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**Labour, Childhood, and Eco-Precarity in Mari Selvaraj's  
*Vaazhai***

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**Abstract:** This paper examines Mari Selvaraj's *Vaazhai* (2024) through the theoretical framework eco-precarity discussed by Pramod K. Nayar in the book *Eco-precarity: Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture*. In order to analyse the interconnected relationship between labour, caste, environment, and vulnerable existence. Set within the space of plantation labour, the film depicts the harsh realities faced by marginalized communities whose lives are shaped by economic insecurity, bodily exhaustion, and social inequality. Through the experiences of the child Sivanaindhan and other plantation workers, the film explores how childhood, education, and emotional life become deeply affected by exploitative labour systems. Focusing upon Pramod K. Nayar's concept of eco-precarity and Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence, this paper argues that *Vaazhai* represents precarity not merely as environmental hardship, but as a broader condition produced through caste-based marginalization, labour exploitation, and unequal power structures. The paper further introspects how hunger, bodily suffering, and the lorry tragedy expose the devastating consequences of structural neglect and precarious survival. Ultimately, the study argues that *Vaazhai* transforms a localized story of plantation workers into a wider political critique of ecological and social vulnerability.

**Keywords:** *Eco-Precarity, Labour, Childhood, Slow Violence, Marginalization*

## Introduction

Childhood is often considered as a period of innocence, growth, and emotional security that determine their overall development. However, for many marginalized communities, childhood is moulded by, labour, poverty, and social inequality from an early stage that deprives their happiness and little joy. The fragile nature of childhood becomes even more evident when survival itself becomes uncertain and precarious. Mari Selvaraj's *Vaazhai* (2024) powerfully portrays this condition through the experiences of plantation workers and their families, particularly through the Lence of the young boy Sivanaindhan who yearn for a normal childhood. The film reflects how lives become extremely vulnerable within exploitative social and environmental systems where basic rights, dignity, and security are perpetual challenged,

Set within the bag drop of banana plantations, the film doesn't hesitate to present labour not merely as economic activity that supports their livelihood, but as a condition that encompasses emotional, physical, and psychological existence. The worker's livelihood is entirely depended up on land and labour for survival, yet the same environment subjects them to exhaustion, danger and uncertainty. Through showcasing the endless plantation labour, caste oppression, poverty, and bodily suffering, *Vaazhai* unravels how the life is precarious for marginalized communities. The film also demonstrates how childhood itself becomes burdened by engaging in economic responsibility, where education, happiness, and emotional growth are relentlessly stripped away by labour and survival struggles.

The concept of eco-precarity, as discussed by Pramod K. Nayar, becomes significant in understanding the film's representation of vulnerable lives. Eco-precarity refers to conditions in which environmental dependence and social inequality together create insecurity and instability. It highlights how ecological conditions, labour systems, and structures of power intersect to produce precarious forms of existence. In *Vaazhai*, eco-precarity is visible not only through environmental hardship but also through the unequal social conditions that force marginalized communities into dangerous and exploitative modes of survival. This paper examines *Vaazhai* through the framework of eco-precarity on labour exploitation, childhood vulnerability, caste inequality, and precarious survival.

The film's climax, centred around the devastating lorry tragedy, becomes the most intense representation of this precarious existence. Rather than presenting the tragedy as an isolated accident, Mari Selvaraj portrays it as the result of continuous exploitation, unsafe labour conditions, and systemic neglect. Through the child's perspective, the film captures the emotional and bodily impact of precarity in deeply affecting ways. This paper examines how *Vaazhai* represents eco-precarity through

plantation labour, childhood vulnerability, caste-based oppression, and embodied experiences of hunger, trauma, and survival.

## Theoretical Framework

### Eco-Precarity as Theory

The concept of eco-precarity examines the condition in which both human life and the environment become unstable due to ecological crisis, exploitation, and social inequality. Nayar builds on Judith Butler's foundational work on precarious lives, which argued that certain populations are rendered more vulnerable than others through political and social structures. Pramod K. Nayar defines eco-precarity as a condition shaped by “discourses of fragility, vulnerability, power relations” and the increasing instability affecting both human and nonhuman life (Nayar 2). Unlike traditional ecological approaches that focus only on environmental damage, eco-precarity emphasizes the interconnected relationship between ecological conditions and vulnerable human existence. It highlights how environmental dependence, labour systems, and unequal social structures together create precarious forms of life. this intertwined set of discourses of fragility, vulnerability, power relations across species and imminent extinction"(Nayar (6). The concept operates simultaneously at two levels: it describes "the precarious lives humans lead in the event of ecological disaster" and "the environment itself which is rendered precarious due to human intervention in the Anthropocene" (Nayar 7). The concept operates simultaneously at two levels: it describes "the precarious lives humans lead in the event of ecological disaster" and "the environment itself which.

Eco-precarity does not affect all communities equally. Vulnerability is shaped by caste, class, labour conditions, and access to resources. Communities that depend directly on land and physical labour often experience greater insecurity because their survival is closely tied to unstable environmental and economic conditions. As Nayar argues, precarious existence emerges from the unequal distribution of environmental risk and social vulnerability (Nayar 5). In this sense, eco-precarity becomes both an ecological and political condition, where systems of power determine whose lives remain protected and whose lives become expendable.

Another important aspect of eco-precarity is its connection to what Rob Nixon describes as “slow violence,” a form of violence that develops gradually and often remains invisible for long periods (Nixon 2). Environmental exploitation and labour oppression do not always appear as immediate catastrophe; instead, they accumulate slowly through exhaustion, poverty, bodily suffering, and economic insecurity. This idea becomes particularly relevant in *Vaazhai*, where the lives of

plantation workers are shaped by continuous exploitation and instability long before the final tragedy occurs.

In *Vaazhai*, eco-precarity is reflected through the relationship between labour, land, caste, and survival. The plantation space functions not as a nurturing ecological environment but as a site of exploitation and danger. The workers depend on the land for livelihood, yet this dependence exposes them to physical exhaustion, economic vulnerability, and social marginalization. Through the experiences of both adults and children, the film demonstrates how precarious existence becomes embedded within everyday life. Eco-precarity in the film is therefore not limited to environmental hardship alone, but extends to emotional, bodily, and psychological experiences of insecurity and survival.

## Film Analysis

### Environment as a Site of Exploitation

In *Vaazhai*, plantation labour becomes one of the central forces shaping the everyday lives of the characters. The banana plantation is not portrayed as a peaceful rural landscape, but as a space deeply connected to exhaustion, exploitation, and insecurity. The workers depend entirely on plantation labour for survival, yet the same labour gradually weakens their bodies and limits their opportunities for a stable life. The film repeatedly depicts workers carrying heavy banana bunches across long distances, emphasizing the physical strain and bodily suffering embedded within their daily existence.

The plantation space also reveals unequal power relations between labourers and those who control the system. Although the workers cultivate and transport the produce, they possess no ownership or authority over the land and resources that determine their survival. Their lives remain controlled by contractors and economic structures that exploit their vulnerability. This unequal dependence reflects what Pramod K. Nayar identifies as eco-precarity, where environmental dependence and social inequality together create unstable conditions of existence (Nayar 4). The workers remain trapped within a system that relies upon their labour while simultaneously denying them dignity, protection, and security.

The film further demonstrates how labour exploitation extends beyond physical hardship and begins to shape emotional and psychological life as well. Plantation labour interrupts education, freedom, and emotional growth, especially in the lives of children. The continuous pressure to work transforms survival into the primary concern of everyday life. As a result, even moments of rest or happiness become temporary and fragile. The plantation therefore functions not only as a workplace but also as a structure that controls the rhythm of life itself.

This condition can also be understood through Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," where suffering develops gradually through long-term exploitation rather than sudden destruction (Nixon 2). In *Vaazhai*, the exhaustion experienced by the workers accumulates slowly through poverty, bodily strain, and economic dependency. The later lorry tragedy becomes devastating precisely because the film has already established the workers' lives as structurally vulnerable. Mari Selvaraj thus portrays plantation labour as a form of eco-precarity in which land, labour, and survival remain inseparably connected.

### **Childhood and Burdened Innocence**

The movie *Vaazhai* is pivotal as it focuses on child's perspective and how labour, poverty, and social inequality have a crucial impact over their lives. While emphasising the perspective of Sivanaindhan childhood is never protected with innocence and emotional freedom, but as a condition relentlessly challenged by economic hardship and responsibility. Although Sivanaindhan is academically bright and emotionally sensitive, film reveals how His life is dominated life by plantation labour and the pressures of survival. Sivanaindhan's mother insists that he continue working in the plantation so that advance credit is repay which she had received, as pledging her son's labour for securing the families survival. This moment reveals the extent to which poverty and economic insecurity shape the lives of marginalized communities, where even childhood becomes is responsible to systems of debt and labour exploitation. Sivanaindhan is denied the freedom usually associated with childhood because his body and labour are treated as necessary economic resources within the family's struggle for survival. there by depicting marginalized children as they forced to carry burdens that hindering both emotional growth and personal freedom. After injuring himself to avoid plantation labour, Sivanaindhan is asked to take care of the family's cow. However, he leaves the cow behind and accompanies his teacher, Poonkodi, to the rice mill. On returning, he understands in despair that the cow has wandered into Muthuraj's field, resulting in conflict and humiliation for the family. Kani intervenes in the confrontation and subsequently loses his job as a loadman, forcing him to work under harsher conditions alongside the other labourers. Seeing his mother's distress and humiliation, Sivanaindhan promises to work without any sort of resistance during his school holidays to help repay the family's debts.

As time passes, the family's financial struggles deepen. Sivanaindhan's mother, becomes temporarily unable to work because of declining health. eventually forced to sell their cow. The loss deeply affects Sivanaindhan, as the cow symbolized emotional comfort and stability within the household. The worsening economic condition ultimately forces Sivanaindhan to work even during school days, further destroying his childhood and education.

Sivanaindhan grapples with happiness and labour as he constantly tries to escape plantation work by seeking comfort in school, friendship, or little moments of joy. Nevertheless, the film consistently establishes how these moments result in subsequent guilt, punishment, or humiliation. Sivanaindhan decides to give preference to accompany his teacher or attend dance practice instead of labour, he is burdened to feel responsible for prioritizing happiness over work. This exploitative system damages the emotional and psychological development of a child

The school acts a refuge where he is just a child, and the harsh reality of his life temporally fades. His interactions with his teacher and friends provide moments of affection, recognition, and emotional comfort that contrast with the exhausting nature of plantation labour. Yet these moments remain fleeting and temporary because the larger social and economic structures continue to pull him back into labour and insecurity. Mari Selvaraj uses the child's lens to amplify the emotional and political impact of the narrative, allowing the audience to witness exploitation through innocence rather than accepted norms.

From the perspective of eco-precarity, the film demonstrates how vulnerability extends across generations and becomes embedded within everyday life. Sivanaindhan inherits the instability experienced by the adults around him, revealing how precarious existence is reproduced through labour systems, caste structures, and environmental dependence. As Pramod K. Nayar argues, eco-precarity emerges from conditions of fragility and unequal vulnerability that shape both human and ecological life (Nayar 2). In *Vaazhai*, childhood itself becomes precarious, shaped by fear, exhaustion, and uncertainty rather than security and freedom.

### **School, Friendship, and Temporary Escape**

In *Vaazhai*, the realm of school and friendship function as brief spaces of emotional sanctuary as the life is overshadowed by labour and insecurity. For Sivanaindhan, school is a like time machine as he is transported into the world of possibilities of education; it becomes one of the few environments where he is recognised for what he is. In contrast to the exhausting routines of plantation labour, the classroom provides a window for emotional freedom and human affection. The innocent love for his teacher and his playful interactions with Sekar shows a childhood that still strives to survive despite harsh social realities.

Friendship in the film serves as a pivotal point because it creates moments of shared joy and emotional support amid hard and cruel conditions. The conversations, humour, and companionship exchanged between Sivananthan and Sekar at least interrupt for a while from the atmosphere of labour and suffering that revolves their lives. Mari Selvaraj craft fully uses these moments to remind the

audience that even within conditions of precarity, children continue to seek for happiness, affection, and belonging. However, the film also reminds that how fragile these moments remain within exploitative systems.

The temporary nature of these spaces becomes much more profound whenever Sivanaindhan decides to prioritize happiness over labour. His decision to abandoning plantation work to participate in dance practice or spend time outside labour routines repeatedly results in punishment, guilt, or emotional distress. The film therefore argues that how simple joys for the marginalized children is a luxury and they must pay huge price for experiencing it as they are met with consequences. Happiness itself becomes precarious because economic survival and labour responsibilities constantly interrupt emotional freedom.

From the perspective of eco-precarity, these moments of school life, friendship, and emotional comfort reveal the unstable nature of hope within vulnerable communities. The characters can experience temporary escape, but never permanent relief from the systems that shape their lives. As Nayar explains, precarious existence emerges from continuous conditions of instability and unequal vulnerability (Nayar 5). In *Vaazhai*, school and friendship emerge as fragile spaces of resistance against exploitation, even though they remain insufficient to fully protect them against the intersection of the labour, caste, and poverty.

### **Hunger and Embodied Precarity**

*Vaazhai* explicitly capture hunger and bodily suffering through the spectrum of eco-precarity. The film repeatedly emphasizes how poverty and labour exploitation defines the physical experiences of the characters, reducing survival to a daily struggle. Exhaustion, physical strain, and hunger is inherent for plantation labour as it reveals how precarity is experienced directly through the body., carrying heavy banana bunches across long distances under unsafe and exploitative conditions imposes continuous physical exertion on the workers.

This embodied experience of precarity becomes most visible during the climax of the film. After the devastating lorry tragedy, overwhelmed by hunger. Sivanaindhan is unable to fully grasp grief because he is extremely taken over by starvation. Instead of focusing on dramatic expressions of mourning, Mari Selvaraj renders the child's bodily condition as the central emotional core of the scene. Hunger dominates grief, suggesting that survival itself has become more immediate than emotional response. The scene powerfully illustrates how poverty and labour exploitation dictate not only material existence but also emotional landscape.

Hunger is not merely portrayed as an individual condition but as a social and structural reality produced through systemic unequal labour. Gradually the workers' bodies become exhausted relentless exploitation and economic insecurity. This reflects Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," where suffering develops gradually over time and often remains invisible within everyday life (Nixon 2). In *Vaazhai*, bodily exhaustion and hunger accumulate slowly, ultimately unravelling the devastating consequences of structural neglect and exploitative the land and workers.

From the perspective of eco-precarity, the body becomes one of the primary sites through which vulnerability is experienced. As Pramod K. Nayar argues, precarious existence emerges through conditions of fragility and unequal exposure to risk (Nayar 3). In the film, hunger symbolizes the extent to which marginalized communities are denied stability, security, and dignity. Mari Selvaraj thus transforms bodily suffering into a political and ecological critique, revealing how exploitative systems reduce human life to the struggle for basic survival.

### **Caste, Labour, and Structural Violence**

In *Vaazhai*, labour exploitation is inseparable from caste-based social structures. The film suggests that the vulnerability experienced by plantation workers is not just incidental reality but deeply rooted in historical systems of caste inequality and economic marginalization. The exploitative labour conditions and social hierarchy limits their access to power there by forcing workers to remain trapped for ever, denying basic security, and mobility. Through its portrayal of plantation life, the film exposes how vulnerability within rural spaces play a huge roll as caste continues to shape the distribution of labour.

The intersection of caste and labour becomes evident through the unequal power structures that govern the lives of the workers by stripping away their agency. Contractors and authority figures exercise power over the labourers, while the workers themselves possess little control over their own physical or economic survival. Even basic dignity becomes a struggle within this system. economic and social inequality is highlighted in the scene in which Sivanaindhan's mother offers her earrings to the contractor after the loss of the cow reflecting the extreme despair. To survive even the personal belongings associated to their dignity are sacrificed and exposed the unequal balance of power between the labourers and those who control resources.

The film also demonstrates how structural violence functions through everyday life rather than through isolated acts of cruelty alone. The workers are continuously humiliated, on the other hand exhaustion, insecurity, and fear is a part of their ordinary existence. This normalized suffering reflects what Rob Nixon describes as "slow violence," where oppression accumulates gradually over time through systems of exploitation and neglect (Nixon 2). In *Vaazhai*, violence is not always visible as

direct physical aggression; instead, it emerges through poverty, unsafe labour conditions, bodily exhaustion, and emotional deprivation.

Through the framework of eco-precarity, caste functions as a system that determines unequal exposure to environmental and economic risk. As Pramod K. Nayar explains, vulnerability is unevenly distributed across communities depending upon structures of power and social hierarchy (Nayar 5). The plantation workers in *Vaazhai* remain dependent on land and labour for survival, yet they are denied the security and protection necessary for a stable life. Mari Selvaraj therefore portrays caste not simply as a mere social category, but as a structure that vividly intensifies ecological and economic precarity across generations.

### **The Lorry Tragedy and Slow Violence**

The lorry tragedy in *Vaazhai* serves the most devastating manifestation of eco-precarity in the film. The accident is not just presented as an isolated moment of misfortune, but as the result of continuous labour exploitation, economic vulnerability, and systemic failure leading to the inevitable climax. The film reaches its most hard-hitting moment when the villagers gather in mourning after a tragic lorry accident that claims the lives of several plantation workers, including Vembu, Kani, Sekar, and Muthuraj. The tragedy occurs while the labourers are transporting bananas in an overloaded lorry after the trader refuses to provide safe and appropriate transportation for them forcing them to travel under dangerous conditions that ultimately led to the tragedy. The accident exposes the extent to which marginalized workers are treated as expendable within exploitative labour systems. The film finally cuts to an archived newspaper report documenting the real-life death of nearly twenty plantation workers near Srivaikundam, who were buried beneath banana loads when the lorry overturned. By connecting the narrative to a real historical tragedy, Mari Selvaraj transforms the film into a broader critique of unsafe labour conditions, structural neglect, and the precarious existence forced upon marginalized communities.. The plantation workers, who depend entirely on physical labour for survival, are forced into hazardous working environments and substandard transportation without protection or security. The tragedy therefore exposes how precarious lives are produced through the intersection of poverty, labour exploitation, and environmental dependence.

The film filters the tragedy through Sivanaindhan's eyes, purposefully eschewing the 'spectacle of death' to focus on the child's internal experience. This choice centres on his physical fatigue and emotional mind set. The audience witnesses the tragedy through innocence, making the social violence embedded within the labour system even more disturbing. The child's inability to fully grasp or emotionally process the catastrophe reflects the extent to which precarity molds both bodily and psychological existence.

The tragedy also reflects the idea of “slow violence” discussed by Rob Nixon, where destruction develops gradually through long-term exploitation rather than sudden disaster alone (Nixon 2). The accident appears sudden, yet the film carefully establishes that the workers’ lives were already structurally vulnerable long before the catastrophe occurred. Their poverty, bodily exhaustion, unsafe labour conditions, and dependence on plantation work continuously expose them to danger. The lorry accident therefore becomes the culmination of an exploitative system that treats marginalized lives as expendable.

The film’s connection to real-life experiences further strengthens its political and emotional impact. By grounding the tragedy within lived realities of plantation labour, Mari Selvaraj transforms the narrative into a broader critique of caste-capitalist exploitation and environmental precarity. From the perspective of eco-precarity, the tragedy reveals how vulnerable communities are forced to survive within systems that deny them safety, dignity, and stability. The accident thus becomes more than a cinematic climax; it functions as a powerful symbol of structural violence and precarious existence.

## Conclusion

*Vaazhai* presents a powerful representation of eco-precarity through its portrayal of plantation labour, childhood vulnerability, caste inequality, and embodied suffering. Rather than representing precarity as an isolated condition, the film reveals how insecurity becomes embedded within everyday life through interconnected systems of labour exploitation, environmental dependence, and social marginalization. Mari Selvaraj uses the experiences of both children and adults to highlight how vulnerable communities are forced to survive within structures that continuously deny them stability, dignity, and protection.

Through the perspective of Sivanaindhan, the film intensifies the emotional and political impact of these realities. Childhood in *Vaazhai* is not portrayed as a space of innocence and freedom, but as a condition burdened by labour, hunger, fear, and responsibility. Moments of happiness, friendship, and education remain fragile because they are constantly interrupted by economic survival and structural inequality. The film therefore reveals how eco-precarity extends beyond environmental hardship and shapes emotional, psychological, and bodily existence as well.

The plantation environment functions as more than a rural setting; it becomes a space of exploitation where labouring bodies are continuously exposed to exhaustion, danger, and insecurity. The lorry tragedy ultimately exposes the devastating consequences of this exploitative system, revealing how long-term neglect and unsafe labour conditions gradually produce catastrophic

outcomes. In this sense, the film reflects what Rob Nixon describes as “slow violence,” where suffering accumulates over time through normalized structures of exploitation (Nixon 2).

By engaging with Pramod K. Nayar’s concept of eco-precarity, *Vaazhai* can be understood as a critique of the unequal relationship between environment, labour, caste, and survival. The film demonstrates that vulnerability is never equally distributed but shaped by social hierarchies and economic power structures. Mari Selvaraj therefore transforms a deeply personal and localized story into a broader political commentary on precarious existence, revealing how marginalized communities continue to bear the greatest burden of ecological and social instability.

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