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Natchathiram Nagargirathu (The Star Is Moving): Challenging the Stereotypes of Dalit Women in Film

Reviewed by Chandrakant Kamble¹

Film Information:

Title: *Natchathiram Nagargirathu (The Star is Moving)*

Director and Producer: Pa. Ranjith

Year: 2022

Length: 170 Minutes

Original language: Tamil (subtitles available)

Genre: Drama & Romance

Dalit director Pa. Ranjith's Tamil film *Natchathiram Nagargirathu (The Star is Moving)*, released in theaters in November 2022, deals with noteworthy themes such as love, caste, gender, and cultural politics. The movie focuses on honor killing, the orthodox agenda of the persisting dominance of caste, and gender politics. The story revolves around a caste-affected romance plot that offers a counterpoint to stereotypical and problematic representations of Dalit women in film.

The Tamil movie *Natchathiram Nagargirathu* features a powerful portrayal of the Dalit woman protagonist, Rene, who faces multiple forms of discrimination and oppression in Indian society. Through an academic lens, Rene's character can be analyzed in terms of her social location as a Dalit woman and her experiences of marginalization and resistance. Therefore, the movie has substantial merits in terms of its subject matter and sufficient agency.

An Overview of the Plot

The Tamil movie *Natchathiram Nagargirathu* highlights the issue of caste discrimination in Indian society through the perspective of Ambedkarism, a social and political movement that emerged in India in the early 20th century. *Natchathiram Nagargirathu* has multi-layered parallel plots running simultaneously until they converge at a dramatic point towards the end of the first half of the film. The movie begins with serious socio-cultural political discussions among theater artists from diverse backgrounds. Finally, the play director Subeer (Rejin Rose) chooses a sensitive topic for their play: an honor killing based on inter-caste marriages in the country.

They have discussions on their individual experiences in different castes, classes, and gender-orientations. Eventually, they create a drama of a caste-based honor killing and present it to the masses by making strong anti-caste and anti-sexist political statements. Many Indian movies represent Dalits as victims, so the film comments on that anti-Dalit reality through its plotline. During the performance, an orthodox antagonist enters into the plot and disrupts the live performance because the play is anti-caste and anti-sexist. Notably, the lead Dalit woman maintains a relationship with an upper-caste partner, while another man, Iniyam, is romantically involved with a French woman within the same dramatic ensemble. It is worth highlighting that a prominent trans model assumes a significant role in the play. These characters, both in their

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performance within the play and their portrayal in the film, challenge societal hierarchies based on caste and class, advocating for a more egalitarian perspective.

Notably, Pa. Ranjith directs and designs diverse characters such as upper-caste orthodox Arjun (Kalaiyaran), Iniyan (Kalidas Jayaram), Dalits, other marginalized classes, and a trans woman character (Sylvia) who is an international artiste, played by transgender actress Sherin Celin Mathew. Pa Ranjith has committed to egalitarianism and Ambedkarism by creating this alternative cinematic narrative that works against typical film representations. The film scenario revolves around an Ambedkarite Dalit woman's caste and gender consciousness, and her theatrical friends who have diverse backgrounds and multi-gender identities. Pa. Ranjith introduces Rene (Dushara Vijayan) as educated, ambitious, progressive, aggressive, and courageous. Rene is the first Dalit woman protagonist portrayed without victimhood or without being sexually assaulted throughout Indian cinematic history.

The film is notable for its depiction of Ambedkarism, which is a social and political ideology based on the principles of social justice, equality, and human dignity espoused by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution and a champion of Dalit rights. The film also addresses how caste-based discrimination affects the lives of Dalit people, particularly women, who face sexual exploitation and violence.

Shifting the Stereotypical Representation

Although the film has a theme of love, it differs from typical Indian love stories that usually do not reveal the fact that Indian inter-caste partners often face honor killings and other shocking responses from a casteist and sexist society. However, in the last few years, South Indian cinema has challenged mainstream (Bollywood) cinema in terms of content quality and the variety of stories, including stories about subaltern Dalits along with other marginalized communities (Wankhede, 2013; Chauhan, 2019). Scholar Suraj Yengde calls this new genre "Dalit Cinema" (Yengde, 2018). The recent massive popularity of films like *Jai Bhim* (Tamil, 2021) and *Pushpa* (Telugu, 2022) underscores the importance of a narrative in Southern cinema that breaks pan-Indian taboos of commensality (meat eating, inter-dining) and non-Brahmin and caste-neutral forms of worship. This foregrounds a popular narrative around marginalized caste and class groups ultimately winning the battle against the social elite in an intense wave of social restructuring.

Pa. Ranjith appears revolutionary, pathbreaking, and destructive of the standard frameworks that have hitherto constrained Dalit representation and subjectivity. His film *Natchathiram Nagargirathu*, an ode to his Dalit origins, is unapologetic, challenging the standard formula of Dalit representation. His portrayal of the protagonist, which is challenging to the unequal society, remains central to the film's narrative, thereby wrenching the initiative away from the "culture of ambivalence" that has been the mainstay of Dalit portrayals in Indian cinema (Sengupta, 2023). Niraj Ghaywan's *GeeliPucchi* (2021) and *Natchathiram Nagargirathu* are two of a host of contemporary Indian films that centralize an intersectional, Dalit feminism that addresses both gender and caste consciousness. The Dalit protagonist is a casteless individual, breaking conventional norms and challenging stereotypical representations. This nuanced portrayal of Dalit subjectivity is especially evident in the works of Dalit filmmakers. The protagonist of *Natchathiram Nagargirathu* is not burdened by or brutalized because of his Dalit identity, but emerges as an independent, rational person with equal authority in the discourse of power.

As a Dalit woman, Rene occupies a unique social location that exposes her to multiple forms of oppression, such as caste discrimination and gender inequality. The film portrays her as

a strong-willed and resilient individual who struggles to navigate the complex intersections of caste and gender-based discrimination. Her experiences of marginalization are rooted in the systemic inequalities of Indian society, which limit her access to education, healthcare, and other basic resources. As a protagonist, Rene is an independent progressive Ambedkarite woman who has rarely been depicted in Indian cinema as an educated, awakened advocate for human rights and an empowered Dalit woman. Being a Dalit woman, she has experienced dual-layered exploitation as a woman and a Dalit (Lalitha & Pankaj, 2022).

Rene's character is portrayed as a resilient and determined individual who is passionate about her education and dreams of becoming an artist. However, her aspirations are hindered by the systemic inequalities of Indian society that limit her access to education and employment opportunities. Despite facing multiple forms of discrimination, Rene refuses to be silenced and challenges the status quo by asserting her right to education and personal autonomy. Her character serves as a symbol of resistance against the oppressive structures of Indian society, inspiring others to stand up against injustice. From an analytical perspective, Rene's character represents the intersectionality of caste and gender-based discrimination and the experiences of Dalit women in India. The film underscores the need for intersectional analysis and solidarity among different social categories to challenge systemic oppression and create a more equitable society. Her character serves as an inspiration for the ongoing struggle for social justice and equality and as a reminder of the resilience and strength of marginalized communities in the face of oppression.

The movie also depicts Rene's character as a vocal advocate for social justice and equality. She participates in political movements and uses her voice to raise awareness about the issues faced by marginalized communities. She is courageous and confident to face challenges and is tremendously active and aggressive in her behavior. She always wears costumes associated with men such as pants and shirts. Her character highlights the importance of collective action and empowerment as tools for social change. In addition, Rene is a powerful representation of the struggle for justice and equality against the oppressive structures of the Indian Brahmanical patriarchal society. Her resilience, determination, and advocacy serve as an inspiration for marginalized communities and highlight the need for intersectional analysis and solidarity in social and political movements. She challenges traditional gender roles and caste-based hierarchies by asserting her right to education and personal autonomy. The movie depicts her as a vocal advocate for social justice and equality, who inspires others to stand up against injustice. From an academic perspective, Rene's character represents the struggles of many Dalit women in India who face intersectional oppression due to their social location. Her story highlights the need for greater representation and recognition of the experiences of marginalized women in social and political movements. It underscores the importance of solidarity and allyship among different social categories to challenge systemic oppression and create a more equitable society.

Intersectionality of Struggles

The film emphasizes the intersectionality of struggles, showing how caste-based discrimination intersects with other forms of oppression such as gender and class. *Natchathiram Nagargirathu* is a powerful film that highlights the struggles of the Dalit community in Tamil Nadu and critiques the Brahmanical system that perpetuates their subjugation. The film emphasizes the importance of education and the role of women in social movements and illustrates the intersectionality of struggles. Through these themes, the film offers a positive criticism of the social and political structures that perpetuate inequality and injustice in Indian society.

Some critics have raised concerns about the portrayal of the protagonist and the way the movie addresses issues related to caste and gender. Some have criticized the movie for perpetuating stereotypes about Dalit women and reinforcing the notion of victimhood, while others have praised it for shedding light on the discrimination faced by Dalits in Indian society (Lalitha & Pankaj, 2022). The controversy has sparked a larger debate about representation in the Indian film industry and the need to create more opportunities for marginalized communities to tell their stories. Some argue that the movie industry needs to be more inclusive and sensitive to the experiences of marginalized communities, while others maintain that art should be free to explore difficult and controversial subjects without being subject to censorship or criticism (Edachira, 2020). Ultimately, the controversy surrounding *Natchathiram Nagargirathu* highlights the complex and contentious nature of issues related to caste, gender, and representation in Indian society and the importance of engaging in meaningful dialogue to address these issues.

The film's themes are also handled with great sensitivity and nuance. Director Pa. Ranjit shows a deep understanding of the complexities of caste-based discrimination and how it affects individuals and communities. He is able to convey the pain and suffering of the film's characters without resorting to heavy-handed or exploitative techniques. Dalit filmmakers provide a critical lens to analyze the complex issues of caste, gender, and cultural politics in India. The film highlights the interconnectedness of various social categories and emphasizes the need for collective action and empowerment to challenge systemic oppression and create a more just and equitable society.

Conclusion

Overall, *Natchathiram Nagargirathu* is a powerful and thought-provoking film that explores important social issues in a sensitive and nuanced manner. Director Pa. Ranjit deserves praise for his excellent direction, strong character development, and powerful storytelling. This film is a must-see for anyone interested in the issues of caste-based discrimination and social injustice in India. The movie provides a powerful lens to analyze caste, gender, and cultural politics in India from an Ambedkarite perspective. This film highlights the intersectionality of various social categories, such as caste and gender, and how they are deeply intertwined with cultural politics. It elaborates on the need for collective action, education, and empowerment as tools for social transformation and underscores the importance of self-respect, solidarity, and allyship in challenging systemic oppression and creating a more just and equitable society.

From an Ambedkarite perspective, the film emphasizes the importance of collective action and empowerment as tools for social change. The protagonist's journey towards self-realization and assertion of her rights highlights the need for solidarity and allyship among marginalized communities. The movie underscores the significance of education, which is seen as a tool for empowerment and resistance against oppressive structures. Dalit filmmakers are authoritatively and sincerely producing movies on the community's experiences while avoiding gender/caste/class prejudices and misogynistic representation of women and marginalized communities. The Brahminical patriarchal mindset of Savarnas reflects in the continuous portrayal of sexual violence against Dalit women as victimized in Indian films. Showing Dalits as vulnerable and portraying them as downtrodden forms repetitive patterns in filmmaking which reflects the motive of Savarnas to maintain their superiority and power in the caste hierarchy. However, Dalit filmmakers' unbiased and realistic presentation of Dalit women, as found in *Natchathiram Nagargirathu*, showcases the positive, progressive, and assertive side of Dalit women. Dalit filmmakers are endeavoring to deconstruct gender-stereotyped portrayals and undertake the

responsibility of creating a cinematic community that brings forth a change to both Indian cinema and society.

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