



### **“Vittil Poochi Thaan Vilakkule Vizhum”<sup>1</sup>: The Spectre of Thalaikoothal hovering over Older Adults in *Baaram* (2020)**

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**Abstract** : *Baaram* (The Burden, 2020) is a Tamil language National Award-winning feature film directed by Priya Krishnaswamy from the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII). The film engages with the questions of the dignity of living, palliative care, and mistreatment of older adults in a docu-fiction style of filmmaking. This paper critically examines the representational politics of *Thalaikoothal*, or involuntary euthanasia, prevalent in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu, through the cinematic piece *Baaram*. It highlights how *Thalaikoothal* is institutionalised as an organised labyrinthine network with unauthorised practitioners, unlicensed sellers, and local quacks. The paper takes a qualitative approach by interviewing the director of the film through a structured questionnaire. Through the interview, this paper analyses the narrative and visual tropes incorporated in the film from the firsthand account by the film practitioner. Further, it also discusses the creative decisions of the team in conceptualising and mapping the script through pre-decided methods and improvisations. Finally, the paper explores how filmic representations like *Baaram* attempt to interrogate the normative scripts that privilege younger bodies and patronisingly segregate others based on age. Towards these ends, the paper focuses on the suffocating structure of *Thalaikoothal* through which individuals orchestrate the conspiratorial performance of executing violence upon the bodies of older adults who are treated as the marginalised “Other” in the mainstream discourse.

**Keywords:** *Baaram*, *Thalaikoothal*, *Older Adults*, *Tamil Cinema*, *Age*, *Tamil Nadu*

#### **Introduction**

“I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
and I have seen the eternal footman hold my coat, and snicker,  
and in short, I was afraid.” (Eliot, lines 90-92)

*Baaram* (The Burden, 2020) is a Tamil language National Award-winning feature film directed by Priya Krishnaswamy from the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII). The film is produced by Priya Krishnaswamy and Ardra Swaroop. The cinematography of the film is done by Jayanth Sethu Mathavan. The film is an eclectic mosaic of experienced and debut actors like R. Raju, Sugumar Shanmugam, Su. Pa. Muthukumar, Jayalakshmi, among many others. This film is a sensitive articulation of the illegal practice of *Thalaikoothal*, that is, senicide, prevalent in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu and other parts of India. The filmmaker engages with the questions of the dignity of living, palliative care, and mistreatment of older people<sup>2</sup> in a docu-fiction style of filmmaking.

Out of the twenty-six feature films, *Baaram* got selected by the Indian Panorama Jury to be screened at the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), 2018, held in Goa. It also got nominated for the ICFT UNESCO Gandhi Medal at IFFI, 2018. This paper critically examines the representational politics of *Thalaikoothal*, or involuntary euthanasia, through the cinematic piece *Baaram*. The paper takes a qualitative approach by interviewing the film director through a structured questionnaire after the film screening at the Indian Habitat Centre in 2019.<sup>3</sup> Through the interview, this paper also analyses the narrative and visual tropes incorporated in the film from the firsthand account by the film practitioner. Further, it also discusses the creative decisions of the team in conceptualising and mapping the script through pre-decided methods and improvisations.

The representation of older adults as potential protagonists in conjunction with the metaphors of mundanity foreground the altering perceptions of age in the Tamil cultural discourse through their multi-dimensional portrayals in film and media texts. While Tamil films like Madhumita's *KD Engira Karuppururai*<sup>4</sup> (KD AKA Karuppururai, 2019), on the one hand, create a mirthful mood to focus on the journey of an older person who decides to live his life in its carefree effervescence after he overhears his family weighing the possibility of killing him through the illegal practice of *Thalaikoothal*, *Baaram*, on the other hand, is a brooding insight into the facts of *Thalaikoothal* with a journalistic conviction and painful urgency. Similarly, the cultural productions in over-the-top (OTT) platforms with anthology film-series such as Venkatesh Maha's *C/o Kancharapalem* (Care of Kancharapalem, a locality in the city of Vishakhapatnam, 2018) and Halitha Shameem's *Sillu Karuppatti* (Palm

Jaggery, 2019) destigmatises romantic intimacies and emotional affinities in older adults through a progressive portrayal of modern-day relationships across different age groups and challenges the negative stereotypes of ageing in our cultural consciousness. These anthologies in the contemporary popular culture underlie the processes of healthy social engagements, cognitive functioning, and contentment of life in older adults to question the discursive constructs of the gerontological rhetoric that marginalises older persons outside the mainstream conventions.

*Baaram* narrates the story of a night watchman named Karuppasamy who lives with his maternal family, including his sister and three nephews, namely Veera, Murugan, and Muni. In the film, Murugan and his brother run an idli stall in a small unnamed town in Tamil Nadu. Veera is a bus conductor who later becomes a unionist. Due to an unfortunate accident, Karuppasamy is advised to undergo a hip replacement by the town doctor, failing which he might be unable to walk for his entire life. However, Karuppasamy's son Senthil, a "fitter" in a spinning mill, is reluctant to pay the operation expenses due to his financial limitations. The doctor suggests that Karuppasamy can also undergo free treatment under the Prime Minister Scheme if he submits a few of his documents. However, due to Senthil's reckless attitude, he refuses to make any efforts. While Karuppasamy's nephews insist on his treatment in the town hospital, Senthil does not budge to their earnest appeal. So, he takes his father to their ancestral village to get him treated by the traditional healer. However, situations turn murky, and we hear Karuppasamy's death shortly. At the funeral procession, an older woman refers to the incident as a case of "murder." The rest of the film revolves around the trade unionist Veera as he unabatedly unravels the reasons behind the mysterious death of his beloved *Mama* (uncle). The title *Baaram*, translated as the burden, is symbolic of how adults refuse to take responsibility for their bedridden parents and treat them as an intolerable burden due to financial and family obligations.

According to Krishnaswamy, the biggest challenge was to raise finances for making the film. As she says, "It began as a small, low-budget film, but then we decided to shoot on a professional 4K RED Dragon camera with sync sound with eighty-six actors on 26 locations, so the production became bigger and professional."<sup>5</sup> The cast<sup>6</sup> comprises a mix of both professional and new actors. Karuppasamy, played by R. Raju turned out to be a professor at the Department of Performing Arts at

Pondicherry University. Sugumar Shanmugam, who plays the character Veera, is Raju's student, and the casting director of the film. Speaking about Raju, Krishnaswamy mentions, "I cast him within two minutes of meeting him, without an audition or even a reading because of the sweetness of his personality. It was a huge bonus when he turned out to be an alumnus of the National School of Drama, New Delhi."

### **The Practice of *Thalaikoothal***

The film begins with a close-up shot of an agitated Veera. Through this familial narrative, the film interrogates one of the chilling accounts of *Thalaikoothal*, where the ailing and bedridden older adults are killed by their own family in the districts of Tamil Nadu such as Virudhunagar, Theni, Thoothukudi, and so on. The literal translation of the term refers to a cold bath given to the older person after his/her body is thoroughly massaged with oil, followed by making the individual drink a few glasses of coconut water. This process leads to severe discomfort in the body and disturbances in the body temperature. As the treatment takes a toll, the person catches a fever and dies in a few days. What is unexpected and frightening is that *Thalaikoothal* is practiced in a traditionally ritualistic way and includes twenty-six ways of terminating older persons' lives. In a society shaped by a patriarchal setup, where sons are preferred and daughters are treated as liabilities, it is appalling to see sons performing *Thalaikoothal* on their sick parents. Speaking about the criminal practice, the filmmaker comments, "When we talk about cultural messaging, this is the country that wants sons, yet the ones who murder the elderly are the sons themselves. We don't have the social infrastructure to take care of the elderly. The breakdown of the joint family is a problem that I wanted to showcase" ("Alternate cinema"). The film presents the contradictions and negotiations in a parent-child relationship in transitional phases like retirement through "intergenerational ambivalence" (Luescher and Pillemer 414-416) where even as the parent, Karuppasamy, wants to maintain physical autonomy from his child Senthil, he ends up being dependent on his offspring. Similarly, Senthil also feels torn between his familial proximity and constraints of caregiving, hence foregrounding family relations that ricochet between the complex dynamics of solidarity and conflict.

In an article in *The Hindu* titled “Thalaikoothal: death in 26 shades,” Dennis S. Jesudasan reports the findings of a study titled “A Study on the Victims of Geronticide in Tamil Nadu, India” carried out by M. Priyamvadha, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology of Madras University. According to the statistical report, “49 percent of the respondents did not want their parents to suffer during old age, 34 percent claim the situation where there was no scope for improvement in physical or mental condition of the elderly, and 23 percent respondents cite poor economic conditions to be the major reasons behind the illegal practice” (Jesudasan). The study also reports a case from Theni district where a son killed his father for joining the government service. In the film, we observe how Senthil leaves for Dubai, with his wife and daughter, for a better job opportunity without any visible guilt of his father’s killing. The film also tells us stories where grandchildren playfully threaten their grandparents with this practice if they try to admonish the kids. The film portrays how this pervasive and unrestricted custom represents our culture’s deteriorating respect for the value of human life. Krishnaswamy herself was brought up in a joint family that functioned as a haven for every member of the household. *Baaram* highlights the altered nature of the extended family system and kinship structures. The decreasing bandwidth in a nuclear family is evident in the film when Karuppasamy’s granddaughter finds it challenging to connect with his grandfather and hesitates to take the flute he has bought for her as a birthday gift. The disengaged isolation of a separate household makes both the kids and the older adults feel physically and emotionally misplaced. Karuppasamy experiences loneliness as his son’s house reeks of a hopeless air of neglect. This subjective experience of social isolation and lack of adequate communication leads to “the absence of an intimate attachment, feelings of emptiness, or abandonment” (De Jong Gierveld 74).

The practice of *Thalaikoothal* is socially sanctioned, and as a result, even the police does not address it as a heinous crime. In the film, the practice of *Thalaikoothal* is described as a “norm” in rural areas. It is that openly prevalent that even the police officer closes Karuppasamy’s case as an incident of natural death and not murder. Due to the election season in the district, the Home Minister orders the police to stop the investigation and permanently close the case. As Krishnaswamy responds, “There is also a strong political unwillingness in Tamil Nadu to allow the news of

*Thalaikoothal* to spread, so political pressure is exerted to shut down cases that do surface, which is what happens between the Home Minister and the police officer in my film.” The fact that no stringent punitive measures are exercised against the perpetrators leaves the victims in a helpless situation.

The cultural acceptance of this practice in Tamil Nadu points to the violent infringement of human rights and the increasing vulnerability of the older population. The film shows an older woman who stays away from her family and earns her daily bread is extremely telling of the torture and psychological trauma these harmful practices entail. This older woman named Mariakka, the cattle herder, had a similar story to that of her character in the film. Despite her arthritis problem, she prefers to stay alone and does not want to die at her son’s hands, who in turn is a daily wage labourer grappling with his family issues. Thus, the articulation of the right to life and physical safety is deeply jeopardised. As Priyamvada states, “Although there is a Maintenance of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 which has excellent provisions for the elderly, the legislation fails to cover prevention of such acts” (Matthew). This spectre of mortality looming large through this illegal, murderous practice creates a crisis in humanity.

Speaking of the research material that went into the making of the film, Krishnaswamy describes that it took three years of intermittent research to trace how the story was taking shape. During the research process, the filmmaker came across two episodes on ageing and the practice of *Thalaikoothal* through Aamir Khan’s *Satyameva Jayate* (Truth Triumphs), a Star plus TV show that discusses social issues in India, directed by Satyajit Bhatkal. Following that, she met the family where the first case of *Thalaikoothal* was reported and spent a week in the small industrial town and the neighbouring village. This visit was accompanied by several interviews with the deceased’s family members to gauge how the act was practiced. Discussions with the activists and volunteers at an NGO that deals with elders helped to further the finding process.

One of the surprising incidents during the research process, according to Krishnaswamy, was meeting the traditional *Thalaikoothal* practitioner in an NGO office that helps elders in Tamil Nadu. As the filmmaker describes, “She was about sixty to sixty-five, and a lovely, sweet woman. She was happy to meet and talk with me, and we spoke for about an hour over cups of tea. She was certain that what she

was doing was positive and helped both the infirm elderly and their families (sic).” Krishnaswamy adds, “She charged no money for her services and saw it as a sort of social service. She said she’d learnt *Thalaikoothal* from her grandmother. The last person she’d done it to was her own mother” (sic). However, her mother survived and continues to live happily with her. The filmmaker also included an abridged version of her in the second half when Veera returns to the village after Karuppasamy’s funeral to interrogate the events in the village. Moreover, the research kept on happening simultaneously throughout the making of the film through dialogue writing and casting, where the cast members expressed anecdotes from the village that they were aware of. It went on even during the post-production phase (Krishnaswamy).

Speaking of the research process, in the eleventh episode of *Satyameve Jayate*, 2012 titled “Old Age: Unwanted Burden,” Pramila Krishnan, a former correspondent of *Deccan Chronicle*, shares details of her 2010 investigative report on elders’ mercy killing in the Virudhunagar district of Tamil Nadu. While visiting the village, she posed to be a researcher who wanted to understand the old customs and practices of the village. According to her findings, *Thalaikoothal* is not restricted to either affluent or economically-weaker strata but happens across different sections of the society. She also met a quack with whom she camouflaged to be someone incapable of enduring her bedridden grandfather and in need of a solution. She drew the attention of the Zilla collector to spread awareness about the issue.<sup>7</sup> In an article titled “Journalist of the Month,” she states, “The government woke up to the issue and introduced a helpline for needy elders. Officials were instructed to check on the deaths of elders in villages and examine whether the death was due to natural cause or murder” (Weiss). In *Baaram*, the character of the journalist Deepa, as Krishnaswamy tells us, stands as “an amalgam of several journalists whose reports [she] read and watched in TV documentaries online.” Her story arc was created from scratch with sagacious thought and precision. The team decided to keep her “gender female so as to heighten the danger inherent in the sting operation that she carries out among a nexus of killers, brokers and commission agents,” ventriloquises Krishnaswamy.

Speaking on the debates surrounding ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ euthanasia, Krishnaswamy says, “Those who choose death might have physical reasons, but must operate within the ambit of the law. However, the killing of people against their wishes is murder. No question about it” (sic). The film presents arguments and

perspectives related to the (il)legitimacy of the practice. The film employs actual documentary footage shot by the electronic media students at Pondicherry University. As Krishnaswamy shares, she outsourced the specific media segment to the university students so that the footage can be used later as a montage accompanied by a song. However, what started as a mock interview shoot led to the revelation that the practice was also increasingly prevalent in Pondicherry. Therefore, the filmmaker's conscious decision was to keep the shots with the dialogue in the film. Out of the several dynamic responses, she selected three perspectives, which represented "different schools of thought" (Krishnaswamy) about *Thalaikoothal*. The footage in the film includes a man who acknowledges killing as a crime but also argues for ending the older adult's suffering. It also incorporates a woman who staunchly condemns the act, and an elder figure who feels scared of the brutal act.

Speaking of the practice, Priyamvada verbalises, "The mode of killing is determined largely by the livelihood and demographic factors of the person" (Mathew). The film refers to several ways in which this practice has been exercised without state injunction. It includes congestion of the food pipe by mud, choking the older adults by thrusting *Murukku*, a deep-fried snack, down their throat, injecting poisonous injections, giving *maatthirai* (tablet) bought from unqualified quacks, and so on. The film highlights how *Thalaikoothal* is, in fact, institutionalised as an organised labyrinthine network with intermediaries, unauthorised practitioners, unlicensed sellers, and local quacks. However, NGOs like HelpAge India, Elders for Elders Foundation, among others have intervened in actively addressing the social issue. Elango Rajarathinam, Virudhunagar-based director of Elders for Elders Foundation, says, "The gradual spread of pensions, however modest, is also helping. "If you're dead, you can't bring a pension in [...] Now families have an interest in keeping you alive" (Magnier). On the 30<sup>th</sup> September 2018,<sup>8</sup> older persons from diverse parts of the country like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, and Bihar gathered at Jantar Mantar for demanding an increase in pension amount and for addressing the issue of decreasing purchasing power. Commenting on the unequal distribution of pension money, the social activist Aruna Roy commented that it is necessary to "consult pensioners and all others to think about a comprehensive legal framework that guarantees a dignified pension entitlement and a people-centred delivery system" (Bhatnagar). The non-governmental organisations have taken



several measures to ensure a dignified life for the elder population such as self-help groups and ensuring palliative care for a healthy life. The groups are also provided loans by Nabard<sup>9</sup> Financial Services in Karnataka to finance their business projects like crop cultivation, agriculture, buying seeds and fertilisers, tailoring, grocery stores, among many others. These small yet significant infrastructural provisions and welfare regimes reduce the risk of social marginalisation, thus stepping towards a more equitable form of distributing economic resources to older adults.

### **Visual Metaphors in *Baaram*: A Discussion**

In the beginning, the film shows us a colourful and busy marketplace with cacophonous sounds and a chorus of discordant voices. Amidst this *mise-en-scène*, we see a long shot of Karuppasamy walking through the streets bargaining with the shopkeepers to buy a gift for his granddaughter's birthday. We also see the repeated shots of the statue of the *kaaval deivam*, or the protector deity Karuppasamy, with his fierce painted face. This shot is extremely telling. Many villages in Tamil Nadu have a tradition of a guardian deity who is believed to protect the entire village (*Oor Kaaval*) from external malevolent threats. The colossal shrines and terracotta statues of these deities are erected on the outskirts of the geographical location to ward off evil forces in the rural landscape. They are known by various names in Tamil Nadu such as *Ayyanar*, *Sudalai Madan*<sup>10</sup> in Tirunelveli, *Karuppasamy*, *Muneeswaran*, *Porpanaiyar* in Pudukottai, among many others. As Krishnaswamy reasons, this reference "seemed culturally and metaphorically appropriate for my main character, and also suited his profession as a night security guard." She adds, "the fact that Karuppasamy is a protector renders his hit-and-run accident, subsequent disability and vulnerability, and eventual killing into a huge tragedy." The film's trailer also incorporates the song "*Aadi Varaan Paadi Varaan Karuppan*" (Here comes Karuppan, singing and dancing). When the music for the film was being recorded, the traditional Tamil musicians from Dharavi were asked to include the name of the character/deity to mirror that duality in their performed work and build emotional resonance in the film.

In one of the crucial scenes of the film, Karuppasamy tells his nephew Veera, "*Vittil Poochi than vilakkule vizhum. Naan minmini poochi*" (only the moth falls into the lamp fire, I am a firefly). This dialogue is pivotal as it provides us a profound

insight, and that is, an older adult with a strong will to live would have never chosen ‘voluntary’ euthanasia, since he also expresses his desire to get operated in the film, but which is nevertheless unjustly denied to him. This decisive moment in the film also foreshadows the fact that a terrible event is going to strike him, a near-death accident, and in fact, his death through *Thalaikoothal*. Commenting on the emotional weight of the dialogue, Krishnaswamy opines, “I do like the idea of a little plant-and-pay off. I also liked the gentle poetry of a healthy man who openly declares his unwillingness to be dependent on his son, and prefers to shine his own light/power on his life.” What makes the scene even more critical is that it is for the final time that Veera would see his uncle in a good physical condition. According to the filmmaker, “Veera’s offer to drop him off on his bike and Karuppasamy’s response – “Why, don’t you want to see me well? I’ll walk” – is far more foreshadowing of the tragedy that follows” (Krishnaswamy). When Veera asks him why he would struggle with a watchman job since he is growing older, Karuppasamy’s unequivocal volition to continue with his work challenges the ageist assumption that the process of growth in older adults needs to be necessarily synonymous with social withdrawal and state of inactivity.

The film also employs visual signifiers and specific cinematic shots to manifest the theme of the film. The cameraman and Krishnaswamy worked for months on the lighting pattern in each scene well in advance. The film is shot in high contrast with deep shadows and dark frames wherever necessary for visually articulating the tense and sinister mood of the film. As the film focuses on a sensitive topic with gritty realism, the makers of the film have chosen the bright colours of Tamil Nadu instead of an artificially forced aesthetic. Commenting on the cinematic language, Krishnaswamy enunciates, “Both the cameraman and I come from a classical film school education and did a lot of pre-shoot visualising, which allowed us to adapt to the changes and challenges of the location shoot.” In several scenes in the film, the focus shots reduce the wholes to parts. For example, after Karuppasamy’s accident, a lot of the shots focus on his legs whether he is being walked into the hospital by Mani and Murugan, or the scenes where he is transported to and fro from the village in the tempo, and even during his paralysed confinement in a bed at Senthil’s house. Karuppasamy’s drip-infused hand shot in the trailer is shot in a close-up with a shallow focus. As the filmmaker explains, “He’s suddenly disabled and dependent on

the kindness of others, and we emphasised that a lot. It's a terrible state to be in, especially for someone so fit and active" (Krishnaswamy). Therefore, the legs are metonymically associated with independence and physical freedom. According to her, she was clear about where the film would show full figures or close shots. For her, "Cinema is a language, and every lens/magnification choice, and every shot is like a word in a sentence. It can be used with the same precision as writing." The film consciously employs few visual metaphors because the team wanted the viewer to forget that (s)he is watching a film to become immersed in the experiential events in the film. The use of a handheld camera for shooting the film adds to the thematic texture of the film and heightens the tension and realism. One of the single-shot scenes from "Narcos," an American crime drama on Netflix, was shown as a reference to the cameraman by the filmmaker. As Krishnaswamy explains, "I wanted the device of a film to disappear so that the viewer is left with only a fly-on-the-wall experience of watching a situation unfold almost in real time." Unlike a steady-cam mounted on a tripod that offers a stable moving image, the handheld camera creates a sense of immediacy with its rough movements.

One of the eeriest and menacing scenes of the film is where Senthil surreptitiously invites the local quack to murder his father. This scene is exceptionally layered as it communicates intense sentiments. While watching his father getting murdered, Senthil stands in the kitchen with cold indifference as his father gets asphyxiated to death. The camera employs a close-up on Senthil's face, which looks completely dark on one side and lighted on the other. The harsh light on his face creates drastic/dark shadows, which makes the scene feel more tense and mysterious. According to the screenplay, there are three magnifications of Senthil and his wife Stella in the scene. As Krishnaswamy describes, "As the scene develops with the killing outside, the camera goes closer and closer to Senthil and Stella, to see what they are feeling. Is there any remorse?" The harsh contrast of shadow and light also highlights the malicious cruelty and unflattering aspects of human nature. It is a cold-blooded murder that happens in the dead of night. Therefore, the nocturnal silence is deafening. What is startling is that the Karuppasamy lies on the bed lifeless while the buzzing fly hovers around his face; a chilling sound of meditative mourning reminding us of the clocks of mortality and vortex of time. This striking absence of noise feels like the sound of death, disturbing and unsettling. This deadening silence

can be juxtaposed with the other scenes where we continually hear the echo of Karuppasamy calling “Senthil! Senthil!” in the background, but now it has been deliberately smothered.

In the end, Veera says, “*Yennaku Kadavulla nambikkai ellam illa, aana unmai yennikaanu oru naal velila varum-nu solvanga. Sari, athukkaga kaathirkkalam-nu thonichi*” (I don’t believe in God, but they say the truth shall prevail. I’m waiting). These lines model Veera’s ideological understanding as a humanist who gathers the conviction to discover the reasons for his uncle’s death. This solitary search is portrayed in the second half of the film, where we are shown a field with a single fluttering plant. For Krishnaswamy, the scene communicates the idea that “it’s a new day, a new dawn, and nothing in the village has changed despite the horrific killings, which are so routine. But a weed, like the truth, is a hardy plant that survives everything.” As she specifies, “It is that idealism that gives Veera the strength and the courage to discover how thousands of others are dying in the villages every year, and the imagination to do something about it when the state machinery turns him away.” Due to his uncle’s words of encouragement, he quits his stable job as a bus conductor and becomes a trade unionist. In the film’s poster, we see Veera’s enlarged face on one side and Senthil’s face on the other, which is relatively smaller than that of Veera’s. This was done to ensure that both the protagonist and the antagonist are incorporated in the poster to enhance the dramatic tension. Interestingly, the end credits scene employs the flute-music, the same instrument Karuppasamy bought for his granddaughter. The flute becomes the signifier of the equilibrium of existence and Karuppasamy’s harmonious personality. According to Krishnaswamy, “The flute is a soothing, mellow, musical instrument that effectively counterpoints the jagged edges of the brutality of Karuppasamy’s story.”

## Conclusion

*Baaram* stands a testament to the fact that the importance of human life is decreasing exponentially due to our self-interest and negligence in sustaining the lives of older adults. For Krishnaswamy, “As a society, we consistently fail our weakest components – the young and the elderly.” Since the older persons get affected by *thadumaatram* (imbalance/disorientation), *vayathu muthirthal* (senescence), *iyalaamai* (physical impairment), the film captures the unavoidable confrontation with

the frightening practice of *Thalaikoothal* where adults withdraw medical assistance and emotional support by deserting their parents. This National Award-winning film painfully portrays the literal and metaphorical strangulation of older adults while they struggle to negotiate with the potential implications of the ageing experience. By laying bare all the rough excrescences and serrated edges, *Baaram* painstakingly documents the suffocating structure of *Thalaikoothal* through which individuals orchestrate the conspiratorial performance of executing violence upon the bodies of older adults who are treated as the marginalised “Other.” Through portrayals of older people in multiple ways through Tamil cultural texts, we observe an alternative vocabulary of articulating the differential experiences of coming to terms with ageist power dynamic, conundrums of caregiving, and narratives of invisibilisation concerning older persons. Such filmic representations involve interrogating the normative scripts that privilege younger bodies and patronisingly segregate others on the grounds of age. Hence, *Baaram*, through its cultural representation, earnestly explores the hierarchies of family structures, the tenuousness of shared affinities, and the ethics of reciprocal relationships.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Only the moth falls into the lamp fire. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Drawing from the critiques of language and linguistic encoding in gerontological discourse, this paper employs terms like older adults, older persons, and older people and avoids the usage of derogatory terms like ageing and old. The term “ageing” has been specifically used to denote a biological and physiological sense of growth in years.

See Palmore “Ageism in Gerontological Language,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/40.6.645>. Accessed 12 Sept. 2019.

Further, see Gendron, Tracey L, et al. “The Language of Ageism,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnv066>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Krishnaswamy, Priya. “Research Paper - Film Festival.” Received by B. Geetha, 27 May 2019. Email Interview.

<sup>4</sup> To cite one of the earlier examples, another legendary character in Tamil cinema is Kannatha from the comedy film *Paatti Sollai Thattaadhe* (Do not disobey the grandmother’s words, 1988), played by the star comedienne “Aachi” Manorama, who questions the reductionist prescriptions and perceptions of ageing by portraying a powerful woman of action with heroic proportions.

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<sup>5</sup> Many of Priya Krishnaswamy's friends and classmates from Rishi Valley School and FTII joined on-board as investors for the film, recognising the importance of the subject.

<sup>6</sup> Krishnaswamy describes, "My co-producer, Ardra Swaroop, and I had earlier seen a play in Cuddalore by students from the Dept. of Performing Arts at Pondicherry University. When Ardra and I decided to produce the film ourselves, the biggest challenge was the casting, since we needed 86 actors of various ages who would convey the sense of a community, and I wanted even the smallest role to be performed well, to maintain the realism of the film" (sic).

<sup>7</sup> In a 2013 Deccan Chronicle article, Krishnan reports how older persons in remote areas do not get informed about welfare schemes. According to 2011 data, the number of older adults in Tamil Nadu benefiting from the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS) is low as compared to states like Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and West Bengal. See Krishnan, Pramila. "Palliative care can save elders." Facebook, 12 Sept. 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10200343879391276&set=a.2378742679659&type=3&theater>. Accessed 7 June 2019.

<sup>8</sup> For more details on the protest for the universal pension scheme, see the article Ghosh, Shinjini. "Higher Pension Required for Us to Lead Respectable Lives". *The Hindu*, 30 Sept. 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/higher-pension-required-for-us-to-lead-respectable-lives/article25086315.ece>. Accessed 7 July 2019.

<sup>9</sup> See Krishnan, Pramila. "Nabard Financial Services to the Rescue of Elders, 16 July 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=4939033925340&set=a.2378742679659&type=3&theater>. Accessed 6 July 2019.

<sup>10</sup> In Kallidaikurichi, a town in Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu, in one of the prevalent slangs, a tall, gigantic person is referred to as "Sollai Maadan," a lexical variant of Sudalai Maadan in everyday spoken Tamil. I am indebted to my grandmother for sharing this information with me for the purpose of this paper.

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