

From Absence to Assertion: Dalit Women on the Periphery of the Indian Parallel Screen

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Abstract

The paper examines the representation, absence, and eventual assertion of Dalit women in Parallel cinema or New Indian Cinema. While Parallel cinema has historically positioned itself as a progressive and realist alternative to mainstream Bollywood, its treatment of caste—particularly the intersection of caste and gender—has often mirrored dominant ideological silences. Dalit women have been doubly marginalized: first, by a dominant caste patriarchy and second, by a cinematic discourse that renders them invisible or voiceless. The article traces the socio-political reasons for this exclusion, the occasional moments of representational rupture, and the recent emergence of Dalit women's voices in film and discourse. Drawing from intersectional feminist theory, subaltern studies, and cinematic analysis, the article aims to explore how Dalit women's narratives have been co-opted, silenced, or marginalized. It also examines the evolution of their screen presence from passive victims or metaphorical symbols to active agents and narrators of their own stories. Using key films from the 1970s to the present—such as *Ankur* (1974), *Nishant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976), *Samar* (1999), *Fandry* (2013), and *Kaala* (2018)—the paper critiques both the aesthetics and politics of Parallel cinema. Lastly, the paper argues for a decolonial and Dalit-feminist cinematic lens, one that not only critiques representational gaps but also advocates for structural change within the film industry. Through the voices of Dalit filmmakers, writers, and activists, this paper envisions a future where Dalit women's subjectivity is not merely included but centred in cinematic discourse.

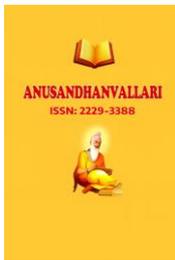
Keywords: Parallel Cinema, Subaltern Studies, Representation, Narrative Agency, Discourse.

The Politics of Representation in Parallel Cinema

Parallel Indian cinema, often referred to as *art cinema* or *the new wave*, emerged in the late 1960s and flourished through the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the formulaic, commercial tropes of mainstream Bollywood (Chakravarty 167; Prasad 85). Supported by the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) and later the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), this movement was shaped by politically conscious filmmakers who aimed to depict the social realities of the nation—poverty, inequality, feudalism, corruption, and occasionally, caste discrimination (Rajadhyaksha 29; Prasad 92). Influenced by Italian Neorealism, Satyajit Ray's humanist aesthetics, and global leftist movements, Parallel cinema imagined itself as an ethical and aesthetic intervention against the escapism of commercial films.

However, despite its progressive self-fashioning, the movement reproduced several of the blind spots of its mainstream counterpart—especially in relation to caste and gender (Rege 15). While the working-class subject gained visibility through realist narratives, Dalit and Adivasi identities—especially those of women—were either invisibilized or depicted within the limited frameworks of suffering and victimhood (Virdi 172; Rege 45). These representations were often curated through the Savarna gaze, which, even when sympathetic, retained control over the narrative, agency, and voice of the subaltern woman (Guru 2549).

The absence of Dalit women in Parallel cinema is not merely an aesthetic oversight but a deeply political silence. It reflects the structures of exclusion that govern cultural production in India, where upper-caste men have



historically held the reins of storytelling—in literature, cinema, journalism, and academia. The representational politics of parallel cinema, while ostensibly aligned with the oppressed, often overlooked the specificity of caste as a lived, material experience, particularly as it intersects with gender.

When Dalit women do appear in these films, their characters are frequently rendered as metaphoric or symbolic. They embody the nation's moral decay, the conscience of the upper-caste protagonist, or the unjust weight of the social system (Virdi 172). In Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974), Lakshmi is a victim of both caste and gendered exploitation, but the film's sympathy for her never translates into narrative centrality or agency. The story is ultimately not hers—it is about the moral evolution of the male landlord and his relationship with guilt, power, and modernity (Prasad 85).

Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980) provides another example. Here, a tribal man is wrongly accused of murder and remains silent throughout the trial. His wife, the supposed victim of abuse, is already dead when the film begins. Her absence is literal, yet her body becomes the symbolic site upon which the film's drama unfolds (Gehlawat 118). This aesthetic strategy—of centring Dalit or tribal suffering but denying subjectivity—functions as what Gayatri Spivak famously termed 'epistemic violence'. The subaltern does not speak; she is spoken about or through. Such cinematic practices highlight the limitations of parallel cinema's realism, which often equates visibility with representation but fails to grasp the epistemological violence of misrepresentation (Hall 12; Spivak 275). Representation, as Stuart Hall reminds us, is not merely about reflecting reality but about producing meaning (Hall 13). Therefore, who tells the story, from whose perspective, and with what ideological frame becomes crucial.

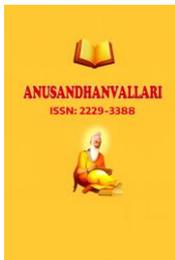
A critical engagement with these films must also consider the larger context of postcolonial nation-building, in which cinema became a key site of imagining the Indian subject. Nationalist discourse has often been guilty of eliding caste in favour of class, particularly in the realm of cultural representation (Rege 18). The rural poor became the synecdoche for all marginality, with the assumption that economic struggle was the primary axis of oppression (ibid 92). This Marxist-class orientation, while valuable in critiquing capital, often erased the specificity of caste, which operates not only through economic exclusion but also through social stigma, spatial segregation, and symbolic violence (Rao 230).

This erasure is especially stark in the case of Dalit women, who are at the intersection of caste-based and gendered violence (ibid 47). Their bodies have historically borne the brunt of Brahmanical patriarchy—through sexual violence, forced labour, and ritual exclusion (ibid 50). Yet, in Parallel cinema, their bodies are often used to arouse Savarna guilt or to signify the moral crisis of the nation without granting them any subjective voice or political agency (ibid 173).

Moreover, the Savarna-centric auteurism of Indian Parallel cinema meant that most films were written and directed by upper-caste men. Even female-centric narratives were often filtered through a male gaze, rendering women's experiences palatable to an elite audience. Dalit women, therefore, existed only as objects of sympathy or as background figures in a broader narrative of male moral awakening or class struggle. This structure mirrors what Bell Hooks describes in the context of American cinema as 'the oppositional gaze' being denied to Black women—a denial of both the right to look and to be seen as a subject (Hooks 115).

The question then arises: Can such a cinema truly claim to be progressive if it continues to replicate the very exclusions it seeks to critique? Can it be a vehicle for social change when it fails to see, hear, or centre those most affected by the structures of oppression it represents?

This inquiry becomes even more pressing when we consider the changing socio-political landscape of India, where Dalit movements, feminist interventions, and the rise of digital platforms have begun to challenge traditional modes of representation. Over the last two decades, Dalit filmmakers, writers, and activists have begun to assert their narratives, challenging both mainstream and parallel cinema's treatment of their identities. The emergence of films like *Fandry*, *Kaala*, and documentaries like *Writing with Fire* signal a shift—not only in aesthetics but in authorship, gaze, and ideology.



Thus, this paper seeks to interrogate the historical and contemporary representation of Dalit women in Indian parallel cinema. It traces the arc from erasure to emergence, from symbolic presence to narrative agency, from absence to assertion. Through theoretical frameworks like intersectionality, subaltern studies, and Dalit feminism, it aims to critique the aesthetic and political limitations of earlier forms while amplifying the possibilities of a Dalit-feminist cinematic future.

In doing so, this paper does not merely analyse what is on screen, but also questions the structures of production, distribution, and criticism that shape what becomes visible and whose stories are deemed worthy of telling. It is in this interrogation that the seeds of a more inclusive, radical cinema are sown—a cinema that does not speak for Dalit women but listens to, learns from, and collaborates with them in telling their own stories.

Intersectionality, Subalternity, and Dalit Feminism

This study is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality, Subaltern studies, and Dalit feminism. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is instrumental in understanding how Dalit women experience layered forms of oppression—not simply as Dalits or as women, but as Dalit women, whose identities intersect in complex ways to produce specific forms of marginalization. Dalit feminism, as articulated by scholars such as Sharmila Rege, critiques both mainstream feminism and Dalit politics for their neglect of Dalit women's voices. While mainstream feminism often universalizes gender oppression, Dalit politics tends to focus on caste while neglecting patriarchy within its ranks. Dalit women occupy a unique position of 'triple marginalization'—oppressed by caste, class, and gender. Subaltern studies, particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", provides another critical lens. Spivak argues that subaltern voices are often co-opted or silenced within elite discourses, including leftist and liberal frameworks. In the context of Parallel cinema, this silence becomes a representational strategy—Dalit women are often portrayed but not heard.

Combining these frameworks enables a nuanced critique of Parallel cinema's claims to realism and resistance. By applying these theories, this paper interrogates the aesthetic choices, narrative structures, and ideological assumptions that govern the depiction—or erasure—of Dalit women in Indian cinema.

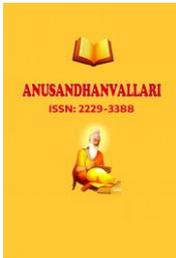
Cinematic Silences: The Absence of Dalit Women in Early Parallel Cinema

From the 1970s through the early 1990s, Parallel cinema, renowned for its realistic portrayal of social issues, often skirted around direct engagement with the intricacies of caste, and when it did, the representation of Dalit women was notably problematic. Films like *Ankur* (1974), *Nishant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976), and *Aakrosh* (1980) highlighted serious social injustices but typically depicted Dalit women as passive victims rather than fully realized individuals with agency.

Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* portrays Lakshmi, a Dalit woman portrayed by Shabana Azmi, works as a domestic servant in a landlord's household. Her character's suffering is central to the narrative, yet the film seldom delves into her personal emotions or aspirations. Lakshmi's plight symbolizes broader socio-economic injustices, but her characterization reinforces an upper-caste, paternalistic viewpoint. Her oppression, captured primarily through physical and emotional trauma, highlights caste and gender inequalities but fails to grant her a fully developed human presence. Benegal's approach, though progressive in intent, unintentionally reinforces existing societal hierarchies by relegating Dalit women to symbolic status rather than depicting them as nuanced individuals.

Shyam Benegal's films, both, *Nishant* (1975) and *Manthan* (1976) stand as exemplary pillars of the Parallel cinema movement. The films have been revered for their bold social critique and realist portrayals of rural life. However, beneath their progressive veneer lies a glaring gap: the silencing of women, especially Dalit women, whose labour and resistance are either overshadowed or erased.

Nishant unfolds in a feudal village where power is concentrated in the hands of a few landlords who exploit the villagers with impunity. The narrative centres on the abduction of Sushila, the schoolmaster's wife, which sparks the village's eventual uprising. On the surface, the film exposes systemic brutality and the tyranny of unchecked



patriarchal power. Yet, when one looks closely, the women in *Nishant* are primarily narrative devices. Sushila's suffering catalyses male action, but her own voice and agency remain conspicuously absent. Other women characters, like Rukmini, the landlord's wife, are sketched superficially, their inner conflicts never fully explored. The collective pain and anger of women are submerged under the film's male-driven plot, turning them into silent witnesses to their own subjugation.

Likewise the film, *Manthan*, inspired by Verghese Kurien's dairy cooperative movement, celebrates rural empowerment and collective ownership. The film foregrounds the clash between corrupt upper-caste elites and the marginalized farmers who reclaim their livelihoods through the cooperative. While Dalit men are shown as workers striving for dignity, the presence of Dalit women is strikingly minimal. Their labour—crucial in the dairy economy—is visually hinted at yet narratively neglected. Women are shown milking cows, tending cattle, or standing in the background, but the story seldom gives them a voice in the decision-making or the transformation that the cooperative promises.

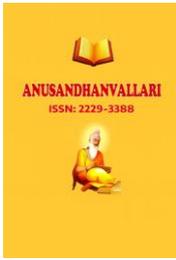
This silence is not just an oversight; it reveals the limitations of parallel cinema's approach to intersectionality. Both films emerge from a genre that prides itself on social realism and critique of systemic oppression, yet they replicate the invisibility that Dalit women experience in real life. The structural marginalization of women—especially at the intersection of caste and gender—remains unaddressed, mirroring the larger failure of progressive cinema to tackle deeply ingrained patriarchal and casteist hierarchies.

Moreover, this erasure has a ripple effect. By sidelining women's perspectives, these films miss an opportunity to present a more complex, authentic picture of rural struggle. Dalit women's labour sustains agrarian and cooperative economies, yet their narratives of resilience, dissent, and everyday survival are rarely foregrounded. Their stories could have expanded the films' critique of power beyond the binary of feudal landlord and exploited farmer, illuminating the multi-layered injustices that persist within these movements. In revisiting these films today, it becomes clear that the radical potential of parallel cinema was, in some ways, constrained by its own blind spots. While *Nishant* and *Manthan* remain invaluable for exposing rural exploitation and corruption, they also stand as reminders that any claim to realism must include the voices of those who are doubly marginalized. Likewise, Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* centres around a tribal man falsely accused of murdering his wife. The narrative focuses predominantly on male suffering and judicial injustices, while the deceased woman remains absent—her story unheard and her identity marginalized. She exists only through the memories and dialogues of male characters, emphasizes on her objectification and the invisibility of her lived experience. This choice, though effective in critiquing systemic oppression, reflects a significant oversight regarding subaltern women, perpetuating their silence within the cinematic narrative.

Collectively, these films, despite their critical acclaim, largely reproduced voyeuristic portrayals or symbolic representations of Dalit women. Their focus on suffering as the central motif often resulted in erasure or superficial engagement with Dalit women's identities, reinforcing stereotypes rather than challenging them. The inability of parallel cinema to fully embrace intersectional feminist perspectives highlights a broader contradiction: although committed to social realism and reformist ideals, filmmakers frequently remained bound by dominant caste ideologies. This narrative and thematic limitation mirrors broader societal prejudices, illustrating the need for deeper, more authentic representations of marginalized voices within cinema.

Breaking Frames: Representational Shifts in Contemporary Independent Films

A noticeable shift occurred in the 2000s and beyond as a new generation filmmakers, many of them Dalit themselves or deeply influenced by Dalit experiences, began to reimagine the cinematic language surrounding caste and gender. Films like *Fandry* (2013), *Kaala* (2018), and others marked a radical departure from the symbolic or victim-centric portrayals of Dalit women seen in earlier mainstream and parallel cinema. Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry*, for instance, while focusing on a young Dalit boy's innocent yearning for love across caste boundaries, offers an equally compelling glimpse into the daily lives of Dalit women. The mother and sister in



Fandry are not silent sufferers—they are active figures whose labour sustains the household, whose resilience counters humiliation, and whose dignity stands unromanticized yet powerful. Their struggles are rooted in material reality, shown with an honesty that neither fetishizes poverty nor erases their agency.

Similarly, Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* transforms Dalit representation into an unapologetically political act. *Kaala* does not merely depict Dalit life—it asserts Dalit identity as the locus of resistance. Female characters like Selvi and Zareena are far from passive figures; they organize, challenge state violence, and articulate their dissent. They are depicted as political agents with voice and choice, whose presence disrupts dominant narratives that confine Dalit women to silence. Ranjith's own location as a Dalit filmmaker informs the narrative with a radical Ambedkarite consciousness, turning the film into an example of what scholars describe as 'assertive cinema'.

Unlike the earlier Parallel cinema, which often framed Dalit suffering through an upper-caste Savarna lens, these films deploy a decolonial cinematic language. They refuse to reduce Dalit women to metaphors of victimhood; instead, they place them within histories of struggle, everyday aspirations, and collective solidarity. The women in these stories are not just witnesses to change—they are the catalysts. They speak for themselves, organize communities, and negotiate desire and dignity on their own terms. By doing so, they break away from the aesthetic of pity and passive realism, creating instead a bold narrative that embodies self-respect and resistance.

Such works are not isolated experiments but part of a broader cultural movement that seeks to dismantle Brahmanical hegemony in visual culture. The rise of Dalit filmmakers and assertive storytelling signals an urgent rethinking of whose stories are told and how they are framed. Films like *Fandry* and *Kaala* invite audiences to witness Dalit lives from within, not as detached sympathizers but as co-travellers in a shared struggle for justice. They insist that Dalit women are not only subjects of oppression but authors of their own stories. This reclamation of voice and visibility is the defining feature that distinguishes contemporary Dalit cinema from its earlier parallel counterpart, forging a path towards a truly inclusive and emancipatory cinematic practice.

Dalit Women Behind the Camera: Authorship and Agency

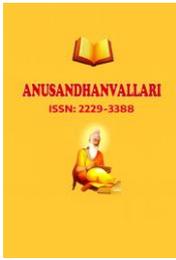
A remarkable change in how Dalit women are portrayed in cinema and media comes from the fact that more Dalit women are stepping into roles as directors, writers, and producers. This shift is not just about who tells the story but about reclaiming the right to shape how their lives are shown on screen. When Dalit women work behind the camera, they bring perspectives rooted in lived experience, resisting the distortions that often happen when others speak for them. Filmmakers like Neelam Pari and collaborators like Pa. Ranjith, who consciously create spaces for Dalit narratives, are helping carve out a more truthful and layered portrayal of Dalit life.

Documentaries have been especially powerful in this regard. The film *Writing with Fire* (2021), directed by Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh, follows the journey of *Khabar Lahariya*, India's only newspaper run entirely by Dalit women. What makes this film stand out is that it does not treat these women as voiceless victims. Instead, it shows them as reporters, researchers, and editors—fearless women who confront corrupt politicians, question police inaction, and hold powerful men accountable. They narrate their own stories, in their own words, on their own terms.

In this way, authorship itself becomes a radical act. Moving from representation of Dalit women to representation by Dalit women challenges old hierarchies in Indian cinema. It breaks the Savarna monopoly on stories about marginalised lives and opens new possibilities for how stories from the margins can be told and shared.

OTT Platforms and the Democratization of Dalit Women's Narratives

The rise of OTT platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and YouTube has opened up new avenues for marginalized voices. The relative decentralization of these platforms has allowed Dalit filmmakers and content creators to bypass the gatekeeping of mainstream or even parallel film industries. Web series like *Delhi Crime*, *Leila*, and *Masaba Masaba*—while not always perfect—have included characters and themes that intersect with caste and gender. Independent films such as *Biryani* (2020), *Paka* (2021), and *I Am Not a Witch* (2021) deal with women's



bodies and oppression with more layered sensibilities. YouTube and regional streaming platforms have also become fertile grounds for Dalit women's cultural expression—from poetry and vlogging to short films. These platforms enable the assertion of identity and narrative control, allowing Dalit women to move from the periphery to the centre.

The journey from invisibility to assertion, from symbolic marginality to vocal subjectivity, reflects a profound shift in how Dalit women are beginning to reframe their presence within Indian cinema. This evolution, though gradual and fraught with ideological resistance, underscores a critical need: the forging of a Dalit-feminist cinematic practice that challenges existing aesthetic norms, representational hierarchies, and epistemic silences. As this paper has argued, Indian parallel cinema, despite its leftist and realist self-positioning, has historically failed to centre Dalit women's voices, often relegating them to roles of passive suffering or metaphorical significance. The erasure is systemic, ideological, and deeply entrenched within the upper-caste authorship and Savarna-controlled infrastructures of Indian cinematic discourse.

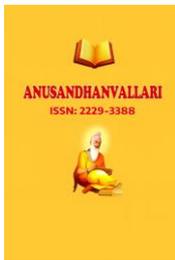
To dismantle this legacy, we must first interrogate what it means to see and represent Dalit women on screen. Representation is not merely about visual presence or tokenistic inclusion—it is about narrative agency, ideological framing, and the power to shape meaning. Early parallel cinema—despite its intentions—rarely allowed Dalit women to speak for themselves. Their presence was choreographed by upper-caste men and constructed for upper-caste audiences, often reinforcing the Savarna gaze under the guise of realism.

A true Dalit-feminist cinematic practice, therefore, must do more than correct the optics of inclusion. It must reconfigure the very modes of storytelling, authorship, and production that have historically marginalized subaltern women. This involves a radical shift in both aesthetics and politics—a departure from the paternalistic narrative of saviourism and a movement towards what Sharmila Rege termed Dalit standpoints, rooted in lived experience, caste consciousness, and feminist solidarity.

This shift is already underway in the works of filmmakers such as Pa. Ranjith, Nagraj Manjule, and in documentaries like *Writing with Fire*. These works are not merely about Dalit characters; they are crafted from within Dalit perspectives. In *Kaala* (2018), for instance, Pa. Ranjith subverts the conventional hero-centric narrative by making the community the central character. Dalit women like Zareena and Selvi are not passive appendages to male protagonists—they are active agents who articulate resistance, question structures of power, and shape the moral and political tone of the film. Similarly, *Fandry* (2013) captures the quiet dignity of Dalit women's daily lives, avoiding melodrama while refusing invisibility. However, while these films mark a significant turn, they still constitute exceptions in a cinematic culture that remains overwhelmingly upper-caste in its institutional makeup. Film schools, production houses, funding bodies, and award committees continue to be dominated by savarna networks, making it difficult for Dalit and Adivasi women to access the means of cinematic production. Structural inequalities persist not only in front of the camera but behind it—in authorship, in critical discourse, and in film archiving.

Thus, moving towards a Dalit-feminist cinematic practice is not merely a matter of aesthetic reform but of institutional transformation. It requires rethinking access to training, resources, and platforms. It involves recognizing the value of oral narratives, testimonial traditions, and grassroots storytelling that challenge elite definitions of what constitutes 'good' cinema. It demands that institutions of cinema criticism and scholarship include Dalit feminist perspectives as legitimate and necessary voices.

Equally crucial is the role of digital and decentralized media in facilitating this shift. OTT platforms, social media, and independent film festivals have provided new spaces for Dalit women to tell their stories without waiting for validation from mainstream or parallel film industries. Web series, YouTube shorts, Instagram reels, and digital poetry performances are emerging as important tools for resisting erasure and asserting identity. The digital realm, while not free from casteism, offers relative autonomy in form and content—allowing for a multiplicity of Dalit feminist voices to flourish.



Moreover, a Dalit-feminist cinematic practice must be intersectional. It must acknowledge that caste and gender do not operate in isolation but are intertwined with religion, region, language, sexuality, and disability. The experiences of a Dalit Muslim woman in Kerala, for instance, differ significantly from those of a Dalit Christian woman in Tamil Nadu. Cinema must make space for these pluralities—not as spectacles of difference, but as complex subjectivities with their own politics and histories.

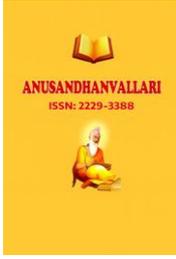
Such a practice must also challenge the traditional forms of narrative closure. Mainstream and parallel cinemas often demand resolution—justice delivered, the villain punished, the victim redeemed. But Dalit women’s realities are not so easily resolved. A Dalit-feminist aesthetic must be comfortable with open endings, with ongoing struggle, with the unfinished project of emancipation. It must refuse the comfort of Savarna empathy and instead insist on discomfort, dialogue, and accountability.

Importantly, critique alone is not enough. While it is essential to identify the representational failures of the past, the future lies in constructive imagination. Dalit feminist cinema must dream new worlds—worlds in which Dalit women are not bound by caste and gender but are allowed to explore love, ambition, conflict, pleasure, and freedom. It must envision roles for Dalit women beyond the frameworks of suffering and resistance—roles that allow for humour, fantasy, experimentation, and joy.

This also calls for a rethinking of cinematic form. Linear narratives, realist aesthetics, and character arcs shaped by Brahmanical notions of morality may not always serve the stories that Dalit women want to tell. Dalit-feminist cinema may require new forms—non-linear storytelling, collective protagonists, experimental soundscapes, or hybrid genres. It may draw from folklore, oral history, community theatre, or radical pedagogy to forge a cinematic language that is accountable to its subjects and audiences alike. Lastly, a Dalit-feminist cinematic practice is not a fixed model but a dynamic, evolving praxis. It must remain rooted in community dialogues, political struggle, and cultural assertion. It must be accountable to the very people it seeks to represent, not merely in its themes but in its processes. As Dalit women filmmakers, writers, and critics continue to challenge the structures that silence them, the rest of the cinematic world must also transform—by listening, collaborating, and relinquishing control.

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