

VOICE FROM VOID: SUBALTERN IDENTITY, PSYCHO-CULTURAL SENSIBILITY AND CASTE PARLANCE IN FILM KANTARA

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ABSTRACT

The 2022 Kannada-language film *Kantara*, serves as a compelling exploration of subaltern psychocultural sensibilities within the context of coastal Karnataka's socio-cultural landscape. This article analyzes how *Kantara* engages with the subaltern through its portrayal of the Bhuta Kola ritual, caste dynamics, and the tension between tradition and modernity. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern and Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, the study examines the film's representation of marginalized communities, particularly the forest-dwelling tribes and lower-caste groups, and their psychocultural expressions. The narrative's rootedness in local folklore, coupled with its depiction of land rights and spiritual practices, highlights the agency and resistance of subaltern voices against dominant structures. By weaving together psychoanalytic and postcolonial frameworks, this article uncovers how *Kantara* negotiates identity, power, and cultural memory, offering a nuanced portrayal of subalternity. The film's critical and commercial success underscores its relevance in contemporary Indian cinema, where subaltern narratives are increasingly gaining visibility. This analysis contributes to broader discussions on caste, indigeneity, and cultural representation in Indian popular cinema, emphasizing the psychocultural dimensions of subaltern resilience and spirituality.

Keywords: Subaltern, Psychocultural Sensibilities, *Kantara*, Bhuta Kola, Caste, Indigeneity, Postcolonialism, Indian Cinema, Cultural Hegemony, Folklore, Psycho-Cultural Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian cinema has historically grappled with representing marginalized voices, often filtered through an upper-caste or urban lens. The Kannada film *Kantara* (2022), directed by and starring Rishab Shetty, marks a significant departure by centering the subaltern—those marginalized by caste, class, and colonial legacies—in a narrative that is both culturally specific and universally resonant. Set in the coastal village of Keradi, Karnataka, *Kantara* explores the psychocultural sensibilities of subaltern communities through the lens of the Bhuta Kola ritual, a spiritual practice tied to local deities and ancestral worship. This article examines how the film articulates subaltern agency, resistance, and identity, drawing on theoretical frameworks from postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies.

The term “subaltern,” popularized by Antonio Gramsci and later expanded by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, refers to groups excluded from hegemonic power structures, often rendered voiceless in dominant discourses. Spivak's seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” questions whether subaltern voices can be authentically represented without mediation by elite frameworks. In *Kantara*, the subaltern is embodied by the tribal and lower-caste characters whose lives are intertwined with the forest, folklore, and spiritual practices. The film's psychocultural sensibilities—defined as

the interplay of psychological experiences and cultural expressions—emerge through its depiction of community rituals, caste conflicts, and the struggle for land rights.

This article argues that Kantara not only amplifies subaltern voices but also complicates their representation by navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity, spirituality and rationality, and individual agency and collective identity. By analyzing key themes, characters, and cinematic techniques, the study highlights how the film contributes to the evolving discourse on subalternity in Indian cinema.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. SUBALTERNITY AND POSTCOLONIALISM

The subaltern, as conceptualized by Gramsci, denotes groups outside the hegemonic power structures, such as peasants, workers, and indigenous communities. Spivak extends this to critique the silencing of subaltern voices, particularly those of women and colonized subjects, within Western and elite discourses. In the Indian context, subalternity is deeply tied to caste, class, and colonial histories, with Dalits, Adivasis, and lower-caste groups often excluded from mainstream narratives.

Kantara engages with subalternity by foregrounding the lives of forest-dwelling tribes and lower-caste villagers, whose cultural practices, like Bhuta Kola, are rooted in pre-colonial traditions. The film's setting in coastal Karnataka, a region with a complex history of caste and land struggles, provides a fertile ground for exploring these dynamics. Postcolonial theory, particularly Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism," helps analyze how the film constructs a collective subaltern identity to resist dominant structures while acknowledging internal complexities.

2.2. PSYCHOCULTURAL SENSIBILITIES

Psychocultural sensibilities refer to the ways in which psychological experiences—such as fear, devotion, or resistance—are shaped by cultural contexts. In Kantara, these sensibilities are evident in the characters' emotional responses to Bhuta Kola, caste oppression, and land disputes. Psychoanalytic theory, particularly Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, illuminates the film's use of archetypes like the forest, the deity, and the hero to evoke shared cultural memories. Additionally, Frantz Fanon's work on the psychological impacts of colonialism informs the analysis of subaltern resistance against external domination.

2.3. CULTURAL HEGEMONY

Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony explains how dominant groups maintain power through cultural institutions and narratives. In Kantara, the upper-caste landlord and the state apparatus represent hegemonic forces that marginalize subaltern communities. The film's portrayal of Bhuta Kola as a site of resistance challenges this hegemony, asserting the validity of subaltern cultural practices.

Kantara (transl. Mystical Forest) is set in the fictional village of Dakshina Kannada, where the protagonist, Shiva (Rishab Shetty), is a Kambala champion and a descendant of a Bhuta Kola performer. The narrative spans two timelines: a historical pact between a king and the village deity, and the present-day conflict over forest land. Shiva's rivalry with Murali, a forest officer, and his confrontation with the landlord Devendra expose caste and class tensions. The film culminates in a climactic Bhuta Kola performance, where Shiva's transformation underscores the power of subaltern spirituality. The film's critical acclaim stems from its authentic portrayal of coastal Karnataka's culture, its performances, and its seamless blend of folklore and social commentary.

3. SUBALTERN VOICES IN KANTARA

3.1. BHUTA KOLA AS CULTURAL RESISTANCE

Bhuta Kola, a ritualistic performance involving spirit worship, is central to Kantara's subaltern narrative. Performed by lower-caste or tribal practitioners, it represents a psychocultural space where marginalized communities assert their identity. The film's depiction of Bhuta Kola, with its vibrant costumes, rhythmic music, and trance-like states, evokes a collective unconscious that binds the community to its ancestral past. Central to the narrative is the ritual of Bhoota Kola, a religious performance unique to Tulu Nadu, wherein performers—believed to be possessed by guardian spirits—

mediate disputes and protect the community. These performances are not theatrical spectacles for outsiders but sacred acts of communion. Bhoota Kola in Kantara serves both as a literal performance and as a metaphor for subaltern knowledge systems—oral, embodied, and non-textual.

Whereas mainstream cinema often appropriates folk traditions for aesthetic effect, Kantara remains deeply faithful to the internal logic of the ritual, allowing it to dictate the film's narrative progression. The spirits in Kantara are not metaphors for justice—they are justice, enacted through spiritual presence rather than legal abstraction. This challenges the authority of the modern state, which views land rights, spiritual claims, and justice through bureaucratic logics. The conflict between Shiva's community and the forest department epitomizes the clash between these divergent epistemologies. By giving cinematic form to Bhoota Kola, Shetty opens a narrative space where the subaltern "speaks" through rhythm, costume, trance, and fire, articulating grievances and desires otherwise excluded from official discourse.

Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is relevant here. While Bhuta Kola allows subaltern voices to emerge through ritual, their representation is mediated by the cinematic gaze. Shetty, an upper-caste director, navigates this tension by grounding the ritual in ethnographic detail, yet the film risks romanticizing subaltern spirituality. The climactic sequence, where Shiva channels the deity, transcends this limitation, portraying subaltern agency as both spiritual and political.

4. GENDER, MARGINALITY, AND SILENCE

Though Kantara primarily foregrounds male protagonists and rituals, it also presents significant, if understated, female perspectives. Leela, a forest officer and Shiva's love interest, operates at the intersection of modern authority and indigenous sympathy. Her character symbolizes the tensions women face in negotiating institutional roles while being embedded in traditional communities.

However, women in Kantara largely remain peripheral to ritual authority—a reflection of the patriarchal structures within both modern and traditional systems. This silence is not necessarily erasure; it reflects a broader critique of how both state and subaltern cultures struggle to fully include women's voices. Yet, their presence—through mourning, caregiving, and silent witnessing—invokes another register of psychocultural resistance: endurance, empathy, and generational continuity.

5. THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Kantara's authenticity stems from its rootedness. Shetty's personal familiarity with Tulu culture informs the film's aesthetics, language, and dramaturgy. Unlike Bollywood's homogenizing tendencies, Kantara preserves linguistic plurality, ritual specificity, and regional ethos. In doing so, it resists both pan-Indian nationalism and cosmopolitan liberalism, asserting the value of localized storytelling as a vehicle of resistance.

This regionalism, however, should not be mistaken for parochialism. Rather, it affirms Bhabha's idea of "vernacular cosmopolitanism"—a rooted openness that allows for cross-cultural solidarity without erasing difference (Bhabha 198). The film becomes a site where subaltern rituals are not romanticized but rendered intelligible through their own frames of meaning.

6. CASTE AND CLASS DYNAMICS

Kantara subtly critiques caste hierarchies through its character dynamics. Shiva, a lower-caste villager, clashes with the upper-caste landlord Devendra, whose control over the village mirrors historical feudal structures. The film's portrayal of Dalit and tribal characters, though secondary, highlights their marginalization within the village's social fabric. For instance, the character of Guruva, a Bhuta Kola performer, embodies the subaltern's spiritual authority, yet his death underscores the vulnerability of marginalized groups.

Drawing on Cinema and Caste (Economic and Political Weekly), the article notes that Indian cinema often reinforces upper-caste narratives. Kantara challenges this by centering lower-caste characters, but its focus on Shiva's individual heroism risks overshadowing collective subaltern struggles.

6.1. LAND RIGHTS AND INDIGENEITY

The film's central conflict—between the villagers and the forest department—reflects real-world struggles over indigenous land rights. The forest, a recurring archetype, symbolizes the subaltern's connection to nature and their resistance to state-led displacement. Murali, the forest officer, represents the state's rationalist perspective, which dismisses subaltern spiritual practices as superstition. This tension echoes Fanon's critique of colonial alienation, where indigenous identities are erased under the guise of progress.

7. PSYCHOCULTURAL SENSIBILITIES

7.1. SPIRITUALITY AND THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

The Bhuta Kola ritual serves as a conduit for the collective unconscious, a Jungian concept describing shared cultural symbols and memories. The ritual's trance-like states, depicted through Shiva's transformation, evoke archetypes of the divine and the hero. These sequences, enhanced by B. Ajaneesh Loknath's haunting soundtrack, create a psychocultural resonance that transcends the individual, connecting the audience to subaltern spirituality.

The film's use of folklore, such as the story of the deity Panjurli, reinforces this collective memory. By rooting the narrative in local myths, Kantara validates subaltern cultural practices often dismissed by hegemonic discourses.

7.2. TRAUMA AND RESISTANCE

Psychoanalytically, Kantara explores the trauma of subaltern marginalization—through caste oppression, land loss, and cultural erasure. Shiva's rebellious persona reflects a Fanonian rage against systemic injustice, while his eventual embrace of Bhuta Kola signifies a reclaiming of subaltern identity. The film's resolution, where the community unites against the landlord, symbolizes collective resistance, a psychocultural act of healing.

7.3. TRADITION VS. MODERNITY

The tension between tradition (Bhuta Kola, village life) and modernity (forest laws, state authority) shapes Kantara's psychocultural landscape. Shiva's initial rejection of Bhuta Kola reflects a modern, individualistic mindset, but his transformation underscores the enduring relevance of subaltern traditions. This dialectic mirrors Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism, where subaltern groups adopt essentialist identities to resist hegemonic forces.

7.4. SHIVA'S JOURNEY: FROM ALIENATION TO POSSESSION

Shiva, the protagonist, is emblematic of the psychic dislocation faced by many young men in marginal communities. Orphaned by trauma and estranged from ritual obligations, he represents a generation caught between the inherited weight of tradition and the disorienting promises of modernity. His inner conflict manifests through rage, alcoholism, and rebellion, revealing what Frantz Fanon termed the "psychic wound of the colonized" (Fanon 220).

Shiva's gradual re-acceptance of his ancestral role is not a regression but an integration—a return to a self shaped by both trauma and transcendence. His climactic possession by the daiva is the culmination of both personal and collective healing. The scene transcends narrative logic and enters the realm of sacred time, where past, present, and future collapse into a moment of ritual enactment. This moment is the film's most powerful invocation of psychocultural sensibility: Shiva no longer acts as himself, but for his people, embodying their unresolved grief and suppressed spirituality.

7.5. CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES AND SUBALTERN REPRESENTATION

Kantara's cinematic language amplifies its subaltern narrative. Arvind S. Kashyap's cinematography captures the lush forests and vibrant rituals, creating a visual tapestry that immerses viewers in the subaltern world. The use of close-

ups during Bhuta Kola sequences conveys the performers' emotional intensity, while wide shots of the forest emphasize the community's connection to nature.

The film's non-linear narrative, blending historical and contemporary timelines, reflects the cyclical nature of subaltern memory. Sound design, particularly the rhythmic drums and chants, enhances the psychocultural impact of Bhuta Kola, evoking a visceral response. These techniques align with Indian Popular Cinema's observation that regional films often use cultural specificity to challenge mainstream narratives.

8. CRITIQUES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite its strengths, Kantara is not without flaws. The film's focus on Shiva's individual journey risks overshadowing collective subaltern struggles, a critique echoed in *Journal of Social Sciences* about Hindi cinema's upper-caste bias. Additionally, the portrayal of women, such as Leela, is underdeveloped, limiting the exploration of gendered subalternity. Spivak's critique of the subaltern's mediated voice applies here, as the film's narrative is shaped by an upper-caste director.

The controversy over Bhuta Kola's origins, as noted by *The Indian Express*, highlights the risk of cultural appropriation. Some critics argue that the film commodifies indigenous practices for a mainstream audience, diluting their subaltern significance.

9. KANTARA IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIAN CINEMA

Kantara joins a growing wave of Indian films addressing subaltern issues, such as *Fandry* (2013), *Sairat* (2016), and *Article 15* (2019). Unlike Bollywood's often sanitized portrayals, Kantara's regional specificity and ethnographic detail offer a more authentic representation. Its success reflects a shift in Indian cinema toward narratives that amplify marginalized voices, as discussed in *Cinema and Caste*.

The film's global appeal, evidenced by its dubbed releases in multiple languages, underscores the universal resonance of subaltern struggles. By blending folklore, spirituality, and social critique, Kantara bridges the local and the global, contributing to postcolonial discourses on cultural identity.

10. CONCLUSION

Kantara is a landmark film that illuminates the subaltern psychocultural sensibilities of coastal Karnataka's marginalized communities. Through its portrayal of Bhuta Kola, caste dynamics, and land struggles, the film amplifies subaltern voices while navigating the complexities of their representation. Its psychocultural depth, rooted in spirituality, trauma, and resistance, resonates with postcolonial and psychoanalytic frameworks, offering a nuanced exploration of identity and power.

Kantara is more than a cinematic homage to folklore—it is a radical act of cultural retrieval. By centering the spiritual and ecological life worlds of an indigenous community, the film challenges hegemonic paradigms that devalue subaltern knowledge. Through its deft interweaving of psychocultural introspection and ritual dramaturgy, Kantara articulates a powerful response to the material and metaphysical violence of modernity.

While not without limitations, Kantara's critical and commercial success signals a transformative moment in Indian cinema, where subaltern narratives are gaining prominence. By centering the marginalized, the film challenges hegemonic structures and invites viewers to reconsider the psychocultural dimensions of subalternity. Future research could explore how regional cinemas continue to shape subaltern discourses, contributing to a more inclusive cinematic landscape.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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