

Marginalisation Existing in Neo-liberalised India and the Attempts to Subvert the Power Structures: A Reading of the Tamil Movies *Aruvi* and *Super Deluxe*.

Bincy Sebastian, IInd year M.A. English Student, 181307

Newman College, Thodupuzha, Kerala, 685585

Abstract

As neoliberalism and globalisation crept into India, they created a chasm between the rich and the poor, the lower and upper castes. These chasms were gradually occupied by marginalisation which started to operate in different guises and at different levels through the various products of the Cultural Industry. The most effective way to represent the protests against these discriminations experienced by the lower and weaker stratum of the society, who leads a life of prosaic quality under the dreariness of the capitalistic society, is to use these same cultural products as a medium to propagate a counter discourse. Films, being the largest revenue earner in the country and as an important cultural presence, can be employed to voice these protests. This paper discusses the impacts made by two such movies namely, *Aruvi* (2017) directed by Arun Prabu Purushothaman and *Super Deluxe* (2019) directed by Thiagarajan Kumararaja.

Aruvi presents the existential angst of an individual who undergoes multiple levels of marginalisation as she suffers the stigma and the discrimination inflicted upon a HIV patient, along with the exploitations of the patriarchy.

The film *Super Deluxe* shows the society's contempt and disapproval towards sex workers and porn actresses and how they are ostracized as outcasts. The film also contests and deconstructs the "deify versus sluts" binary that exists in the modern society. Also, both these films show the class, caste and social stratification and how sexual differences are demonized by the modern society especially through the representation of transgender characters. This paper attempts to throw light on how both these films address the above mentioned aspects and tries to subvert the power structures and protests against marginalisation through the theoretical framework of Queer theory, Gender studies, Subaltern studies and Deconstructive reading.

Keywords: Tamil Movies *Aruvi* and *Super Deluxe*, Marginalisation, Cultural Industry, Existential Angst, Capitalistic Society, Outcasts, Gender studies, Subaltern studies, Deconstructive reading and Queer theory.

As India stepped into the era of neoliberalism and globalisation, the country witnessed a maelstrom of social changes in its various spheres. From outside these changes appear very progressive. The dominant groups exercise their power and spread their ideologies and politics of "development for all". However, whether the modern India was completely successful in achieving

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this development is a serious question to ponder. As in reality, the term ‘development’ remains confined to the upper stratum of the society and it excludes the people at the grass root level. Globalisation ended up increasing the economic disparities and the religious and cultural differences between people. Though the country has welcomed liberalisation and westernization, the old ideologies of power and inequality still exists in the lives and minds of the Indian people. The only difference from older times is that the power structures have adopted new modus operandi in order to continue marginalisation, discrimination and inequality in this country. In the midst of all these discouraging factors, it gives hope to know that the country is not completely devoid of voices that attempts to subvert the power structures and represent the unrepresented people who are pushed into various margins. This paper throws light into two such endeavours that were produced in the Tamil film industry, specifically in the movies *Aruvi* and *Super Deluxe*.

¹*Aruvi* (meaning stream) is a socio-political drama film, written and directed by Arun Purushothaman and was released on 15th December 2017. The film ²*Super Deluxe* was released on 29th March 2019. *Super Deluxe* is a neo-noir film which was co-written, co-produced and directed by Thiagarajan Kumararaja. Both the films portray marginalisation at multiple levels. In *Aruvi* the one-woman revolution cast out by the eponymous heroine represents the voice of not just women but the entire relegated sections of the society- the voice of the poor against the rich, the voice of the “ashamed” against the “pride” of the society - the voice of a stream (*Aruvi*) against the sea. As the name denotes “Aruvi” takes a different path to the tread- a stream that decides not to go with the flow of the society and thereby claiming its individual existence. Whereas *Super Deluxe* reveals the politicization of body, gender, religion and the false and follies of the society. Both the films portray the lives of the weaker sections of the society and the ‘outcasts’ that are devoid of the glamour and splendour of the socially privileged group. The TV show *Yours Truly* that is presented in the movie *Aruvi*, underlies the kind of problems and inequalities faced by the marginalised community in India. It presents a minor girl accusing her uncle for forcefully making her watch porn, a father crying about his son being maltreated at the school because of his caste, the sex workers and physically challenged being rejected by their families, the celebrity obsessions of the youth, a women asking whether she is a machine so as to work according to the demands of her husband, people who claim themselves as Gods, the incidents of honour killing and sexual abuse, the corruption in the government sectors and the hospitals, the suicide of famers and the final question that the students who graduates with marks, do they come out with alternative thinking that can promote social change?

The extensive influence of a particular idea, ³Antonio Gramsci argues, operated not through the brute application of force in nontotalitarian societies, but by consent- a tacit, unwritten agreement often passed off as conventional wisdom or common sense. This paper with the aid of Cultural

¹ “Aruvi”. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aruvi. Accessed 27 July 2019.

² “Super Deluxe”. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Deluxe_(film). Accessed 26 July 2019.

³Bayoumi, Moustafa, and Andrew Rubin. *The Edward Said Reader*. Vintage Book, 2000.

studies, analyses how the consumeristic and capitalistic industry deceives the masses in India. It attempts to identify the exploitation of women and transgender using gender studies and feministic reading of the films. This paper with the help of the theory of Deconstruction attempts to find how these films subvert the ideologies of various power structures and protest against the different levels of marginalisation. According to Barbara Johnson: “The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion [generalized skepticism], but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself” (Johnson 173) The deconstruction of various binaries and social stigmas reveals that they are not natural and inevitable, but a construction made by the dominant group. It is a construction produced by a discourse that actually depends on it for its meaning. Deconstruction seeks to dismantle and re-inscribe it.

With globalisation, consumerism and new commodity patterns entered into the lives of the Indian people. The prosaic quality of life under the dreariness of capitalism, and how the capitalistic society exploits the poor and downtrodden is very well portrayed in both these films. The film *Aruvi*, begins by showing the happy moments that Aruvi spends with her family at her home in the countryside. Their life is closely related to nature and is characterised by simplicity and innocence. There she receives the warmth and love of her family and nature. The young Aruvi is reluctant to leave the countryside when her family decides to move to the city. Her father promises her, that the city has “the parks, beaches, the sand and everything” (*Aruvi* 00:06:51). However, the later part of the movie shows the hypocrisy and the deceptive mannerisms of the city life as the family shifts their home from the lap of the nature to the four walls of a flat. The lines of the song *Cement Kaadu* aptly describes the lives of the city dwellers, “with wheels on our feet, Blind folded with eyes wide open” “In this world of money life ceases to exist” (*Aruvi* 00:20:30-00:21:33). The products of Cultural Industry become the media operandi of ideologies that favour the existing status quo and it is through these products that the dominant group exercises their power on the masses. ⁴Adorno in his *Culture Industry Reconsidered* says that,

“the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object.”
(Adorno 3)

Aruvi voices her protest and dislike towards the consumerism of the capitalistic society. She deconstructs the sentence, “to live happily in the society” revealing the vicious circle of consumerism and capitalism that entraps the masses and how the Culture Industry acts as an omnipresent phenomenon by saying that

⁴ Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford University Press, 2000

“You can buy how much ever you want, and you are bound to buy them. You don’t have to think what you have to buy. Wherever you are, you are surrounded by TV, newspaper, radio, mobile, internet, roads that are filled with shops, and advertisements with ‘exciting offers that blow you away’. There is only one rule here and that is money. The society says that I will respect you only if you are rich. Or else you will not be respected, simple. Work wherever you want, snatch from anyone’s plate, flatter anyone, be a slave, be cruel, kill or coerce or rape anyone, fool as many people as you wish, run a multi crore. There is only one rule here and that is money.” (Aruvi 01:06:24-01:07:03)

Aruvi expresses the agony and existential angst of an individual being cheated physically, mentally and emotionally by this capitalistic society. When she is asked what is that she needs, she replies, that “Like in the Hollywood films, some bomber virus must destroy all humans” (Aruvi 01:01:11). The film also shows how the ⁵‘petrified relations’ and even the emotions of the people are transformed as commodities in order to increase the profit of the producers. In *Aruvi*, the TV show ‘Yours Truly’ is the best example to portray this. The show makes profit by triggering the emotions of people by making them believe that the sole concern of the show is to reveal the truth and provide solutions to their problems, when in reality their only concern is increasing the TRP rating of the show. As ⁶Adorno says, “The culture industry misuses its concern for the masses in order to duplicate, reinforce, and strengthen their mentality, which it presumes is given and unchangeable”. (Adorno 3)

Though the neo-liberalised India have favoured the women to join the huge working force, the dual responsibilities of preserving the sanctity of home and heart remains the responsibility of women. The Indian family can be viewed as a dystopic space where familial authority constructs the female gender and her subjectivity. The women characters in both the films, namely, *Aruvi*, *Vaambu*, *Jyothi* and *Leelea* reveal this aspect about the India families. *Aruvi* exposes the exploitation and marginalization of women and AIDS patients while *Super Deluxe* deals with the plights of the modern Indian women.⁷ Amartya Sen in his work *The Argumentative Indian* describes gender inequality as,

“Inequality between women and men can appear in many different forms - it has many faces. Gender disparity is, in fact, not one affliction but a multitude of problems. Sometimes the different asymmetries are quite unrelated to each other. Indeed, there may be no significant inequality in one sphere but a great deal of inequality in another”

⁵ Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford University Press, 2000

⁶ Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford University Press, 2000

⁷ Sen, Amartya. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. Penguin Books, 2005

Aruvi approaches the TV show ‘Yours Truly’ demanding an apology from the three men who sexually abused her. The TV host describes Aruvi’s incident in the beginning of the show as “the 3 beasts who cheated an innocent and beautiful girl”. (*Aruvi* 00:44:13) However, as the show progresses, she makes the revelation that she is infected by HIV. This information changes the attitude of the host and other people towards her. The host describes Aruvi as a “girl” who has “tried to infect these men with the most dreaded disease of AIDS through her relationship with them” and calls her as “the cruel minded Aruvi”. (*Aruvi* 01:00:41)

Both the films effectively contest and deconstruct the ⁸ ‘deify versus slut’ binary that exists in the modern Indian society. Similar to the ⁹ ‘Angel in the house’ pointed out by Virginia Woolf, the patriarchy of India advocates deification. The Angel versus Monster binary that dominated the 19th Century literary imagination and lives of the women in the west, appears in a different guise in the neo-liberalised India and that is the ‘deify versus slut’ binary. This complex metaphor simply reflects not just the fierce nature of the patriarchy but also the underpinning of misogyny upon which that severe patriarchy has stood. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their work ¹⁰*The Madwoman in the Attic* describes women as, “she becomes herself an embodiment of those extreme mysterious and intransigent otherness which culture confronts with worship or fear, love or loathing.” In the movie Aruvi’s childhood is presented through a song called *Kukkotti Kunaatti* (*Aruvi* 00:03:43-00:05:47) and a line in the song refers her as a ‘deity’. Later when the director of the TV show comments about her as, “logically, if she has been with three men, then she definitely is not a holy virgin”. (*Aruvi*00:47:58) Also the host asks Aruvi that “Why do you ask them to apologize as though you are a holy virgin.” To which she replies, “I don’t trust in the concept of being a holy virgin...Instead of making these men apologize, you question a girl’s chastity!” (*Aruvi* 01:03:25- 01:04:01)

The film *Super Deluxe* further problematizes the social notions regarding chastity through the representation of porn actresses who are ostracised by the mainstream society. In this film Leela works as a porn actress and she is the breadwinner of her family. When her son Soori gets to know about his mother’s profession he becomes furious. In his rage he runs to kill his mother. Leela’s husband also treat her with contempt and disgust. However, Leela deconstructs the stigma associated with her job when she says to her son that, “It’s not a big crime. Like a Doctor or a driver, it’s just another job. If there are millions who watch films like that, then obviously there will have to be at least a few actors. The world is okay with the people who watch porn. But it shames the actors” (*Super Deluxe* 02:50:00). Defying the deify slut binary Leela claims her identity and emerges above the disgust, disgrace and the contempt of the patriarchal society as she says “Have you heard of a

⁸Panicker, Joji John. *A Critique of the Psycho-Sexual Dimensions in Select Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Queer Approach*. Gandhigram Rural University, 2009.

⁹ Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The woman writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. 2nd ed., Yale University Press, 2000.

¹⁰ Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The woman writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. 2nd ed., Yale University Press, 2000

film called *Have faith in Goddess Shakthi*? I played the role of Goddess in that film. One may see me as a goddess. One may see me as a whore. But ultimately, I am Leela. No more, no less” (*Super Deluxe* 02:50:53). Soori realizes that it is not after all bad or wrong to be regarded as the son of a porn actresses. Because as Leela says, ‘righteousness’ is constantly manipulated to suit the convenience of the prevailing status quo.

Apart from the class and social stratifications, and female inequalities that appear, another important issue problematized by these movies is how the society treats the Transgender. In both the films transwomen plays a major role. ¹¹Transgender is an umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity or gender expression differs from their assigned sex (journal subaltern identity phone). Queer theory incorporates the dispositions made by Foucault and it is built upon the feministic challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self. It also closely examines the socially constructed nature of the sexual acts and identity. ¹²Donald Hall, in his work called the *Queer Theories*, describes the queer texts as those that “explicitly or implicitly denaturalize notions of sexual normality and that provide evidence of the mutability and variability of human sexual desire and performance in excess of the hetero/homo binary” (Hall 37). In a further expansion of cultural-constructionist theory, ¹³Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of identity* (1990), describes the categories of gender and of sexuality as ‘performative’, in the sense that the features which a cultural discourse institutes as masculine or feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, the discourse also makes happen, by establishing an identity that the socialized individual assimilates and the patterns of behaviour that he or she proceeds to enact.

However, the elasticity which is one of the fundamental characteristics of the term ‘queer’ is not often accepted by the Indian society. ¹⁴It is relevant to mention here about Foucault’s theoretical dispositions that turned against the system building, and difference excluding tendencies of the structuralist thought. The films show how Transgender are demonized by the Indian society. Despite of the growing awareness and the attempts to include transgender within the parameters of the society by several initiatives from the NGOs and the Government, they end up being relegated to the margins. In *Super Deluxe*, the film shows a family eagerly waiting for the return of Manickam who had left his home 7 years ago leaving his wife Jyothi and his son Rasukutty. However, the family and the village are left transfixed as Manickam returns as Shilpa, a transwoman. People wonders, “Has he gone mad or what” (*Super Deluxe* 00:23:18) while his brother-in-law, violently approaches Shilpa to beat her and uses abusive words at her. Manickam’s mother says to Jyothi that, “Instead of waiting for him, you could’ve eloped with another man”. (*Super Deluxe* 00:49:38) The family views Shilpa’s arrival as a misfortune in the life of Jyothi. In *Aruvi* the transwoman Emily earns her daily wages by

¹¹ Jain, Amit Kumar, Upendra Nath Tripathi and Vinita Katiyar. “Subaltern Identity, Problems and Welfare of Transgenders in India”. *Indian Journal of Human Relations*. Vol.52, no.1, 2018, pp. 10-21

¹² Hall, Donald E. *Queer Theories*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

¹³ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 2007

¹⁴ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*. Vintage Books, 1990.

working and is not involved in any anti-social activities. Yet Emily is not accepted by the society, when the TV show host says, “These days transgenders are treated badly in the society”, (*Aruvi* 00:46:18) the director then interrupts her telling that “Madam you are getting into unnecessary matters.” (*Aruvi* 00:47:21). Later the same lady who spoke high of the transgenders in the show when she meets Emily outside the set, insults her as “look at you face, get lost”. (*Aruvi*00:58:21)

Both in *Super Deluxe* and *Aruvi*, there are several instances where the transwomen are addressed often as ‘it’, dehumanizing their identity. In *Super Deluxe*, we see how Shilpa is insulted at her son’s school and is physically abused by the Sub Inspector at the police station. The inadequacies that the transgender community have to face due to the society’s lack of acceptance is expressed Rasukutty’s question to Shilpa, “Do you use the men’s loo or women’s loo” and she says, “Ideally the women’s loo, but we are not allowed to use it”. (*Super Deluxe*01:18:27-01:18:33). But the films subvert and deconstruct the society’s notions regarding gender construction and we see both the transwomen are given their voice in the films. Emily at one instance tells Aruvi that, “these men, they may even overlook an Aishwarya Rai (Indian Actress) but they never fail to ogle a transgender, are we that beautiful!” (*Aruvi* 00:21:42-00:21:50) later in the climax we see Aruvi describing Emily as a person who loved her the most, the person who was there for her when both the society and her family alienated her as an AIDS patient and exploited her as a woman. Whereas in *Super Deluxe*, when Shilpa decides to run away from her family thinking not to cause them any further trouble she is prevented by her wife and her son. Her six-year-old tells her “Everybody is mocking you, so you wanted to run away, but mom and I accept you as you are...just be with us”. (*Super Deluxe*02:36:48-02:36:53) Through the love and acceptance that Shilpa finally receives from her family the film brings forth the transwoman from the margins to which she was pushed into.

Deprivations in the wellbeing of the poor and the marginalised are serious and atrocious and they must be removed for the effective rendering of the social justice. Both the films uphold the point made Amartya Sen regarding women that they “are, not passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help brought about by society but are active promoters and facilitators of social transformations. Such transformations influence, of course, the lives and well-being of women, but also those of men and all children - boys as well as girls.” (Sen 222) Both the films end with the images of a new generation who stands for the future India’s hope. In *Super Deluxe*, Rasukutty, the 6-year old who was the first to smile and accept Shilpa to his family presents this hope and the final dialogues of the Seth girl (or the Alien), acts as a call for the eradication of all kinds of marginality. She tells Balaji that she is “waiting for you people to realize, that everything is just one, Man and women soil and stone, Dog and cat and even you and me. You know every cell in your body behaves like it’s an individual, but those cells put together make you an individual. Similarly, all of us are tits and bits of the one.”(*Super Deluxe* 02:47:50-02:48:08) Whereas the climax of *Aruvi* calls forth a generation which does not just believes everything instead, a generation with the courage to think and to ask why. Therefore, in order to instil a change that can eradicate the evils of marginalisation, to ensure a progressive development for all, and to present the voices of subversion against the power structures

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the hope lies in the hands of the future generation and they are bound to do so. This paper showcases that films can be best employed to fulfil this purpose because of its far fetching reach and influence upon the masses.

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