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Reframing the Margins: Gender Performativity and Intersectionality in “Kottukaali (The Adamant Girl, 2024)”

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Abstract

In the mainstream cinema, the female character is only shown as fulfilling the needs and desires of men, subservient to patriarchy, and without any purpose of her own, helping to achieve the male ideal. However, in recent times, this custom has been broken, and films are coming out that speak loudly about women's motives, desires, problems faced by men and women due to social constraints, and also women's voices against violence and oppression. In this way, *Kottukaali* (The Adamant Girl, 2024), a Tamil film directed by P.S. Vinodraj, reveals in a different style the extent to which caste, gender inequality, social and patriarchal restrictions against women have seeped into even the smallest of everyday things - scenes, characters, silence, sounds, symbols, and gestures. Visual symbols, dialogues, and rituals are analysed by qualitative content analysis. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is applied to examine the patriarchal control through rituals; Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality to explore caste and gender oppression, and bell hooks' oppositional gaze to explore the resistant modes of spectatorship. The paper argues that *Kottukaali* redefines silence as resistance and transforms cinema into a space for reimagining entrenched hierarchies and alternative futures. The paper argues that *Kottukaali* redefines silence as resistance and transforms cinema into a space for reimagining entrenched hierarchies and alternative futures.

Keywords: #Tamilcinema #patriarchyandresistance #genderperformativity #intersectionality #oppositionalgaze

1. Introduction:

Cinema has served as a mirror reflecting our social, cultural, and political reality and a tool for highlighting and dissecting social developments, in addition to being a kind of amusement. For many years, Indian cinema has portrayed women from a patriarchal perspective, as a resource for men, as an enslaved person, as a symbol of men's admiration, and as subject to social norms. Women are now routinely oppressed as a result of these portrayals. Gender discrimination against women, caste inequalities, and cultural and ceremonial traditions have become ubiquitous, especially in rural areas.

Tamil cinema has often portrayed women as subject to social and cultural restrictions. However, in recent times, many creators have offered films that transcend such contradictions. Tamil cinema represents the

voice of the downtrodden against gender inequity, patriarchal thinking, caste oppression, and violence against women as a result of social, cultural, and ritualistic practices.

Kottukaali (The Adamant Girl, 2024), directed by P.S. Vinodraj, is a different kind of script that depicts the violence against women, directly and indirectly, under the guise of society, culture, ritual, tradition, and patriarchy. The main character, Meena, falls in love with a man at the place where she went to study. The story says that Meena's family opposes this, and Pandi, who wants to marry Meena, thinks a demon possesses Meena and takes her to a priest. However, it is Meena who is haunted, or the society that has suppressed women through various oppressions. The film deals with this question in many ways - scenes, characters, dialogues, and social symbols.

Meena's silence against oppression, the verses that show patriarchy in women, the rooster that symbolizes Meena's status, the conservatism that is embedded in the thoughts even when modern technologies come to the village, and finally, the question that is put in front of the film-goers makes them question the oppression that this society has built against women.

To unpack these representations, this paper applies three feminist theoretical frameworks: Butler's gender performativity, Crenshaw's intersectionality, and hooks' oppositional gaze. Together, they allow us to analyze not only how patriarchy operates, but also how women resist—sometimes quietly, ambiguously, or symbolically.

2. Statement of the Problem:

Though Tamil cinema has often expressed the problems and needs of women and their protests against oppression, they have often been unrealistic verses or male-centric. Most of the films do not reveal the violence against women that pervades every activity in the region. The gap lies between mainstream cinematic representations and the lived realities of marginalized women, whose resistance is often subtle, quiet, and overlooked.

The film *Kottukaali*, directed by P.S. Vinodraj, is a 2024 Tamil-language film that has garnered significant attention for its poignant exploration of societal norms and individual resistance. It breaks conventional narrative patterns and captures the oppression that is built up against women in a patriarchal society, in every act, through the obsessive gaze of the female protagonist, the long silences, and the speech, mannerisms, and actions of the co-passengers.

By analyzing *Kottukaali* through the frameworks of Butler, Crenshaw, and hooks, this study seeks to reframe silence and ambiguity as political strategies of resistance, rather than signs of passivity.

3. Review of Literature:

Devi Mohan, Balakrishnan (2025), analysed the gender representation in Bollywood and Malayalam Cinema and stated that Filmmakers, viewers, and industry participants are dedicated to producing more varied and genuine portrayals of women as Indian cinema develops. Though there have been many women-centric films, they have been portrayed as sacrificers, bearers of family responsibilities, and are still the same multifaceted characters.

Jesslyn Quaneisha Lie, Nathanael Raditya Putra Satriyo, Gabriel Andrea Ricky, and Caesar Allie Sihalohe (2024), made a gender performative analysis of the movie *The wonder Woman 1984 (2020)* movie and stated that the movie challenges the traditional gender roles by illustrating how women's ability to act independently is frequently limited by societal expectations, especially in terms of relationships and their roles within society.

Nindi Putri, Anis Endang, Bayu Risdiyanto (2024), analyzed the representation of resistance by women in the horror film "Perempuan Tanah Jahanam" and stated that the resistance carried out by women in the film is an opposition to the culture (feminist patriarchy) which binds their freedom.

Nelly Khaled Abdelwahed (2023) critically examines the movie Barbie through the frameworks of gender performativity and intersectionality and states that although the film does a good job of promoting women's empowerment and challenging social constraints, its over-reliance on a Western-centric narrative lessens its applicability on a worldwide scale.

Rachana Gangwar, Princi Mishra (2023), studied the representation of women in Indian films and stated that cinema has the responsibility to uplift the culture it is a part of rather than reinforcing the same old objectification and insignificant portrayal of women in films just to woo the audience. The misogynistic representation of women does not just question how men see the women in society or how the society sees women but also how the women see themselves as well.

Smita Jha and Sheetal Yadav (2023) examined the gender norms and subjectivity in cinema. They stated that society reflects itself, and audiences can deeply understand the sociocultural issues of women when they see strong women facing violence and needs in cinema. Women-centric films are beginning to talk about women's problems that have been hidden for a long time. Such a change is necessary to break the age-old stereotype that women are meant to serve the needs of men. |

N. Nazini and V. Vijay Kumar (2020), said that, Cinema not only narrates the story but also showcase views of the cultural and traditional practices of people and their customs. Indian films, by and large, not only make opinions about race and community but also reshape the views of the people

Amutha Manavalan and Shailashree B (2018), noted that Tamil popular cinema has been a reflection of political, cultural and ethnic ideologies creating a Tamil identity among the fans for many decades. It has been instrumental in creating images of genders through visual culture and visual representations which has led to stereotyping the identity, culture and appearances of the Tamil populace.

Mana Tabatabai Rad (2016), analyzed the portrayal of women in two films *Daman* and *Mrityudand* and stated that since the image of women in cinematic representations reflects the realities of women's lives, then by showing empowerment and agency of women on screen, perception of society may be changed and people can be made have a better understanding of women's social and cultural issues.

Priya Upadhyay and Bhawani Shankar (2012), analysed the portrayal of women in Hindi movies and stated that Indian cinema idealizes the sacrifices made by women. It presents docile, patient women as the ideal. There are numerous instances where women who do not advocate for their own rights are viewed as perfect and domestic. These pictures are influencing a lot of men and women. They believe that women should become housewives and that the so-called ideal woman is incapable of being independent or having a career. They lack a distinct personality and stance.

4. Objectives of the Study:

1. To analyze how *Kottukaali* challenges patriarchal structures through its narrative strategies, character portrayals, and the politics of silence.
2. To interpret the protagonist's resistance by applying feminist theoretical frameworks—Judith Butler's Gender Performativity, Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality, and bell hooks' Oppositional Gaze.
3. To situate *Kottukaali* within the larger context of Tamil cinema, exploring how it reimagines spectatorship and positions cinema as a site of resistance for marginalized communities.

5. Research Methodology:

Qualitative analysis is adopted in this study to look at the movie's scenes, language, characters, and symbolism. It looks at the anti-stratification attitudes toward women as well as the social mores imposed on them by caste and gender systems.

5.1. Research Design - A qualitative content analysis methodology is adopted, suitable for deciphering cinematic texts in which visual clues, conversation, and symbols are used to generate meaning. The analysis places more emphasis on depth, interpretation, and critical reflection than it does on numerical facts.

5.2. Data Source - The primary data was gathered by examining the visual settings of the Kottukkali film. The research reports on the portrayal of women, caste, and gender in Tamil cinema were collected as secondary data. Apart from this, film reviews, interviews, etc., were also taken for the study.

5.3. Analytical Framework:

- **Judith Butler's Gender Performativity:** Used to examine how patriarchal control is enacted and reinforced through repeated rituals and bodily performances in the film.
- **Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality:** Applied to explore how caste and gender simultaneously shape the lived experiences of the protagonist.
- **Bell hooks' Oppositional Gaze:** Utilized to understand how female audiences, in particular, might engage with and resist dominant cinematic readings.

5.4 Units of Analysis

The following film components were extracted from *Kottukaali* to examine intersectionality, resistance, and gender performativity.

1. **Characters and Characterization** - Focus on the protagonist Meena, Pandi, family members, friends, representation of women characters, their body language, acts that reveal the male and female gender difference, and the oppression men exhibit on women.
2. **Dialogues and Silences** - The dialogues reveal patriarchal oppression, gender discrimination, the imposition of ritualism, and the reality of Meena, who uses silence as her weapon of resistance.
3. **Rituals and Practices** - The ritualistic practices depicted in the film and the physical and mental patriarchal oppression of women through them.
4. **Visual Symbols and Cinematic Techniques** - Mise-en-scene elements such as Settings, costumes, Direct and symbolic properties, and framing of shots.
5. **Narrative Structure** - Plot narration that narrates conflict between the protagonist and the social norms, open-ended climax from a subjective angle.
6. **Audience Positioning** - Spectators' perspective on the protagonist's point of view, possibilities of oppositional readings by women audience.

5.5. Scope and Limitations

This study only examines the various components of the *Kottukaali* film. There is no comparison to any other film. However, being studied based on various theories, this paper is being written to delve deeper into the films that reflect the oppression shown to women through social, gender, caste, and patriarchal formal structures.

6. Analysis and Discussion:

6.1 Gender Performativity (Judith Butler)

Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity argues that gender is not an innate or stable identity but rather the effect of repeated performances, gestures, and behaviors that society normalizes as “natural.” In *Kottukaali*, this framework becomes crucial in understanding how the female protagonist resists the gendered scripts imposed upon her.

In the rural Tamil setting of the film, women are expected to embody silence as obedience, to conform to domestic roles, and to perform femininity in ways that reassure patriarchal authority publicly. However, the protagonist’s refusal to engage in these ritualized acts unsettles the community. Her silence is not passive; it becomes a deliberate interruption of the gender script. By not performing submission, she destabilizes the illusion of “natural” femininity and exposes the performative, enforced nature of patriarchal gender norms.

The characters of the film *Kottukkali*, their age-old rituals, and the oppression imposed on women can be explored from the point of view of Judith Butler.

6.1.1 Unit of Analysis

Characters & Characterization

Meena: Courage means perseverance. In the same way, the film's main character, Meena, has an unshakable mind, eyes that transmit a thousand thoughts, and whatever she has to say, even if there are no words in any scene, she has done it with her own emotions. Meena's persona embodies silent resistance to tyranny based on caste and patriarchy. Meena defies the expectations placed on her by expressing a deep feeling of agency through her expressive eyes and reserved manner.

Pandi: A character who firmly believes in the relationship patterns and beliefs taught by this society. Pandi emphasizes how repressive norms are internalized. Over the course of his quest, Pandi gradually comes to understand the suffering these ideas cause, leading to an epiphany that causes him to reevaluate his once unwavering beliefs. This development emphasizes how people can evolve and how crucial it is to challenge social norms.

Dialogues & Silences

Meena's character speaks only once in the film, uttering the line, "They are not just beating me," a powerful statement that encapsulates her suffering and the broader societal violence inflicted upon her. It is a potent way to capture both her pain and the larger violence that society inflicts on her. Her silence is a protest against the established customs and choices without her input, not a sign of acceptance. This is clear in instances where she sees a rooster trying to escape, representing her wish for independence. Meena whispered the words of a song playing somewhere along the way, "Sing to you!" her words. Do you recall him? We are taken to the male-centric perspective in the movie, where the attacking Pandi is perceived as a woman.

Rituals & Practices

The film gradually reveals the repressive social structure that surrounds Meena as she travels to the healer. Rituals like puberty functions are observed, where girls are honored but also marked symbolically for

marriage and procreation. While a lady who unexpectedly gets her period has to conceal to change her pad, a striking sequence depicts men urinating in public, using the open space shamelessly. This is a visual metaphor for gendered freedom vs bodily shame, purity, and the desire for freedom.

Visual Symbols & Technique

It shakes up the patriarchal structure in a way that the metaphors of men freely enjoying the air in the wide open, in the cab space, where women are locked inside shared autos, are not forced. A girl can handle any big bull. You are just a small piece in front of her. She does not have any of the caste and customs you have created in the society. At the same time, the little girl is a miniature version of Meena. The bull is the social issue. Meena is a brave girl who faces it very boldly. Similarly, the little boy in the auto is a miniature version of Pandi. Pandi was also in his childhood because he knew nothing about the world. However, the superstition, casteism, and all this are eating at him.

Narrative Structure

The story of the movie revolves around Meena, a young woman whose family misinterprets her love for a man from a lower caste as possessed and seeks to "cure" her through exorcism rites. The repression of women's liberty, caste inequality, and patriarchy are all major topics in this plot. *Kottukkaali* is notable in the current Tamil film landscape for its strong performances and understated narrative. The deliberate use of silence and natural soundscapes immerses the audience deeply into the narrative. Non-professional actors portray characters with natural body language and genuine interactions to portray societal dynamics and personal relationships.

Audience Positioning

Meena has fallen in love, and her refusal to marry someone her family chose is being pathologized. Her uncle and family members conspire to take her to a local healer or religious intervention—a symbolic "treatment" of her "madness." Along the journey, we witness multiple symbolic scenes of men urinating publicly, a woman hiding to put on a sanitary pad, and the buffalo being equated to Meera in a livestock context. These scenes build quiet tension, showcasing how society views and controls women's bodies and choices. Discomfort emerges because the film denaturalizes "good woman" behavior. Butler helps us read Meena's silence not as a lack, but as an active disruption. The viewer is left with open-ended questions about love, autonomy, and sanity.

6.2 Intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw)

Intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, foregrounds the overlapping and interconnected structures of power that shape marginalization. In *Kottukaali*, the oppression of the female protagonist cannot be reduced to gender alone; instead, her condition is determined by the intersections of caste, class, patriarchy, and rural marginalization.

The protagonist's suffering is not the universal suffering of "woman" but specifically the suffering of a woman in a caste-bound, economically deprived rural setting. This layered experience marks the difference between her oppression and that of middle-class or upper-caste women, whose patriarchal struggles take different forms.

Intersectionality helps reveal how silence, in this context, is not simply a personal act of resistance or submission but a response shaped by multiple forms of structural violence. Her silence embodies the cumulative weight of caste restrictions, economic dependency, and gender subordination.

6.2.1 Unit of Analysis:

Characters & Characterization

Meena’s cross-caste love threatens the reproductive boundary-work of caste. Pandi’s sisters act as female gatekeepers of purity. The mother’s plea to “run” admits the structural trap; escape is individual, risk is communal.

Dialogues & Silences

The father’s shame and the family’s labeling of Meena as “possessed” convert caste anxiety into a “medical-spiritual” problem to be fixed on her body. Her silence sits at the crossroads of gender subordination and caste honor.

Rituals & Practices

The exorcism trip doubles as caste maintenance. The presence of multiple girls arriving (Meena by share-auto, another by car) marks class variation yet shared caste-patriarchal ritual. Menstrual seclusion reprises “purity” as both gendered and caste-coded.

Visual Symbols & Technique

TN-59 vs. TN-14 plates indicate rural-urban permeability: superstition/casteism travel both ways. Shrines, offerings, and the landscape of "development" narrate a region where modernity coexists with caste ritual. Close-ups and cramped areas define the film's visual aesthetic, which mirrors the characters' inner conflicts and social norms. By giving the viewer a personal look at the characters' viewpoints, this method helps them relate to their experiences on a deeper level.

Narrative Structure

Kottukkaali does not have a typical commercial storyline. Instead, it adheres to a sentimental, symbolic framework in which landscapes, silences, and rituals serve as narrative tools. Through Meena's journey, viewers can experience the emotional suffocation of patriarchy because the story is more focused on internal conflict and systematic oppression than on external action.

Audience Positioning

Intersectionality reframes Meena’s silence as structurally produced: the cost of speech is higher when a woman’s desire threatens caste borders.

6.3 The Oppositional Gaze (bell hooks):

bell hooks’ concept of the “oppositional gaze” emphasizes the possibility for marginalized subjects to resist dominant forms of representation by looking back, refusing the passivity imposed upon them by hegemonic narratives. While hooks developed this theory in the context of Black women’s spectatorship

in American cinema, its application to *Kottukaali* highlights how silence itself can function as a mode of resistance to both patriarchal and cinematic gazes.

Within the diegetic world of the film, men continually attempt to interpret, manage, and control the female protagonist's silence. Her refusal to speak back frustrates patriarchal authority. In cinematic terms, her silence also unsettles the audience, who expect women in film to reveal emotions, speak their trauma, or provide narrative closure. Instead, *Kottukaali* forces viewers to sit with silence, discomfort, and ambiguity. By refusing to deliver the submissive speech or expressive emotional cues that both patriarchy and mainstream cinema expect, the protagonist enacts a form of the oppositional gaze. Her silence “looks back” at the viewer, denying the audience the comfort of clear interpretation and demanding an ethical responsibility to confront silence not as emptiness but as agency. In this way, *Kottukaali* not only resists patriarchal representation but also challenges conventional cinematic spectatorship, enabling an oppositional way of seeing.

6.3.1 Unit of Analysis:

Characters & Characterization

Meena: This character affirms her agency in a culture that aims to silence her by refusing to speak, challenging the narratives that are pushed upon her. Her silence is a conscious act of rebellion against the caste-based and patriarchal oppression she experiences rather than one of surrender. Her glance at a most, representing her own captivity and need for release, is one instance where her nonverbal cues express more than words could. She can regain her voice in a society that seeks to quiet it by using her silence as a platform to highlight her inner strength and fortitude.

Dialogues & Silences

The film's open-ended climax dislodges authoritarian meaning-making. Pandi's guilt POV forces viewers to confront complicity: *Do we intervene or rationalize the ritual?* Hooks names this ethical labor of spectatorship.

Rituals & Practices

The “exorcism” can be re-read by women viewers as institutional violence masked as faith. The little girl calmly leading the bull models a counter-image of female agency for spectators.

Visual Symbols & Technique

The Rooster and Bull as Metaphors for Freedom and Resistance Animals in *Kottukkaali* are potent symbols reflecting Meena's inner turmoil and aspirations. The poster, often tied to a stone, symbolizes Meena's entrapment within societal expectations. Its brief moments of freedom mirror her floating desires for autonomy and escape. In contrast, the bull encountered during the journey represents resistance and the challenge to authority. The bull's refusal to move and the subsequent actions of the characters highlight the tension between individual desires and collective control. These animal motifs enrich the narrative, offering a deeper understanding of the characters' struggles and the societal forces.

Narrative Structure

Refusal of neat closure enables interpretive autonomy. The film relocates meaning into the viewer's gaze, inviting oppositional reading over passive consumption. The absence of a musical score also emphasizes the characters' dialogues and actions, compelling the audience to pay closer attention to the nuances of their interactions.

Audience Positioning

The film's open-ended climax sparked diverse reactions among viewers. Director P.S. Vinodraj intentionally left the ending ambiguous, encouraging audiences to interpret Meena's fate and the journey's conclusion. The final image leaves the viewer with a question: Is Meena furious, or is society sick in its refusal to allow love, choice, and dignity to its women?

6.4 Comparative Matrix of Analysis:

Unit of Analysis	Judith Butler – Gender Performativity	Kimberlé Crenshaw - Intersectionality	bell hooks - Oppositional Gaze
Characters	Pandi enacts masculinity through domination; Meena destabilizes gender norms by refusing submission.	Meena's love across caste lines threatens both caste and gender systems; Pandi's sisters uphold both caste and patriarchy; women become gatekeepers of caste purity.	Meena embodies oppositional gaze; her silence is re-read as defiance, not shame.
Dialogues & Silences	Male shaming reaffirms masculinity; Meena's silence is a non-performance disrupting gender scripts.	Father's humiliation links gender failure to caste honor; silence naturalizes women's role as caste protectors.	Silence becomes resistance for female/marginalized viewers; alternative readings reject patriarchal meaning.
Rituals and practices	Repeated rituals (cleansing, menstruation taboos) perform and reinforce gendered oppression.	Rituals ensure caste continuity under the guise of purity; women's bodies become caste boundaries.	Women audiences may decode rituals as violence, not sacred tradition.
Visual Symbols	Shrines and bull scene show masculinity as fragile performance; symbols naturalize gender hierarchy.	Shrines function as caste-coded markers, embedding women's suffering into tradition.	Symbols can be reinterpreted through resistant gazes—shrines as oppression, bull as masculine failure.
Narrative Structure	Violence erupts as suppressed gender roles break open; Meena's refusal queers the “good woman” role.	Family's journey = intersection of caste and gender policing through ritual and mobility control.	Open-ended climax resists closure, allowing viewers to assert oppositional interpretations.

Audience Positioning	Viewers are unsettled by exposed constructedness of gender roles.	Audience is pushed to see oppression as layered—caste and gender reinforcing each other.	Female/marginalized spectators empowered to resist dominant readings; agency in interpretation.
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Table 1. Comparative Matrix of Analysis Using Butler’s Gender Performativity, Crenshaw’s Intersectionality, and Hooks’ Oppositional Gaze

7. Conclusion

Kottukaali emerges as a striking example of how cinema can function as a medium of resistance by refusing to conform to dominant storytelling conventions and by centering marginalized subjectivities. Through Judith Butler’s *Gender Performativity*, the protagonist’s silence becomes a radical act of defiance, unsettling the scripted norms of femininity imposed by patriarchal society. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s *Intersectionality* reveals how her struggle is not only gendered but also deeply entangled with caste and class hierarchies, making her silence a layered form of protest against systemic oppression. bell hooks’ *Oppositional Gaze* reframes spectatorship, compelling audiences to resist passive consumption and instead engage critically with the power structures that attempt to contain her voice. By refusing narrative closure, the film shifts the responsibility of meaning-making to the audience, encouraging them to imagine alternative futures and question their own complicity in patriarchal and casteist systems. In doing so, *Kottukaali* exemplifies how Tamil cinema can challenge hegemonic narratives, amplify silenced voices, and transform the screen into a space of political dialogue. Thus, the film not only represents resistance but actively performs it, demonstrating the potential of cinema to reimagine social realities and contribute to the larger struggle for justice at the margins.

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