

Negotiating Cultural Dominance within Indian Regional Cinema: Reconfiguration of the Narrative Strategies Used as an Alternative Device to Resistance

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Abstract-

Margins in Indian cinema increasingly function as narrative epicenters where alternative cultural expressions challenge the dominance of Bollywood. Rather than remaining peripheral, regional cinemas actively generate cinematic signifiers that reshape the cultural vocabulary of Indian film discourse. This study examines how regional film practices, grounded in local histories, identities, and socio-political realities, reposition themselves by de-canonizing dominant narrative structures within Indian cinema. The paper critically investigates how regional cinemas resist marginalization, articulate alternative voices, and intervene in the politics of canon formation. The research explores how regional films negotiate their position within a Bollywood-centric cinematic hierarchy, and analyzes narrative strategies that enable audiences to engage with and subvert mainstream ideological norms. It further examines the impact of caste, gender, class, displacement, and regional histories on modes of representation and storytelling. Adopting a comparative framework, the study attends to both local specificities and shared strategies of resistance across different Indian regions. The analysis is based on select case studies *RRR* (South), *Ardaas Karaan* (North), *Rajkahini* (East), *Sairat* (West), and *Yarwng* (Northeast) chosen to illustrate commonalities and variations in narrative resistance. Each film embodies distinct thematic and formal strategies that contest dominant cinematic paradigms while contributing to a broader pan-Indian perspective. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative approach incorporating critical discourse analysis, cultural studies, narrative analysis, visual and content analysis, and comparative methods. The paper ultimately argues that regional cinemas are not static margins but dynamic cultural sites that actively reconfigure India's cinematic landscape through representational politics and narrative experimentation.

Keywords- Regional Cinema, Narrative Strategies, Indian Film Studies, Culture, Resistance

Framing the Margins: Contexts and Approaches

Indian film is frequently equated with Bollywood in both popular and critical discourse. Bollywood with stardom, melodrama and large-scale productions, has long dominated the cinematic imagination of the nation. The films often offer a homogenized representation of Indian life that appeals to national sentiment while suppressing regional specifics. However, Indian cinema is much richer and more varied than the one-dimensional representation (Balabantaray). Beneath the presence of Bollywood exists a wide array of regional practices that are deeply embedded in local histories, languages, and identities. These practices have their own audiences and traditions of storytelling that reconfigure what cinema can mean in a multicentric nation like India. The question canon formation lies at the heart of this argument. Film canons, as explored in recent critical literature tend to privilege a narrow set of works often those from Bollywood or internationally recognized films thereby freezing existing cultural hierarchies (Stelmach). In doing so, many cinema-practices are dismissed as peripheral or secondary, even though what is dismissed often proves to be generative, offering alternative visions of Indian modernity and distinct vocabularies of cinematic expression. A meaningful recalibration of Indian cinema requires a deliberate effort to look beyond dominant centers, to engage with the diversity of narrative strategies used by regional cinemas. Such strategies rooted in local culture, language, and history operate as devices of resistance, decentering the hegemony of Bollywood and expanding how we understand what Indian cinema can be. Resistance in cinema does not always take the form of overt political critique. It often resides in how stories are told,

whose voices are foregrounded and which stories are remembered (Holtmeier). Hrishikesh Ingle's analysis of Marathi films such as *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016) highlights how narrative articulations of caste marginality function as moments of cinematic resistance by inserting subaltern subjectivity into mainstream forms. This insight is instructive for understanding broader dynamics of regional film practices. By weaving local socio-political realities into their narratives, regional films resist homogenization, challenge dominant ideologies, and create spaces for alternative cultural expressions.

This paper locates its argument in this theoretical frame by addressing five films from varying parts of India: *RRR* (south), *Ardaas Karaan* (North), *Rajkahini* (East), *Sairat* (west) *Yarwng* (Northeast). Each of these films instantiate resistance, though the form of that resistance differs according to its context. *RRR* mobilizes epic spectacle and mythic retelling to rewrite nationalist memory from a southern lens. These films do not merely exist as regional variants of Bollywood but stand as distinct narrative projects that destabilize the center and reshape the cultural discourse of Indian cinema. In approaching these films, the paper takes visual narrative analysis as its central methodological tool. Narrative analysis allows us to examine how strategies of storytelling through narrative, character development or visual style bear ideological weight and serves as site of resistance (Gavidia and Adu). This approach is supplemented by cultural contextualization, which situates each film within the socio-political histories of its region. For example, caste politics provides the context for understanding *Sairat*, while colonial memory frames the reading of *RRR*. Finally, a comparative perspective ties such single analyses into a larger template revealing both difference and similarity in strategies across regions of India. This comparative approach underscores that while regional cinemas are grounded in local experiences, they converge in resisting marginalization and intervening in the politics of canon formation. The task of this paper, therefore, is not to replace Bollywood with a new canon of regional but to recognize that cinematic canons themselves must remain open, fluid and attentive to multiplicity. Regional cinemas are not passive peripheries but active sites of cultural reconfiguration. By foregrounding marginal voices, experimenting with narrative forms, and challenging dominant historical memories, they reshape the cinematic topography of India. This study thus contributes to an understanding of Indian cinema as field of dynamic negotiations rather than fixed hierarchies. The following sections will examine each film will demonstrate how these diverse practices converge into a broader pan-Indian perspective of cinematic resistance. In doing so the paper seeks to show how re-reading narrative strategies at the margins enables to rethink the politics of canon formation in Indian cinema.

Epic Spectacle and Historical Revisions: *RRR* from the Southern Screen

The intersection of epic form and cinematic spectacle has long shaped the grammar of national storytelling. In literary and visual traditions alike, the epic is associated with scale, myth and the dramatization of foundational struggles (Elliott). On the other hand, spectacle refers to the affective and sensory aspects of representation (Mitchell)- the visual intensities that arouse, convince and create collective identity. In this context, Guy Debord's Theory of Society of the Spectacle¹ (1967) becomes relevant. According to him, the spectacle is a way to mediate and reconstitute social relations rather than just a collection of dazzling images (Jackson and Heath). When spectacle is combined with epic form, it becomes a potent tool for ideologically and immersively portraying the emotion related to nationhood, history and memory. Parallel to this, the cinematic treatment of history must be understood not as transparent reproduction² but as interpretive revision. Robert A. Rosentone emphasizes that historical films³ create a usable past by compressing, fictionalizing and re-narrating events to address contemporary cultural concerns (Munslow). This act of historical revision, rather than signaling inaccuracy reveals how cinema functions as a discourse of memory, granting visibility to suppressed experiences or offering alternative interpretations of hegemonic narratives. Taken together, the frameworks of spectacle and historical revision allow us to trace how regional cinemas mobilize form and content to contest canonical histories. This dual approach is exemplified by SS Rajamouli's *RRR* (2022), which was made in the Telugu film industry. The movie creates a fabricated friendship between Komaram Bheem and Allu Sitarama Raju two significant leaders in

¹ This concept refers to the dominance of images and representations in late-capitalist societies, where social relations are mediated through appearances, creating a separation between reality and its representation.

² It suggests that cinema can offer an unmediated objective reflection of historical reality.

³ Rosentone argues that historical films must be understood as cultural narratives that reshape the past for contemporary audiences, rather than as literal reproduction of historical fact.

the anti-colonial movement of the early 20th century. It tells the story of devotion, treachery, sacrifice and ultimately insurgency against colonial control through this creative coupling. The movie creates an allegorical; story that combines individual paths with national destiny, even though the historical figures never actually met. This intentional fabrication supports Rosenstone's argument that the cinematic past is a re-reading that enables the present to navigate its cultural fears and aspirations rather than archival truth. The deployment of spectacle in *RRR* is central to its cultural work. The film's action sequences- ranging from choreographed battles against colonial forces to elaborate dances such as the now-iconic 'Naatu Naatu' are staged with operatic excess. These are not ornamental digressions but narrativized spectacles that elevate the protagonists into mythic archetypes. In Debordian terms, the spectacle here organizes collective perception by transforming political resistance into a shared cultural experience (Lahhab). Visual excess amplifies ideological content: personal grief becomes national allegory; bodily struggle becomes communal resistance and the local becomes legible as pan-Indian. The epic scale of these spectacles functions not only to entertain but to consolidate alternative imaginaries of nationhood outside Bollywood's dominant idiom. The way the movie revises history is equally important. Through the perspective of southern storytelling traditions, *RRR* rewrites the colonial record by dramatizing made-up interactions and giving its protagonists magical strength. The story emphasizes the brutality of cultural appropriation, dislocation and humiliation meted out to under privileged groups, particularly tribal communities, rather than portraying British imperialism as a distant background. For example, the recovery of indigenous dignity from imperial exploitation is symbolized by the rescue of a young Gond girl from colonial captivity. According to Rosentone the historiographic role of film is exactly this interpretive re-working: to re-inscribe experiences that have been obliterated by prevailing narratives inside a framework of cultural resistance. Positioning the movie within the broader history of southern cinema clarifies the distinctiveness of this intervention. Telegu cinema has historically invested in mythological and historical epics that merge local cultural idioms with large scale story telling (Sv). Rajamouli's film inherits this tradition while expanding its reach to a pan-Indian and global audience. By doing so, it disrupts Bollywood's presumed monopoly over the national epic. The film's success demonstrates how a regional industry, by fusing epic spectacle with revisionist history, can reposition itself as a central force in shaping the collective cinematic imagination of India.

As a result, the movie serves as an example of how narrative techniques of epic spectacle and historical reinterpretation function as a substitute tool of resistance. Historical revision reframes the colonial past from subaltern and regional viewpoints, while spectacle amplifies affect and turned resistance into a common cultural myth. When combined, these strategies enable the movie to express a southern reimagination of the country's history while simultaneously challenging Bollywood's hegemony. By doing this, *RRR* reaffirms that regional films are dynamic places of cultural reconfiguration that have the power to alter the canon itself, rather than being merely imitations of the center.

Generational divides and Conflicting Views: *Ardaas Karaan* in the Northern Frame

The breakdown of generations is a central thematic problem in *Ardaas Karaan* (2019), a Punjabi film by Gippy Grewal. Against the backdrop of Punjabi communities in Canada, the film shows how cultural passing is rendered problematic when traditions, values, and expectations encounter problems of displacement and modernity. The film employs private conversations and household conflicts to illustrate resistance in less boisterous yet equally potent ways. The northern filmmaking landscape here is a site of self-reflection regarding identity, belonging and intra-generational negotiation, where resistance to marginalization does not appear as monumental battle but as everyday chat. Generational conflicts in cinema have become explained through cultural negotiation in which the new generations oppose the traditions left by their predecessors. Stuart Hall's description of cultural identity as continuity and rupture (Yang et al.) is particularly relevant in the explanation of *Ardaas Karaan*. Identity, explains Hall is never an essentialism but a perpetual negotiation between tradition and the exigencies of the moment. This conflict is observed in the manner in which the film depicts the older Punjabi generation, who are holding on to inherited culture and religion and the younger generation of family

members, who are rebelling against the said customs in achieving independence based on exposure across the globe. The schism⁴ is not presented as simple opposition but as an arena where resistance and reconciliation meet.

The plot of the movie is that of three elderly men in Canada who meet regularly to discuss their life philosophies and wars that they wage with their children and grandchildren. The dialogues are narrative sign posted calling attention to a pervasive motif of inter-generational strife. On the other hand, the elderly symbolize continuity by espousing justice, tradition following, and the moral instructions of communal life. In contrast, younger generations attribute their frustration over such expectations to assimilation pressures, irrelevance of original values in new contexts, and the quest of day-to-day life as compared to historical or mythological categories, leading northern cinema towards an introspective mode of narration. In narrative resistance, *Ardaas Karaan* resists the hegemony of Bollywood not with spectacular images but with a commitment to small-scale, dialogic forms of resolving conflicts. Pierre Bourdieu's habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) is an analytical tool useful in uncovering this strategy. Habitus is the embodied system of dispositions shaped by an individual's environment and upbringing. Elders in the film embody the habitus of Punjab, created through collectivist tradition and strong religious-moral frameworks, while youths embody diasporic modernity habitus, marked by individualism and negotiation within multicultural sites. It is this conflict between the two habitus frameworks that drives the film's central tensions. In bringing this conflict to the screen, *Ardaas Karaan* illustrates how regional cinema enacts resistance as a perpetual negotiation of values, and not a certain triumph of one over another. The northern cinematic landscape, as seen through *Ardaas Karaan*, encounters opposition not in high-octane insurgency but in the silent negotiation of intergenerational values. Resistance here is the practice of challenging settled hierarchies of the family and questioning cultural continuity against the background of displacement and migration. Unlike the dominant Bollywood, which glosses over such conflicted battles for the sake of homogenized narratives of modernity, *Ardaas Karaan* puts at the center stage the battles between authority and autonomy as most essential to the experience of the diaspora. The film resists marginalization by wanting it known that these everyday battles—bargains over respect, identity, and tradition's survival—are of equal cultural value as epic battles of history elsewhere in Indian cinema.

By its narrative strategies, the film emphasizes how debate, tension, and inter-generational bargaining themselves become means of cultural resistance. By maintaining competing understandings as opposed to presenting one solution, *Ardaas Karaan* re-negotiates the North as a site where resistance is articulated in terms of words rather than fragmentation. The northern film frame therefore becomes involved in the grand project of de-canonization through the presentation of a different mode of narration—one immune to Bollywood's monologic voice and verisimilar to lived realities of diasporic and provincial publics. In doing so, *Ardaas Karaan* writes into film that resistance does not need to be spectacular in the first instance; it may also emerge from the discreet but tenacious articulation of difference in everyday life.

Partition, Trauma and Gendered Histories: *Rajkahini* from the Eastern Lens

Partition in South Asia (Tripathi and Chaturvedi) entailed not only the marking out of political boundaries but also the establishment of communal identities governed by the Two nation theory whereby Muslims and Hindus formed two nations apart (Khan et al.). This theoretical framework underpinned demands for Pakistan and informed many nationalism narratives. Ethno-nationalism under which a nation is identified by common ethnic, religious or cultural characteristics- developed in tandem with British Colonial strategies that emphasized divisions for convenience when it came to governance (Malik et al.). These divisions, however, acted to heighten the shock of partition when borders were defined, with the population being torn away from communities, tongues, houses and selves. Trauma theory assists us in explaining how these interruptions are channeled: Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma is never present until it recurs through memory and narrative as a non-assimilable wound (Tomos). Srijit Mukherjee's *Rajkahini* (2015) employs these theoretical lenses to bring the foreground the gendered history of partition. The film is set during 1947 Bengal when the Radcliffe line is being mapped out. The film is about Begum Jaan, the owner of a brothel and its inhabitants. As the border is being mapped out by officials and all inhabitant are asked to move out because it falls on the Indian side, begum Jaan and her women resist moving out. The plots map out their resistances- against the external political authority that imposes broader and against internal social bias that excludes them. The brothel is transformed beyond a site of

⁴The term refers to a deep division or separation within a cultural, religious or social order. In cultural studies, Raymond Williams schism often indicates structural ruptures that generate conflict but also open possibilities for negotiation and transformation.

stigmatization. It is a site of revolt wherein women make decisions regarding their body, their agency and to belong to. Applying the concept of two nation theory to *Rajkahini* reveals how the film critiques the idea that belonging is reducible to religion or communal identity. The authorities want to assert the legitimacy of borders grounded in the theory. But Begum Jaan's refusal destabilizes that claim. Her resistance shows that for some people, home, identity, and loyalty do not align neatly with political maps drawn by communal ideology. The brothel women's identities are hybrid, complex, outside the dominant narratives that the Two-Nation Theory promotes. Ethno-nationalism is another factor explaining their marginality. As membership is based upon accepted nationality by the new nation state—almost always based upon religion—people who fall outside regular definitions are dislocated. The brothel and its women are outside normal national identifications in *Rajkahini*: excluded by society, condemned by morality, yet insisting upon their space and history. They are marginalized physically (eviction notice and assault) and symbolically (humiliation and societal stigma). Ethno-national discourse would erase them; the film puts them back.

Trauma is key to the representation of collective and gendered violence and displacement. Caruth's concept of the delayed wound is present in the narrative structure. Moments of violence and displacement can fade to background but recur in the women's memories, their fear of being abandoned, loss of community, and their insistence upon being recognized as persons. Begum Jaan and her women are not helpless victims; they bear and yet are borne by trauma as burden and witness. They are unwilling to move away as a form of maintaining dignity and protesting erasure. In this way, *Rajkahini* demonstrates that Partition's trauma is not just historical footnote but ongoing condition. Gendered histories become essential lenses through which resistance is possible. The film insists that the experiences of marginalized women—those excluded by nationalist narratives—must be included in any re-reading of Partition history. In doing this, the movie contributes to de-canonizing mainstream cinematic narratives that privilege male heroism, state formation, and communal divisions. It asserts that women, gendered suffering, and marginalized identities are central to cultural memory and national history.

Caste, Love and Subaltern Resistance: *Sairat* within the Western Narrative

Nagraj Manjule's *Sairat* (2016) arises out of Western India's socio-political landscape and rural Maharashtra, where caste hierarchies are still ingrained as a daily presence. The Western aesthetic frame has long been informed by Marathi parallel cinema and Gujarati social dramas but has consistently highlighted rural life, social disparities, and marginal communities' challenges. The film positions itself within this convention as continuation and unprecedented reconfiguration of romance cinema by using love as an affective trope but as subaltern political defiance. The story tracks Parshya, a boy from a lower caste and modest means, and Archie, who is from a powerful upper-caste dynasty with political clout. Their love affair is, while set within typical conventions of ingenuous passion, a transgressive one since it crosses fixed caste boundaries. The elopement—a seeking to create an equal space beyond the social hierarchy—represents a "pure relationship" as defined by Anthony Giddens in *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), one governed by mutual opting rather than enforced by kinship or caste (Hull et al.). However, this expression of individual freedom intersects with structural violence by virtue of caste dominance and ends with murder of the lovers by way of an honor killing.

The tragic ending to this film is typical to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational provocation in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), where she highlights how subaltern speech, even when it is expressed, is forcefully silenced by dominating orders (Nathan). Parshya and Archie try to speak through love, yet their silencing confirms the continuity of power that invalidates subaltern speech. Nevertheless, at another level, the Subaltern Studies collective's wider point—domination is never complete and resistance frequently appears as everyday practice—comes to light through their non-conformity to caste endogamy. Love here is at once a weak mode of agency and an overwhelming political challenge to the social order. In situating *Sairat* within the Western cinematic frame, one sees how the film continues a regional tradition that has long interrogated caste, class, and rural inequities. Earlier Marathi films such as *Fandry* (also by Manjule) and other socially-conscious Western Indian cinema foreground similar struggles of marginalized communities against systemic oppression. *Sairat*, however, radicalizes this trajectory by embedding its critique within the seemingly popular genre of romantic melodrama, thereby reaching audiences beyond the art-house circuit and confronting the mainstream with the realities of caste violence. Unlike Bollywood romances that often universalize love by detaching it from social realities, *Sairat* insists that intimacy is always mediated by caste and power, and in doing so, transforms a

personal narrative into a critique of systemic inequality. Thus, the Western cinematic frame not only contextualizes *Sairat* but amplifies its intervention: it demonstrates how regional cinema resists Bollywood's homogenizing aesthetics by grounding narratives in local histories, rural landscapes, and subaltern struggles. The subtitle *Caste, Love and Subaltern Resistance* is justified in this light, for *Sairat* exemplifies how Western Indian cinema mobilizes love as a site of cultural and political contestation, foregrounding defiance against entrenched hierarchies while simultaneously exposing the violent limits imposed on such resistance.

Displacement and Settlement: *Yarwng* through the Northeastern Gaze

Displacement in the Northeast is not merely a by-product of developmental projects. It is a part of longer history of displacement whereby the Northeast has been continually relegated to the margins. The Indian nation-state has routinely framed the Northeast on reductive terms, as both an exotic difference, and as a zone of insurgency and underdevelopment. Such representations have served to obfuscate the social realities of Northeast communities and created a gap between both the official narratives of progress, and silenced the inevitable histories of loss. In this context, displacement is more than an ephemeral act of movement; it denotes loss of memory, kinship, and cultural continuity that produces a rupture of people from their land. The Dumboor hydroelectric project in Tripura, implemented in the 1970s, represents this very paradox. Although hailed as a success in developmental terms, this hydroelectric system inundated fertile valleys, displaced thousands of Kokborok-speaking families, and dispersed them across landscapes that were foreign to them, under duress and with minimal assistance. For these families, what was lost to the rising waters were not just agricultural fields, but homes and sacred sites, and family ties that had been constructed over generations. While mainstream narratives framed the hydroelectric project as progress and a marker of modernization, the trauma and negative social impacts endured by the displaced continued to exist on the margins (*The New Indian Express*). This is precisely the marginal space that regional cinema, and specifically Joseph Pulinthanath's *Yarwng* (2008), interjects. By narrating the romance of Sukurai and Karmati—two lovers whose separation foreshadows the dismemberment of the undersea village to which they belong—*Yarwng* operates to expand an intimate tragedy into a collective tragedy of cultural loss. The love story is not merely about two people in love, but rather the disruption of communal life and the emotional disorientation of dislodging. The film's insistence, however, on culturally abiding by Kokborok language, performance traditions, and local actors firmly localizes its story in the cultural specificities of the Northeast and in which the experiences of the subjects can no longer be homogenized. This adherence to authenticity destabilizes the developmental discourse of displacement as a necessary sacrifice by narrating it as lived experience and suffering.

Raymond Williams's theory on the structure of feeling (1977) serves as a particularly productive way of reading this cinematic refusal. Williams identifies how art and culture register together emotions and lived experience that are left unarticulated from official political discourse (Sanehi). In the film *Yarwng*, displacement is not shown through violent confrontations, but rather through subtler, affective registers: the slow and quiet resolute walkers walking away carrying their possessions; the eerie disconnection where once there were roads that left the empty fields; and the gradual invasiveness of water erasing recognizable landscapes. These moments articulate what political historians cannot; that every community undergoes collective trauma, disorientation, and resilience in the face of developmental triumphalism. What sets the movie apart is its reframing of the cinematic gaze. Mainstream Indian cinema often portrayed dams as symbols of national pride and technological advancement, whereas this film decenters the state's version of events and instead foregrounds the lived realities of those displaced. In doing so, *Yarwng*, along with many other films produced in the Northeast, challenges the epistemic erasure of the Northeast while claiming the right to render history from within the community. The film, therefore, serves as an alternative archive, a repository of memory that intends to resist erasure, while making it clear that the costs of development are not simply concepts, but embodied wounds on bodies and landscapes.

Comparing crossroads: Negotiating Regional Narratives of Resistance

The comparative study of Indian regional cinemas shows us in short how these cinemas although emerging from different cultural geographies, historical situations, and storytelling traditions, all have one overriding unifying characteristic: resistance articulation. One can see in each of these under-discussion movies—*RRR* in the South, *Ardaas Karaan* in the North, *Rajkahini* in the East, *Sairat* in the West, and *Yarwng* in the Northeast—the exercising of different storytelling, symbolisms, and cultural memory strategies to combat Bollywood's long-dominant role as most visible and canonized of

Indian cinema's public face. Their resistance is not just thematic, but also formal, inscribed in language, narrative style, acting traditions, and modes of representation refusing assimilation into Bollywood's homogenizing impulses (Pezzullo and Striplhas). What unites them in this comparative context, is their common resistance to Indian cinema's hegemonic discourse, as it over decades has erased or marginalized regional voices. In their differences, these movies forge an opposing canon as they privilege multiple histories, fractured identities, and competing imaginaries repressed by Bollywood's logic of the universal. Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony offers a useful theoretical foundation for examining this process. Gramsci explains how ruling classes sustain their power not simply through coercive apparatuses of the state⁵(Stoddart)but by securing consent, shaping cultural norms, and naturalizing ideologies so that they appear common-sense to the masses (Sardar). Applied to Indian cinema, Bollywood has historically operated as the hegemonic institution that circulates dominant ideas of the nation—promoting homogenized nationalism, reinforcing patriarchal gender roles, celebrating developmental triumphalism, and reproducing upper-caste aspirations as universal values. Its widespread popularity and visibility ensure that these ideologies are normalized within the cultural imagination of India. Regional films, however, resist this cultural hegemony by dramatizing exclusions, silences, and contradictions that Bollywood ignores. For instance, *Sairat* challenges Bollywood's sanitized portrayals of romance by foregrounding the violent realities of caste; *Rajkahini* contests the nationalist myth of Partition as merely a story of territorial division by situating women's bodies as sites of trauma and memory; *Yarwng* dismantles celebratory discourses of development by showing the displacement of indigenous communities through the Dumboor dam project; *Ardaas Karaan* resists globalized consumerist ethos by turning inward to questions of intergenerational conflict and spiritual continuity; and *RRR* rewrites colonial history not from the center but from a regional vantage point where local heroes become epic resisters of imperial domination. Each of these films exposes the exclusions in hegemonic cultural production, refusing to allow the narratives of the state and Bollywood to stand uncontested.

What emerges through this comparative lens is that resistance is perhaps positioned in local histories and cultural specificities. *RRR* deploys the spectacle of historical epic to reauthor colonial resistance as a regional narrative, thus claiming that resistance to imperialism is not an abstract national struggle but one integral to local histories of suffering and heroism. *Ardaas Karaan*, placed in the Punjabi context, highlights how migration and globalization break down family structures and cultural values, but it resists this decline through an emphasis on spiritual practices, moral deliberation, and intergenerational communication. *Rajkahini* returns to Partition of Bengal but eschews its mainstream narrative as national triumph; instead, it reveals the scarring violations imposed on women, revealing ways in which nationalist discourse often effaced gendered suffering. *Sairat* emerging out of Maharashtra shifts the focus to caste oppression, revealing that love becomes an arena of subaltern resistance as it breaches established social hierarchies. Lastly, *Yarwng* places resistance in Northeast by recounting displacement not as mere casualty of progress but as an existential cultural severing for tribal societies, placing front and center indigenous voices and affective memories otherwise occluded. These contexts clarify that regional resistance does not exist in monolithic form: its enunciation is intimately linked to histories, traumas, and future hopes of particular communities. Yet, in spite of differences, these movies converge in an interdicted move to not allow Bollywood's dominant narratives to become the sole authentic history of Indian cinema. To illuminate further how these regional films undermine dominant discourse, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism offers another critical lens. In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), Bakhtin pits monologic texts, which assert a single authoritative voice, against dialogic texts, which generate polyphony—by which he means not just multiple voices, perspectives, and truths but an interweaving of these, creating space for different truths to coexist. Bollywood, in its canonical format, tends to operate monologically (Hamston): its great nationalisms, its depiction of dams as triumphs of progress, and its romantic stories erasing caste or class contradictions all assert single visions of India, repressing dissenting voices. The regional films, on the other hand, themselves embody dialogism. They bring repressed perspectives into dialogue with dominant ones, creating heteroglossia, reflecting Indian society's complex, layered experience (Flanagan). These polyphonic modes not only resist homogeny but assert, too, that cinema itself can be not just monologic but also, at times, a space of dialogue wherein silenced voices can find voice. The comparative study therefore identifies two related findings: firstly, that resistance as common thread runs through different regional

⁵ It refers to institutions such as the military, police and judiciary, which enforce the authority of the ruling class through force or the threat of force. In Gramsci's formulation, these coercive means are complemented by ideological strategies that secure popular consent.

cinemas, and, secondly, that resistance finds expression both in terms of theme and form. Thematically, resistance manifests as resistance to colonial domination (*RRR*), to cultural value erosion (*Ardaas Karaan*), to Partition's gendered violence (*Rajkahini*), to caste domination (*Sairat*), and to displacement and effacement (*Yarwng*). Formally, resistance manifests as resistance to monologism, as these texts develop dialogic plots, which set out multiple truths and challenge hegemonic closure. Together, they not only criticize Bollywood's dominance but also position themselves as active participants in canon-formation, insisting upon an acknowledgment of their competing perspectives. Thus, regional films do not exist as peripheral voids but as active cultural sites redefining Indian cinematic topography. Against Bollywood's hegemonic dominance, they express counter-hegemonies, recover repressed histories, and invoke dialogic modes bringing to view Indian social heterogeneity. Their common practice of resistance, in Gramsci- and Bakhtin-informed reading, affords this paper's central argument: regional cinemas, different in their practices and contexts, come together in refusing to be silenced. They produce a dialogic counter-canon resisting Bollywood's cultural hegemony in favor of a plural, contested, and effervescent cinematic discourse wherein margins actively remake the center.

Conclusion: Peripheral Cinemas as Dynamic Sites of Cultural Reconfiguration

The present study demonstrates that Indian regional cinemas despite being shaped by distinct geographies, histories, and narrative traditions, converge around a shared premise of resistance. Films such as *RRR* (south), *Ardaas Karaan* (North), *Rajkahini* (East), *Sairat* (West), and *Yarwng* (Northeast) illustrate this convergence by deploying narrative strategies that foreground alternative cultural, social and political realities. Taken together these films resist the homogenizing impulses of mainstream Indian cinema by positioning marginal experiences at the center of their narratives. Through distinct formal choices and cultural references, they construct cinematic spaces that highlight local histories, languages, struggles and practices. In this way they do not merely reflect regional concerns but actively affirm the value of lived experiences often ignored or simplified in dominant narratives. The act of resistance, therefore, operates both in their thematic content and in their resistance on alternative modes of representation. This intersection becomes clearer in comparative analysis, where a common thread of resistance emerges across varied contexts and narrative strategies. *Sairat* juxtaposes romantic idealism with caste oppression, *Rajkahini* layers women's voices against historical erasure, and *Yarwng* presents displacement as both individual and collective trauma. Similarly, *RRR* and *Ardaas Karaan* trouble established accounts of history and spirituality through reinterpretation and intergenerational dialogue. Each of these interventions disrupts dominant cinematic conventions, generating new narrative vocabularies that extend the expressive possibilities of Indian cinema. In this sense, the margins are not passive or peripheral but active sites of negotiation where cultural, historical and social meanings are reimagined. Regional cinemas affirm pluralism by chronicling oppression alongside resilience, trauma alongside survival and displacement alongside belonging. By doing so, they expand the critical and aesthetic landscape of Indian cinema, positioning themselves as indispensable to any understanding of its complexity and diversity.

This research also suggests directions for future study. Future researchers might want to study the impact of digital platforms and streaming services on expanding access to regional films and redefining what is understood by canonical cinema. Audience studies might allow us to examine how viewers engage with, make sense of, and distribute regional stories of resistance, providing a fuller picture of how production, consumption, and cultural impact are linked. Studies beyond comparisons within India may also reveal trends of transnational regional resistance, and how peripheral cinemas are negotiating cultural authority in other postcolonial contexts. Additionally, emergent sub-regional cinemas—such as Dalit, queer, or ecological films—can add even more to our understanding of the intersectionality of marginality, identity, and resistance. This study would further deepen our understanding of the modalities by which regional cinema continues to challenge centralizing claims and endeavors in both content and form, and show that the process of canon formation continues to unfold and evolve. To sum up, Indian regional cinemas, while varied in their narrative approaches, geography, and contexts, share a steadfast commitment to resistance. They resist cultural homogenization by prioritizing marginalized voices, celebrate local specificity, and assert themselves as legitimate parts of the larger Indian cinema discourse. The complexities of themes, styles, and cultural perspectives in these films challenge the center's hegemony of cinema and illustrate the impossibility of grasping India's cinematic landscape through the center's lens alone. Rather, the vibrancy, creativity, and cultural nuance found in regional cinema that continually redefine and enrich the national cinematic imagination impose an acknowledgment that the margins exist as living and influential sites within the construction of India's cinematic project.

Declaration of using AI tools

During the preparation of this work, the author used *Semantic Scholar* to support literature discovery and to clarify specific theoretical concepts discussed in selected research articles. Following the use of this tool, the author critically reviewed, synthesized and edited the content as necessary, and take full responsibility of the article.

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