its political and social message through both narrative and visual storytelling (Manoharan, 2024).

### **From Survival to Institutional Participation**

The film *Maamannan* mainly focusses on the generational shift in how suppressed and marginalised people cope with caste

structures in their immediate political empowerment. Older characters in the movie survive within the existing caste system by adjusting and negotiating with those in power. In contrast, younger and more politically aware characters move toward active participation in politics. They contest elections, claim positions within political parties, and refuse symbolic gestures that offer respect without real authority. Through this change, the film suggests that political participation becomes an important path to dignity and self-respect (Chatterjee, 2004).

Cinematically, Mari Selvaraj presents this transformation through strong visual contrasts. Small and crowded home spaces are shown alongside large public political spaces, such as meetings and rallies. Marie Selvaraj deftly presents several long shots of public meetings, which symbolize subaltern characters' silence and their gesture of respect and submission to the oppressors. Close-up presentation of characters' faces presents in detail the silent and quiet expressions of resistance and acceptance. These visual presentations in the movie focus on calm and serious political action and present silence in the movie as a clear sign of reflection and strategy instead of mental and physical weakness.

### **Silence as a Strategic Choice**

Several important scenes use pauses, minimal dialogue, and slow pacing to show the characters' inner thinking. In one scene, after an act of intimidation, the camera stays on the protagonist's face for a long moment. The protagonist's silence is definitely meaningful, and it presents him as a thinking and deciding character. The silence also conveys the idea of his preparation for a strong and genuine political response. Marie Selvaraj does not present silence as simply the absence of speech but as a strategic choice of the protagonist. This resonates with Gayatri Spivak's belief that marginalized or subaltern voices are often shaped and controlled by larger structures of dominant power. Silence in the movie can be said to represent both loss of voice and a deliberate act of resistance (Spivak, 1988). Selvaraj's film captures these two meanings at the same time.

### **Space and the Claim to Public Power:**

The film also highlights the importance of space. Traditional or ritual spaces that we find in places such as temples or caste-divided public areas often show clear social hierarchies. In political spaces represented by places such as political party offices, election platforms, and legislative assemblies, Marie Selvaraj presents a different kind of interaction. In the movie, when the oppressed characters courageously enter the political spaces, they change their submissive nature and start asserting their genuine constitutional rights. The subaltern characters no longer plead for any help or recognition. They assert themselves and start negotiating for their genuine rights within the existing framework. In terms of Gramsci's ideas, this reflects a shift from being marginalized to demanding political and cultural leadership in the public sphere (Gramsci, 1971).

### **Performance, Body Language, and Symbols:**

The performances of the actors are subtle and controlled, especially in key scenes. Instead of dramatic speeches, dignity is expressed through body language, calm behaviour, and steady presence. This quiet acting style strengthens the film's message that self-respect can appear in everyday gestures as much as in political speeches. The film also uses symbolic objects and visual elements such as clothing, farming tools, and political materials.

These objects connect the characters' daily labour and social identity with their political struggles. In this way, the film suggests that political action grows out of lived experience and collective memory (Guru, 2009).

### Moving Beyond Victim Narratives

Many mainstream films about caste focus mainly on suffering and victimhood. The film *Maamannan* differs from other movies in this aspect. Instead of presenting oppressed communities as mere victims, the movie showcases their political approaches, organization, and fortitude. Through their courageous participation in elections, local activism, and brave acts of refusal, the marginalised characters in the movie demonstrate that they have the intelligence and potential to shape their own political destiny (Ilaiah, 1996). Several researchers and film reviewers have appreciated Mari Selvaraj for his movie's emphasis on agency and political consciousness rather than a mere spectacle or emotional presentation (Rangan, 2023).

### Subaltern Voice and Democratic Politics

The movie presents subaltern characters' silence not just in the minimum words but also in their actions and participation in the political institutions. Marie Selvaraj, through his movie *Maamannan*, conveys that marginalised sections of society can get empowered only through their participation in electoral politics. Their entry into politics would provide them with new ways to influence power and assert their rights for their peaceful existence in the hierarchical society.

Partha Chatterjee and many Indian social activists comment on the importance of political society in helping the marginalised groups to negotiate with the people in power or the dominant class (Chatterjee, 2004). The protagonist in the movie *Maamannan*, with his political empowerment, not only helps his family but also provides an identity to the entire Subaltern community, which he represents. A thorough reading of Dipesh Chakrabarty's work also encourages researchers to understand political action in India through Indian historical and social contexts rather than through Western perspectives (Chakrabarty, 2000). Gayatri Spivak, in her seminal work, affirms that representation for Subalterns is always complex (Spivak, 1988). Mari Selvaraj's film *Maamannan* addresses this challenge of gaining political representation by avoiding an external explanatory voice. Mari Selvaraj, through his astute direction, permits the real depiction of the characters' experiences and political actions to speak through everyday scenes, captivating visual storytelling, and social interactions.

### Conclusion

The film *Maamannan* has made an important contribution to Tamil political cinema by presenting silence as a form of dignity and a deliberate political strategy on the part of the subalterns. Through careful pacing, thoughtful use of space, and restrained performances, the film moves away from narratives that focus only on suffering. The movie, with its innovative presentation, shows how marginalised people with their active participation and leadership, can compete and achieve political power for the betterment of the entire community and the nation as a whole. The research paper, taking insights from Subaltern Studies and Indian thoughts on caste and politics, suggests that movies like *Maamannan* can create spaces for the marginalised voices to gain

audience, visibility, and authority (Guha, 1982; Chatterjee, 2004). The movie *Maamannan* presents silence not as a sign of weakness but as a powerful step taken by the oppressed community towards political agency, leadership, and governance.

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