

Pariyerum Perumal and a Periyarite Note on Political Engagement

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Abstract

What was in the rhetoric of Periyar that moved an entire people in a direction that has continuing political relevance? How does his style respond to concerns about how we may engage within contemporary political formations, especially given that his work continues to resist being co-opted by his detractors? Analysing the formal elements of a 1931 speech by Periyar, delivered at Nagapattinam, I investigate the movements in his rhetoric which repeatedly mobilises the self as a site of political action. I argue that Periyar's presentation of the self provides a distinct avenue of political engagement that substantiates the notion of inner conflict as crucial to the development of the titular hero in the 2018 Tamil film *Pariyerum Perumal*. Methodologically, I draw on the work of the relational psychoanalytic thinker D.W. Winnicott; in particular, his concept of 'playing', which refers to the creative moment of passionate immediate engagement with the other that opens up a potent space of understanding and is vital for survival. I show how charting out the various dimensions of this moment of creative play in these two works is crucial to further our understanding of the politics of Periyar and the journey of *Pariyerum Perumal*.

Keywords

caste, psychoanalysis, Periyar, *Pariyerum Perumal*, literary analysis, film studies

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I may have unconsciously sought respect, but the truth is I actually pursued only infamy for myself. Be that as it may.

– Periyar (1931, p. 279; translation mine)

These words taken from a speech by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879–1973; hereafter, Periyar) delivered at Nagapattinam on 3 October 1931 are a remarkable instance of a crack in an otherwise coherent image of the self that he is usually understood as presenting to his readers (or listeners, in this particular case). Following the tentative nod to a possible unconscious desire for respect from others, Periyar states that his actions which instigated outrage were motivated by the desire for disrepute. It is fascinating that Periyar embodied this struggle of opposing forces within himself, and it appears as fissures in rare instances. The space opened up by this quirk serves the narrative arc in his rhetoric which repeatedly mobilises the self as a site of political action. The work with the self in this speech provides a distinct avenue of political engagement that, I argue, substantiates the notion of inner conflict as crucial to character development in Mari Selvaraj's 2018 Tamil film *Pariyerum Perumal*. In the first section of this article, I present the critical literature on films, caste and psychoanalysis that have been formative to my thinking and the writing of this article. In the second section, I offer a reading of the structure of the film and in the process tease out the nature of political engagement that the lead character grows into through working out his cognitive crisis. Drawing on the formal learnings from the film, I then closely read the movements in Periyar's rhetoric to show how the nature of engagement delineated through the mind of Periyar has been demonstrated in practice. I conclude this article by sketching the stakes of this argument.

The Critical Literature

It is imperative at the outset to present the theoretical literature which this article builds on and enters into dialogue with. My method of critical engagement is literary, that is, close-reading for form and content, and in this article, I stage a conversation between a particular film and a particular speech, both engaging and modifying the discourse around caste through a particular articulation of the self. Therefore, I rely on a small section of the wide and sprawling secondary literature on films, caste and selfhood from the Tamil land and beyond, and borrow from disciplinary contributions in film theory, sociology/anthropology, rhetoric and psychoanalysis.

Tamil films have had a long history with social movements. S. Theodore Baskaran, prominent film historian, has painstakingly documented the early history of Tamil cinema in *The Message Bearers* (1981) and *The Eye of the Serpent* (1996). He notes that political consciousness seeped into Tamil film-making as early as 1929, when A. Narayanan's film *Dharmapathini* took up Gandhi's campaign for prohibition by depicting how addiction to alcohol disrupts domestic peace, and was quickly followed by bringing to screen the anti-untouchability rhetoric enshrined in the story of the medieval Bhakti poet Nandanar in Raja Sandow's *Nandanar or the Elevation of the Downtrodden* in 1930 (Baskaran, 1981, p. 85).

Baskaran documents the local elite's revulsion to the cinematic medium in these early years and shows how, with the quickening pace of the nationalist movement, filmmakers and actors (along with the established theatre firmament) who vociferously supported political activities soon became a 'powerless elite' (Ibid., p. 98). With the Tamil film reaching and beginning to cater to the aspirations of the large illiterate masses by the mid-twentieth century, and freedom from colonial rule at hand, Baskaran notes, nationalist fervour was supplanted in favour of a distinctive Tamil consciousness, and this reached its apogee in Kothamangalam Subbu's 1953 film *Avvaiyar*, which collapsed at least three distinct historical personages into one legendary poetess who also symbolized Mother Tamil deriving legitimacy from Murugan who is presented unequivocally as the deity of the Tamils (1996, pp. 22–23). This was soon to be followed by what Baskaran calls 'the era of the dialogue-writer and the cinema of dissent', marked by propaganda films written and produced by scholar-politician screen and stage writers most of whom would soon form the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party. There were also formal innovations unique to the landscape that moulded the trajectory of the content of the Tamil film: when rural electrification became a reality, Baskaran observes, the classical and folk traditions began to be amalgamated in varying degrees (1996, p. xv); and with the ascendancy of ideologues in filmmaking, 'speech' became a pivotal rhetorical device that the cinematic medium exploited to its fullest potential (Ibid., p. 34). The dialogues and speeches in films such as R. Krishnan and S. Panju's *Parasakthi* (1952) and L.V. Prasad's *Manohara* (1954), dialogues penned by five-time Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M. Karunanidhi, were in terms of the camera angle and forceful delivery 'meant for crowds in a political rally' (Baskaran, 1996, p. 67). Speech and film, then, have an entwined and enmeshed history in Tamil politics, and I take this formal insertion of speech within films as a guide for the near-filmic momentum I demonstrate in Periyar's speech later in the essay; that is, borrowing on methods of reading film content to closely read that speech. This is where we will leave a historian's perspective on Tamil films and move to another historian's perspective on the history of the Dravidian movement which gave birth to the DMK. It is only appropriate at this juncture to introduce the colossus of the movement, Periyar.

The radical anti-caste iconoclast Periyar continues to be an intellectual and rhetorical behemoth in Tamil civil society since the early twentieth century. Born to a wealthy landowning family in 1879, Periyar cultivated an acute political awareness as a child and took up political posts early on in his working life despite missing out on formal education. In 1919, he began making a mark in the larger political movements of the time when he joined the Indian National Congress (INC). After six years of active involvement in the initiatives of the party, he resigned from the Congress in 1925. Precipitating this break away from what was perhaps the most impactful counter-colonial force in the subcontinent was the inability of the party's organisational apparatus to take a decisive stand against caste discrimination. This felt need for a critical inward gaze in social movements would come to mark his over fifty-year-long writing and lecturing life that was dedicated to subjecting the society he lived in and its political formations to sustained critical scrutiny. No

one was spared his incisive analysis, neither his detractors, nor his supporters, but most importantly not Periyar himself. The movement he began in 1925 came to be known variously as the self-respect movement, after the philosophy it espoused; or the Dravidian movement, after the ethno-linguistic turn the politics of the movement later took. Periyar had dissolved an erstwhile electoral political party which he led called South Indian Liberal Federation (or the Justice Party) in 1944 and established the non-electoral party Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) that same year, with the sole aim of realising the mission of the self-respect movement and eradicating caste, among other social evils such as the subjugation of women. In 1949, a large faction of the DK broke away and formed the DMK ostensibly to protest Periyar's marriage to the much younger Maniammai, but actually due to a fundamental disagreement about contesting electoral politics. The DMK would further split into a series of parties in the coming decades, but that party and one breakaway party—the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)—have successfully managed to stay in power in Tamil Nadu since 1967.

Since we have seen that the movement founded by Periyar has consistently worked on the plank of anti-caste resistance, it would be instructive to learn about the nature of the persistent and pernicious enemy that movement was engaging with: Brahminism, the ideological script of power that normalises caste order. In her speech/article 'Brahminism and the Anxieties of History' (2002/2015), V. Geetha documents how Brahminism flexibly worked its way through challenges to its existence in the face of late colonial modernity, Independence and later. She details the critical moments when anti-caste intellectuals such as Iyothee Thassar, Periyar, S. Gurusamy and Ambedkar mobilized the tools of modernity to challenge the authority of Brahminism and demonstrates how even if Brahminism could not sustain its fraudulent logic, it creatively engaged with these issues of difference and inequality and thereby preserved its potency to prevail till this day. Under the colonial government, when Brahminism encountered legal and social injunctions which granted privileges and capital to castes lower in the caste hierarchy, it mobilised a rhetoric of reform that ensured the relevance of scriptural authority, only decrying its mistaken interpretation and practice. When Brahminism encountered legislative reform, it turned the problem on its head by claiming legitimacy under the rubric of nationalism. When the subcontinent was inching towards freedom, Geetha notes that Periyar's challenge to a narrow notion of freedom without self-respect for the cause of an independent nation would only result in the institutionalisation of a casteist nation state. This was met with Gandhi's formulation of fighting the evils of the caste system as an inner ethical and spiritual struggle for caste-Hindus. Thereby, according primacy to the morally-aware individual self of the caste-Hindu, who has to convince no one else but himself. In both these avenues, Geetha notes that the manoeuvres that Brahmin political agents carried out were in essence 'an exercise in self-regard' (2002/2015, p. 17). She uses the term 'narcissism', which has striking resonances in the psychoanalytic literature, when she argues for how Brahminism encountered the self in all these problematic sites and did not permit its critique but rushed to preserve it and shore up its hegemony: 'The peculiar narcissism that felt implicated in all matters from the sexual to the social, the

political to the spiritual, proved extremely significant: it granted the Brahmin the right to define and redefine the social world' (Ibid., p. 22). In other words, it appears as if the Brahmanical subject repeatedly wondered and enacted the answer to the question, 'How can I think of myself as a modern individual and yet reconcile my antiquated casteist beliefs?' It is this notion of the self, as coherent individual bearing rights, refusing to engage, that Periyar seems to puncture, and I will return to this later in this article.

Tamil films have taken a similar route along the trajectory of this conception of self-regard that Geetha delineates. Damodaran and Gorringer (2017) note that the political message was Dravidian in Tamil films until the 1970s, where the emphasis lay on the valour of the protagonist who would defend the vulnerable. Much of the audience's reception to the 'image-trap' of these films were to identify with their abject position in need of rescue, as M.S.S. Pandian (1992) argues in the case of the three-time Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M.G. Ramachandran (MGR). Damodaran and Gorringer's central argument, however, is that films since 1985 are replete with thematic and visual structures which move away from exclusive focus on the hero and extend into his community, i.e. films begin to valorise the intermediate castes as a community and the authors refer to it as nativist/neo-nativist cinema. The valour noted in the Dravidian (and MGR period) in this mode was now accented with the intermediate caste hero's honour which rests on preserving the family and caste loyalties and thereby violently marginalizes Dalits. They call this potent brand of films 'Madurai Formula Films', which celebrate violence and argue for social dominance of one particular caste—in this case, the Thevars: '[the film] has fuelled caste conflicts, resulting in an exaggerated sense of caste pride and an emphasis on caste symbolism that has periodically pockmarked the southern regions of the state with violence, and continues to inform caste politics today' (Damodaran and Gorringer, 2017, p. 22). The visual and spoken language of these films reify stereotypical notions of patriarchal inheritance and constitute in the Tamil polity what it means to belong to a particular caste; in other words, they reconfigure notions of selfhood in the service of violent ends within members claiming affiliation to those assertive castes.

The 2010s mark a significant moment in Tamil filmmaking, when directors identifying with their Dalit identity began making films that secured popular support beyond rigid identarian demographics, while also garnering critical acclaim. Karthick Ram Manoharan (2021) makes an argument about conceptions of the self with regard to the Dalit heroes in two recent Tamil films by Pa Ranjith, *Kabali* (2016) and *Kaala* (2018). Drawing on the work of the psychoanalytic theorist Frantz Fanon, Manoharan focuses on how the titular central character of *Kabali* identifies himself as Tamil, a universalist position in the context of a film that focuses on the struggles of Malaysian Tamils, when he is constantly viewed by both his adversaries as Dalit. On *Kaala*, Manoharan's point draws on another universalism that is predicated on the nature of the Tamil community's self-definition vis-à-vis the *Ramayana* through the interventions of the Dravidian movement, epitomized in Pulavar Kuzhandai's 1946 work *Ravana Kaviyam*. That this aspect of a Tamil imaginary, a fictive mythology created to serve the political demands of a movement, gets creatively adapted in a

film on Dalit oppression as *Kaala* lays claim to a universalism that exceeds narrow identity politics, Manoharan argues. The central problem with a narrowly-conceived brand of identity politics, after all, is the definitive certainty with which selfhood is constructed, without any permission or accounting for quirks or inconsistencies. This is along the lines of the ‘real site’ of untouchability that Sarukkai models for us as the ‘person who refuses to touch the untouchable’ (2012, p. 186); that is, untouchability can be located in the visible Brahmin self who finds meaning through the Dalit self that has to be made invisible. The identarian recognition and encounter of the Brahmin self is predicated on a violent erasure of the humanity of the Dalit self. How then do we engage with our own selves without reducing the other? The fabulous *Pariyerum Perumal* is an answer in engaging anti-caste politics creatively with frameworks of the community that the long history of Tamil cinema has generated, and arguably far surpasses all recent Tamil films in granting a conflicted interiority to its central character without participating in the politics of erasure of the other. In my reading *Pariyerum Perumal* resonates with a distinctive theorisation of engagement with the other—called ‘playing’—in the works of the relational psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott to whose contribution we will now turn.

One can read for Winnicottian ‘play’ when one is looking for engagement, interaction or confrontation, and the anxieties and resolutions incumbent upon such contact. Winnicott (1971) draws on the children’s world of playing, kids play with each other (or with a toy or with an idea, such as ‘look there’s the crow, eat this quickly!’) only if they believe in the creative potential of the space they are capable of building. Within a facilitating environment, the child tries to overwhelm the other person/thing/idea confronting it, and emerges in delight when that object has survived (Ibid.): the child invests the faculties of its mind to creatively imagine the space between the self and the other, and it plays with the object, i.e. the other, and is delighted when that object survives that aggression. This relationship with the surviving other and the creativity it entails is essential even in adulthood. What follows then is that we are able to play only when we do not doubt the stability of our relationship, and in that moment of play we try and test endurance. This is how meaning is made, belongingness is forged and beliefs are instituted. This moment of creativity, according to Winnicott, ‘belongs to being alive’ (1971, p. 91). In other words, every waking moment of our life is marked by our playing with people, with ideas, with struggles.

How am I working with this notion in the context of political engagement and caste? I would like to approach this question with the help of a reading of the poignant note that Rohith Vemula left behind. This work by a ‘glorious thing made of stardust’ urges us to re-evaluate our practice of engagement. Let me cite a few lines from his letter and attempt to say what they mean in this context:

I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan.

I loved Science, Stars, Nature, but then I loved people without knowing that people have long since divorced from nature. Our feelings are second handed. Our love is constructed. Our beliefs colored. Our originality valid through artificial art. (Vemula, 17 January 2016)

Rohith was denied a place to stay by his university. The state denied the scholarship he deserved. The society denied the dignity he was entitled. But, more importantly, all of us denied the space we could have facilitated for his creativity to emerge. He wanted to be a writer of fine prose. He wanted to think and write about the natural world, and he was disappointed when people around him had closed off their rich inner worlds to him. All art is artificial to Vemula because the art that engagement outside of ourselves (i.e. with nature) brings has been forgotten. Winnicott says that the decision to end one's life is because one is unable to creatively make sense of the struggle for making meaning, when one is unable to play. At that decisive moment one only wants to end the struggle; one is exhausted. That is why on the Winnicottian couch 'When a patient cannot play the therapist must attend to the major symptom before interpreting fragments of behaviour' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 64). If we are unable to play, we must begin to learn to play to stay alive. In the world of the Dalit protagonist of *Pariyerum Perumal*, we encounter this struggle for survival in the face of multiple attempts at extinguishing his life, and Pariyan continues to fight it out physically where physical force is necessary but more importantly with mental fortitude when structural forces threaten Pariyan's sense of self-regard. That is, while he has to face the threat of death every day, his inner world needs to grow into a life of its own because the prevalent societal forces prevent him from realising the wholeness of his interiority, enabling him to be able to creatively engage with the world outside him and play.

Before we delve deeper into the film, it is necessary to consider another strain of thinking on the powers of persuasion of the Dravidian movement that has informed this article. We began this critical survey with impressing the genre innovation of filmic speeches in the Dravidian model of filmmaking, but what do we know of the vitality of public speeches that were delivered to political audiences that the movement inherited? In his study of orations just before the emergence of the self-respect movement from 1905–1919, Bernard Bate argues that vernacular oratory 'played an infrastructural role in the transformation of Tamil society and the production of modern forms of politics, or at least the politics that came to dominate the twentieth century' (2013, p. 146). He rues the lack of scholarly work on this form of political rhetoric and attributes it to the assumption that speech is 'natural and pan-human, that people must have always orated' (p. 160). His argument, however, shows that the innovations in stage-speaking enabled a politics that took political action, which was until then confined to the elites, to the masses and 'entailed a new kind of agency on the part of an entirely new genre of political actor, the vernacular politician, who could now turn toward and evoke the participation of people formerly thought to be irrelevant at best and irrational and dangerous at worst' (Ibid., p. 162). In an earlier magisterial volume titled *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic*, Bate had focused on what he refers to as the 'centamil revolution' as he trains his eye and ears to the displacement of the colloquial register of the diglossic Tamil language with the high register (*centamil*) in public oratory and how that was necessitated to embody 'a "proper" distinction between leaders and the people, a political distinction between the DMK and the Congress Party, and a civilizational distinction between the Dravidian and the Indo-Aryan civilizations' (Bate, 2009, p. 183). This new mode of speech, Bate observes, different from the

unornamented speech of Periyar and in so weaning away from their political mentor, the Dravidianist speakers invented a neo-classical tradition that was tied to notions of antiquity as a way to adapt to the changing circumstances of confrontation: now they were no longer dealing with the British, they were struggling with their own in a quest for control and power. Bate adds that there is a formative paradox in this scenario: how can a movement that would go on to garner populist support effectively wielding this elite language? He shows us that the legacy of the centamil revolution relied on persuading its constituents that the modern turn the paradigm took was not really a succession of tradition but rather a reaffirmation of the old Tamil tradition which in the context of the nascent pan-Indian national identity was new; in other words, the modernity that the Dravidian paradigm entailed was a ‘newness of old things’ (Ibid., p. xvi). This modernity was working against the modernity ushered in by Periyar through his ordinary language. The site of that modernity enjoined by Periyar, a consequence of subjecting social structures and constructions of the self to reason, in my view was the self. This self—contradictory and conflicted, because of the essential tyranny of reason—can be satisfactorily read and examined when the language is not affected, i.e. when it is shorn of linguistic acrobatics that derive its force more from ingenuity than honesty: much similar to the need for free association as a prerequisite for a rewarding therapeutic relationship on the psychoanalytic couch.

The Central Crisis in *Pariyerum Perumal*

Mari Selvaraj’s *Pariyerum Perumal* is the story of the titular Dalit character (hereafter, Pariyan, played by Kathir) who enters law college, befriends his classmate Jo (Anandhi), and ends up facing the wrath of Jo’s father (G. Marimuthu) and cousin Sankaralingam (Lijeesh) because they see him as growing too close to her. How he survives the attempts to humiliate and murder is the narrative arc of the rest of the film. This summary, however, does not map on to the three-act structure of the film. If we consider the villain figure in the elderly Thatha Maistry (Karate Venkatesan), who is commissioned to kill boys and girls, men and women across castes who have fallen in love, then we would read the romantic entanglement of Pariyan and Jo as the central conflict of the film. We would of course be on stable ground, because we could draw on the prevailing violence surrounding inter-caste unions, and the travails entailed in inter-caste romance would appear to be the force propelling the narrative. However, we do not witness any instances of desire flowing between the lead characters that could even be remotely construed as imbued with the conventional tropes of erotic or conjugal enrapture. In fact, for the entirety of the film, Pariyan is practically asexual; he is not constructed in the mould of the hypermasculine figure of desire that has come to dominate Indian cinema, he sternly opposes his friend Anand’s (Yogi Babu) efforts at characterising his relationship with Jo as romance, and encounters the limits of everyone’s understanding when a friendly teacher reads their relationship as romantic love. The flow of desire, instead, is from Pariyan towards self-preservation and development; it is as if the character is consciously working on building his arc through the narrative. He joins college because he is falsely implicated in an instance

of theft, and his mentor-grandfather imbues in him the desire to study law, in order to be able to do some good for his society. If at all there is desire, it is to survive—the personal extending into the communal—through the workings of his mind. This single-minded determination looking forward into inner development finds its first obstacle in language. During his first class in college, in what is ironically an instance of looking back—the History of Courts course—he is faced with incomprehensibility. He just cannot understand a word the teacher says because she lectures in English. He is subjected to ridicule for his honest and forthright request to be taught in a language he and indeed everyone in class is used to. Driving home this point even further is yet another round of singular humiliation he (and Anand, albeit initially) faces at the hands of the professor of English. Since he is unable to follow the notes dictated in class, he pretends to jot down points and instead draws rows of circles in his notebook. The professor snatches his notebook and asks Jo to read what he has written. When she says she cannot read circles on a piece of paper, the Professor says out aloud ‘Read what he has written: Egg ... Egg ... Egg ... Egg ... Egg ... Egg ...’ The class erupts in laughter and Pariyan is humiliated for occupying a seat in the college through reservations. It is this set up that brings upon his arc an interaction with Jo for the first time, when he approaches her and she offers to help him with English and follows it through the rest of the film. Pariyan’s engagement in this first act is unabashedly motivated towards working on himself—narratively cemented in a scene by his insensitivity to Jo’s bleeding hands, when he is only concerned if she would be able to write the assignment on his behalf as she had promised. The incident propelling the narrative begins at around the mid-point in the narrative when he is humiliated, thrashed, urinated upon and threatened by Jo’s family for simply coming too close to her, when he accepts an invitation from Jo to attend a wedding in her family. This conflict is presented again in the register of incomprehension—Pariyan cannot understand the visceral hatred of people he has just met in his life. Since Jo does not get to meet him at the wedding, thanks to her family locking him up in a room in an attempt to break his spirit, she confronts him in class and asks why he did not turn up. Pariyan lies to her. It is in this scene that we first see an inkling of desire in the register of the romance flowing from Jo to Pariyan. She is angry and annoyed with him that he cannot relate to her feelings, and furiously walks away saying they will not talk to each other until she wants to talk to him herself. This expression of desire follows casteist logic—the right order of conduct always flows in a dictatorial route from the upper caste body to the lower caste body—and at this moment the logic of realism is bent in favour of conflict in Pariyan’s inner world.

When Jo walks away, the classroom has been purged of its furniture and the blackboard is filled with rows of circles, the pivotal visual metaphor for incomprehensibility and tool of humiliation early in the film. This conflict is instantiated with the surrealist song ‘*Naan yaar*’ (‘Who am I?’) and the arrival into the frame of Pariyan’s pet dog, Karuppi, whose killing at the hands of an upper caste gang we witness in gory detail right at the outset of the film. The artistic genre of surrealism attempts to harness the creative potential of the unconscious by what may seem an irrational assemblage of symbols and otherworldly realities. With this formal break in

the narrative, the film asks us to focus on the turmoil in Pariyan's inner world. This crisis of the self in the face of attempts at his life is resolved at the end when he is able to tell Jo's father, 'As long as you are the way you are and expect me to be the dog, nothing will change. Everything will remain the same.' It is towards this realisation that the film wants us to reach. The film neither presents this resolution as preserving the status quo, nor as a refusal to admit change in the social fabric (i.e. the persistence of casteism through altered mechanisms), but as a realisation that the fight is still on for Pariyan. That Pariyan may yet have to face attempts on his life in the hands of Jo's family tomorrow; that no change has happened outside of him but a world of change has occurred inside him. It is on this premise, that the film asks us to do a reading of the shifts within Pariyan's mind which I would like to investigate through two conversations.

In the first interaction from the film I would like to analyse, Jo meets Pariyan outside the hospital where his father has been admitted after being jeered at by Jo's cousin and his friends for being effeminate, stripped, thrashed and made to run for his life. Jo closes her eyes and says she doesn't have the courage to look at him in the face and express what she then says:

I've told my dad, mom, brother, everyone at home how much I like you. I don't know what they all feel about that. But I have feelings. I keep feeling that I should be with you. That I should come and live with your father, mother, everyone in your family. It is wrong of me to think all of this about you, without your permission. I know. But I should tell you this someday, shouldn't I? That's why I've told you this today, with my eyes shut. You don't have to respond to any of this. My desire is only this: Can we go back to being the way we were? The first day I saw you; you were sitting in the last bench and introduced yourself as Pariyerum Perumal BABL with a line on the top. Will you be that Pariyan? Tell me you will be that Pariyan, only then I will open my eyes. (translation mine)

We will be able to note the significance of the construction of Jo as a caste-blind dominant caste heroine in this film that is deeply embedded in working against the steady build-up of caste forces. In narratively literalising her blindness the film is conscious and incisive in its study that the hero is inexplicably torn between choosing to burst her bubble of blindness and maintaining the fiction because Pariyan sees her as his only ray of hope (post-caste future). To extend this further, when we consider the placement of this dialogue, it is after this scene that Pariyan faces what is perhaps the first instance of him fighting back without running away from the threat of destruction. Pariyan would physically overpower Thatha Maistry, fights back when Jo's nephew and his friends turn up to finish the work Thatha Maistry couldn't do, and struggles with the very-human urge to kill any and all of his assailants. Returning to the scene being analysed, as viewers we are privy to Thatha Maistry's assignment to murder Pariyan, and we see him hovering in the margins of the scene, blurred out by the blindness staged by Jo. Both Jo and Pariyan are unaware of being observed by Thatha Maistry. One may argue that Jo's playful language in this dialogue and her character

arc—which is all but a definitive point in this film—both point to the conventional fair-skinned heroine fantasy that popular contemporary Tamil films are replete with. However, I would urge us to look at the scene as depicting an adult who is ignorant, childish, at times brattish. Importantly, Jo is fearful of her sexuality, but determined to make something of the charge with which that desire possesses her. She is incapable of understanding the world around her, but is invested in carving out a potential space of creativity outside of her. The internal contradiction in the speech excerpted above is remarkable in staging a moment of play: she basically says, I will tell you without telling you that I desire you and that should create a future that is the past. To Pariyan that is incomprehensible; he has outgrown that past, how can he grow down? He smiles through his tears endearingly. That smile, in this reading, is representative of him having found in his interlocutor a playing child, and the subtle realisation that he has just learned a new detail about Jo and, in his mind, he has to shift in the way he engages the pernicious problem she presents.

The second scene I'd like to read is the climax, which is an interaction between Pariyan and Jo's father. After having been at the receiving end of multiple assaults on his life and severe violence in the hands of goons hired by Jo's father, Pariyan manages to escape alive. Jo is unaware of all of this and brings together Pariyan and her father to a meeting over tea. When she goes to buy tea for them, Jo's father repentantly asks Pariyan why he hasn't revealed any of his struggles to Jo. If we follow the interactions between Pariyan and Jo's father in a previous scene, we know that Pariyan has already answered this question. Perched atop the hood of Jo's father's car, Pariyan tells him that the love of his daughter is a charity bestowed on him by Pariyan's conscious act of not turning Jo against her own father by telling her the truth. But, then, in the climax, Jo's father and indeed we as audiences ask him again: Why doesn't Pariyan turn Jo against her father? Pariyan gives us another explanation. He says that he knows how much Jo loves her father and that is the reason. Both these reasons border on paying homage to the edifice of heteronormative patriarchy that fuels the villain in the narrative: casteism, the network of forces that evacuates a person's self-regard and ties it to the regard of the clan they belong to and motivates them to excesses of violence. In response, Jo's father says that he knows that Jo loves Pariyan as much as she loves him and enquires if Pariyan did not have reciprocal feelings for Jo. Having dealt with the same question from two other well-meaning characters in the narrative, Pariyan has by now arrived at a meaningful resolution of the conflict of incomprehensibility in him. The interaction is as follows:

Pariyan: I don't know. Before I could understand it, you tore me to pieces. But your daughter is very lucky, she can say what she feels openly, anywhere. Look at me. I have to die so many times, before I can say what I feel.

Jo's father: Sorry! You are a good person. You will become all that you wish to be. Study well. Ok? I can only say this for now. What else can I say. Let's see. Things can change tomorrow right? Who knows!

Pariyan: I know sir! As long as you are the way you are and expect me to be the dog, you want me to be. Nothing will change! Everything will remain the same.

In the space of three exchanges, Pariyan makes the interaction pedagogic both for Jo's father and the audiences. It is true that as long as attitudes towards others do not change, oppressive structures are not going to be dismantled. It is also true that education is not going to make caste differences disappear. However, if we draw our attention to the throw-away remark about conversations that Pariyan begins with we may see this differently. Pariyan locates himself as someone who cannot speak without dying. In perfect alignment with the Winnicottian notion of creativity, he ties life to the ability to engage and converse. If he needs to speak he has to have suffered countless deaths. Besides the fact that he has had to struggle to keep his life throughout the film to be able to say these few words to Jo's father, will Pariyan still survive after this conversation? The threat of Jo's desire still hangs over him, and Jo's father, even if he is apologetic, still asks Pariyan to focus on studies. The workings of caste network have been left untouched and Pariyan's caste identity will follow him everywhere. We can attempt an answer if we ask the question: Has a conversation at all happened in this series of exchanges? In an earlier episode of violence and humiliation in the film, Jo's father tears up and admits to a thrashed up Pariyan, drenched in someone's urine, that he is helpless under the command of casteism; in other words, Jo's father implicitly admits that he is nobody without his caste. The violence that falls on Pariyan, therefore, does not have a face. That seems to have been the case with his interlocutor in this scene as well. Pariyan is able to say all of this to Jo's father because he isn't there to engage. Pariyan could die after this showdown because he has spoken to no one in particular. He hasn't been able to creatively engage with any person. But the difference here is, Pariyan has worked on what has bothered him all this while—the throttling sense of incomprehensibility; he has come to understand it as an idea and has overwhelmed it. The implication of this reading, then, is not that the caste-blind upper caste heroine is the prime mover of this coming-of-age narrative, but that Pariyan learns to play and creatively engage with the struggle he faces, and that begins midway through the narrative when he asks a question of his own self 'Who am I?' The formal shift from realism to surrealism, a moment of creative rupture in an otherwise straightforward narration then becomes exciting because the very real world outside is not engaging with Pariyan and he is moved to discover and confront his rich inner world. The conversation with Jo outside the hospital then is a significant witness to the growing comfort Pariyan feels with his own self, because he demonstrates being able to hold the frustration of having to deal with the complicated challenges of an adult-child, desire-non-desire. If his journey began with self-preservation, it has blossomed by now into a strength that is required to deal with the precariousness that we open ourselves to when we focus on our inner world. We will all run the risk of being Jo if we do not recognise the import of these political stakes of the film.

At this juncture, one might wonder how this kind of engagement that demands shifts in the inner world can come to bear on contemporary political movements. Is this reading of *Pariyerum Perumal* merely an attempt at theorizing and abstracting from the real world of struggle and political action? We are, after all, in a time of steady right-wing ascendancy, marked by the co-option of anti-caste struggles and leadership,

even scholarship and rhetoric as can be seen in the multiple instances when the current ruling dispensation has invoked Ambedkar to justify its casteist/communist stances (Neelakandan, 2017; Banerjee, 2021; for an academic engagement with this appropriation, see Guru, 1991; Teltumbde, 2015). In this milieu, Periyar stands as one unforgettable figure, long gone yet constantly resisting appropriation and consistently persisting as a thorn to those in power. The predominant response to Periyar among his detractors is of mischaracterisation and revulsion (for instance, Neelakandan, 2018). Periyar would have smiled at the nature of this continuing legacy. It was after all Periyar who said:

If I am seen as someone possessing divine powers, people will not think carefully about my words. If I am called a rogue, my words will be carefully scrutinized. ... Therefore, since my words should not suffer the respect accorded to these works, since they should receive the careful attention they deserve, all those who declaim that I am a rogue or that I am someone who accumulates a lot of money or a thief are all people who have helped me. (Periyar, 1931, p. 278)

It appears as if Periyar is raring for a fight and he calls for a worthy opponent who would carefully ‘scrutinize’ him. The rhetoric of this speech is marked by the clarity of thought and simplicity of articulation that has come to define our understanding of Periyar’s works. It is at this juncture that we will now begin to focus on Periyar’s presentation of his self that could help develop our understanding of engagement as working on the inner world as it happens in *Pariyerum Perumal*.

The Crisis of the Self in Periyar

Periyar begins that speech with the following words:

You were all calm and the leader has instigated you into asking questions. I haven’t come to pick a fight. How can I run if someone comes charging at me? I am not foolhardy to think that I can resolve all your doubts. I speak what occurs to me, what I consider to be right. Accept what you consider to be right. ... You don’t have tell me even if you think what I say is right or wrong. Think over what occurs to you. Correct yourself. I do not have any objections, no objections whatsoever, to the fact that what I speak will be ridden with mistakes. (Ibid., p. 276)

His practice of adding cautionary statements against taking his words as the gospel truth, but to rather ponder over his ideas and bring their rational minds to bear on his words is fairly common across his works. What stands apart in this instance, however, is his drawing our attention to the inevitability of confrontation with him. In what will turn out to be an ironic twist in the speech, he begins by stating that he is not interested in a confrontation. But the kind of confrontation he is not interested in is the one where he would have to turn back and run. He gives an example of this kind of confrontation

by drawing on material immediately available to him: wall graffiti he notices at the venue. On the way to the place where food was served, Periyar says he noticed graffiti abusing him and his wife. In response to these graffiti, supporters of Periyar have responded with graffiti targeting others. He leaves this material evidence hanging and goes on to decry the sainthood conferred on M.K. Gandhi and Thiruppalakudi Masthan and warns against the misfortune that entails treatment of humans as people with divine powers. He ridicules the ritual practices of worship accorded to both and questions the relevance of their work in tangible materialist terms ('What is the benefit accrued to the country because of these people?' he says in as many words). Stating that he has dedicated his life to being an iconoclast and that it would be his misfortune if he is turned into an icon himself, he states that those who do not hold him in regard and respect are those who have helped him uphold his principles. They are his true friends because they would not rummage through their powers of rhetoric to justify the dangers and problems caused due to the words and actions of their icon. He considers such rhetorical manoeuvres 'dangerous results'. He says:

Therefore, since my words should not suffer the respect accorded to these works, since they should receive the careful attention they deserve, all those who declaim that I am a rogue or that I am someone who accumulates a lot of money or a thief are all people who have helped me. (Periyar, 1931, p. 278)

He invites rebuke, but the actual demand he places is on the intellect of his interlocutor who must work towards developing the faculty of critical scrutiny. One may argue that Periyar was mistaken in assuming that shaking his listener into revulsion need not necessarily entail careful attention (as can be seen in the case of contemporary critics referenced earlier). Could we place this in comparison to the bait that he throws at his listeners right at the beginning of his speech, when he declares that he does not want to hear from them if he is right or wrong, but that their own thinking will inevitably lead them to correct themselves, while almost immediately maintaining that what he says will be riddled with mistakes. This formative contradiction that Periyar trains us to inhabit is crucial to understanding the potency of the resistance of his rhetoric to co-option. It is a register of speech quite distinct from the academic intonation of an Ambedkar. This is not to say that Ambedkar did not playfully work out other registers in his writing and speeches or that Periyar was not academic in his works. In fact, in this same speech Periyar urges his listeners to investigate the material forces that led to the production of such literary works as the *Bhagavad Gita*, when he says: 'It is popular because we have been told that it was spoken by god and applies to every human alive today, and we have been rendered incapable of asking the questions "Who was the man who really spoke those words? Why did he say what he said?"' (Ibid.). My intervention has been to focus rather on the mechanics of his rhetoric, the intricate weaving into an extempore speech a device that disturbs the cognitive balance of his listeners. This friction, I contend marks the first stone thrown into the field declaring that Periyar is ready to play.

Periyar finishes his train of thought on the graffiti right at the middle of his speech by explaining that he is happy that such graffiti are written on walls because he is now

sure that he is successful to a certain extent. It is here that the epigraph that began this article occurs and it is interesting that its position structurally divides the speech into neat halves. There appears in Periyar's assured tone a distinct turn marked by tentativeness. He addresses a question often posed to him as an anti-caste crusader: 'Will you marry off your daughter to a Paraiyan?' Periyar responds to this question in a way that is consonant with his practice. He says that it is the wrong question to ask because the self-respect project is against treating one's daughters 'as a thing given away in marriage' but 'to facilitate co-habitational arrangements' between a consenting woman and man. However, quickly we reach the crux of a difficulty he has to surmount. This speech is probably delivered to a largely non-Dalit audience, because it draws attention to the oppression Dalits face(d) in the region at the hands of the Shudra castes. Many to most of his supporters were drawn from the Shudra castes, and therefore, when he chastises his listeners as 'distilled idiots' if they continued to hold the belief that their 'Shudra' tag will vanish without abolishing the 'Paraiya' tag, one can get a sense of the unease that would have rippled through the crowd. Although, the central concern he seems anxious to import to his audiences is that 'efforts made for the welfare of the Adi-Dravidas are actually for the benefit of all non-Adi-Dravidas and non-Brahmins as well' (Ibid., p. 280), he immediately follows this definitive proclamation with a disclaimer about his changing stances. He addresses what could have been a pressing concern amongst his followers at that time: What do we make of a leader who somersaults in his opinions? He does not lambast consistency nor does he take the route of inevitability of change to respond to these criticisms. He places another contradiction in his rhetoric. He acknowledges that rational thinking would have to be mobilized when he exhibits any shocking reversal of position, and that they needed to figure it out for themselves if his motives are in tune with the changing times or if they are selfish. Simultaneously, however, he also asks them why it concerns them that he changes at all. He says:

I may have changed my opinion many times in the past. I may have somersaulted many times. I may have done it for selfish reasons too. I may have been a chameleon. How does that affect you? Don't you pay for it and appreciate it when an actor puts on various guises and acts on stage? Would you consider yourself cheated? Think of us that way, come over, listen to us and leave. (Ibid., p. 281)

While demanding a kind of interaction that is abrasive and intelligent, Periyar also wants his listeners to not take him seriously. This sudden toss from a call to rationality to an obliging indulgence of the performative drama of his rhetoric comes to a moment of cognitive crisis borne out of the momentum that has built up till then and the distinctive demands of the audience when Periyar says: 'In fact, I am unsure if what I say today are conclusive to me. Anyway, given the current circumstances, and given the paucity of time—it can also be said that I am holding back—I am going to measure my speech and discuss only a few things.' This dramatic performance has come to a screeching halt a full two pages before the speech can actually end. Periyar is here on the brink of exceeding the materialist in him. He has till now given us instances of

his critical method of investigating texts and ritual practices, he has even justified his changes by citing the forces (changing times and selfish interest) that make him move. This moment, when he is holding back, however, is a moment of an inner conflict, not in the mode of incomprehension as we saw in *Pariyerum Perumal*, but in the mode of the here-and-now political action. Periyar seems to hold back and measure his speech because of something that is happening right there and then; it could be something as banal as paucity of time, but it could also be that he had whipped up the sensibility of his interlocutors to a peak beyond which even if he would be adding to his performance it would be overdone. We may never know. There is no point speculating on a particular event that could have happened, because this really is a speech that has come down to us because it was published in *Kudi Arasu* over a week after it was delivered. If it was indeed an insignificant utterance it could have been edited out of the reprint by the editor, who was Periyar himself. He seems intent on etching his uncertainty, his moment of stumble as a demonstration of the changes he has been speaking about until then—an instance of form mimicking the content. This instance of fragility appears like an invitation to his audiences, in 1931 and 2022, to confront him, to bring out their aggression in their engagement with him. He urges us to play with him. What follows this call to play is a call to action to rise in fury when someone calls them Shudras and a short critique of Gandhi's brand of nationalism. He ends the speech by quoting Rabindranath Tagore's identification of '[i]rrationality, superstition, caste divisions [and] communalism' as the primary problems the country faces, rather than subjugation by a foreign power and takes another dig at Gandhi and the Congress. His parting words in that speech draw us back to the precarity of playing, when he says: 'Our philosophy is opposed to god and religion, which are ideas that directly feed varnashrama and capitalism. I myself cannot be sure of where else our philosophy will take us. Therefore, be courageous and employ your rationality for any purpose' (Periyar, 1931, p. 283). Periyar was not calling for courage only because rationality stands opposed to structural forces of oppression that would close ranks and violently suppress the workings of the critical mind. That he was. But, more interestingly, his rhetoric also shows that when one plays as he did, one opens oneself to conflict that is directed into the inner world throwing it into upheaval and shift, in the mould of what encounter with incomprehension did to Pariyan.

We had observed a tonal shift in the speech after the utterance of what has become the epigraph of this article. When Periyar says he may have unconsciously sought respect, he isn't of course referring to the unconscious in Freudian terms. This article is not an attempt at a psychobiography of Periyar, because the unconscious is by definition inaccessible when one is alive and thinking, let alone when one attempts to unearth it through an analysis of a speech by an author long gone. What this article has been, however, is to explore the salience of the self as a site of political action, and the necessity of conflict that is not oriented outwards but into the rich complexities of the inner world. Gleaning insights of formal rupture and engagement to read for confrontation and recognition of a changing self within the parameters of the film have enabled me to read Periyar's speech as exceeding the materialist and contingent on performative and self-reflexive conditions, apart from the established Marxist

mode of reading Periyar's thought (see, 'Gramsci: Periyarai Purinthukolla' ['Gramsci: To understand Periyar'] Rajadurai and Geetha, 2017, pp. 845–94). This exercise has come to remind us that oppressive structures in place are in fact populated by people with inner worlds requiring a violent jolt, a rhetorical device crucial to Periyar's performance. This article has, therefore, studied the ways in which a film character and a social revolutionary show instances of such conflict and how these instances have been crucial to the politics they embrace and enable them to survive.

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