
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Articulating the Silenced: Voice, Voiceless and Structures of Suppression in Maari Selvaraj's *Bison Kaalamaadan*

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| ABSTRACT

This paper analyses how voice, the voiceless, and structures of suppression are articulated in the Tamil movie *Bison* through narrative design (flashback architecture), cinematic voice (sound and silence), embodied performance (sport as public speech), and institutional dramaturgy (police, selectors, party networks, caste hierarchies). The argument is anchored in film scholarship on subalternity and representation, symbolic violence, and cinematic sound, then situated within Tamil Nadu's caste political history and compared to five key films. *Bison Kaalamaadan* (*Bison*) frames sport as a contested public language, kabaddi becomes a space where Dalit lives are disciplined, denied, or permitted visibility, never neutrally celebrated. The film is positioned, by critics and interviews, as a sports drama whose biopic grammar is repeatedly bent towards caste, bureaucracy, and inherited vulnerability bodies carry histories long before they carry medals.

| KEYWORDS

Subaltern, cultural memory, symbolic realism, sociopolitical, spatial resistance

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Bison is positioned by Netflix as a rural Tamil Nadu set story about a gifted kabaddi player fighting for dignity and a community cast aside, establishing at the paratext level voice as both personal aspiration and collective recognition. Reputable criticism further maps the film onto a genre tension, it is repeatedly read as a sports drama that uses the sports biopic template while insisting that sport cannot be separated from caste society. (Bunkar, 2025) In this sense, voice becomes a question of *where* speech is permitted (selections, passports, police permissions, caste boundaries) and *what* counts as legitimate speech (achievement, awards, deference, silence).

Across reputable reviews, the film's central axis of voice is relational rather than individual, a father and son bond mediates when and how aspiration can be spoken, the state (police, selectors, bureaucrats) is depicted as an apparatus that can silence without spectacle through permissions, paperwork, and everyday refusals.

From a film form perspective, sources converge on three craft choices that matter to voice and voicelessness. First, the narrative is structured through present-tense tournament scenes and layered flashbacks, marking voice as memory work and re narration, not merely dialogue. (Mukherjee, 2025) Second, selective withholding of melodramatic cues (especially music) in key scenes foregrounds a politics of silence state power appears quietly, bureaucratically, and without apology. Third, the film extends a Dalit cinema motif of the human and animal

relationship (e.g. goat incident), using embodied vulnerability and trained rage as aesthetic arguments about how violence circulates.

Comparatively, *Bison* sits within a cluster of contemporary Tamil films where the voice of the oppressed is staged via performative arenas, the ring (Sarpatta Parambarai), the public road and bus-stop struggle (Karnan), electoral institutions (Maamannan), land and family survival (Asuran), and the law college space (Pariyerum Perumal). Across the set, suppression commonly takes the form of institutional gatekeeping plus humiliation, while narrative resolution tends to split between strategic exit mobility and collective confrontation (Eswaran, 2023).

2. Review of Literature

Suresh and Subramani (2024) in their article titled *Visualizing Caste Identity: An Analysis of Pariyerum Perumal Tamil Movie* deliver the impact of the movie societal context and film industry. They precisely portray the caste discrimination and social justice in every part of India. The realistic incidents in the nation are deeply portrayed in the movie and showcases the struggles of the marginalized people in education, society, etc. The authors also discussed the vital part of the film as a social change to eradicate the discriminations.

Sageedevie (2026) in her work *A Voice for the Voiceless: A Subaltern Reading of Vetrimaan's Asuran 2019* conveys that disputes in caste and the framework of power in Tamil films. The researcher shows the challenges in the movie such as dominant narratives, violence and humiliation. Caste oppression is the pivotal context in the movie rather than any other narration. The movie undoubtedly delivers the importance of education and the need of political awareness to transform the society.

3. Theoretical Approach

A rigorous account of the research paper needs three conceptual layers.

First is subalternity and representation, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously problematises whether the subaltern can speak within dominant representational systems not as a lack of vocal cords, but as structural non-recognition and epistemic violence. (Spivak, 1988) This is useful for analysing *Bison's* repeated gatekeeping sites (selection committees, police, village power blocs), where speech is heard only when translated into institutionally legible forms (certificates, awards, obedience).

Second is symbolic and disciplinary power, Pierre Bourdieu theorises symbolic violence as misrecognised domination embedded in everyday meanings and social legitimacy, precisely the domain of humiliation and place. (Bourdieu, 1991) Michel Foucault analyses of discipline and power/knowledge, provides tools to read institutions (police stations, bureaucracies, training regimes) as sites where bodies are regulated and made docile or deviant. (Foucault, 1975)

Third is cinematic voice as form, Michel Chion argues that cinema is typically vococentric, privileging voice and organising attention around it, thus, withholding voice (or withholding music behind voice) can be a political aesthetic strategy. (Michel, 1994) Feminist film theory classically Laura Mulvey on visual pleasure and narrative cinema matters here because voice is also gendered: whose desire is narratively centred, whose body is looked at, and whose speech is treated as credible. (Laura, 1975) These frameworks caution against equating speaking more with being liberated, and instead direct attention to authorship, framing, and institutional legibility

4. Socio-Political Context in Tamil Nadu and Narrative Architecture

4.1 Socio Politics

Bison's socio-political frame is repeatedly located by commentary and criticism in the southern districts where caste conflicts and retaliatory violence have remained salient in public memory and reportage. (Kannadi, 2025)

Two contextual anchors are especially relevant because they link voice to state power rather than interpersonal prejudice alone. One is the 1995 Kodyankulam police violence, frequently invoked in public discourse around caste cinema, and explicitly discussed in scholarship on *Karnan* as a real-life referent for portraying caste oppression and police brutality. (Jeeva, 2025) The Tamil-language summary of the event is included here to register that this memory circulates in vernacular informational ecosystems as well, though it is not itself a peer-reviewed source.

The other is the documented history of gang and caste linked feuds in the Thoothukudi region, including reportage on the decades-long conflict linked to C. Pasupathy Pandian and the Pannaiyar family, which a later opinion piece reads as being referenced in Bison's rivalries. Importantly for this report's theme, such contexts describe a public sphere where voice can be punished through policing, fabricated cases, and the normalisation of retaliatory control.

At the legal institutional level, the Parliament of India enacted the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, indicating the acknowledged persistence of caste-based atrocities and the state's formal commitment (however uneven in practice) to prevention and redress.

The cinematic field itself is part of this context, contemporary scholarship argues that filmmakers such as Swarnavel Eswaran read Dalit-centred Tamil cinema as challenging hegemony not only through story content but through spaces, locations, and representational priorities (for example, foregrounding districts and landscapes that mainstream Tamil cinema historically coded through dominant-caste pride).

A compact timeline helps situate how socio-political flashpoints, legal frameworks, and film releases intersect.

Timeline- Socio-political events and key film releases shaping caste cinema discourse

1968 : Keezhvenmani massacre (Dalit labourers killed)

1989 : SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act enacted

1992 : Thevar Magan intensifies debates on caste pride in cinema

1993 : Thoothukudi-region feud linked to Pasupathy Pandian and Pannaiyar family begins (reported history)

1995 : Kodyankulam police violence becomes a key reference point for later caste-cinema readings

2018 : Pariyerum Perumal releases

2019 : Asuran releases

2021 : Karnan releases; Sarpatta Parambarai releases (OTT, pandemic context)

2023 : Maamannan releases; caste within party politics debated publicly

2025 : Bison Kaalamaadan releases; later streams on Netflix

This timeline is grounded in documented summaries of Keezhvenmani and Kodyankulam, the statutory text of the 1989 Act, reportage on the 1993 feud history, and film context commentary on Maamannan and Bison

4.2 Plots and Narratives

The Netflix synopsis establishes the film's baseline narrative, a gifted kabaddi player in rural Tamil Nadu fights for dignity while a marginalised community is "cast aside."

A detailed review describes the film's structuring device, it opens at an Asian Games match in Japan with selection politics and the protagonist, Kittan, benched, it then shifts into extended flashback to narrate the path from village life to national level sport. The same review notes that the present tense track is rendered in black and white to distinguish time layers, yet the film's nested flashbacks can still blur chronology, an aesthetic choice that matters for voice, because it makes memory and testimony part of the storytelling grammar rather than a transparent record.

In the film's described social world, Kittan's ascent is embedded in village rivalries and political figures, crucially, the narrative does not reduce oppression to a simple oppressor and oppressed binary but acknowledges internal hierarchies and intra-community conflicts (including gatekeeping within Dalit groups).

The Indian Express column reframes the plot arc as inheritance, dignity, rage, memory, and love operate as survival strategies under caste stratification, and the awards and recognition sequence is framed with an Ambedkar portrait, symbolising that the protagonist's voice is historically situated rather than purely personal triumph

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Film Techniques

The most explicitly documented formal device is the film's black and white present track against colour flashbacks, used to mark the Asian Games now versus the remembered then. This does not merely signal time, it signals how voice is mediated recognition arrives late and is retrospectively narrated.

Editing is politically consequential here. The same review notes flashback within a flashback structures, that risk disorientation. (Vimal, 2024) In analytical terms, this layering can be read as mimicking how marginalised histories are often grasped: not as linear biography, but as interrupted recollection shaped by social stigma, violence, and the need to explain oneself repeatedly to institutions.

Sound and silence are reported as unusually strategic in a key father and police scene, rather than swelling score or overt emotional signalling, the scene is described as stripped of conventional cues, presenting state power as quiet bureaucracy. This is a craft choice that makes suppression feel routine and administrative, not only spectacular or riot like. A related observation from the review is that the film withholds sublime flourish until the end, suggesting a deliberate distribution of catharsis, voice is delayed, rationed, and made costly.

Bringing film sound theory into view, Chion's account of cinema's vococentrism provides a framework to interpret why a refusal of emotional cues designed to manipulate can be politically productive, silence or low key sound design can refuse to repackage structural humiliation as consumable inspiration. (Manoharan, 2023)

5.2 Characterization, Dialogue and Politics

Kittan is repeatedly described as a character "in motion" running from humiliation and a social order designed to keep him in place suggesting a dramaturgy where speech alone is insufficient, bodily skill (kabaddi technique) becomes an alternative register of articulation.

The father figure is central in critical reception, the Indian Express essay treats him as flawed yet affectively powerful, holding an unwavering belief in his son amid caste society's insistence on seeing the son only through the lens of caste. This matters to voice because it frames speech and aspiration as intergenerationally authorised the father's belief functions as a social credential against a world that denies credibility.

Dialogue is also described as carrying intra-community critique. A later scene is cited where a character reflects on how some oppressed people may reproduce casteism downward if they find someone beneath them, complicating any simplistic model of the voiceless as morally pure victims.

5.3 Symbolism and Motifs

A recurring motif highlighted by the Indian Express column is the Dalit cinema pattern of human–animal relationships, including an explicitly referenced goat incident and blood imagery as a way to show how rage is trained and how violence circulates.

Symbolic framing is also reported in the awards sequence, the presence of an B. R. Ambedkar portrait during a father and son exchange over the Arjuna Award (not an entity type, noted here only as text) indicates that the film's voice is situated in anti-caste historical memory rather than solely in national integration mythology.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence helps interpret why such objects (portraits, household spaces, police offices) matter, domination is not only physical, it is also the organisation of legitimacy whose achievements are taken seriously and whose bodies are read as out of place.

5.4 Caste, Gender, Class and State Violence

Caste is not presented as a background social issue, but as an organising principle of opportunity and exclusion. The film's core claim, across reviews, is that kabaddi is embedded in access, violence, and survival, not a neutral meritocratic arena.

State violence, in the film as described, is less about a single riot than about routinised policing, the father pleading with police for permission for his son to leave and play maps suppression onto administrative control. This resonates strongly with Foucauldian accounts of discipline, power operates through control of movement, documentation, and institutional permission structures, not merely through overt brutality.

Gender is more difficult to analyse rigorously without a citable screenplay or scene by scene access, but relevant public discourse exists. An opinion piece criticises the tendency to reduce debates about Dalit filmmakers to the

skin tone and caste identity of female leads, describing such fixation as a strategy that can subvert, Dalit political discourse rather than extend representation. Mulvey's framework is relevant here, the politics of who is looked at, whose body is marked and whose speech is centred can operate even in social issue narratives, however, any definitive claim about Bison's gendered gaze would need direct scene analysis beyond what open sources provide.

5.5 Agency and Silence

A key analytical error would be to treat voicelessness as lack of expression. Spivak's intervention is that the subaltern's speech is structurally foreclosed heard only when translated into dominant idioms. Bison's described arc fits this well, Kittan's legitimacy emerges not when he merely speaks but when he is forced into institutionally legible forms selection lists, national matches, awards, state recognition.

Kabaddi, then, functions as embodied articulation, the body speaks through technique, stamina, and risk. The Indian Express column explicitly frames the body as political long before it becomes athletic, aligning sport with social inscription rather than escapism.

Connell and Messerschmidt's model of hegemonic masculinity is useful to interpret why this embodied speech is ambivalent, sport can reproduce hierarchies of masculinity while also enabling marginalised men to negotiate dignity and community status. (Connell, 2025)

5.6 Audience Reception

Reception, as reflected in a major review, includes a core critique, the film is seen as coherent and effective but more familiar than the director's earlier innovations. The sports biopic template is said to remain largely intact, with the most striking sports choreography saved for the ending.

At the same time, a contrasting opinion column praises the film's refusal to turn politics into slogans and highlights its trust in audience inference (for example, the un-underlined Ambedkar portrait symbolism). Together these positions describe a recurring tension in socially committed popular cinema: accessibility can widen address, but may flatten formal experimentation.

5.7 Director's Oeuvre and Interviews

A key through line in Mari Selvaraj's public self articulation is the commitment to using art to generate progressive debate, in an interview about *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), he frames his aim as using cinema to address caste, gender, and religion, and he explicitly explains Karuppi as a metaphorical cinematic device to convey the story's emotional arc. (Nathan, 2018)

Producer testimony on Bison positions the film as both mainstream sports drama and pure Mari Selvaraj in its politics of power and powerlessness, and community detail, emphasising extensive preparation and cross departmental craft (cinematography, music, sound, staging). Analytically, these materials support reading Bison not as an outlier but as a genre mediated extension of a consistent oeuvre: the film shifts the arena of struggle to the sports field, but maintains the director's emphasis on tactile detail, community worlds, and political stakes. (Mullappilly, 2025).

6. Comparative Film Analysis

To compare Bison with these five films rigorously, the key is to track, where suppression is located (family, party, police, land, campus), what counts as voice (speech, body, art, violence, institutional legitimacy), and how resolution is staged (exit, confrontation, reform, martyrdom, negotiated survival).

An article by Eswaran is particularly valuable here because it analyses how Dalit masculinity and caste hegemony are negotiated in both *Sarpatta Parambarai* and films by Mari Selvaraj, including how oppression and self-destructiveness (e.g., alcoholism) are narrativised as responses to systemic caste power.

For *Maamannan*, political reportage highlights caste operating within Dravidian party structures and electoral institutions, framing suppression as intraparty prejudice and conditional equality dependent on power positions. (Janardhanan, 2023)

For *Karnan*, public discourse and scholarship link the film to histories of caste oppression and police brutality, even as the director publicly insisted on fictionality, this creates an interpretive field where cinema is understood as a vehicle of truth claims and counter truth claims about the state.

For *Asuran*, longform commentary foregrounds caste violence through land rights (including panchami lands) and perspective reversal, making the Dalit protagonist's viewpoint the narrative centre rather than the object of law and order discourse. (Shinde, 2010)

For *Pariyerum Perumal*, the director's own interview makes explicit the use of metaphor (Karuppi) to speak what the social order would rather deny, offering a direct statement of how "voice" can be built as film form rather than merely a theme.

7. Counter Arguments

A first counter argument is formal containment, one major review argues that *Bison* largely follows the sports biopic playbook and withholds the most distinctive sports observation until the end, implying that the film's politics may be more thematically explicit than formally innovative. If voice is partly a question of form (who controls narrative rhythm, whose speech is foregrounded, what is withheld), then reliance on familiar genre grammar could be read as a partial domestication of radical critique.

A second counter argument concerns the politics of representation beyond caste, especially gender. Public commentary suggests that debates around Dalit filmmakers sometimes become narrowly fixated on the casting and complexion of female leads, and warns that this can function as an elite conspiracy to derail anti caste discourse, however, the existence of this debate also indicates that audiences are evaluating these films on representational consistency and inclusion, not only on anti caste intent. A feminist film theory lens would further caution that even politically progressive narratives can reproduce asymmetries of desire, attention, and agency if women remain primarily relational supports to male self-realisation.

A third counter argument is ethical, violence as articulation risks being read as either catharsis or endorsement. Reviews of *Bison* (and surrounding discourse on Mari Selvaraj's cinema) emphasise that violence is portrayed without glorification and under a sense of inevitability, nonetheless, the very repetitiveness of violent assertion across the broader film cluster (*Karnan*, *Asuran*, *Maamannan* and *Bison*) invites debate on whether cinema risks narrowing Dalit voice to rage, rather than plural registers such as humour, care, organising, or legal strategy.

A fourth counter argument challenges the subaltern voice framing itself, Spivak's caution implies that mediated speaking can still reinstall dominant frames especially when recognition arrives primarily via state honours and mainstream institutions. Under this reading, *Bison*'s resolution could be interpreted as celebrating conditional inclusion rather than dismantling the representational regime.

8. Summation

Bison's most significant contribution to the voice, voiceless and suppression discourse based on strong accessible sources, is that it locates voice in the body, the family, and the institution simultaneously. *Kabaddi* is not an escape hatch, it becomes a language through which caste society and state bureaucracy decide whose body can move, whose dreams can be admitted, and whose dignity is legible.

Formally, the film's layered flashback structure and reported refusal of easy melodrama in key state facing scenes ground suppression in the ordinary, power operates through paperwork, permissions, and quiet refusal as much as through overt violence.

Comparatively, across the six-film set, *Bison* extends a contemporary Tamil anti caste cinema tendency, to convert public arenas (ring, road, party, land, campus, court) into stages where marginalised subjects negotiate being heard. What varies is the mechanism of voice sport discipline, political office, violent confrontation, narrative perspective reversal, or metaphor, while suppression consistently appears as a combined field of caste hierarchy, institutional power, and the everyday technologies of humiliation.

8.1 Limitations and Future Scope

This study is primarily limited to the movie *Bison* and its thematic contexts. Moreover, the research work is supported by research articles, Tamil movies, online sources, etc. The study completely relies on primary movie and does not include data, interview, production context and audience reception. Furthermore, the study may extend to comparative analysis of Maari Selvaraj movies and other similar movies. Researchers may use interdisciplinary approaches like subaltern, Dalit studies, posthumanism and trauma studies deliver new insights to the suppressions and voices in the contemporary Indian movies.

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