



## **Symbolism, Social Justice and Cinematic Technique in *Thangalaan*: A Theoretical Study**

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### **Abstract:**

The field of cinema has been a strong place for Dalits to challenge dominant views that existed in history. P A Ranjith, in his film *Thangalaan* brings out forgotten history of Kolar Gold Field in full circle. Perspectives from which this film is made are in the eyes of Dalit people whose work and sacrifice have been mostly ignored in official accounts. Related to it the present paper examines the cinematic strategies, social justice and symbolism in theoretical lenses of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. These concepts reveal the representation and repression of oppressed people in negotiating the identity of colonised and colonial power. Applying qualitative textual analysis, this research paper argues that *Thangalaan* foregrounds indigenous perspective and reimage neglected histories through narrative strategies, cinematic technique and symbolism. This paper shows the interconnections of postcolonial aspects to caste, colonial, labour exploitation and identity formation connected to exploited people.

**Keywords:** Symbolism, Cinematic, *Thangalaan*, Resistance, Postcolonial, Subaltern.

## Introduction

The film *Thangalaan* is generally a critique of Indian politics and society and is an expression of the oppression of underprivileged communities such as the Dalit and the Adivasi. In this film P A. Ranjith, a film director from Tamilnadu, India, brings forth the disadvantaged tales and highlights the systematic injustices of colonial system and caste system. *Thangalaan* portrays the enslavement of the native population and colonial capitalism in the Kolar Gold Fields through the stories of the Kolar Gold Fields workers. By highlighting the perspective of historically silent people and neglected historical events, the film challenges the notion that history is unchanging and apolitical. The cinema *Thangalaan* challenges traditional and historical explanations in the cinematic approaches, folklore and visually rich cultural metaphors and symbols. This cinema illustrates what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says about the agency of the subalterns and the attempts of dominant narratives to silence Dalit people. The dominant systems always suppress the perspective of the oppressed and the hegemonic institutions never give a voice to the subaltern (Bhabha 1994). *Thangalaan* is a film that explore subaltern identity and the revival of ancient work practices.

The cinema depicts colonialism as a continual process of cultural resistance, adaptation and interchange. Homi K. Bhabha's notions of ambivalence and hybridity (Bhabha 1994) mean the same. The instability of colonial power and its problems are revealed in the various ways that some native elite people devise and use for their own advantage. In connected to it Ranajit Guha in his re-evaluation of history argues that stories of the Dalit people had been in the grip of the elite nationalists and the colonial rulers (Guha 1983). "A stronger resistance to the process of monopolisation that is rooted in the destitute and their own political acumen and might is what *Thangalaan* needs," says Guha (Guha 45). Cinematic narration, mythical motifs, environmental imagery, soundscapes and symbolic stories may encourage Dalit and

Adivasi people to fight for social justice and restore our identity. In this paper, it will be examining *Thangalaan* through the theoretical lenses of Ranajit Guha, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, with a focus on cinematic strategies, social justice labour discourse and symbolism.

### **Review of Literature**

Postcolonial philosophy has been immensely illuminated as far as colonial discourse is concerned especially with regard to oppressed communities. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) elucidates the colonial knowledge that objectifies the East conquest. In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak relies on previous critiques to argue that the subalterns are systematically silenced by colonial and elite nationalist ideologies. Gayatri Spivak addresses the issue of representation where the voice of the marginalised is filtered through dominant institutions. Homi K. Bhabha theorises ambivalence, imitation and hybridity in postcolonial analysis in his 1994 work, *The Location of Culture*. Colonial rule, he believes, is never total, because the colonised people negotiate, reject and modify imposed identities as a result of cultural encounter. Importantly, as Gopal Guru argues, the perspective of the poor needs to be brought back into the public conversation (2009). Sharmila Rege focuses on rewriting history from Dalit perspective. P A Ranjith has caught the attention of the academic community in his cinema (2006). Ranjith's *Thangalaan* is very important not only as cinema but as an academic study, a study of cinema and documentary about caste politics, spatial injustice and identity politics. It has been examined for its historical accuracy, its treatment of anti-colonial problems, its labour politics and its aesthetics. The present study adds to the literature by examining cinema through the theoretical lenses of Spivak and Bhabha that have not been explored before.

## Theoretical Framework

The main idea of this paper is based on the concept of the subaltern, as defined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the concept of hybridity of Homi K Bhabha. Gayatri Spivak argues that Dalits are often excluded from political representation and from the production of information. The filtered elite experience makes a true self-portrait impossible. The native *Thangalaan* workers are subalterns, their history erased from the official colonial archive. The theories of Homi K. Bhabha supported this view. Through hybridity and mimicry, he explains how colonised peoples actively oppose colonial power by developing their own cultural identities. Bhabha's ambivalence places the colonised population as an object of authority and also a source of terror. This shows the paradoxical character of colonial power. Taken together, these themes paint a complete picture of the aesthetic, political and symbolic dimensions of *Thangalaan*.

## Methodology

The methodology employed in this paper is qualitative and it combines textual and visual analysis. While primary source is Ranjith's film *Thangalaan*, critique and scholarly articles on postcolonial theory, Dalit studies, film criticism, and subaltern studies of various writers are secondary sources for the argument of the present paper. It is also interpretative and postcolonial critique. The paper analyses the film's cinematography, colour palette, character development, dialogs, costuming, visual elements, cinematography, narrative structure, and symbolic imagery through the lens of Spivak's theory of subalternity and Bhabha's ideas of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. In this way it reveals recurring symbolic patterns that signify resistance, identity formation and social justice. Comparative theoretical reading connects cinematic representation to broader postcolonial discourse and it enables an integrative study of history, politics, visual culture and film aesthetics.

### **Symbols in *Thangalaan***

P.A. Ranjith's *Thangalaan* is a curious mix of political critique and historical fiction, featuring oppressed Dalits and Adivasis, unlike most contemporary Indian films. This film examines the Kolar Gold Fields in the 19th century through the lenses of caste bias, colonial plunder and unorthodox photography. *Thangalaan* reveals hidden histories and challenges dominant narratives, the hallmarks of subaltern studies, postcolonial theory and Marxist critique in various symbols.

Among various symbols Gold is one in this film. Gold is the symbol of brightness, capital, beauty and prosperity. The geographical area in the film *Thangalaan* is full of natural richness, brightness, beauty and prosperity where plenty of gold is available, but the Dalit people live in that place, are in poverty because it has been completely usurped by the colonial masters and other wealthy elites. It is called utter exploitation of Dalits. In a sense it is similar to Karl Marx's critique of capitalism, where the workers are really responsible for the production, but they do not get any benefit from it. It is well visualised in the film. The land itself is the symbol of resistance, cultural memory and ancestral identity. Now that land is our heritage and our strength. The desecration and subsequent repair of the beheading Buddha statue is another symbol, it symbolises anti-caste persecution for some, a return to cultural reclamation and egalitarianism for others. The black panther, is yet another symbol. It is not only symbolises an animal but a movement for Dalits in India through that they fight bravely for social justice, equality, liberty for well-being.

*Thangalaan's* worldview is based on social justice. This film showcases the exploitation of the lower castes by the colonial power and the domination of the upper castes. Frantz Fanon said colonialism had been defined by "psychological enslavement, economic exploitation and cruelty" (Fanon 2004). This is portrayed in the narrative postcolonially. As Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak states the 'subaltern' are the downtrodden people who are invisible to conventional historians. *Thangalaan* is theirs. This film says these folks are not helpless victims, because they are fighting for justice and freedom. Modern critics have pilloried the film as an "in-your-face" study of colonial power, caste connections and the forcible digging-up of buried history. But the film *Thangalaan* gives voice to the voiceless throughout history, interweaving cinematic aesthetics, symbolic interpretation and social critique. The film illustrates how films can make Dalit people to think critically about politics, hegemony, exploitations, and to challenge the inhuman culture existed for long period in order to reconnect with the mainstream of society for equal rights and comfortable life. *Thangalaan's* visual vocabulary is rich in showing the oppression in society and it helps the audience to think over caste, colonial control, labour and identity in India.

### **Social Justice and the Subaltern**

It also makes a strong statement against the economic and social structures that disadvantaged the indigenous peoples. It also examines the historical connection between caste prejudice and British exploitation during the colonial period. This film takes a look at the lives of mine workers that kept the colonial economy going, but are not in official history. Dalits are mine workers but their lives and experiences are often written out of histories. This is like what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls the "subaltern" (Spivak 271). It is a term used to refer to those social structures that are seldom addressed by official historians. Think of the indigenous workers in *Thangalaan* who formed a large part of this system but could not be part of the colonial narrative of success, as they were valued mainly for their labour.

The film explores the oppression, cultural narratives, traditions, and the misappropriation of the land of Dalit communities by colonial powers for financial profit. However, *Thangalaan* is not only about presenting the native oppressed communities as hapless victims of the past.

But also it provides them the tools to fight through encouraging social collaboration, cultural identification, oral traditions and collective memory. These are powerful attempts to reclaim the past, to question orthodox histories. This critique of historical elites restores the power of the oppressed working class, including peasants, labourers and others whose political consciousness has been largely ignored. It follows the paradigm of Ranajit Guha's Subaltern Studies (Guha 1-8). In this sense, it tries to re-contextualise the experiences of the indigenous people Dalit workers and tribal members. The dominant narratives of colonial rulers and native elites are called into question. Further explanation of the complex identity constructed in the film can be found in Homi K. Bhabha's conceptualisation of hybridity and colonial ambivalence. The indigenous characters in this film aren't shackled by any particular cultural norm; rather, they're coping with the tensions that arise when colonial modernism clashes with their fundamental beliefs. According to Bhabha, their lifestyle represents the polar opposites of colonial control—resistance and accommodation (Bhabha 112-22). This hybridism is a reflection of the psychological struggles of colonised peoples to assert their heritage, to reject imperial control.

*Thangalaan* is also pertinent given Spivak's critique of representation. Powerful institutions and prominent thinkers still speak for the marginalised people instead of empowering them (Spivak 287). Ranjith shows this through a cinematic narrative, based on Dalit life stories, oral histories and traditional knowledge. *Thangalaan* is more than lost histories. It's a formation of them, giving a voice to the voiceless and dignity back to them. Therefore the film is capable of undermining the current dominant narratives and creating a more powerful platform for the oppressed, an instrument for the recovery of history and social justice.

### **Bhabha's Hybridity and Colonial Ambivalence**

Bhabha's idea of hybridity comes in hand to comprehend the cultural and social relations depicted in *Thangalaan*. The film shows colonialism not only as a way of political domination but as a form of evolution with the whole range of their contacts, identities, cultures and modes of life. For instance, the relations between native communities and the British colonial government. Colonial authorities in their efforts to reconstruct the lives of indigenous peoples through the rules of labour, cultural hierarchies and administrative systems. However, indigenous knowledge, history and customs are alive and evolving. Attempts at domination in colonial settings are thus almost never a fruitful enterprise.

The identities of characters in *Thangalaan* are a concoction of traditional practices, oppression, resistance and the influence of colonialism. The cinema deals with the ways in which repressed societies construct and alter external structures to suit their needs. These stories trouble the neat categories of 'coloniser' and 'colonised'. It is an example of how colonial discourses were engaged by indigenous communities mimicry of Bhabha. Some colonial practices have been co-opted by Indigenous communities to resist cultural imperialism. Here the mimicry shows how the domestic's power can be limited and paradoxical, since the coloniser's power depends on the very people he wants to control. For example, the relationships between British officers and native workers exemplify the varying attitudes of the coloniser throughout the film. The manual labour and know-how of indigenous peoples are indispensable to colonial authority, but at the same time they are refused social equality and political respect. This disjunction produces what Bhabha identifies as the instability of colonial discourse, which seeks to maintain differentiation and superiority, but which also requires the involvement of the colonised.

### **Cinematic Technique**

The production values of *Thangalaan* elevates it beyond a simple historical portrayal, into a fascinating discussion about colonialism, social justice, and the path of self-discovery. Filmmaker Ranjith uses a specific visual language of reality and symbolism to bring to light forgotten narrative of underserved communities. The film connects indigenous peoples emotionally to their land by using grand landscape designs and a natural colour palette. The visual approach aligns with Ranajit Guha's Subaltern Studies project that seeks to reclaim the histories and first-hand accounts of marginalised populations from the period of dominant colonial and nationalist narratives (Guha 1). Nevertheless, the environment of *Thangalaan* is not only about the past but beyond its physical manifestation, it is also about resistance, cultural preservation, memory and oppression. The film's expressive cinematography heightens its political subject. The many close-ups that convey the emotions, grief, courage and dignity of the oppressed characters allow the audience to empathise with their everyday struggles. The big sweeping shots of the huge mines show how everyplace there is imperial and colonial power, and the unequal power dynamics between the oppressors and the oppressed. This visual difference resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of the "subaltern," whose voices are often Dalits or silenced in dominant histories (Spivak 271). The film *Thangalaan* is a means to reclaim history and social resistance through cinema that promotes the perspective of the Dalits.

Light is used symbolically throughout the film. The lack of light outside the mines represents the hope, perseverance and resilience of the native peoples. The darkness inside represents colonial oppression, suffering and hatred. The combination of elaborate costumes, ceremonial re-enactments, indigenous music, silence and rhythmic montage eloquently conveys the feeling of self and shared memory of indigenous peoples. These are filmic traits where Homi K. Bhabha presents his concept of cultural hybridity. This is to say that

indigenous traditions do not simply assimilate but actively fight against the effects of colonialism (Bhabha 56). However, *Thangalaan* is not a superficial treatment of Dalit oppression but a powerful visual language that resurrects dormant histories, challenges colonial narratives and pays tribute to the value, autonomy and cultural legacy of oppressed communities.

## **Discussion**

*Thangalaan* is an opportunity to recover histories of marginalised peoples that have been written out of official narratives, especially when viewed through Spivak's lens. While the subaltern voice can never be fully recuperated, the film constructs a space of representation where the exploited communities emerge as the principal historical subjects. Bhabha's views imply that colonial domination can never be total ideological control. Exploited communities' resistance continues in hybrid identities, culture and symbolic activities. Thus it refuses the binary oppositions of domination and submission and sees history as a constant renegotiation of power and identity. The film uses cinematic technique and symbolism to bolster its argument for social justice. Visual metaphors, visual elements and music and discourse combine to produce an alternative historical consciousness.

## **Conclusion**

*Thangalaan*'s postcolonial narrative that brings the forgotten history back to the present Indian cinema while questioning the dominant historical discourses is intriguing. *Thangalaan*'s cinematic language and symbolism bring history of Dalit community to life. Ranjith breathes life into the stories of indigenous peoples whose histories have often been ignored and whose contributions have often been rejected by past historians. The film examines the cultural identities and collective memories of oppressed communities and reinterprets the effects of colonial exploitation of labour on these communities. It illustrates

the ability of cinema to be a powerful tool for social justice and resistance. The film is particularly illustrative of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's assertion that the voice of the subaltern is perpetually silenced by the dominant institutions of representation, a central tenet of her theory of the subaltern. The film follows the subaltern instead of the colonial elite in their struggle for historical recognition. Dalit community practices, resistance and the fluidity of identities continuously challenge colonial hegemony. Therefore, the film's complex cultural exchanges are illuminated by Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of ambivalence, hybridity and the "Third Space." This presents a quite thin picture of colonial authority. Rather the film shows paradoxes and the possibilities for cultural change inside authoritarian structures. The film is not about the elite of colonial times but about recovering the history from the subaltern. This would be blessed by Ranajit Guha's paradigm of Subaltern Studies. The film's depiction of collective resistance that shows ordinary workers as active agents in history rather than as passive spectators is a response to Guha's call for subaltern agency. Finally, *Thangalaan* argues that real social justice involves awareness of history and political and economic recognition. A dramatic tale of honor, defiance, cultural preservation and the consumption of history, told in a new cinematic language of vivid symbols and enthralling imagery. Hidden experiences of labour are revealed in the film. Therefore the aim of this paper has been to provide an academic analysis of cinematic technique, symbols and social justice.

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