

From Silence to Revolt: Resistance and Subaltern Assertion in *Asuran* and *Karnan*

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Abstract: Tamil cinema has become an important space for expressing the voices of marginalized communities and questioning social inequalities. This paper studies the films *Asuran* (2019) and *Karnan* (2021) using Resistance Theory. It examines how these films portray the struggle of oppressed communities against caste oppression and social injustice. Both films show the harsh realities faced by marginalized people and present resistance as a natural response to violence, humiliation, and exclusion. Using Resistance Theory as the main framework, this study explores different forms of resistance shown in the films. *Asuran* presents resistance through the journey of an oppressed farmer who slowly changes from silent endurance to open rebellion against feudal power. In contrast, *Karnan* portrays resistance as a collective uprising where an entire village stands against neglect and police violence. The paper also studies how cinematic elements such as symbolism, storytelling, and character development strengthen the themes of resistance, dignity, and justice. By placing these films within the larger context of caste oppression and subaltern struggles, the study argues that Tamil cinema can function as a powerful medium of social and political resistance. The films ultimately show that resistance can help marginalized communities reclaim their dignity, identity, and rights.

Keywords: *Resistance Theory, Subaltern Resistance, Tamil Cinema, Caste Oppression, Dalit Assertion, Social Justice.*

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Introduction

Cinema is not only a form of entertainment, but also a powerful cultural and social medium. Films often reflect the realities of society. They show social problems, inequalities, and struggles faced by people. In many cases, cinema becomes a space where marginalized communities can express their experiences and voices. Tamil cinema has increasingly addressed social and political issues. In recent years, several films have focused on caste oppression and social injustice. These films show how marginalized communities face discrimination, violence, and exclusion in everyday life. Through powerful stories and characters, Tamil cinema has begun to question traditional power structures and social hierarchies.

Contemporary Tamil films such as *Asuran* (2019) and *Karnan* (2021) are important examples of this change. Both films portray the harsh realities of caste-based oppression. At the same time, they highlight the resistance of oppressed communities against injustice. These films do not simply show suffering. Instead, they present resistance, courage, and the desire for dignity and equality. *Asuran* tells the story of an oppressed farmer who struggles against powerful upper-caste landlords. The film shows how violence, humiliation, and land conflicts push marginalized people towards resistance. The protagonist initially chooses silence and survival. However, as injustice continues, he eventually fights back against the oppressive system. *Karnan* presents a different form of resistance. It focuses on a marginalized village that suffers from neglect and discrimination. The village does not even have a bus stop, which symbolizes their exclusion from basic rights. The protagonist, Karnan, becomes the voice of the community. The film shows how collective anger and suffering lead to a powerful

uprising against state authority and police violence. These films are significant because they highlight the idea of resistance. Resistance can take many forms. It may appear as silent endurance, strategic survival, open rebellion, or collective protest. Through their narratives, both films show how oppressed communities challenge systems of domination and assert their dignity.

The main objective of this study is to analyze *Asuran* and *Karnan* through the framework of Resistance Theory. The study examines how the films portray different forms of resistance against caste oppression. It also explores how cinema can act as a medium that questions injustice and promotes social awareness.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- How do *Asuran* and *Karnan* portray resistance against caste oppression?
- What forms of resistance are represented in these films?
- How does cinema function as a medium of socio-political resistance?

By examining these questions, the paper aims to understand how cinema can represent the struggles of marginalized communities and encourage discussions about justice, equality, and social change.

Theoretical Framework: Resistance Theory

Resistance Theory explains how oppressed people challenge domination and injustice. It studies the ways in which

marginalized groups respond to power, control, and exploitation. Resistance does not always appear as open rebellion. It can also exist in small actions, silent defiance, or collective protest. In many societies, oppressed communities resist systems that deny them dignity, equality, and rights. Resistance Theory helps scholars understand how power operates in society and how people oppose it. It also explains that resistance can take different forms depending on social conditions. Sometimes resistance is hidden and subtle. At other times, it becomes open and revolutionary.

Several important scholars have contributed to the development of Resistance Theory.

- **James C. Scott** explains the idea of *everyday forms of resistance*. According to him, oppressed people often resist domination in quiet and indirect ways. These acts may include refusal, silence, small acts of defiance, or subtle opposition to authority. Such actions may appear minor, but they allow marginalized people to challenge power without directly confronting it.
- **Antonio Gramsci** introduced the concept of *hegemony*. Hegemony refers to the control that dominant groups exercise over society through culture, ideas, and institutions. The ruling class maintains power by making its values appear natural and acceptable. However, oppressed groups can challenge this control through *counter-hegemony*. Counter-hegemony occurs when marginalized communities question dominant ideas and create alternative voices and perspectives.
- **Frantz Fanon** focused on resistance in colonial societies. He argued that colonized people often experience deep psychological and social oppression. According to Fanon, resistance may sometimes take the form of violent rebellion against oppressive systems. For him, such resistance becomes a way for oppressed people to reclaim dignity, identity, and freedom.
- Resistance Theory identifies several forms of resistance that appear in social struggles.
- **Hidden resistance** refers to subtle and indirect acts of opposition. People may resist through silence, small acts of refusal, or symbolic gestures. These actions allow oppressed groups to survive within oppressive systems while quietly challenging them.
- **Collective resistance** occurs when a community joins together to oppose injustice. In this form, resistance becomes organized and visible. Communities unite to demand rights, equality, and recognition.
- **Revolutionary resistance** is the most intense form of resistance. It involves open rebellion against oppressive structures. In this stage, resistance aims to completely challenge or transform the system of domination.

These concepts provide a useful framework for analyzing how resistance is represented in cinema. Films often portray different forms of resistance through characters, conflicts, and symbols. In the context of this study, Resistance Theory helps explain how *Asuran* and *Karnan* depict the struggles of marginalized communities against caste oppression and social injustice.

Resistance and Caste Politics in Tamil Cinema

Tamil cinema has long reflected the social and political realities of society. Since the early years of the film industry, cinema has been closely connected with politics, culture, and social

reform. Many films have addressed issues such as poverty, inequality, and injustice. However, the representation of caste oppression has changed gradually over time. In earlier periods, caste issues were often shown indirectly. Films sometimes avoided discussing caste openly because it was considered a sensitive topic. As a result, many stories focused on general themes of poverty or class struggle rather than directly addressing caste discrimination. Over time, Tamil cinema began to portray caste oppression more clearly. Filmmakers started to show the harsh realities faced by marginalized communities, especially Dalits. These films highlighted problems such as social exclusion, violence, land disputes, and denial of basic rights. By bringing these issues to the screen, cinema helped create awareness about caste discrimination in society. The representation of Dalit struggles has become more visible in contemporary Tamil cinema. Films now show the everyday lives of marginalized communities and their fight for dignity and equality. These narratives often portray the pain, humiliation, and injustice experienced by oppressed groups. Another important change is the shift from victimhood to resistance. Earlier films often depicted marginalized characters only as victims who suffered silently. In contrast, many recent films present them as active agents who challenge oppression. These characters question injustice, organize collectively, and fight against dominant power structures. This shift reflects a broader social and political awareness within the film industry. Several contemporary filmmakers are more politically conscious and socially engaged. They attempt to represent the voices of marginalized communities with greater sensitivity and realism. Their films often highlight themes such as social justice, equality, and resistance. In this context, films like *Asuran* and *Karnan* play an important role. Both films portray strong narratives of resistance against caste oppression. They show how marginalized communities respond to violence and injustice. Through powerful storytelling and symbolism, these films demonstrate how cinema can become a medium for expressing resistance and questioning social hierarchies.

Resistance in *Asuran*

Feudal Oppression and Caste Hierarchy

The film *Asuran* clearly shows the existence of feudal power and caste hierarchy in rural society. Land ownership plays an important role in maintaining social power. In the film, the dominant caste landlords try to control land and resources. They do not want marginalized communities to own or cultivate land. The conflict in the film begins because the oppressed family refuses to give up their land. For the landlords, land is not only property but also a symbol of power and dominance. When the marginalized family claims their right to the land, the dominant caste responds with anger and violence. This situation represents **structural violence**. Structural violence refers to the harm caused by social systems and power structures. In the film, caste hierarchy, economic control, and social discrimination create a system that constantly oppresses marginalized people. Violence is used as a tool to maintain this system of dominance.

Transformation of the Protagonist: From Survival to Rebellion

The protagonist, Sivasami, initially believes in survival rather than confrontation. He understands the power of the dominant caste and tries to protect his family by avoiding conflict. His silence and patience reflect a strategy of survival within an oppressive system. However, repeated acts of injustice and

violence slowly change his attitude. The murder of his son and the continuous humiliation faced by his family force him to confront the oppressive system. Sivasami eventually shifts from silent endurance to active resistance. This transformation shows how oppression can push marginalized individuals toward rebellion. When survival becomes impossible under injustice, resistance becomes necessary.

Education as Resistance

One of the most powerful ideas in *Asuran* is the importance of education. Sivasami repeatedly tells his younger son that education is the key to freedom. He believes that knowledge can help marginalized communities escape oppression. According to Sivasami, violence may bring temporary justice, but education can create long-term change. Education gives oppressed people the ability to question power, understand their rights, and build a better future. Through this message, the film suggests that education is a strong tool of resistance against social inequality.

Violence as Counter-hegemonic Resistance

The film also portrays violence as a form of resistance against oppressive power. The dominant caste uses violence to control and intimidate marginalized communities. In response, Sivasami uses violence to defend his family and challenge the oppressive system. This resistance can be understood as **counter-hegemonic resistance**. Counter-hegemony occurs when oppressed groups challenge the authority and dominance of powerful groups. Sivasami's actions show that resistance sometimes becomes necessary when all peaceful options fail. However, the film does not glorify violence. Instead, it shows violence as a response to extreme injustice and oppression. At the same time, the film emphasizes that education and awareness are more powerful tools for long-term social change.

Resistance In Karnan

Symbolism of Oppression

The film *Karnan* uses strong symbols to show the oppression faced by the marginalized village. One important symbol in the film is the absence of a bus stop in the village. The villagers are forced to stand on the roadside because buses do not stop for them. This neglect shows how the community is denied basic facilities and recognition. The neglected bus stop represents social exclusion. It shows that the village is ignored by authorities and treated as unimportant. This small but powerful detail reflects the larger system of discrimination faced by marginalized communities. Another important symbol in the film is the chained donkey. The donkey appears injured and tied down, which reflects the suffering and helplessness of the oppressed people in the village. The animal symbolizes the pain, silence, and humiliation experienced by the community. Through these symbols, the film visually represents oppression and inequality without always using direct dialogue.

Collective Resistance

Unlike individual resistance, *Karnan* shows resistance as a collective action. The entire village experiences neglect, humiliation, and injustice for many years. These shared experiences create anger and frustration among the people. Karnan becomes the voice of the community. He represents the courage and determination of the villagers. When oppression becomes unbearable, the community rises together against injustice. This

collective uprising shows how unity can strengthen resistance. When marginalized communities act together, they can challenge powerful institutions and demand recognition of their rights.

Police Brutality and State Power

The film also portrays the role of the state in maintaining social control. The police represent state authority and institutional power. Instead of protecting the villagers, the police use violence to suppress their voices. The police attack the village and brutally punish the people for their resistance. This shows how state institutions can sometimes support existing social hierarchies. Police brutality becomes a tool to silence marginalized communities and maintain order. Through this portrayal, the film highlights the unequal relationship between power and justice. The oppressed community faces not only social discrimination but also institutional violence.

Mythological Symbolism and Heroic Resistance

The film also uses mythological symbolism to strengthen the narrative of resistance. The character of Karnan represents a heroic figure who fights for justice and dignity. His name itself reminds the audience of the legendary warrior Karna from the epic tradition.

Karnan becomes a symbol of courage and sacrifice. He fights not only for himself but also for the entire community. His actions inspire the villagers to challenge injustice and reclaim their dignity. Through this heroic symbolism, the film presents resistance as a struggle for identity, justice, and equality. It shows that even marginalized communities can rise against oppression when they unite and demand their rights.

Comparative Analysis

Both *Asuran* and *Karnan* portray resistance against caste oppression, but they present it in different ways. While both films focus on the struggles of marginalized communities, their narratives, symbols, and forms of resistance differ. In *Asuran*, resistance mainly appears through the individual journey of the protagonist, Sivasami. At the beginning of the film, he chooses silence and patience in order to protect his family. He believes that survival is more important than confrontation. However, repeated injustice and violence force him to resist. His resistance becomes strategic and personal. Through his experiences, the film highlights the importance of education and awareness as long-term solutions to oppression. In contrast, *Karnan* portrays resistance as a collective movement. The oppression in the film is experienced by the entire village. The villagers face neglect, discrimination, and violence for many years. Karnan emerges as a leader who represents the anger and frustration of the community. His resistance is not only personal but also communal. The uprising in the film shows how collective unity can challenge powerful institutions. The two films also use different symbols to express oppression and resistance. In *Asuran*, land plays a central role. Land ownership represents dignity, survival, and independence. The conflict over land reflects the deeper struggle for equality. The film also emphasizes education as a powerful tool for social transformation. In *Karnan*, symbols such as the missing bus stop, the sword, and the chained donkey represent the suffering and neglect faced by the village. These symbols visually show the social exclusion experienced by marginalized communities. They also represent the anger and desire for justice that leads to collective resistance. Although the films differ in their approach,

both carry strong messages about resistance. *Asuran* suggests that knowledge and education can help marginalized communities break the cycle of oppression. *Karnan*, on the other hand,

emphasizes the power of collective uprising and unity in challenging injustice.

The following table summarizes the major differences between the two films:

Aspect	Asuran	Karnan
Type of Resistance	Strategic resistance	Collective rebellion
Protagonist	Individual transformation	Community leader
Symbolism	Land and education	Bus stop, sword, donkey
Message	Knowledge as liberation	Collective uprising

Through these different narratives, both films highlight the importance of resistance in confronting caste oppression and reclaiming dignity and justice.

Cinema as A Space of Political Resistance

Cinema is not only a form of entertainment. It is also an important cultural platform that reflects social realities. Films can question injustice, challenge power structures, and create awareness about social issues. In this way, cinema can function as a space of political resistance. Films often act as a form of cultural resistance. Cultural resistance occurs when art and cultural expressions challenge dominant ideas and social hierarchies. Through stories, characters, and symbols, films can expose systems of oppression and encourage audiences to think critically about social inequality. When cinema presents the struggles of marginalized communities, it becomes a powerful tool for questioning injustice. Another important aspect of political resistance in cinema is the representation of Dalit agency. In earlier films, marginalized communities were often portrayed only as victims who suffered silently. However, many contemporary films show Dalit characters as active agents who question oppression and demand dignity. These characters resist discrimination, organize collectively, and challenge dominant power structures. Such representations give visibility to voices that were historically ignored or suppressed. Cinema also plays an important role in shaping public consciousness. Films reach large audiences and influence how people think about social issues. When films portray caste oppression and resistance, they encourage viewers to reflect on the realities of inequality. They can generate discussions about justice, rights, and social change. Through powerful narratives and strong characters, films like *Asuran* and *Karnan* contribute to this process. They show the struggles of marginalized communities and highlight their courage to resist oppression. By doing so, these films do not simply entertain audiences. They also raise awareness and inspire conversations about equality, dignity, and social justice. Therefore, cinema can function as an important space where political resistance is expressed, social hierarchies are questioned, and marginalized voices gain visibility.

Conclusion

Both *Asuran* and *Karnan* present resistance as a response to systemic oppression and caste discrimination. The films show how marginalized communities face violence, exclusion, and humiliation within unequal social structures. When injustice becomes unbearable, resistance becomes an inevitable response.

Asuran mainly portrays strategic resistance. The protagonist, Sivasami, initially chooses patience and survival in order to protect his family. However, continuous oppression forces him to confront the system of domination. At the same time, the film strongly emphasizes the importance of education as a long-term path to liberation. Through Sivasami's message to his son, the film suggests that knowledge and awareness can help marginalized communities challenge oppression and build a better future. In contrast, *Karnan* presents collective resistance. The film shows how an entire village experiences neglect, discrimination, and state violence. The people eventually unite and rise against institutional injustice. Karnan becomes the symbol of courage and leadership for the community. The film highlights the power of unity and collective action in confronting oppressive structures. Together, these films demonstrate how contemporary Tamil cinema has become an important space for expressing marginalized voices. By portraying the struggles and resistance of oppressed communities, cinema challenges dominant power structures and encourages discussions about equality and justice. Therefore, Tamil cinema is not only a medium of entertainment, but also serves as a powerful platform for social awareness, political resistance, and the representation of historically marginalized communities.

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Filmography