

Film Review

Karnan (2021) by Marie Selvaraj

Understanding the rage of a marginalized body, its critique by the 'mainstream'.

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As I write this, a 6-year-old Dalit girl is getting treated at AIIMS Delhi after she was raped by her 34-year-old neighbour. This happened just a few days after a 9-year-old Dalit girl was raped, murdered and forcefully cremated without the consent of the girl's parents. I am filled with rage, this is just not a rage against crimes against young girls, it is more than that. A rage that is only known to a marginalized body. A rage that is not understood by many, not seen by the most, a rage that is ever encompassing a marginalized body.

In 1961, author James Baldwin was asked by a radio host about being Black in America. He said:

To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost, almost all of the time — and in one's work. And part of the rage is this: It isn't only what is happening to you. But it's what's happening all around you and all of the time in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference, indifference of most white people in this country, and their ignorance. Now, since this is so, it's a great temptation to simplify the issues under the illusion that if you simplify them enough, people will recognize them. I think this illusion is very dangerous because, in fact, it isn't the way it works. A complex thing can't be made simple. You simply have to try to deal with it in all its complexity and hope to get that complexity across.

The Dalit movement has built solidarity and drawn inspiration from the black civil rights movement. If we interchange negro/black to Dalit and white to oppressive castes, Baldwin's quote holds true and is valid in our present context. It is within this context that I write about understanding the rage of a marginalized body. I also wish to critique the critique of this rage that comes from the 'mainstream/liberal politics' which arguably draws considerable inspiration from Rawls's theory of justice. I do this with reference to the movie *Karnan* by Mari Selvaraj. The film is made from a Dalit standpoint, just as this piece is written from the same standpoint.

Karnan, from an artistic point of view, is a masterpiece. I believe that there is some brilliant behind-the-camera work which captures the scenic beauty of Podiyankulam. But I will not go into any of it, because I feel enough people have spoken about it. I will tell you, the reader, what I have felt about the movie as a Dalit man in his late 20's.

Most movie critics, in newspapers and film websites, spoke and wrote of the film as an angry film, they called *Karnan* (also the name of the protagonist) an angry man, but very few of them went into the nuances of this anger/rage.

In the opening scene, we see a helpless body of a young girl dying and being ignored. You feel uneasy, you feel helpless and then comes the anger, the anger that comes from being devoid of basic human dignity, either in life or in death. Few minutes into *Karnan*, when men and women are singing *Kanda Vara Sollunga Karnana Kaiyoda Koottivaarunga*, there's anguish and anger.

Physiognomies were never put to such great use and the art of close-up was never this brilliant. Their faces, their mouths singing lines, and cut to the shots of camera moving back and forth in shaking the focus of their silhouettes and the fire-ash drawing the portrait of *Karnan* (or the image of the community remembering him) will all consume you in a feeling that is yet to get built and is vast and deep. The portrait of the community Mari Selvaraj paints here is as large as the universe because the experience of community is being recorded from

everywhere in the air - from snails to vermin, bugs, pigs to donkey, water, fire, sun, moon to memories of the community in Podiyankulam.

Even for human life the feeling of community and oppression was documented broadly ranging from an unborn baby to the village's oldest woman who depended on others to pee. The detailing that depicts the experience of the community in Karnan is so visceral that the horror being inflicted on life there is delivered under the skin. And yet there is space for the surreal too in depicting the image of the image i.e., memory. Memories of ages of toiling under the landlords, losing children and women to famine and cholera, the memories constituting both grief and myth. Yaman (older friend of Karnan) continues to perform the memory of his wife during every death in the village. This is the memory of loss and the performance of rage. Imagine a death in the 20th century in a community not because of a lack but denial of their basic rights, even something as basic as a bus stop. Each denial perpetuates further denial, denial of connectivity, denial of education, denial of healthcare and denial of right to life. That is the reality of everyone living in Podiyankulam.

All of this imagery leads us to the interval scene, Karnan along with others smashing a bus, after its window was broken by a kid whose pregnant mother was denied travel in it. Karnan's and his peoples' rage was not about this one moment or incidence of violation, but the collective rage of the community and how a basic right like a bus stop was denied for ages.

In the last act of the movie, we see how the police perpetuates violence in the name of justice. But here all they did was be casteist and couldn't digest the fact that the people of Podiyankulam can have names of royalty or could stand tall against the almighty, all powerful "The Police". In one of the final scenes Karnan says to the police officer *"Our needs don't matter to you, or our troubles, all you care about is how we stand in front of you, how we address you...You hit us because we stood tall"* and Karnan kills the police officer who was responsible for the violence in the village. That is the essence of it. Even in the larger context the marginalized bodies are often subject to various kinds of violence, and the rage comes out in various forms, be it protest, thefts, violence or, in this case, murder.

There is so much completeness (catharsis?) when the bus and the oppressors were elaborately smashed. There is so much grieving at the end when they are dancing because there is both celebration of loss and hope. The movie is a big 'fuck you' to meta narratives like nation (the shot of Indian flag cut to the persecution of Karnan in the police van) and merit (denial of bus stop so that you are forever kept shackled); at the end asserting that experience is the only identity that shall remain.

I want to quote Fred Hampton from Judas and Black Messiah, he says '*It's not a question of violence or non-violence, it's a question of resistance to fascism, or non-existence within fascism.*' And that is what Karnan and the people of Podiyankulam did, they resisted fascism by channelling their rage through violence.

Written by Vamsi, with assistance from Kala Samuel Babu.

