

Myth, Resistance, and Power: An Intersectional Reading of Mani Ratnam's *Raavanan* through Historical Materialism and Film Analysis

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Abstract

Film studies is an academic discipline that delves into a variety of theoretical, historical, and critical viewpoints on cinema, viewing it as both an art form and a means of communication. It provides multiple approaches for analysing films, examining how meaning is constructed and how audiences interpret and engage with them. The film analysis technique deconstructs cinematic texts and explores how they reflect and refract social realities. The cinematic techniques are used to construct meaning, evoke emotions, and convey socio-political messages to audiences. A film can be analysed intersectionally. Intersectionality examines how various social categories intersect and shape representations of identity, power, and inequality within films. This paper explores the intersection of race, gender, class, power structure, ethnicity, religion, marginalised identities and ability to influence character development, plot dynamics, and thematic concerns in the film Raavanan. By integrating Karl Marx's theory of historical materialism, film analysis, and intersectionality, this paper offers a nuanced understanding of Mani Ratnam's Raavanan as a cinematic text that reflects and critiques the complexities of contemporary Indian society while offering narratives of resistance and liberation. The interdisciplinary approach allows for a deeper understanding of how cinema both reflects and shapes the socio-economic, cultural, and political landscapes of the societies in which it is produced and consumed.

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Introduction

Film studies is an academic field that explores diverse theoretical, historical, and critical perspectives on cinema as both an artistic expression and a communication medium. In France during the late 1940s, the filmology movement was advocated for the serious examination of cinema, and in the 1950s, various attempts were made to label the field as cinematology. On the otherhand, by the 1970s, film studies have been emerged as the prevailing term for the discipline. While sometimes considered a subset of media studies and frequently juxtaposed with television studies, film studies have emerged as an independent academic discipline in the twentieth century. "...film studies examine how to construct meaning as well as how audiences interpret and interact with that meaning." (Lajeunesse). Film studies offer various frameworks for analysing films, exploring both the construction of meaning and audience interpretation and engagement. Cultural narratives portrayed in films mirror the values, aspirations, and anxieties of societies. As a form of artistic expression, film enables the collective processing of trauma and the celebration of victories.

Studying the evolution of cinema is similar to studying societal evolution. Forby, cinema exerts influence on culture, shaping audience reactions to real-life events based on what is depicted on screen. Essential elements of film language include cinematography, sound design, editing, mise-en-scene and special effects. Cinematography is about camera shots and movements which can effectively convey emotions, motives, and foreshadow events for audiences. In terms of sound, the cinematic world presented on screen is known as the diegetic world. Sound in films can be categorised as either diegetic, which is part of the film, such as dialogue or ambient noise or non-diegetic, which is not recognized within the film's world, such as voiceovers or background music. Indeed, editing techniques play a crucial role in guiding the narrative progression. Techniques like fade, dissolve, wipe and jump cut are included. Mise-en-scène involves the arrangement of characters, objects, lighting, colour, costumes, makeup, facial expressions, and body language within the frame. Special effects encompass a range of techniques, including CGI, stunts, explosions, animatronics, and models. Presently, film studies is recognised as a global discipline, with dedicated educational institutions worldwide. Its scope has expanded to include a wide array of methodologies for examining the intersections of history, culture, and society. Numerous liberal arts colleges and universities offer specialised courses focusing on the analysis of film.

Overview of Mani Ratnam's *Raavanan*

Raavanan is a Tamil film released in 2010, directed and co-written by Mani Ratnam. It is produced by Mani Ratnam along with Sharada Trilok. The film's cinematography is handled by Santosh Sivan and V. Manikandan. The editing is done by Sreekar Prasad, while the music is composed by A. R. Rahman. Produced

under the banner of Madras Talkies, the film is distributed by Reliance Big Pictures. *Raavanan* features Vikram, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, and Prithviraj Sukumaran in the lead roles, supported by Karthik, Prabhu, and Priyamani. The movie has been simultaneously produced in Hindi as *Raavan*. Additionally, the film has been dubbed in Telugu as *Villain*. All three versions have been released worldwide on June 18, 2010. Ensuing, it was remade in Bengali in 2011 as *Tiger Number One*. *Raavanan* has been considered for India's submission to the Academy Awards. V. Manikandan has received a nomination for Best Cinematography at the Asia Pacific Screen Awards (APSA). The film is also included in the Austrian Film Museum's collection. At the 58th Filmfare Awards South, Vikram has won the Filmfare Best Actor Award, while Karthik has won the Filmfare Best Male Playback Singer award. At the Fifth Vijay Awards, Vikram won the Best Actor Award. Additionally, Vikram has received the Best Actor Award at the Tamil Nadu State Film Awards. The movie has received a lot of nominations as well.

Raavanan as a Modern Adaptation of Ramayana

The film is a modern adaptation of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, exploring themes of love, revenge, and redemption. The story revolves around Dev Prakash, a brave and determined police officer assigned to capture Veeraiyya (Veera), a feared and revered tribal leader. Veeraiyya (Veera) is seen as a hero figure by the local villagers, but Dev considers him a criminal responsible for numerous atrocities. The conflict intensifies when Veera kidnaps Dev's wife, Ragini, during a celebration. Ragini finds herself caught between her captor and her husband, struggling to understand Veera's motivations and the truth behind his actions. Ragini develops a complex relationship with Veera, gradually gaining insight into his troubled past and the injustices suffered by his tribe. The narrative unfolds through a series of flashbacks, revealing the events leading up to Ragini's kidnapping and the reasons behind Veera's hatred and revenge against Dev.

Raavanan is known for its stunning visuals, captured in the beautiful forests of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The film's soundtrack adds to its atmospheric intensity, enhancing the emotional depth of the story. On the whole, this film is a tale of love, sacrifice, and redemption. It offers a fresh perspective on the themes of the *Ramayana* while exploring the complexities of human relationships and the consequences of violence and vengeance. There are devotional movies on Rama and his virtues, which go back to the same old narrative. In *Raavanan*, the myth of Ramayana is subverted in many aspects. It blurs the lines between good and evil. Through the intersectional analysis under historical materialism, Mani Ratnam's *Raavanan* portrays characters and narratives that challenge traditional power structures, subvert dominant cultural narratives, and offer representations of resistance and intersecting identities such as gender, caste, class, and ethnicity.

Review of Literature

There is a decent amount of research articles on Mani Ratnam's *Raavanan* where the subversion of the mythical Ramayana has been analysed in terms of

character, gender, power politics, class politics and so on. Some of the articles referred to are “Validating Demons: Recasting Rāvaṇa as a Leader of the Oppressed in Mani Ratnam’s Film Version of the Rāmāyaṇa” by Genoveva Castro. This paper analyses Mani Ratnam’s portrayal of the *Ramayana* and explores how the film presents a reinterpretation of the epic and challenges the conventional idea of a clear distinction between the hero and the villain. It looks at how Ravaṇa’s portrayal in Indian literature over time is compared with his depiction in the movie, including the negative portrayal of him.

The paper “From Mythology to the Modern Age: Exploring the Role of Mythology and Literature in Mani Ratnam’s Cinematic Adaptations” analyses the practice of adapting globally acclaimed literary works into films, which remain popular for a certain period, coinciding with the film’s release and subsequent critical discussions. It looks at how incorporating literary references from various languages, particularly through songs and dialogues, serves to draw attention to specific literary elements and enhances the audience’s understanding and appreciation of the material as portrayed in visual form.

The paper “Gradual Shift in Treatment of the Character of “Ravan” of the Ramayana” by Chowdhury Omar Sharif examines how the portrayal of the character Ravan from the *Ramayana* has evolved over time. It specifically explores the influence of postmodernism in recontextualising Ravan within a framework where the distinction between hero and villain becomes blurred.

The paper “Examining Hegemony, Ideology, and Class in Mani Ratnam’s Raavanan (2010)” explores how Mani Ratnam challenges dominant ideologies, class divisions, and hegemonic structures within contemporary cinema and society through his film *Raavanan*. It also delves into broader questions regarding India’s sociocultural context.

The movie *Raavanan* has not been analysed intersectionally in the framework of historical materialism. This article offers a film analysis of Mani Ratnam’s film *Raavanan*, exploring its journey from being a myth to a form of resistance through the lenses of historical materialism and intersectionality.

Theoretical Framework: Historical Materialism

Historical materialism is a Marxist theory, proposed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. “Historical materialism provides an account of processes that govern the structure and direction of human history. The theory purports to explain epochal historical divisions-conceived as discrete economic forms or structures, traditionally designated “modes of production.”” (Levine 310). The theory asserts that human society and history are shaped by economic factors. According to Marx, social institutions and ideas evolve as a superstructure built upon an economic foundation. All aspects of human society, such as government and religion, stem from its economic activities. When applied to film studies, historical materialism offers insights into how films reflect and are influenced by the economic and material conditions of the societies in which they are produced. Under historical materialist

frameworks, the film is analysed in three major aspects, that is, the portrayal of the socio-economic context of contemporary India, the representation of class struggles, and the historical context of the film. The paper looks into the cinematic techniques, narratives, and visual aesthetics used in *Raavanan* to convey its socio-political messages and challenge dominant narratives through film analysis. Furthermore, by using an intersectional approach, the study explores how intersecting identities such as gender, caste, class, and ethnicity shape characters' experiences, relationships, and interactions within the film. By analysing these aspects, the movie highlights themes of resistance, agency, and identity.

Methodology: Film Analysis and Intersectionality

Through the film analysis method, *Raavanan* is analysed in terms of narrative elements, character interactions, visual symbolism, and dialogue. Both literature and film share common elements such as plots, characters, dialogue, settings, and symbolism. Just as the components of literature, a film can be subjected to analysis. "films convey meaning through various audiovisual elements, such as mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound" (James). The objective of film analysis is to investigate how these formal aspects enhance the overall significance of a film. A close analysis of *Raavanan* is done by paying attention to narrative structure, character development, symbolism, imagery, dialogue, and cinematography. The paper identifies specific moments in the film where mythological narratives are subverted or reinterpreted. This paper also uses intersectionality for a comprehensive analysis of the film. The term intersectionality was introduced by Professor Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. "The concept of "Intersectionality" refers to the interactivity of social identity structures such as race, class and gender in fostering life experiences, especially experiences of privilege and oppression." (Gopaldas 90). It depicts the interconnectedness and overlapping nature of individual characteristics such as race, class, gender, and others. "Intersectionality's insistence on examining the dynamics of difference and sameness has played a major role in facilitating consideration of gender, race, and other axes of power in a wide range of political discussions and academic disciplines..." (Cho 787). In contemporary social science, intersectionality is utilised in various contexts.

Historical materialism emphasises the importance of the economic base, including modes of production, in shaping social life. In film studies, this perspective can be applied to analyse how the capitalist mode of production influences the production and distribution of films. Mani Ratnam has used the dominant and commercial aspects of the film industry to convey a controversial subject that is prevalent in India and impacts the viewers. In one of his interviews, he has stated that our ancient heritage is a constant presence in his life, and it is a benefit belonging to a rich cultural background. He then states that addressing contemporary issues demands representation in mainstream media, and to reach a wide audience, films are the best way. His intention is simply to raise awareness, and as viewers, one can see the political aspects of the government and the police system being flawed and how the dominant group justifies it in *Raavanan*.

Representation of Power and State Violence

This movie highlights the ruthlessness of police officers and cases that are happening in Tamil Nadu and India. The atrocities in the name of justice are pointed out through the portrayal of Dev and his fellow policemen. Dev is the head police officer and is ruthless. He is the representation of Rama, but here in the film, he is the worst, heartless person. His ultimate notion is to capture Veera. So, he devastates Veera's step-sister Vennila's wedding. She is captured and beaten up to reveal Veera's hideout, and also sexually harassed by the police officers. Vennila, who is depicted as a strong woman at the beginning of the flashback scene, commits suicide due to all the barbaric actions of the police. Here, the ruling class, the one who is in power, holds the upper hand in controlling the social and personal lives of the minorities. The system, which has to protect its people, is not safeguarding and is being merciless. Gender dominance in society is also pointed out. Veera kidnaps Ragini, and his people kill some officers to take revenge for this cruel action. When Chakkarai, Veera's educated brother, visits Dev's camp to compromise and resolve the fight, he is tricked and killed by Dev. Veera's tribe questioning and hurting the police officers for their rights and the injustice done by Dev and his fellow police officers is a form of resistance that the film conveys by subverting the dominant notions and features of *Ramayana*. Veera is called Raavan by his tribe's people and is seen as a protective God. He fights against the injustice happening to his people. Though he is seen as a saviour figure, according to the law, he is an extremist, terrorist and anti-social person, while the actual destruction and brutality are caused by the dominant system. The existing power structures reflect and perpetuate dominant ideologies. The ideological messages of inequality and existing social hierarchies have been justified by the dominant class.

Class Struggle and Resistance

The centrality of class struggle in driving historical change is highlighted by historical materialism. The struggles of Veera's tribe against the exploitation of the government and the police officers depict tensions between different social classes. The villagers strive to advocate for their rights against an establishment that has neglected their progress by the government. By facing hardship in the harsh jungle, Ragini gains a deeper understanding of the challenging life in these isolated villages. Mani Ratnam portrays Sita as a woman awakening to an alternate social reality. The film depicts the dominant class, that is, the police officers' efforts to maintain power and control over society. Here, the police officers' lack of dedication to moral values is depicted. As a result, Ratnam's adaptation sheds light on the complex modern-day context where legal enforcement and criminal activities are closely intertwined. The film's reinterpretation of mythological morality has also drawn scholarly attention. Genoveva Castro argues that Mani Ratnam's portrayal "recasts Ravana as a leader of the oppressed," thereby challenging the conventional hero-villain dichotomy embedded in the *Ramayana* tradition (Castro). This reinterpretation strengthens the film's representation of class struggle and resistance against dominant structures.

Cinematic Techniques and Visual Symbolism

The lyrics, narratives, visual aesthetics, cinematography, and sound effects are designed to uncover underlying themes, ideologies, and power dynamics in the film. The cinematography of the movie takes the viewers to a completely different state with its breathtaking and incredible visuals and shots. Dramatic music throughout the movie during key moments and crucial scenes escalates the narrative. The beautiful, calm river with a lush green forest in the background before the abduction of Ragini intensifies the beauty of the character. The atmospheric change during crucial situations amplifies the seriousness of the scene. For instance, the scene when Ragini jumps into the river creates a mood which is depicted with a suspenseful overtone. The short monologue of Ragini while standing on top of wet black rocks, amidst the forest, with the camera zooming out and zooming in, elevates her mental state. After knowing the reason behind her abduction, Ragini stands in front of a magnificent broken statue, pleading to have a clear mind about good and bad people. Here, Veera comes and sits on the feet of the statue. This reflects the caste hierarchy that is prevalent in Indian society.

In the final fight scene and throughout the movie, Veera is dressed in black and Dev in white. The colour black, which is often seen as dark and white as pure, is ironically represented. The recurring flashback scene gives a clear picture of the incidents that have led to the present. The visuals of Veera in the title song and the final song portray a powerful image of him as Raavana and as a tribal leader. The fifth stanza of the title song 'Veera', which means, 'If you have seen my life, crossed my path, fought my battle, then you are both Raman and Raavanan' shows how Veera as a character blends the idea of good and bad. The final stanza from the song 'Kodu Poatta' that goes as 'the law has been yours yesterday, but from today it belongs to us' suggests how the tribe, though powerless in front of the judicial system, has taken an upper hand by kidnapping Ragini and controlling the situation in the forest and taking revenge on the police officers. Critics have also observed that while *Raavanan* excels visually, its narrative complexity received mixed responses. Vishal Menon notes that the film's visuals were "too beautiful," suggesting that its aesthetic brilliance sometimes overshadowed narrative coherence (Menon). Likely, several reviewers pointed out that Mani Ratnam's reinterpretation of mythology was ambitious but uneven in execution. These criticisms, however, do not undermine the film's significance as a political text that questions dominant power structures and presents resistance narratives through cinematic language.

Historical Context and Contemporary Relevance

Historical materialism situates cultural texts within their historical context. This film reflects the historical conditions of contemporary India and its social concerns. This film is directed at a time when the system is corrupted. By addressing those contemporary political issues and social movements, the film outsmarts and stands unique. Overall, historical materialism offers a valuable theoretical framework for

analysing the relationship between film and society. The complex interplay between cinema and society has been explored in this research paper.

Intersectionality in Raavanan

Different factors like history, film techniques, and social identity overlap in Mani Ratnam's movie *Raavanan*, the characters and stories go against the usual ideas of power and culture. They show resistance and strength, especially considering things like gender, caste, and class. The storyline also reflects what is happening in society today, showing how things like money and history affect people's lives. Thusly, this paper gives an interdisciplinary analysis of Mani Ratnam's film *Raavanan* and explores its journey from being a myth to a form of resistance. By integrating historical materialism, film analysis, and intersectionality, the paper offers a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of cinema that considers both the material conditions of production and the complex interplay of social inequality and power dynamics within cinematic texts.

Conclusion

Mani Ratnam's *Raavanan* emerges as a compelling cinematic text that reimagines mythological narratives through the lens of contemporary socio-political realities. By subverting the traditional Ramayana framework, the film challenges the binary opposition of good and evil and instead presents morally complex characters shaped by historical and material conditions, employing historical materialism, the film reveals how economic structures, power hierarchies, and institutional authority influence social relationships and individual actions. The marginalised tribal community, represented through Veera and his people, embodies resistance against dominant systems such as state power, law enforcement, and socio-political control. This reinterpretation shifts the focus from mythological morality to material realities and lived experiences. Besides, the intersectional approach enhances the analysis by examining how multiple identities, including gender, class, caste, and ethnicity, shape the experiences of characters within the film. Ragini's transformation from an outsider to a witness of marginalised suffering reflects the emergence of alternative perspectives that challenge dominant narratives. Similarly, the portrayal of Vennila highlights the gendered violence embedded within systems of authority, revealing how oppression operates across multiple axes of identity. These intersecting dimensions contribute to a deeper understanding of resistance, agency, and identity formation within the film. Mani Ratnam's use of cinematic techniques such as visual symbolism, colour contrasts, sound design, and narrative structure reinforces the film's thematic concerns. The forest landscapes, contrasting costumes, and symbolic imagery collectively construct a visual language that questions conventional morality and power structures. Through these cinematic elements, *Raavanan* transcends mere adaptation and becomes a political and cultural commentary on contemporary India. Thus, by integrating historical materialism, film analysis, and intersectionality, this study demonstrates how *Raavanan* transforms from a mythological retelling into a narrative of resistance. The film not only reflects

existing social inequalities but also critiques dominant ideologies and highlights the voices of marginalised communities. *Raavanan* stands as a significant example of how cinema can function as a site of resistance, offering alternative interpretations of history, power, and identity while engaging audiences in critical reflection on contemporary social realities.

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