Interpreting the Representational Meanings of a Movie from a Subaltern Perspective: A case Study of Kabali

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Abstract
This paper focuses on how film is used as a tool to disseminate an ideology. The film Kabali hit the screens in July, 2016 across the world. The presence of superstar Rajinikanth and widespread promotion of the movie had built greater expectations for all the Rajini fans in the world. This film had symbolically represented the problems, issues and everyday struggles of the subaltern classes. It used the film as a narration to explain the subordinated classes that they must be very cautious of the ‘cultural invasion’ and the necessity of education. It signifies the necessity of an egalitarian society with anti-Gandhian philosophy and the necessity of annihilating caste. The photographic images, cultural symbols and Icons represented in the movie are drawn from the ‘equal-rights movements’ across the world. This movie is an attempt by the subaltern classes to legitimize their spaces in the mainstream media. I will explain how semiotics is structurally used in this movie to spread the idea of the subaltern classes.

Keywords: visual communication, subaltern, visual culture, Representation, Identity

Introduction
Film is one of the major means of communication to reach to a wider audience. Of all the ‘media’, the cinema plays the best role to convey the message to its viewers with its audio-visual and representational qualities. Either to critique a social system or to praise a cultural system, the cinema can always do wonders in spearheading the change. The cinema acts as an alternative public sphere providing space for multiple sections of the society to represent and assert one’s identities. People imitate, imagine and compare themselves with the characters playing in the celluloid. The visual narrative of the cinema represents the people’s choices, lives and their identities. Against all odds of the dominant forms of production and reception, the film Kabali has got many subaltern representative meanings that are to be closely viewed and observed and deciphered. This socially-specific cinema is representing the lives of the suppressed people across the world and not in a ‘dominant reading’ perspective but totally from a subaltern perspective. It is a tool hitting against the Indian oppressive social system that was directed by the very victim of it. The choice of selecting the images, shots, frames, the constructs, locations, diversity of characters and dialogues reflects the cultural and embodied lives of the marginalized communities.

My paper focuses on interpreting the film with a subaltern cultural perspective. This cinema, because of its huge promotion and for the presence of Rajinikanth, a star known and favorite to many people across the world, is supposed to be interpreted very thoroughly since he had played the role of a ‘Dalit’ leader and as a savior of the low-caste communities. The ideological modes of production depicted in the movie and the symbolic representations it has been carrying are very close to the contemporary political ‘Bahujan movement’ and their struggle for the path to power. I will explain how this cinema is used as a symbolic vehicle to provoke the un-guided masses towards an egalitarian system of society. My method of collection of the data is through conducting informal interviews and group discussions with Dalit rights activists, cinema critics and active cinema viewers, and Ambedkarite students’ groups.

Methodology
A semiotic analysis is used in this study. I interpret the characters in the movie and their relationship status with the other characters. I take chance to interpret the culture of the subaltern, the food practices, self-respect and loyalty that were reflected in the movie. I studied them as modes of representation and explain the identity they are carrying. I conducted semi-structured interviews or non-standardized interviews with those people who are active members of the

1 A person belonging to the community of ex-untouchables or scheduled castes in India who are socially placed at the lower most levels of the historical hierarchies.
2 The political movement of all the subaltern communities towards achieving the political power along with social change in India.
3 The arrivals of Ambedkarite parties, like BSP, in India and the establishment of Ambedkarite student groups in central Universities. Ex:Bahujan Students’ Front and Ambedkar Students Association.
Bahujan movement. My method of enquiry is explorative since my objective is to know whether the film is used to represent the political movement of the marginalized communities. My sampling is convenient sampling so as to focus on particular characters, frames and scenes in the movie that are of interest which will enable me to get answers to my research questions.

Objectives

- To find out whether the movie is representing the marginalized communities socio-political movement.
- To identify the representative picturization tools of the marginalized sections.
- To understand the portrayal of the Bahujan culture in the movie.

The film title ‘Kabali’ opens up with a backdrop of the carved image of all the working class people performing their indentured labor. The title acts as a sign, in the form of a pictorial representation, of the movie, which communicates to the audience saying that the movie is about the subaltern people, their experienced lives and their cultural practices their contestation with the new forms of discrimination and their socio-economic struggle towards political power. This sign, as a Representative image, stands as an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture which represent things’ (Hall, 1997). The term ‘Kabali’, in films, has been used for a lower class, lower caste Dalit goon or some comedy character, from the very origin of Tamil Cinema. But, this film broke that stereotype that he is no longer that kind of a goon who would bend his back like a slave and obey the orders but, as a new ‘Kabali’ who strikes back.

Ideology of the movie

As Eco points out that the ‘Film, as a text, can say more than one supposes, they can always say something new, precisely because signs are the starting point of a process of interpretation which leads to an infinite series of progressive consequences’. ‘Texts are more or less open to multiple interpretations. (Eco, Umberto 1981) . Film disseminates ideology, (Carroll, 1985). The director of the movie, Pa.Ranjith who himself is highly motivated and inspired by the academic writings and teachings of the subaltern scholars, activists and intellectuals, used the medium of film to disseminate the ideology of these organic intellectuals⁴. These socio-cultural leaders have waged a war against the atrocities, inhuman treatment, multiple discriminations and forced economic deprivation on Bahujans⁵ (the subaltern class) in India. They propagated for an egalitarian society with the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity along with justice. They also denied all kinds of Brahmanic cultural practices that were imposed over the Bahujans⁶. The film selectively follows the three fundamental principles of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, one of the key leaders of the anti-caste struggle in India, summarized the essence of this movement in the following three words – Educate, Agitate and Organize.

The symbolic deployment of the chappal⁷ in the hero introduction scene conveys the meaning that the role played by the protagonist is about a Dalit’s life⁸. Historically, footwear is culturally connected to the Dalits since they

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⁴ Dr.Ambedkar, Jyothirao Phule, Periyar, Savitribai Phule, Gadge baba, Ayyankali. All these subaltern social scientists have extensively worked for the rights, equal share of resources and dignity of the subaltern classes through various means.

⁵ A major portion of people who do not have extended access to power, polity and wealth and people who are economically poor and socially backward.

⁶ Of anything that is related to the cruel cultural practices of a Brahman community who are the centre for the Hindu religion and its practices.

⁷ footwear
occupy a major share in the invention of footwear. The Dalit communities across India were/are the makers of the footwear in India. As Kancha Ilaiah points out that he science behind the manufacturing of the chappal is rarely visited and the scientific temper of Dalits was relegated to the mere menial job. ‘If the vast and varied spread of the shoe-making Dalit communities across India and the available information about the shoe in ancient India is an Indication, India was the most advanced country in the world in leather technology’ (Ilaiah, 2009). Chappal in this scene acts a tool of resistance and as an assertion of Dalit identity against the delegitimization of chappal by the Indian priestcraft by ascribing notions of impurity on leather tanners. The hegemonic Brahmanical priestly class labeled the shoe making communities as ‘untouchables’ and considered the shoe making process as anti-spiritual and thus were the scientific energies of Dalits never were given social support.

The protagonist is an ardent reader of the Dalit-Bahujan literature. The book titled ‘My Father Balaiah’ is seen in the movie, which is being read by the protagonist. This book explains about the life experiences of three generations of a Dalit family. The atrocities, the social isolation, the caste order punishment, the cultural practices of Dalits were portrayed in the book. This visualization represents the necessity for the subaltern to know the subaltern history. As Marcus Garvey says - ‘A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots (Garvey, 2004).

Subalternity Represented

The word ‘subaltern’ can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist. It meant the people of ‘inferior rank’, the disadvantaged, the deprived, the lower classes, exploited, weak, or someone who has no political and economic power and are subjected to the hegemony of the ruling classes that denies the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation. The subaltern becomes defined in descriptive terms, according to a particular marginalized subject position in any given cultural or social context (Loui, 2012). The Class is an economic status where as caste in India is a social status. Most o the lower classes in India are the lower castes. The original subaltern are those productive labors who form the major chunk of the population and they are the Dalit-Bahujans. This film is from the perspective of that productive labor, the original subaltern, who are the very victim of the brutal discriminatory caste system.

It denotes the true identities of their lives as a unique piece signifying the culture, history, socio-economic position, and their contestations with the hegemonic Brahmanic systems of filmic representations through cleverly organized film narrative. In Gayathri Chakravartthy Spivak’s terms – ‘the task of an intellectual is to pave way for the subaltern groups and let them freely speak for themselves’ (Spivak, 1988).

Interpreting the Characters

The signified meaning to the character portrayed by the protagonist is of Kanshiram’s9. The protégé of the protagonist can be signified to the real life role of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar. Both these characters play a key role in the movie as leaders of the old generation and modern era respectively, towards achieving an emancipatory political power. The powerful personality, extra-ordinary oratory and motivating character of the protégé admires the protagonist towards fighting for the

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8 In India, there is a social system called caste system where people are divided into four hierarchial categories according to their birth and must perform their caste profession without moving out of the that closed circle which is a Brahmanical religious forced imposition. The fifth one is the community of people who are forcefully placed away from the village and are ordered to do all menial jobs and are called as un-touchables. Dr.B.R.Ambedkar had named that community of people as ‘scheduled castes’ and now they are being called as ‘dalits’ which was connotated as a respectful word.

9 The founder of the third largest national party named Bahujan Samaj Party in India. He is the crusader of the broader Bahujan political movement.
community. Their speeches in the movie represent the oratory skills of Dr. B.R Amedkar and Kanshiram that have a huge impact on the lives of the subaltern people.

Few lines from the Speech:

‘The labor of the productive castes was sipped and benefitted by the non-productive castes and the laborers were thrown away like filthy inanimate objects’. The fight against this is not for an individual person nor for an individual family, but for the community and for the people’

Both of them organize all the victims of the system and drives them towards education and political power. The protagonist carries forward the morals and ideology of his Predecessor, protégé. He follows the formula of ‘Educate, Agitate and Organize’ that was formulated by Dr.B.R.Ambedkar. The only difference between Dr.B.R.Ambedkar and Kanshiram is that the former is an academic coupled with activism whereas the later is only a political activist. Kanshiram is more like a pragmatic person who was very successful in implementing the ideology of Dr.Ambedkar10. The character beside protagonist in the film was portrayed by a muslim named Amir. He is the friend and advisor of kabali. This convivial relationship between the ‘dalit’ and the ‘muslim’ portrays the historical cultural connectedness between the two communities. Both the dalits and muslims are treated as secondary grade citizens in India stereotyping them as villains and terrorists (Punyani, 2015). This film marked both these stereotyped identities as saviors of the toiled masses.

The Bahujan women possess the ability to physically work hard and are highly adaptable to the socio-economic changes (Ilaiah, 2009). The wife of the protagonist occupies a major role in suggesting and advising him at every position. She suggests an anti-Gandhian philosophy to the protagonist teaching him the necessity of situational violence. Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, an eminent scholar and pioneer of the socio-political movements during colonial period, criticizes the Gandhian ideas as ‘seasonal politicism’ and were never helpful for the turmoiling subordinated castes in India11 (Ambedkar, 1945). She keeps on guiding, advising and warning him at all possible levels. Unlike the Savarna style depiction of ‘speech-less’ ‘house-wife’ who participates in so called divinely activities of ‘husband-worship’, the wife in this movie is represented as a key decision maker on par with the husband. She shares her equal space, and at occasional situations stays ahead of the protagonist. She actively participates in a tiny revolution against the unequal wages along with the protagonist.

The movie had successfully portrayed the subaltern women’s due role towards their political and social enlightenment.

Representing the Bahujan Culture

‘The phenomenal conceptions and cosmovisions of the subaltern classes were simply rated as ‘folklore’ and as ‘primitive beliefs’ but not as a true and strict “culture” (Aguirre Rojas, 2005). Ginzburg, an Italian Historian who is the proponent of micro-history, criticized these aristocratic and descendant visions of visual culture. The film denies and resists the aristocratic assumption that only the dominant classes are able to produce the culture. The film portrays the cultural practices of the marginalized communities unlike the Brahmanic style of worshipping god. The food practices of the Dalit-Bahujans were represented at a dining scene in the Aamir’s house. The characters discuss about the meat eating practices, pointing to mutton (meat of a goat) telling it as tasty. But, the mutton in a Muslim household is beef (meat of a cow). Historically, both the Muslims and Dalits share this common food practice as part of their friendly relationship. In another scene, the protagonist and his wife goes to the temple for a small offering to the god. The entire place is closely connected to the cultural practices of the Dalit-Bahujans. Here, unlike the Savarna style depiction of the temple in a so-called ‘pure’ place with a serene and calm atmosphere, the director showcases the original culture of the Bahujans where there are animal sacrifices and huge sounds and drum beats. And the god is not the racist god of the Brahmanical culture, but the egalitarian

10 Kanshiram mobilized the people in Uttar Pradesh and established a party called Bahujan Samaj Party and led the Dalit-Bahujans towards achieving the political power.
11 Gandhi is a staunch believer of diabolic caste system who emphasizes and glorifies the necessity of social hierarchies which favors the top notched Brahmins, Baniyas (tradesmen).
gypsy god Madurai Veeran\textsuperscript{12}. The stark differences between ‘Bahujan culture’ and ‘Brahmin culture’ is highlighted and portrayed in the movie. The subordinated masses identify their own culture as powerful with their own perceptions and constructions and regard those practices as ‘aboriginal’ and the Brahmins culture as non-aboriginal. ‘The Bahujan castes see these rites as being an important proof of the supposedly fundamental difference between them and Brahmins’ (Kapadia, 1996). ‘They are seen as a demonstration of the truth of ‘aboriginal’ religiosity as against Brahmin religious ethos’ (Kapadia, 1996). The film gave a warning of cultural invasion by the Brahmanical forces in particular scenes. The practice of ‘culture kill’ is in existence where the Savarna forces imperialize the Bahujan cultures\textsuperscript{13}. ‘The cultural invasion is always an act of violence against the persons of invaded culture who lose their originality or face the threat of losing it’ (Freire, 1970).

The dominant constructed notion of the ‘fair skin’ as beauty was deconstructed in the movie with particular symbolic referents. ‘Over and over again in many movies, in brutal caricatures, physical attributes of dark skinned people were associated with negative character traits and low social positions (Craig, Maxine Leeds, 2002). These racist ideologies created social hierarchies based on visible physical differences. Against the hegemonic dominant representation of white skin color as heroic and lovable, the movie emphasizes the beauty of being black. The wife says to the dark skinned husband - ‘I love to apply your skin color to my whole body’, explaining the heights of love she’s got towards him and his ‘black’ skin tone. This movie expresses the self presentation and newly expressed appreciation of dark skin. It is an attempt of movement from Black self hatred- to Black self-love.

The film had deconstructed the socially constructed multiple stereotypes at various levels. The subaltern people who speak in ‘rough tone’ are basically stereotyped as unfriendly, deceptive and violent in nature. Breaking this stereotype, the film represented them as vehicles of truth and loyalty. Apart from this representation, the film also speaks about the ‘male gaze’ and on how female bodies are subjected to voyeuristic look.

As Laura Mulvey points out that “the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey, 1975). To break this sexualized gaze, the woman in the movie warns the male for his ‘male gaze’ to look at the female ‘face’ and not the sexualized body.

**Symbols of Resistance, Liberation and Power**

The images of Buddha, Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, MalcomX, Che Guevera, Nelson Mandela, Chinua Achebe were dexterously used in the movie, adorning the walls. All these personalities are the icons of the human rights who fought against the oppression and tyranny of the social and political systems at various geographic locations in the world. The significance of placing those icons is a suggestion to the Bahujans to take to the cause of humanity and raise voice against all forms of discrimination. There is a huge symbolism of connectivity between ‘Black culture’ and the ‘Bahujan culture’. The subordinate caste leaders of India like Buddha, Phule, Dr.B.R.Ambedkar and the subordinate class leaders of Africa and America like Malcom X, Che Guevera, Nelson Mandela, Marti Luther King Jr, Chinua Achebe were portrayed in the movie signifying that the ‘theories of oppression’ across the world are similar. It attempted to deconstruct the dominant social construction of images by placing the images of these personalities in the movie. The usage of the luxury sofas in many

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\textsuperscript{12} The warrior and protector of Madurai. A temple town in Tamil Nadu.

\textsuperscript{13} Replacing of gypsy goddess with the ‘Durga’ in subaltern village deities is an example of cultural imperialism. Goddes Durga is a brahmanical construction where as the gypsy goddess are the peoples leaders and saviors. ....
scenes is a symbolic representation of power where the protagonist always occupies it. Each time, the Kabali character occupying that luxury sofa shows the ‘occupy power’ attitude of the subaltern.

In one of the songs, bodily representation of Michael Jackson’s personality is portrayed in the movie. Micheal Jackson, a black pop-singer, used the ‘cultural vehicle of communication’ of ‘song and dance’ to transform the world. Ray Pratt says, ‘Body is the site for the assimilation and communication of information’ (Pratt, 1990). Jackson’s own body articulates a message of resistance, agency, and tolerance. His expressive cries encode a history of oppression, resistance, and the desire for freedom towards building a unified community on a global scale. His famous song ‘All I wanna say is that they don’t really care about us’ has a great signifying linkage to the atrocities on Blacks to the atrocities on Dalits in India (Ramaiah, 2011). He used the medium of ‘song’ as resistance to represent the problems of the ‘Blacks’ and as a tool for fighting against racism. In relation to this, the Director of this film used the medium of ‘movie’ as a tool to articulate the problems of Bahujans and method of resisting it.

The film speaks about the adaptability of the subaltern classes. Despite of their poverty and low economic status, they struggle hard to educate, get decent jobs and move towards sophisticated living conditions. The adaptability is that they are capable of performing physical sweating labor in the inhuman conditions and are quite skilled to work in the luxurious air-conditioned halls. The protagonist, a plantation laborer in the initial stages of the movie becomes a ‘big-shot’ in the whole country and proudly says that he is capable of doing both ‘class’ work and ‘mass work’.

The symbolic meaning of the protagonist wearing a three piece suit refers the dressing style of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar. Dressing in suits is a mark of dissent and a code of self-formation through clothing. It is a statement of resistance against the subaltern nature of existence. It is deployed to upset the denotation of power, status and social location. It acts as a tool of resistance against the Brahmanical oppressive attitude. It conveys the meaning that the low social positioning of the lower castes must be transformed to respectable and dignified conditions. It is an attempt to gain equal respect, dignity and friendly treatment. It represents an identity of self-respect and also an anti-Gandhian philosophical attitude.\(^{14}\)

In the climax scene, the protagonist says that he may be not from a ruler clan, but that he was born to rule. And then he says, “if it is a problem for you if I progress, then I will definitely progress more than you, I will get educated, I will wear coat and suit, I will sit with my legs crossed before you, stylishly”. All these dialogues are in reference to a certain caste based parties who consider themselves as ruler clans who accuse the dalit boys of dressing stylishly, wearing jeans pants and coolers, and who reportedly are the reason for the increase of caste killings in India.\(^{15}\)

**Conclusion**

Challenging the established idioms of the cinema it de-established the conventional sign systems that have been constructed in cinema for long. It is extension of the subaltern social life, which is marked by the realities of caste and its hierarchical nature. This cinema has evolved particular modes of representing configurations of caste, class, and gender. And it comes as no surprise that only a few castes and occupational categories are represented. Dalits and some other subaltern groups have become invisible under this exercise of cultural hegemony. But, kabaali could successfully break that chain and represented the organic lives of the subaltern sections. Kabali is more like a lesson. He is talking to the Dalit-Bahujans who were split into many castes who are fighting amongst themselves without any of them progressing further at all. He shows what would happen if someone rises to be a leader from the oppressed community and, how he would be back-stabbed by his own men. The climax is more like a lesson or a plea asking them to unite and organize, keeping in mind the possible danger. Through this film, Ranjith calls out for that unity.

\(^{14}\) Gandhi presents himself half-naked.

References


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