



SUBALTERN MASS CINEMA IN KABALI: FROM PLANTATION LABOUR TO DIASPORIC STRUGGLE IN COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENTS

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This article reads Pa. Ranjith's *Kabali* (2016), principally through its Hindi-dubbed version and with reference to the Tamil original and English subtitles, as an experiment in subaltern mass cinema. The film connects the colonial recruitment of Tamil plantation labour in Malaya with the unequal competitive environments inhabited by later generations of Malaysian Tamils. Its protagonist's return from imprisonment brings together public history and private catastrophe: the murder of a political mentor, betrayal within the community, separation from his pregnant wife, loss of his daughter, and the criminal capture of vulnerable youth. Using narrative-sequential close reading, historical contextualisation, representation theory, diaspora studies, subaltern criticism, and Ambedkarite accounts of dignity and education, the article examines how costume, bodily bearing, collective memory, family reunion, schooling, and physical resistance acquire political significance. It argues that *Kabali* neither offers a documentary history of Malaysia nor a simple celebration of gangster sovereignty. Rather, it dramatises the predicament of a minority community seeking security, mobility, and recognition where lawful institutions appear distant or insufficient. Physical force becomes narratively intelligible as defence against organised violence, but it remains ethically unstable when it turns into retaliatory execution. The Free Life Foundation, not revenge, finally provides the film's most defensible model of emancipation: education, rehabilitation, historical understanding, and organised social care. The film's achievement lies in making plantation afterlives and caste-coded humiliation visible within popular cinema; its limitation lies in concentrating collective aspiration in a paternal, armed hero.

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Introduction

Pa. Ranjith's *Kabali* (2016) invites two opposed, and equally inadequate, descriptions. It can be reduced to a Rajinikanth action film in which an ageing don leaves prison, recovers his family, and destroys his enemies; or it can be elevated into an uncomplicated manifesto of subaltern liberation. The first reading misses the film's historical intelligence, while the second overlooks its dependence on charismatic paternalism and spectacular violence. A more adequate account must hold together the movie's mass-cinematic pleasures and its inquiry into plantation history, diaspora, caste-coded humiliation, family loss, education, community leadership, and the limits of institutional protection.

The phrase subaltern mass cinema is used here to describe popular cinema that transfers historical memory, interpretive authority, visual dignity, and political speech to subjects conventionally confined to the margins. The phrase does not imply that every represented character is sociologically subaltern or that a globally famous actor can simply stand outside cultural power. It identifies, instead, a struggle conducted within commercial form. Ranjith uses the recognisable grammar of the star vehicle—entrance, costume, slogan, combat, music, and moral confrontation—to challenge an older screen grammar in which the dark, poor, caste-marked man appears as servant, henchman, comic body, or anonymous victim. Rajinikanth's prominence matters, but this article treats his performance as one instrument of the narrative rather than making "superstardom" its governing subject.

The film locates its conflict among Malaysian Tamils whose modern history is tied to British Malaya's plantation economy. Large numbers of Indians were recruited through indenture, assisted migration, and the kangani system; labour brokers linked impoverished southern Indian districts to plantations while debt, employer power, and estate isolation narrowed workers' freedom (Kaur, 2012). The population was never caste-homogeneous. Caste structured recruitment, supervision, intimacy, and

status even as plantation labour placed migrants within new racial and class hierarchies (Belle, 2016; Ramasamy, 1994). The descendants of estate labourers later faced the contraction and redevelopment of plantations, insecure residence, limited mobility, and struggles for recognition (Willford, 2014). *Kabali* compresses this complex history, yet its insistence that present vulnerability has a history is central to its politics.

This article argues that *Kabali* converts plantation afterlives into a chronological drama of diasporic competition. “Competition” here does not mean a neutral contest among equal market actors. It includes unequal struggles for employment, education, cultural recognition, urban security, community leadership, and legitimate institutional presence. Organised drugs, trafficking, and gang power form one part of that environment, but they do not define the paper. The film’s deeper question is whether a historically disadvantaged community can establish itself without reproducing the coercive power it opposes. *Kabali*’s force is sometimes defensive and intelligible; at other times it becomes punitive and usurps the law. The narrative therefore presses governance into the argument even when the state remains visually peripheral. If equal citizenship is to be meaningful, minority security cannot depend indefinitely upon a benevolent armed leader.

Methodology and Theoretical Orientation

The study uses qualitative, narrative-sequential close reading. The Hindi-dubbed version is the primary viewing text because the present inquiry addresses the film’s pan-Indian, Hindi-language accessibility. The Tamil original and a reliable English-subtitled edition serve as supporting texts where dubbing may flatten culturally specific or political meanings.

The method proceeds from event to form, context, theory, and finding. It first asks what happens and how the scene is constructed; it then places the scene beside relevant plantation or diasporic history; only then does it mobilise theory. Hall’s (1990, 1997) account of representation treats identity as produced through history and cultural form rather than passively reflected. Brah’s (1996) “diaspora space” helps analyse Malaysia not as a temporary station outside an authentic Indian home but as the lived arena in which different histories meet. Cohen (2008), Clifford (1994), and Safran (1991) clarify the selective memory, settlement, homeland narratives, and affiliations characteristic of diasporic formations.

Subaltern criticism supplies a necessary caution. Guha (1982) identifies the political initiatives of subordinated groups obscured by elite historiography, while Spivak (1988) warns against assuming that intellectuals can transparently recover a single subaltern voice. *Kabali* is conspicuously able to speak; indeed, he commands attention. The critical question is therefore not simply whether the subaltern can speak, but what cinematic apparatus makes his authoritative speech possible, whose voices it gathers, and whose it overshadows.

Ambedkar provides the paper’s most productive normative vocabulary. His critique of graded inequality and his insistence that political democracy requires social democracy join dignity to education, organisation, minority security, and equal citizenship (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, 1947/2014, 1949/2014). The film’s coat dialogue, its school, and its refusal of submissive bodily codes invite an Ambedkarite reading. That reading must nevertheless avoid turning every blue object or formal suit into conclusive iconographic proof. Rajan’s (2017) analysis of clothing in Ranjith’s films supports a semiotics of fabric, but meaning emerges from costume, dialogue, framing, and the director’s broader anti-caste practice together.

Finally, Dyer’s (1998) star theory helps explain how an already familiar public image can be revised, while Butler’s (2004) account of vulnerability illuminates the protagonist’s dependence on kinship and mourning. Work on South Indian popular cinema clarifies how mass form turns political performance into public affect (Srinivas, 2013; Velayutham, 2008), while Rege’s (2006) attention to gendered Dalit testimony guards against allowing the male leader’s grief to absorb women’s histories. These frameworks remain subordinate to the chronological movement of the film. The study does not treat *Kabali* as documentary evidence, does not collapse race into caste, and does not infer the conduct of Malaysian institutions solely from a fictional narrative.

Plantation Labour and the Historical Ground of the Story

The film’s retrospective account of Tamil migration refuses an origin in crime. It locates the community within labour. British commercial expansion drew workers from southern India to Malaya’s coffee and, increasingly, rubber estates. Under the kangani system, an overseer recruited workers through village and kinship networks, advanced passage costs, and mediated relations between labourers and management (Kaur, 2012). Such networks could enable migration while also producing debt and dependence. Colonial plantations further naturalised inequality through racial and class classifications that represented coercible labour as culturally suited to hardship (Belle, 2016).

This background matters because the film’s Kuala Lumpur is not simply a glamorous foreign setting. The city contains the afterlife of the estate. Willford (2014) shows how plantation contraction and redevelopment could leave long-settled Tamil communities confronting eviction, insecure claims to place, and a legal order experienced as distant or unequal. The movement from estate to town did not automatically produce occupational mobility. *Kabali* translates that historical discontinuity into a generational problem: young people inherit neither the stable community imagined around the plantation nor assured access to the opportunities of metropolitan Malaysia.

Caste travels through this history but changes within it. It would be inaccurate to describe Malaysian Tamil society as a copy of Tamil Nadu or to treat every economic disadvantage as caste discrimination. Yet it would be equally misleading to imagine that crossing the sea abolished inherited social distinctions. Diasporic communities can preserve caste associations, marriage

boundaries, and status codes even while colonial racial ordering and class location transform them (Belle, 2016; Gorringer et al., 2017). Ranjith himself has remarked that Indians carry caste abroad and that oppressed-community dress matters because representation determines perception. The film encodes caste less through named jatis than through bodies, names, occupations, colour, clothing, and the repudiation of deference.

The historical prologue consequently performs an ethical function. It asks the spectator not to interpret poverty, addiction, or gang recruitment as proof of communal deficiency. Structural explanation does not remove individual responsibility, but it changes the field in which responsibility is judged. The community's later problems arise within a history of extracted labour and restricted opportunity. This is the paper's first crucial submission: *Kabali* makes collective memory a condition of fair moral judgement.

Release, Return, and the Recovery of Political Time

Kabali's release after twenty-five years makes personal time and community time collide. Prison has taken from him his middle age, his wife, his expected child, his organisation, and his ability to narrate what happened. Kuala Lumpur has changed, rival power has consolidated, and younger people know fragments rather than the whole history. His return is therefore not merely the arrival of a feared fighter. It is the return of a suppressed account of the past.

The prison and police scenes also introduce the problem of governance. The state appears first as the power that confined *Kabali* after a false accusation and then as the authority that warns him about future conduct. The film does not offer enough evidence to condemn an entire legal system, but it clearly establishes a deficit of trust. Law has punished the protagonist without resolving the organised violence that produced the massacre. This narrative asymmetry helps explain why *Kabali*'s followers treat personal authority as more effective than formal protection. It does not, however, prove personal sovereignty legitimate.

The early confrontations stage a battle over appearance and address. *Kabali* evokes a familiar cinematic stereotype: the dark, moustached man in a lungi who lowers his head when summoned by a villain. In the English-subtitled edition, his challenge is rendered, "Do you think I'm that *Kabali*?" (Ranjith, 2016, approximately 00:18). The Hindi dub conveys the same refusal of the subservient figure. The sentence matters because it is metacinematic. "*Kabali*" has functioned as the sort of name assigned to an expendable lower-class body; Ranjith makes it the name before which others must reorganise their gaze.

This reversal is not liberation by itself. The protagonist's capacity to refuse humiliation depends upon followers, reputation, and force. Yet representation is politically consequential. Hall (1997) reminds us that stereotypes do not merely misdescribe; they organise difference and distribute visibility. *Kabali*'s upright posture, controlled pace, dark complexion, and refusal to bow replace the visual syntax of servility with one of self-possession. The reversal supplies a pleasure especially available to viewers who recognise the older stereotype.

The Coat, Ambedkar, and the Politics of Dignity

The flashback conversation between *Kabali* and Kumudhavalli gives costume an explicit politics. She teases him about his expense on suits; he replies that dress is also a sign of protest. The English subtitles formulate the comparison: "If Gandhi went shirtless and Ambedkar wore a coat..." (Ranjith, 2016, approximately 01:01). The Hindi dub preserves the opposition between Gandhi's reduced clothing and Ambedkar's formal dress, his coat.

The point is not that one leader is morally superior because he owns a coat. Clothing answers different histories. Gandhi's simplified dress marked identification with impoverished colonial subjects; Ambedkar's suit contested a social order that demanded visible deference from the "untouchable." In *Kabali*'s explanation, the suit is neither imitation of an upper caste nor empty luxury. It claims entry into public modernity without asking permission. Rajan (2017) persuasively describes clothing in Ranjith's films as a representational conflict capable of altering the social image of Dalit identity.

The scene's domestic setting prevents the symbol from becoming a diagram. Kumudhavalli's amused resistance makes *Kabali* explain himself; their intimacy turns ideology into lived conversation. His dignity is relational, not solitary. The coat matters because someone who knows the man beneath it asks why it matters. This personal texture is quite crucial in an Ambedkarite analysis.

Ambedkar's relevance extends beyond dress. His democratic thought rejects the notion that a formal vote can compensate for entrenched social inequality. Democracy requires habits of liberty, equality, and fraternity in social life (Ambedkar, 1949/2014). *Kabali*'s insistence on appearing as an equal, his community organisation, and the later emphasis on education all belong to this larger claim. Yet Ambedkar also grounds change in constitutional morality and institutional transformation. *Kabali*'s lethal punishments therefore cannot simply be called or accepted as Ambedkarite resistance. The film's dignity politics and its revenge politics must be analytically separated.

Tamilnesan, Leadership, and Internal Diasporic Conflict

The flashback locates *Kabali* within Tamilnesan's movement for workers' rights. Tamilnesan opposes exploitation and refuses illegal commerce, but his murder opens a struggle over succession. Veera manipulates Tamilmaaran's sense of hereditary entitlement: why should *Kabali* rather than Tamilnesan's son lead? This conflict complicates any simple minority-versus-majority model. Diasporic communities contain class ambitions, rival moral economies, generational tensions, and contests over authority.

Kabali's rise is presented as earned through commitment rather than inherited through blood. In that respect the film favours political capacity over genealogy. But the organisation still depends on a central male protector. Its democratic procedures are unclear, and the community's endorsement is dramatised more than institutionally explained. Guha's (1982) recovery of subaltern initiative should not be confused with approval of every leader who claims to embody "the people." Ranjith allows Kabali's authority to appear necessary while leaving its accountability uncertain.

The dispute also reveals what "competitive environment" means in the paper. Malaysian Tamils must compete for wages, status, education, and recognition within a stratified society, but competition also operates internally. Veera and Tony Lee pursue profitable domination; Tamilnesan seeks rights without illegal trade; Kabali combines protective politics with force. These are competing programmes of community survival as much as competing personalities.

Betrayal, the Temple Massacre, and Intergenerational Injury

The deceptive temple invitation brings public rivalry into intimate and sacred space. Kabali attends with the pregnant Kumudhavalli in the expectation of reconciliation. The ambush wounds him, apparently kills her, destroys the anticipated family, and produces the killing of Tamilmaaran before his young son, Kumaran. A false accusation then removes Kabali for twenty-five years. The sequence refuses a clean division between innocent and guilty. Kabali is betrayed and nearly murdered, but the retaliatory killing makes him the origin of another child's trauma.

Kumaran's later attempt on Kabali's life demonstrates how violence travels through incomplete stories. He has inherited the visible fact of his father's death without the preceding history of conspiracy. At the Free Life Foundation, Kabali's narration changes his judgement. The scene does not suggest that historical context makes Tamilmaaran's killing harmless. It demonstrates that moral knowledge requires more than an isolated image. Kumaran's movement from assassin to teacher is one of the film's strongest arguments for narration, education, and rehabilitation.

The temple sequence also establishes personal tragedy as more than sentimental motivation. Kabali loses the persons through whom political life had become domestic continuity: mentor, spouse, and child. Butler (2004) argues that grief reveals the relational constitution of the self; one is altered by the loss of those through whom one exists. Rajinikanth's later restraint, pauses, and emotional collapse register this relational wound more persuasively than the combat scenes. The protagonist's public hardness is built around an uncompleted act of mourning.

Diasporic Identity and Unequal Competition

Kabali does not portray India as the permanent home from which authentic Tamils have temporarily departed. Malaysia is the community's lived political world. India enters as ancestral geography and, later, as the place where Kumudhavalli survives. Brah's (1996) distinction between a desire for a homeland and a desire to return is valuable here. Kabali's journey to Puducherry recovers a person, not a nationalist destination; after reunion, the family returns to Kuala Lumpur because the unresolved obligations of home remain there.

The diaspora's competitive environment is neither wholly closed nor fairly open. The film foregrounds Tamil vulnerability, but it should not be converted into a factual claim that every Malaysian Tamil shares the same deprivation. Malaysian Indian responses to *Kabali* were divided, and some viewers objected to the film's simplified ethnic alignments. That disagreement is important: representation selects, intensifies, and organises social reality. The film speaks most directly for a plantation-descended underclass, not for an internally uniform diaspora.

Competition occurs across several registers. Economically, characters seek livelihoods and access to urban opportunity. Socially, the community contests stigma and the assumption that dark, poor Tamil bodies belong below authority. Culturally, Tamil language and memory compete against erasure. Politically, Kabali's organisation competes with actors who recruit the same vulnerable youth into drugs and violence. Institutionally, the Free Life Foundation competes with the street by offering education, history, and belonging.

The antagonist's Chinese identity requires careful handling. Tony Lee should not be treated as a representative of Malaysian Chinese society, and the conflict should not be generalised into a racial war. The film's compression risks precisely that inference. A rigorous paper must distinguish the ethnicity of a villain from a sociological explanation of communal relations. Diasporic dignity cannot ethically be secured by transferring stereotype or collective blame to another minority.

The Free Life Foundation and Ambedkarite Social Reconstruction

The Free Life Foundation is the film's most important political institution. It works with young people vulnerable to addiction, recruitment, and retaliatory violence. At its function, Kabali tells the story that changes Kumaran's conduct. The school therefore joins historical understanding to practical rehabilitation. Its pedagogy is not nostalgic: it explains how the past structures present choices while insisting that inherited injury need not command the future.

The sequence accords with the Ambedkarite triad commonly expressed as educate, agitate, organise. Education interrupts manipulation; historical consciousness converts private shame into structural understanding; organisation builds durable capacity. Unlike the instant clarity of cinematic revenge, schooling works slowly and collectively. It disperses agency among teachers and students. It is significant that Kumaran, once directed by inherited vengeance, becomes a teacher. His transformation is a stronger victory than an enemy's death.

The Foundation also reframes governance. Community institutions can supplement public provision, create trust, and respond to local knowledge, but they cannot substitute for the state's responsibility to protect life, enforce law impartially, and expand opportunity. The destruction of the school by Tony's organisation is thus more serious than an attack on Kabali's property. It is an assault on the community's nonviolent future. The film makes the assault the immediate context for Kabali's final campaign, thereby rendering his anger intelligible. Yet the same event strengthens the case for institutional protection rather than permanent vigilantism.

Yogi, Kumudhavalli, and the Repair of Diasporic Kinship

The movement through Thailand and Puducherry shifts the narrative from public leadership to dispersed family. Yogi first appears within the economy of hired violence and is then revealed as Kabali's daughter. The revelation condenses the consequences of the temple attack: a child separated by political violence has survived across borders and learned force as a means of agency. She refuses the passive-daughter role, protects her father, and participates in the return. Yet her story remains organised by the recovery of paternal identity; the film gives limited attention to her life before recognition.

Kumudhavalli's survival carries a different form of resistance. Her endurance preserves the possibility that Kabali's earlier life was not entirely annihilated. The reunion scene is central because it suspends the dominant grammar of action. Kabali searches hesitantly, sees her, and loses the composure that clothes and followers ordinarily sustain. Rajinikanth's performance serves the story through stillness, disbelief, tears, and bodily dependence. The hero who commands public space must be received and recognised in private space.

Love here is neither an ornamental subplot nor a reward following victory. It is an archive. Kumudhavalli remembers the young organiser, the meaning of his clothes, and the family interrupted before birth. The recovered couple joins political memory with ordinary companionship. Nevertheless, feminist scrutiny remains necessary. Her years of displacement receive far less narrative elaboration than his grief, and her suffering largely repairs his identity. Yogi acts, but her violence is ultimately aligned with the father. The film enlarges women's importance without fully redistributing narrative authority.

Organised Violence, Physical Force, and Ethical Limits

Gang 43's activities—drugs, laundering, prostitution, intimidation, recruitment, and territorial violence—matter because they prey upon vulnerability. They are not certainly the master metaphor in this discussion of the film - *Kabali*. The film's central opposition is better described as one between alternative modes of organising insecure lives: exploitation through fear and dependency; paternal protection through armed authority; and social reconstruction through education and solidarity.

Kabali's force must be judged scene by scene. During immediate attacks on himself, Yogi, and Kumudhavalli, physical defence is narratively and ethically distinguishable from revenge. The defence of another person against imminent lethal danger can be necessary and proportionate. The killing of an already controlled adversary, by contrast, resembles punitive execution. The final destruction of Tony Lee's organisation combines prevention, retaliation, and sovereign display so completely that the categories cannot be cleanly separated.

Fanon (1963) helps explain why anticolonial and subaltern narratives invest violence with the recovery of agency, but his account should not be converted into a universal licence. Physical resistance may break the image of the submissive victim while simultaneously reproducing domination. *Kabali* understands the emotional truth of counter-force: a community repeatedly attacked cannot survive through moral appeal alone. Yet its spectacular killings offer little institutional future. The question is not whether the oppressed have a duty to remain passive; it is whether emergency defence becomes a permanent political form.

The film's distinction between Kabali and Tony also remains incomplete. Tony profits explicitly from destructive activity, while Kabali supports a school and condemns drugs; nevertheless, the economic basis and accountability of Kabali's organisation are not clearly described. This ambiguity is productive if acknowledged. It prevents the critic from equating moral intention with lawful authority.

Host-Country Governance and the Rule of Law

The state in *Kabali* is powerful enough to imprison but insufficiently present to prevent the networks that attack the school and family. The final suggestion that police may have directed Tiger toward Kabali deepens the uncertainty. The ending cuts to black after the sound of a gunshot, withholding narrative closure. Kabali's fate remains uncertain, as does the political meaning of the shot: it may suggest continuing revenge, institutional complicity, or the vulnerability of a movement centred upon one powerful leader.

It would be methodologically irresponsible to infer the actual quality of Malaysian governance from this narrative alone. The film constructs an experience of institutional distance; historical or policy claims require independent evidence. Willford's (2014) study nevertheless shows why plantation-descended communities might experience development and law through dispossession rather than equal recognition. The film's fictional distrust therefore has a relevant historical horizon without becoming a comprehensive verdict on Malaysia.

A normative reading should affirm both minority security and the rule of law. Government must prevent trafficking and gang recruitment, protect schools and witnesses, police without ethnic profiling, provide credible complaint mechanisms, and widen educational and employment access. Communities require meaningful representation in the institutions that govern them. At the

same time, lawful force must remain proportionate and accountable. A heroic protector may be emotionally satisfying precisely where institutions fail, but dependence on him leaves rights contingent upon personal survival.

The host country's responsibility is not assimilation at the cost of Tamil memory. Equal citizenship should allow cultural continuity, public dignity, and economic participation together. Nor should state recognition freeze the diaspora into a single victim identity. The objective is institutional equality capable of making private armies unnecessary.

The Final Return and the Unfinished Politics of Resistance

After defeating Tony, Kabali returns to a function associated with the Foundation. The setting appears to promise movement from combat back to education. Tiger's approach, the prior police connection, the black screen, and the gunshot rupture that promise. The ending can be read as state elimination, the return of uncontrolled youth violence, or the inevitable aftershock of gangster sovereignty. Its refusal to identify the shooter's political meaning is not merely suspense; it is a judgement on the fragility of hero-centred change.

If Kabali dies, the decisive question is whether the institution can continue without him. The film does not answer. That omission exposes the contradiction of subaltern mass cinema. Commercial form needs the concentrated charisma of a hero; democratic emancipation requires agency that survives its leaders. The Foundation points toward that dispersed agency, while the final shot returns attention to the vulnerable body of one man.

The ending also completes the personal-tragedy structure. Kabali has recovered wife and daughter but cannot return to the years stolen from them. Revenge removes enemies without restoring time. Kumaran's change, the reunited family, and the students constitute partial repair; the gunshot declares that repair insecure. The film's politics is consequently tragic rather than triumphalist.

Discussion

Five connected findings emerge. First, *Kabali* uses plantation history as a counter-history of the present. It refuses explanations of marginality that begin with individual failure. Labour recruitment, caste-marked migration, racialised work, estate isolation, and post-plantation displacement form the background against which later competition must be judged. The film simplifies this history, but it makes historical explanation indispensable.

Second, caste operates through aesthetic and ethical codes more than explicit caste nomenclature. The stereotyped name, dark body, suit, posture, Ambedkar reference, educational institution, and refusal of deference construct an anti-caste field of meaning. This is why the film can address Malaysian Tamil experience without pretending that Malaysian racial-class formations are identical to Indian caste society.

Third, diaspora is represented as lived belonging rather than endless exile. Kabali's journey to India repairs kinship, but Malaysia remains the arena of responsibility. The community seeks not withdrawal from competition but fair capacity within it: education, livelihood, security, cultural recognition, and institutional voice. Its identity is historical and relational, not pure or homogeneous.

Fourth, personal tragedy supplies the ethical depth of public struggle. Kabali's politics cannot be separated from the loss of Tamilnesan, the attack on Kumudhavalli, imprisonment, the disappearance of Yogi, and the guilt transmitted to Kumaran. These injuries humanise resistance while also explaining its danger: grief can generate care, but it can also harden into retaliatory sovereignty.

Fifth, physical force has a limited place in the film's moral world. Defence against immediate violence is not equivalent to domination, and a criticism that demands passive victimhood would reproduce the hierarchy the film contests. Yet the narrative cannot establish killing as a stable basis for justice. Its most defensible politics resides in the Foundation, Kumaran's rehabilitation, collective memory, and the restored family. Education turns injury into understanding; organisation turns isolated vulnerability into capacity; accountable governance turns protection from a favour into a right.

Conclusion

Kabali is best understood as subaltern mass cinema because it makes a plantation-descended, caste-coded, dark-skinned Tamil subject the interpreter rather than merely the object of history. Pa. Ranjith uses Rajinikanth's performance effectively but does not need to be discussed only through the scale of stardom. The ageing body, formal coat, controlled speech, grief, marital tenderness, and capacity for force together embody the contradictions of diasporic leadership.

The narrative's progression—from plantation memory to political organisation, betrayal, imprisonment, family dispersal, return, education, reunion, counter-violence, and the unresolved gunshot—shows that dignity is never merely symbolic. It requires safety, material opportunity, historical recognition, and institutions. Ambedkarite self-respect clarifies the politics of dress and education, but constitutional morality also exposes the inadequacy of private execution. The film's physical resistance is understandable where organised violence and weak protection converge; it becomes dangerous when necessity expands into unaccountable sovereignty.

The film finally offers two futures. One is the recurrent economy of injury: humiliation, gang recruitment, revenge, and another gunshot. The other is slower and less spectacular: education, rehabilitation, family repair, community organisation, and responsive government. *Kabali* cannot fully relinquish the first because it remains a mass action film. Its lasting political value

lies in making the second visible—and in compelling viewers to ask what social and governmental arrangements would allow diasporic dignity to survive without an armed saviour.

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