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Research Article

Laughing at Darkness: Gendered Colourism and Caste in Tamil Cinema

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Abstract

This paper examines how colourism operates within Tamil cinema, particularly through comedic representation, and explores its intersections with caste, gender, and class hierarchies. Through critical discourse analysis, the paper examines how humour and cinematic dialogues normalise colourist prejudice within Tamil popular culture. Films, featuring comedians such as Goundamani, Senthil, Vadivelu, Vivek, and Santhanam, are selected based on their cultural prominence, historical span, and inclusion of scenes engaging with colour-based humour and social prejudice. The study systematically identifies and codes comedic scenes and dialogues from Tamil films produced between the late 1980s and the present, with particular reference to the comedian Goundamani, in order to trace recurring representational patterns related to skin colour, bodily appearance, and social hierarchy. The analysis demonstrates how Tamil comedic conventions have frequently normalised discriminatory attitudes, particularly toward darker-skinned women, through ridicule, stereotyping, and the reinforcement of fairness-centred beauty ideals. At the same time, recent films such as *Kaala*, *Mandela*, and *Sarpatta Parambarai* are examined as counter-hegemonic interventions that challenge dominant colourist narratives. Ultimately, the study argues that Tamil cinema functions not only as a reflection of social prejudice but also as a powerful cultural site capable of reproducing or resisting entrenched colour hierarchies within contemporary society.

Keywords:

Tamil Cinema, Caste, Colourism, Comedy, Gender, Intersectionality

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Introduction

Tamil cinema has long functioned as a significant cultural space through which social values, identities, and hierarchies are circulated and normalised. Among these, colourism remains one of the most persistent yet under examined forms of discrimination represented within Tamil popular culture, particularly through comedy. Humour in Tamil cinema has frequently relied upon ridicule directed at darker skin tones, bodily appearance, caste identity, and social status, often presenting such prejudices as harmless entertainment.

Colourism has had a strong and lasting impact on Tamil cinema, shaping casting practices, beauty standards, and the representation of dark-skinned characters, and notably in comedy (Paul, 2019; Penmetsa, 2021; Sheth et al., 2021). Over time, Tamil films have spread colourist ideas, often mixed with caste-based biases. Comedy has served as a significant medium through which these ideas have been circulated, with the period dominated by Goundamani representing a particularly influential phase in the development of this trend. Even though Goundamani himself is dark-skinned, he often made fun of others with similar skin tones in his acts, thereby reinforcing prevailing prejudices. Thus, Tamil cinematic comedy functions as a cultural mechanism through which colourist and caste-based hierarchies are normalised, reproduced, and made socially acceptable through laughter.

Colourism and the comedic reinforcement of such biases are not unique to Tamil cinema. In Hindi cinema (Bollywood), for instance, light skin has also long been idealised, with fair-skinned actresses favoured for leading roles and dark skin often used as a marker for villainy or comic relief. Sheth et al. (2021) argue that Bollywood historically privileged fair-skinned actresses and reinforced colour-based stereotypes, while darker-skinned women were often confined to marginal or stereotypical roles. Bollywood comedies frequently utilise colourist ridicule, especially through side characters, but these are more commonly framed in the context of North Indian standards of beauty and less explicitly tied to structural inequalities such as caste.

However, Tamil cinema's treatment of colourism is distinct due to its deep intersection with caste and class hierarchies. Compared to Bollywood, Tamil comedic scenes frequently allude not only to appearance, but also to the social station and background of characters, reflecting local power structures. Other Indian regional cinemas, such as Telugu and Malayalam films, also engage with colourist tropes, but to varying degrees. Telugu cinema has frequently privileged fair-skinned heroines, many of whom are recruited from North India, reflecting broader beauty hierarchies within Indian cinema. Although colour-based humour appears in comedic sequences, it is often framed through social stereotypes rather than explicitly articulated caste discourse.

What sets Tamil cinema apart is the frequent intertwining of colourism with local caste identities, making comedies about skin colour not only acts of personal ridicule but also reinforcing broader social stratifications and systematically marginalising lower-caste and rural characters. This qualitative difference is especially visible in the comedic genre wherein Tamil cinema often frames fair skin as aspirational and ties dark skin to both social disadvantage and comic derision, with colour-based representational strategy repeatedly directed at characters identified by audience cues as belonging to lower-caste, rural, or less privileged backgrounds. This unique link between colour, caste, and class in Tamil films sets it apart and makes its exploration particularly significant compared to other contexts. Thus, dark skin in Tamil cinema is not merely aesthetic, rather it is caste-coded, rural-coded, labour-coded, and class-coded. This is one of the most important distinctions between Tamil cinema and others. Comedic performances by influential actors such as Goundamani, Senthil, Vadivelu, Vivek, and Santhanam have played a major role in popularising colour-based humour, where darker-skinned characters especially women are routinely mocked, marginalised, or excluded from conventional ideals of beauty and desirability.

This paper examines how colourism operates within Tamil cinema and explores its intersections with gender, caste, and class hierarchies. Using critical discourse analysis grounded in narrative, textual, and thematic analysis, the study investigates how comedic conventions both reinforce and occasionally challenge discriminatory attitudes surrounding skin colour. Films from the late 1980s to the present have been selected based on their cultural prominence, representation across different decades, and inclusion of scenes engaging with colourist humour and social prejudice. Through the systematic analysis of recurring comic humiliation, dialogues, character dynamics, and visual representations, the study traces how colour-based stereotypes become normalised within cinematic narratives and subsequently embedded within everyday social language and audience behaviour.

However, contemporary films such as *Kaala*, *Mandela*, and *Sarpatta Parambarai* further suggest the emergence of counter-hegemonic cinematic approaches that challenge dominant colourist and caste-based aesthetics. Ultimately, this study argues that Tamil cinema functions not merely as a reflection of social prejudice but also as a powerful cultural institution capable of reinforcing or contesting entrenched hierarchies related to colour, caste, gender, and social identity. Hence, this paper argues that Tamil cinematic comedy has

historically functioned as a vehicle for normalising colourist and caste-gender hierarchies through humour.

Historicity of Colourism in India

Colourism in contemporary India has evolved through the interaction of caste hierarchy, colonialism, and social stratification rather than originating from a single historical source. Although associations between complexion, purity, and social status existed in different historical contexts, the presence of revered dark-skinned deities such as Kali, Draupadi, Rama, and Krishna indicates that dark skin was not uniformly stigmatised in precolonial India. Scholars argue that caste gradually became intertwined with ideas of bodily difference, labour, and social hierarchy, while cautioning against reducing caste solely to skin colour (Bayly, 1999; Dirks, 2001; Omvedt, 1994). Occupational divisions further contributed to the association of darker skin with manual labour and lower social status (Knight, 2013).

Colonial rule significantly intensified these hierarchies by introducing European racial ideologies that equated fair skin with beauty, intelligence, civility, and authority, while representing darker-skinned Indians as inferior and uncivilised (Glenn, 2009; Mishra, 2015). Colonial administrative practices and spatial segregation reinforced these associations, embedding colour-based prejudice within social and cultural institutions. Although India gained political independence, these colonial constructions persisted through beauty standards, popular culture, and media representations (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). Contemporary Indian cinema, including Tamil cinema, continues to reflect and reproduce many of these historically embedded colour hierarchies.

Research questions

1. How does Tamil cinema reproduce colourist ideology?
2. In what ways is dark skin coded through caste and class markers?
3. How are women differently affected by cinematic colourism?
4. How do contemporary films challenge dominant colourist aesthetics?

Literature Review

Colourism refers to forms of discrimination that privilege lighter skin over darker skin within the same racial, ethnic, or social group (Burke, 2008). Existing scholarship demonstrates that colourism functions through socially constructed beauty standards that associate fairness with attractiveness, morality, status, and social mobility (Hall, 2005). Alice Walker popularised the term “colourism” to describe discriminatory treatment based on skin tone within communities themselves (Walker, 1983), while later scholars expanded the concept to include broader forms of appearance-based hierarchy linked to facial features, hair texture, and bodily presentation (Hunter, 2012). Research further shows that stereotypes surrounding darker skin are often connected to assumptions regarding poverty, hygiene, labour, and social inferiority, thereby reinforcing social stigma and exclusion.

Scholars have also examined the historical development of colourism within colonial and caste-based societies. Although colourism is frequently associated with European colonialism, studies on South Asia demonstrate that ideas linking complexion with hierarchy existed alongside caste practices and social stratification (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). Colonial rule further intensified these perceptions by associating whiteness with power, education, civility, and administrative authority (Mishra, 2015). Research on caste and labour hierarchy similarly demonstrates how lighter skin gradually became associated with social privilege and upper-caste status, while darker complexions were linked to outdoor labour and lower social positions (Chakravarti, 1993). Historical studies therefore suggest that colour prejudice in India emerged through the intersection of colonial racial ideology, caste hierarchy, labour division, and social stratification.

Existing studies on colourism further demonstrate its relationship to gender and social mobility. Hunter (2004; 2007) argues that lighter-skinned individuals, particularly women, are frequently perceived as more attractive and socially desirable, which affects marriage, employment, and social opportunities. Research within Black communities in the United States similarly shows that colourism shapes internal social hierarchy through beauty standards and social perception (Harvey, Banks, & Tennial, 2014; Wilder, 2015). Comparative studies further reveal that lighter skin often functions as a form of symbolic and social capital across different cultural contexts (Bourdieu, 1986). Schwartzman's (2007) research on Brazil, for instance, demonstrates how marriage and partner selection frequently reflect aspirations toward lighter skin and upward mobility. Such scholarship highlights that colourism is not merely aesthetic prejudice but a broader social system connected to status, desirability, and structural inequality.

Within Indian visual culture and cinema, scholars have identified the persistent privileging of fair skin in relation to femininity, romance, and beauty. Studies on Bollywood and South Indian cinema note that lighter-skinned actresses are frequently preferred for lead roles, while darker-skinned characters are often marginalised, stereotyped, or relegated to comic and supporting roles (Sheth et al., 2021; Penmetsa, 2021). Existing research also observes that commercial cinema repeatedly associates fairness with modernity, sophistication, and social aspiration, thereby reinforcing dominant beauty hierarchies within popular culture.

Tamil cinema has long been recognised as a distinctive cultural and political institution, closely linked to the Dravidian movement, regional identity, and Tamil linguistic nationalism. In contrast to many other Indian regional cinemas, it has historically functioned not only as a medium of entertainment but also as an important vehicle for articulating anti-caste politics, social justice, and Tamil cultural consciousness (Hardgrave, 1973; Pandian, 1992; Velayutham, 2008). Previous scholarships have explored how Tamil cinema constructs caste identities, negotiates regional belonging, and shapes political subjectivities through its plots and visual aesthetics (Dickey, 1993; Velayutham, 2008). Despite this substantial body of research, limited attention has been paid to the systematic analysis of colourism, particularly the ways in which cinematic comedy

normalises skin-colour prejudice through its intersections with caste, gender, and class. By examining colourist humour as a culturally embedded representational practice, this study broadens existing scholarship on Tamil cinema and offers a more nuanced understanding of how aesthetic preferences reinforce broader structures of social inequality and examines how Tamil cinematic comedy functions as a cultural mechanism through which colourist and caste-gender hierarchies are reproduced, circulated, and normalised within everyday social consciousness. At the same time, the study also explores emerging counter-representations in contemporary Tamil cinema that challenge fairness-centred beauty norms and dominant cinematic aesthetics.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon theories of colourism, hegemony, Brahmanical patriarchy, epidermalisation, and intersectionality to analyse how Tamil cinema reproduces and negotiates hierarchies related to skin colour, caste, gender, and class.

The concept of colourism, developed by scholars such as Margaret Hunter (2007; 2012), refers to forms of discrimination that privilege lighter skin over darker skin within the same racial or social group. Unlike racism, colourism operates internally within communities and frequently shapes perceptions of beauty, desirability, morality, and social worth. In Tamil cinema, colourism becomes visible through the repeated association of fairness with femininity, attractiveness, modernity, and upward social mobility, while darker skin is linked to ridicule, labour, and social inferiority.

The study also employs Chakravarti's concept of Brahmanical patriarchy (1993) to examine how caste hierarchy and gender oppression intersect within cinematic representation. Brahmanical patriarchy regulates women's bodies, sexuality, and marriageability through caste-based notions of purity and social status. Within Tamil cinema, these structures become visible through the intense scrutiny imposed upon female appearance, where fair skin is repeatedly constructed as an essential marker of femininity and desirability.

Frantz Fanon's concept of epidermalisation (1967) further explains how social hierarchies become internalised through the body and skin colour. Fanon argues that oppressed individuals may internalise dominant beauty standards and experience psychological alienation through their physical appearance. This framework is useful for understanding how darker-skinned characters in Tamil cinema are frequently represented as socially inadequate, undesirable, or inferior, while fairness is associated with aspiration and legitimacy.

Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony (1971) provides an important framework for understanding how cinema normalises dominant social values. Hegemony operates when unequal social arrangements become accepted as "common sense" through cultural institutions such as film and media. Tamil comedic cinema often normalises colourist humour by presenting ridicule of darker skin as harmless entertainment.

At the same time, this study also engages with the concept of counter-hegemony to examine films that resist dominant cinematic aesthetics and

discriminatory representational structures. Films such as *Kaala*, *Mandela*, and *Sarpatta Parambarai* function as counter-hegemonic texts by challenging the association between fairness and desirability, while representing darker-skinned and working-class characters with dignity, political agency, and emotional complexity. These films disrupt dominant cinematic norms that historically associated dark skin with inferiority, comic humiliation, or marginality.

Finally, the study draws upon Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (1991) to analyse how colourism intersects with caste, gender, class, labour identity, and social marginalisation. Colour-based discrimination in Tamil cinema does not operate independently but is closely connected to broader structures of power and inequality. Darker-skinned women, labouring characters, and rural subjects often experience overlapping forms of marginalisation where bodily appearance, caste-coded identity, economic vulnerability, and gender discrimination become interconnected within cinematic representation.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for examining how Tamil cinema simultaneously reproduces and contests social hierarchies related to colour, caste, gender, and class. The study therefore approaches cinema not merely as entertainment but as a powerful cultural space through which dominant ideologies are circulated, negotiated, and occasionally resisted.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design grounded in Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013), combined with narrative, textual, and thematic analysis. Fairclough's model examines discourse at the levels of text, discursive practice, and social practice, enabling the analysis of how cinematic dialogues, humour, visual representation, and character interactions construct meanings around skin colour while reproducing or challenging broader ideologies of caste, gender, class, and colourism.

The study also conceptualises cinema as a performative archive rather than merely a reflection of social reality. Cinematic dialogues, humour, costume, dialect, and visual framing provide cultural evidence through which caste practices, gender relations, bodily regulation, and symbolic violence can be examined (Taylor, 2003; Stoler, 2009). Narrative analysis explores storylines and characterisation, textual analysis examines cinematic language and visual symbolism, and thematic analysis identifies recurring representational patterns across the selected films.

Corpus Selection

The study developed from approximately eight years of engagement with Tamil cinema and its comedic traditions. During this period, the researchers documented recurring examples of colour-based humour, caste-coded representation, bodily ridicule, gendered stereotypes, and social hierarchy.

Approximately 50 Tamil films released from the late 1980s onwards were initially surveyed, from which a purposively selected corpus was chosen for detailed analysis based on the recurrence of these themes. The corpus includes films that both reproduce dominant colourist representations and challenge them through counter-hegemonic narratives.

Films were selected using three criteria:

1. Presence of influential comedians such as Goundamani, Senthil, Vadivelu, Vivek, Santhanam, and Yogi Babu.
2. Inclusion of colour-based humour, caste-coded representation, bodily ridicule, or gendered humiliation.
3. Representation across different decades to examine continuity and change in cinematic colour politics.

Data Collection and Coding

The selected films were viewed repeatedly, and scenes containing references to skin colour, beauty, marriageability, bodily appearance, caste-coded labour, rural identity, social inferiority, humour, and romantic desirability were manually documented.

Coding was undertaken by the first author, with the second author contributing to data interpretation. Interpretive consistency was maintained through repeated viewing, iterative comparison across the corpus, and discussions between the authors. Coding decisions were continuously reviewed against the research questions and theoretical framework.

Inductive thematic coding was employed to identify recurring representational patterns. Initial codes relating to skin colour, caste, labour, humour, gender, and social positioning were compared across the corpus and organised into broader thematic categories. For example, codes concerning beauty standards, marriageability, and female representation informed the theme **Gendered Colourism**, whereas occupation, social status, and rural identity informed **Caste, Class and Labour Coding**. These themes were subsequently interpreted through the concepts of colourism, Brahmanical patriarchy, epidermalisation, cultural hegemony, and intersectionality.

Table 1. Coding Categories Used in the Study

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Indicators</i>
<i>Gendered Colourism</i>	Fairness as feminine capital; celebration of dark masculinity; marriageability; gendered beauty standards
<i>Caste-Coded Representation</i>	Labour identity, social inferiority
<i>Humiliation Humour</i>	Punch dialogues, bodily mockery, colour-based ridicule
<i>Counter-Hegemonic Representation</i>	Dignified dark-skinned protagonists, anti-colourist narratives

Identifying Caste-Coded Representation

The study identifies caste coding through indirect representational markers rather than explicit caste naming. Occupation, dialect, costume, bodily presentation, rural identity, forms of address, and social interaction were analysed as indicators of caste hierarchy. Darker-skinned characters are frequently associated with manual labour, poverty, and rural occupations, whereas lighter-skinned characters are commonly linked with authority, landlord status, and urban respectability. Similarly, differential forms of address and occupation-based humour reveal how colour-based ridicule intersects with caste and class hierarchy within Tamil cinema.

Table 2. Caste/Class-Coding

Film	Expression	Occupation	Skin Colour Representation
Chinna Gounder (Junior Gounder) (1992)	Beggar dog, pig, etc.	Washer man	Dark-skinned
Parambarai (Lineage) (1996)	beyond their range, buffalo, hey dog, etc.	Daily wagers, pastoral workers, other menial laborers	Dark-skinned
Yajaman (Proprietor) (1993)	Ayya or periyavar (respectful way of calling elderly person or a person who is in the top of social hierarchy.	Elderly landlords	Light-skinned

These asymmetrical representational patterns demonstrate how colour-based humour intersects with caste hierarchy and labour identity within Tamil cinematic culture.

Thematic Film Analysis

Fairness as Feminine Capital: Gendered Colourism in Tamil Cinema

In Tamil cinema, colourism is reinforced through both casting practices and narrative structures that privilege fair-skinned women while marginalising darker-skinned female characters. Lead and romantic roles are frequently assigned to actresses with lighter complexions, whereas darker-skinned women are often confined to comic, supporting, or subordinate roles. Such representational patterns sustain hierarchies of beauty, desirability, and social status within cinematic narratives. The increasing prevalence of interracial pairings, particularly those involving white or North Indian actresses opposite Tamil male protagonists, strengthens Eurocentric beauty standards while simultaneously reproducing locally embedded caste and colour hierarchies.

Tamil film songs also play a significant role in normalising colourist ideals. Romantic lyrics frequently celebrate fair-skinned heroines through metaphors associated with purity, beauty, and value, including the moon, milk, gold, diamonds, butter, stars, and jasmine flowers. Through these repeated symbolic associations, fairness becomes linked to femininity, desirability, and moral virtue. Female characters portrayed as angelic or ideal are often light-skinned, reinforcing the association between fairness and goodness. In contrast, dark-skinned male protagonists are commonly represented as strong, authentic, masculine, and emotionally desirable. Such representations suggest that male attractiveness is not dependent upon fairness, while women remain subject to restrictive beauty standards centred on light skin.

For example, Tamil songs such as “Karuppu Thaan Ennaku Pudicha Coloru” (Black is my favorite colour) from the film *Vetri Kodi Kattu* (2000), “Karuppaana Kaiyyaale Yennai Pudichaan” (He held my hand with his dusky hand) from *Thaamirabharani* (2007), “Karuppu Perazhaga” (Hey! Dusky handsome man) from *Kanchana* (2011), and “Naan Konjam Karuppu Dhaan” (My complexion is a little dark) from *Kaththi Sandai* (2016) portray dark-skinned men as attractive, charismatic, and desirable. However, this celebration sharply contrasts with the representation of women. Songs written for female protagonists often contain lyrics such as “Un Kaal Kooda Karuppu Illa” (Even your legs are not dark) from *Mudhalvan* (1999), implying that fairness functions as a form of social capital for women.

Similarly, songs such as “Chandiranai Thotathu Yaar” (Who Touched the Moon?) from *Ratchagan* (1997) and “Iruvathu Kodi Nilavugal Koodi Penmai Aanatho?” (Have millions of moon gathered together to become this woman?) from the film *Thullatha Manamum Thullum* (1999) compare fair-skinned heroines to the moon, associating femininity with brightness, purity, and desirability. Through repeated metaphors of light, radiance, and whiteness, Tamil cinema constructs fair skin as an ideal marker of feminine beauty and romantic value.

These contrasting representations reveal the gendered nature of colour politics in Tamil cinema. While dark skin may enhance masculine authenticity, strength, or rural masculinity, it often disqualifies women from romance,

desirability, and social acceptance. Tamil cinema therefore constructs a gendered colour hierarchy in which masculinity can accommodate dark skin, whereas femininity remains closely tied to ideals of fairness and bodily perfection.

Gendered Beauty and Marriageability in Tamil Comedy

Comedy in Tamil cinema, like in many other film industries, is primarily intended to entertain audiences; however, it frequently relies on stereotypes that marginalize particular social groups. Humour often targets individuals on the basis of skin colour, bodily appearance, caste, class, or social status. Female actors, in particular, are subjected to intense scrutiny regarding appearance and beauty standards.

Goundamani, one of Tamil cinema's most influential comedians, became renowned for his long-standing comic partnership with Senthil and his distinctive style of sharp repartee and physical comedy. Although celebrated for his contribution to Tamil popular culture, his performances frequently relied on ridiculing Senthil's physique and dark complexion. Such recurring comic exchanges contributed to normalising colour-based ridicule, with many punch dialogues entering everyday popular discourse.

For instance, in *Ulagam Piranthathu Enakkaga* (1990), the dark complexion of Goundamani's sister becomes an obstacle to her marriage prospects. Unable to arrange her marriage in the village, Goundamani relocates with her to the town and artificially whitens her skin to secure a groom, establishing fair skin as a prerequisite for female desirability and marital acceptance. Parallel to this, Senthil, who is himself dark-skinned, dreams of marrying a fair-skinned woman. After being deceived into marrying Goundamani's sister, he attempts to reject her upon discovering her "original" complexion. When his wife points out that he shares the same complexion, Senthil responds that "black is the most beautiful colour for men," exposing the gendered double standards embedded within dominant beauty norms. While dark skin in men may be tolerated or celebrated as masculine, dark-skinned women remain stigmatized as undesirable.

Similarly, *Rajakumaran* (1994) features a widely remembered comedic sequence in which Goundamani mocks Vadivelu's sister, Megalai, for her dark complexion. Although Senthil and Goundamani initially compete for her attention, both immediately attempt to flee upon seeing her appearance, transforming dark-skinned femininity into the central object of ridicule. Significantly, the mockery is articulated by Goundamani, whose own complexion closely resembles that of the woman he ridicules, illustrating how colourism operates through internalized beauty hierarchies that privilege fairness irrespective of one's own appearance.

In *Sivaji: The Boss* (2007), Rajinikanth's character openly expresses disgust toward the dark-skinned characters Angavai and Sangavai, whose appearances were artificially darkened for comedic effect. Vivek's dialogue, including the derogatory phrase "Roamba ponga vechiteenga poola" (It seems you overcooked your daughters), directed at the girls' father, exemplifies the intersection of

colourist and sexist humour. In another sequence, Rajinikanth attempts to lighten his complexion through remedies such as Multani soil, saffron milk, and skin-whitening products, reinforcing the association between fairness, desirability, and social acceptance. Although the film appears to challenge colour prejudice against men by describing dark skin as “Dravidian colour,” femininity continues to be structured around fair-skinned beauty ideals through the character of Tamizhselvi (Shriya Saran).

These contradictions reveal the gendered operation of colour prejudice within Tamil cinema. Male protagonists may retain heroism, authority, and romantic legitimacy despite darker skin, whereas female characters remain constrained by expectations of fairness, beauty, and sexual attractiveness. Tamil cinema therefore negotiates colour politics differently for men and women, ultimately reinforcing patriarchal and colourist hierarchies even while appearing to resist them.

Dark Skin as Comic Object

Within Tamil comedic cinema, dark skin is frequently transformed into a comic object through ridicule, humiliation, and bodily mockery. Although presented as harmless entertainment, such representations reproduce chromatic hierarchies in which fairness is associated with beauty, femininity, and social value, while dark skin becomes linked to shame and comic inferiority. For instance, in *Ulagam Piranthathu Enakkaga* (1990), Goundamani ridicules Senthil’s complexion by sarcastically asking whether his mother had “bathed him in tar” after birth. Humour in such scenes emerges through the degradation of dark-skinned bodies, normalizing colour-based humiliation within popular culture.

Likewise, in *Kattabomman* (1993), Goundamani ridicules an older woman seeking work at a rice mill by sarcastically questioning why someone in such a “ripened age” would need an attractive name. The humour derives from humiliating the ageing female body. The recruitment scene further reveals the gendered politics of labour, where women are evaluated through appearance, complexion, and perceived desirability rather than labour capacity. Although framed as comedy, the sequence reflects the intersection of colourism, ageism, and the objectification of women’s bodies, while subtly linking employability to male approval and bodily attractiveness.

In contemporary Tamil cinema, comedian Santhanam similarly relies on colour-shaming and body-shaming for humour. In *Siva Manasula Sakthi* (2009), a woman becomes site of ridicule based on bodily appearance and colour difference. Likewise, in *Endrendrum Punnagai* (2013), he ridicules darker-skinned characters through derogatory nicknames and insults a woman by claiming that “anyone who marries her would flee on the first night.” Such recurring patterns demonstrate how Tamil comedy continues to normalize gendered and colourist humiliation under the guise of entertainment.

Caste, Class and Labour Coding

In *Karakattakaran* (1989), Goundamani ridicules economically vulnerable rural characters. In one scene, he mocks a date seller who identifies himself as a “merchant,” sarcastically implying he is a “ship merchant.” The humour treats the aspirations of small traders as laughable, reinforcing caste-coded assumptions about labour and status. The film also contains explicit colourist humour, as Goundamani mocks Senthil’s dark skin through insults such as “burnt legs” and “acid-burnt face,” reducing dark skin to comic spectacle.

In *Chinna Gounder* (1992), the title itself foregrounds the dominant Gounder caste within a rural feudal order. Goundamani, a washerman, humiliates Senthil, his assistant, for asking scientific questions, eventually kicking him into a river and implying that labouring communities should not behave like intellectuals. Although framed as comedy, the scene polices knowledge and reinforces caste hierarchy through ridicule and violence.

Similarly, in *Varavu Ettana Selavu Pathana* (1994), Goundamani mocks Vadivelu, a working-class auto driver, when he claims ownership of his vehicle, sarcastically asking, “If you are an owner, then who are Tata and Birla?” This dismisses labouring-class dignity and social mobility while normalizing exploitation and humiliation.

Parambarai (1996) visualizes feudal hierarchy through costume, skin colour, and bodily behaviour. Dark-skinned labourers in dirty lungis bend before a fair-skinned Gounder landlord dressed in white and adorned with gold jewellery. Goundamani repeatedly humiliates labourers, calling one “dog” for speaking English and mocking Senthil, a buffalo herder, as “one buffalo herding another buffalo.” Such humour dehumanizes labouring bodies while glorifying dominant caste authority.

Likewise, *Periya Thambi* (1997) represents caste hierarchy through spatial segregation in a roadside hotel. Respectably dressed men sit on benches, while labourers in dirty lungis squat on the floor. One labourer immediately removes the towel from his shoulder and ties it around his waist upon seeing Goundamani and the protagonist, signalling ritualized submission. Goundamani’s approving smile reinforces caste-based behavioural discipline and feudal social etiquette.

Countering Colourism in Tamil Cinema

Drawing from Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, mainstream Tamil cinema normalises fairness and upper-caste aesthetics as dominant ideals, while films such as *Kaala* (2018) function as counter-hegemonic texts that challenge colourist and caste hierarchies (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemony operates by shaping cultural values and “common sense,” making dominant beauty standards appear natural and desirable. In Tamil cinema, these standards privilege fairness, upper-caste aesthetics, and Eurocentric ideals. In contrast, *Kaala* reclaims dark skin, lower-caste identity, and slum spaces as symbols of dignity, resistance, and political consciousness, thereby challenging dominant cinematic narratives.

Similarly, *Super Deluxe* (2019) complicates stereotypical representations through Yogi Babu's character. Although his appearance and complexion persist as site of humour, the film grants him emotional depth, vulnerability, and agency, partially disrupting representational hierarchies through multidimensional characterisation. However, unlike the explicitly political films of Pa. Ranjith, *Super Deluxe* critiques colourism more subtly while still retaining traces of stereotypical humour.

Likewise, *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021) represents dark skin as an ordinary and authentic aspect of lived reality rather than an object of ridicule. Its visual language associates dark complexion with dignity, labour, resilience, and collective pride, challenging upper-caste and colourist aesthetics dominant in mainstream Tamil cinema.

Although these films challenge dominant colourist aesthetics, they do not completely escape the conventions of commercial Tamil cinema. Counter-hegemonic representations therefore coexist with residual patriarchal, caste-based, and colourist assumptions, indicating that resistance remains partial rather than absolute. For instance, while *Super Deluxe* humanises Yogi Babu's character, it nevertheless retains elements of appearance-based humour. Similarly, even films that foreground anti-caste politics continue to operate within commercial cinematic conventions that may reproduce certain gendered or aesthetic norms. Counter-hegemony in Tamil cinema should therefore be understood as a process of negotiation rather than a complete rejection of dominant representational structures.

Together, these films indicate a gradual shift in Tamil cinema toward counter-hegemonic representations that portray darker-skinned protagonists as complex, dignified, and politically significant subjects. At the same time, the continued popularity of comedians such as Yogi Babu reveals the persistence of colourist humour. Although he often remains the target of appearance-based ridicule, films such as *Mandela* (2021) position him as a protagonist with dignity, moral authority, and political agency. Such representations suggest an emerging transformation in Tamil cinema, where dark complexion increasingly becomes associated with individuality and political subjectivity rather than humiliation or inferiority.

Table 3. Film Corpus and Thematic Categories

Film	Year	Comedian / Character	Relevant Scene / Dialogue	Type of Representation	Reason for Inclusion
Karakattakkaran	1989	Goundamani	Ridicules a date seller claiming to be a “merchant”; mocks Senthil’s dark skin as “burnt legs” and “acid-burnt face.”	Colourism; caste/class-coded labour humiliation	Illustrates the intersection of colourism and caste-coded labour through comic ridicule.
Ulagam Piranthathu Enakkaga	1990	Goundamani, Senthil	Goundamani whitens his sister’s skin for marriage; Senthil rejects her after discovering her dark complexion.	Gendered colourism; marriageability politics	Illustrates how colourism regulates female marriageability and social acceptance.
Chinna Gounder	1992	Goundamani, Senthil	Goundamani humiliates Senthil for asking scientific questions and kicks him into a river.	Caste-coded intellectual policing	Demonstrates how comedy reinforces caste hierarchy by policing knowledge and social mobility.
Kattabomman	1993	Goundamani	Ridicules an older woman seeking employment at a rice mill.	Gendered humiliation; ageism; colourism	Illustrates the intersection of colourism, ageism, and gender in comedic representation.
Varavu Ettana Selavu Pathana	1994	Goundamani, Vadivelu	Mocks Vadivelu’s claim of being an auto “owner” by comparing him to Tata and Birla.	Caste/class-coded labour hierarchy	Highlights how humour undermines working-class dignity and social mobility.
Rajakumaran	1994	Goundamani, Senthil, Vadivelu	Megalai’s dark complexion becomes the object of ridicule.	Gendered colourism; marriageability politics	Demonstrates the gendered construction of colourism through marriageability.
Parambarai	1996	Goundamani	Labourers bend before landlord; labourer mocked for speaking	Feudal caste hierarchy; labour humiliation	Illustrates how humour legitimises feudal caste

			English; Senthil compared to a buffalo.		hierarchy and labour humiliation.
Periya Thambi	1997	Goundamani	Labourers squat on the floor while dominant caste men sit on benches; towel removed as a sign of submission.	Spatial caste hierarchy; feudal etiquette	Demonstrates the visual coding of caste hierarchy through spatial practices and bodily discipline.
Ratchagan	1997	Female protagonist (song sequence)	“Chandiranai Thotathu Yaar” (Who Touched the Moon?)	Gendered beauty hierarchy.	Illustrates how songs idealise fair skin as feminine beauty.
Thullatha Manamum Thullum	1999	Female protagonist (song sequence)	“Iruvathu Kodi Nilavugal Koodi Penmai Aanatho?” (Have millions of moon gathered together to become this woman?)	Gendered colourism	Demonstrates the symbolic association between fairness and ideal femininity.
Mudhalvan	1999	Female protagonist (song sequence)	“Un Kaal Kooda Karuppu Illa” (Even your legs are not dark)	Gendered colour hierarchy	Illustrates fairness as a form of feminine social capital.
Vetri Kodi Kattu	2000	Male protagonist (song sequence)	“Karuppu Thaan Ennaku Pudicha Coloru” (Black is my favorite colour)	Celebration of dark masculinity	Demonstrates the positive construction of dark-skinned masculinity.
Sivaji: The Boss	2007	Vivek, Rajinikanth	Angavai and Sangavai mocked for dark skin; “overcooked daughters” dialogue; defending male protagonist’s dark skin as “Dravidian Identity”	Gendered colourism; sexist humour	Contrasts the ridicule of dark-skinned women with the celebration of male dark skin.

Thaamirabharani	2007	Male protagonist (song sequence)	“Karuppaana Kaiyyaale Yennai Pudichaan” (He held my hand with his dusky hand)	Celebration of dark masculinity	Reinforces the gendered double standard in cinematic colourism.
Siva Manasula Sakthi	2009	Santhanam	Women’s bodily appearance and complexion becomes object of ridicule.	Body-shaming; colourism	Demonstrates the persistence of colourist humour in contemporary comedy.
Kanchana	2011	Male protagonist (song sequence)	“Karuppu Perazhaga” (Hey! Dusky handsome man)	Celebration of dark masculinity	Reinforces the cultural acceptance of dark-skinned masculinity.
Endrendrum Punnagai	2013	Santhanam	Uses derogatory nicknames for darker-skinned characters; insults women’s appearance.	Colourism; gendered humiliation	Illustrates the continued normalisation of gendered colourist humour.
Kaththi Sandai	2016	Male protagonist (song sequence)	“Naan Konjam Karuppu Dhaan” (My complexion is a little dark)	Masculine acceptance of dark skin	Demonstrates the acceptance of dark skin in men but not women.
Kaala	2018	Rajinikanth	Dark-skinned female and male protagonist represented with dignity and political authority.	Counter-hegemonic representation	Illustrates counter- hegemonic resistance to colourist and caste hierarchies.
Super Deluxe	2019	Yogi Babu	Marginalized identities represented with complexity and dignity.	Counter-hegemonic representation	Demonstrates more complex and humanised representation of marginalised identities.

Mandela	2021	Yogi Babu	Dark-skinned protagonist positioned centrally with political agency.	Anti-caste and anti-colourist representation.	Illustrates anti-caste and anti-colourist cinematic intervention.
<i>Sarpatta Parambarai</i>	2021	Female Protagonist (Dushara Vijayan)	Dark-skinned female protagonist is represented as politically sound and rugged, ordinary and authentic dalit woman.	Anti-Brahmanical patriarchal and anti-colourist representation.	Illustrates the reclamation of dark-skinned femininity through dignity, labour, resilience, and anti-caste politics.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that colourism in Tamil cinema functions as a deeply embedded cultural ideology that intersects with caste, gender, and class to shape meanings attached to skin colour. Across the five thematic categories, colourism emerges not merely as an aesthetic preference but as a representational system through which hierarchies of beauty, desirability, morality, and social worth are produced and legitimised. Rather than simply reflecting social attitudes, Tamil cinema actively constructs and normalises these hierarchies through casting practices, narrative conventions, song lyrics, visual aesthetics, and especially comedic performance. By presenting colour-based ridicule as harmless entertainment, cinematic humour transforms discriminatory assumptions into culturally accepted social practices. At the same time, contemporary anti-caste films indicate the emergence of counter-hegemonic representations that challenge dominant colourist aesthetics and broaden the representation of darker-skinned characters.

The findings address the study's four research questions by demonstrating that colourism is institutionalised through multiple cinematic practices rather than isolated acts of prejudice. Fair skin is consistently associated with beauty, femininity, romance, education, and social mobility, whereas darker skin is linked to unattractiveness, manual labour, poverty, and comic inferiority. These recurring associations reveal how Tamil cinema reproduces colourist ideology by presenting unequal beauty standards as natural and desirable.

The analysis further demonstrates that colourism cannot be separated from caste and class. Darker-skinned characters are repeatedly associated with labouring communities, rural life, and lower social status, while lighter-skinned characters signify authority, education, urban modernity, and privilege. Comedy reinforces these hierarchies by ridiculing labouring bodies, discouraging social mobility, and normalising unequal power relations through humour. At the same time, colourism operates in distinctly gendered ways. Although both men and women experience colour-based stereotyping, women remain subject to far more restrictive standards of beauty, marriageability, and desirability. Dark-skinned women are frequently represented as undesirable or comic figures, whereas dark-skinned men often retain value through heroism, authenticity, physical strength, or political leadership, revealing the close relationship between colourism and patriarchal regulation of women's bodies.

The findings also identify important shifts within contemporary Tamil cinema. Films such as *Kaala*, *Mandela*, *Super Deluxe*, and *Sarpatta Parambarai* challenge dominant associations between fairness and desirability by portraying darker-skinned protagonists with dignity, emotional complexity, and political agency. However, these films do not entirely escape commercial cinematic conventions. Counter-hegemonic representations therefore coexist with residual colourist and patriarchal assumptions, suggesting that resistance remains partial rather than absolute.

The findings reinforce the study's theoretical framework. Hunter's concept of colourism explains how lighter skin functions as symbolic and social capital, while Chakravarti's concept of Brahmanical patriarchy demonstrates how beauty ideals become intertwined with caste, femininity, and marriageability. Fanon's concept of epidermalisation explains the internalisation of dominant beauty standards, and Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony illuminates how colourist humour becomes accepted as "common sense" through repetition. Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality further demonstrates that colour-based discrimination operates through overlapping structures of caste, gender, class, and labour identity rather than as an isolated form of prejudice.

Overall, this study shows that Tamil cinema functions as a powerful cultural institution through which colour-based hierarchies are reproduced, negotiated, and increasingly contested. By integrating colourism, Brahmanical patriarchy, epidermalisation, cultural hegemony, and intersectionality, the study demonstrates that colourism is a structural cultural practice through which caste, gender, and class inequalities are both sustained and challenged within contemporary Tamil cinema.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that colourism in Tamil cinema extends beyond aesthetic preference to function as a cultural mechanism through which hierarchies of caste, gender, class, and skin colour are reproduced and normalised. By integrating theories of colourism, Brahmanical patriarchy, epidermalisation, cultural hegemony, and intersectionality, the study shows how comedic humour, cinematic narratives, and visual representation collectively shape perceptions of beauty, desirability, and social worth. At the same time, contemporary films such as *Kaala*, *Mandela*, *Super Deluxe*, and *Sarpatta Parambarai* indicate an emerging shift toward more dignified and counter-hegemonic representations of darker-skinned characters, although these interventions remain partial and continue to operate within broader commercial cinematic conventions.

The study contributes to media, cultural, gender, and film studies by demonstrating how cinematic humour functions as a site where colourism intersects with caste and gender, while also highlighting cinema's potential to challenge discriminatory social norms. These findings have broader implications for filmmakers, critics, educators, and scholars seeking to promote more inclusive and socially responsible forms of representation. Ultimately, Tamil cinema not only reflects social attitudes but also shapes collective imagination; moving beyond colour-based ridicule toward equitable representation can contribute to challenging entrenched prejudices within society.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited to a purposively selected corpus of Tamil films and relies on qualitative textual, thematic, and discourse analysis. It does not examine audience reception, production practices, or the perspectives of filmmakers and industry professionals. Future research may extend this work through audience studies,

interviews with filmmakers and actors, comparative analyses of regional Indian cinemas, and investigations into casting practices, digital media, and colour-based representation across South Indian film industries.

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Authors' Contribution

The first author primarily conducted the research, analysis, and manuscript preparation. Both authors contributed to the conceptualisation and revision of the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Ethical Approval

This study is based on textual and cultural analysis of publicly available films and media content. No human participants or confidential data were involved; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required.

AI Declaration

The author used AI-assisted tools solely for language enhancement, grammar correction, and improving the structural flow of the manuscript. All arguments, coding, analysis, interpretations, findings, and conclusions were independently developed and conducted by the author.

Research Data

This study is based on commercially and publicly available Tamil films accessed through CDs, television broadcasts, and online audiovisual platforms.

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