

Trying to cage a superstar

Rajinikanth's latest outing as a gangster with a golden heart befits his acting persona, but the film is a let down

Remove the Malaysian-Tamil setting, and *Kabali* plays like... a Rajinikanth movie. A revenge drama. It would be silly to expect grime and grit in a mega-budget Superstar movie whose seemingly endless pre-release publicity has spanned the earth to the sky (courtesy Air Asia), but given that Pa. Ranjith is behind the camera, there is a sense of a let down. It's as though, given the biggest stage of his still-young career, the director went up before the audience and got a severe case of the jitters.

The meat of *Kabali* is a gangster story that attempts to tease out some history about Malaysian Tamils.

The suits *Kabali* wears aren't just a fashion statement. The coat, the tie: they're symbols of a rung of capitalism people like *Kabali* weren't allowed to set foot on. (It's also a nod to Ambedkar's sartorial tastes). But as with Ranjith's *Madras* (2014), these are scribbles on the margins of an all-too-familiar story.

The primary narrative thread in *Kabali* deals with the gang war between *Kabali* and Tony Lee (Winston Chao), a purring Malay (I'm assuming) who wears his silken suits with the entitlement of generations of privilege. This conflict is, of course, a metaphor, for the antagonism between Malaysian-Tamils and natural-born Malays; but the way all this plays out is hardly new or interesting. One of the strengths of Ranjith as a writer is the way he shapes the supporting characters, but no one registers here. *Kabali* is filled with familiar faces: Kishore, Attakathi Dinesh, Kalaiyarasan and Riythvika. But they all get so little to do.

Where's the drama?

At least some of the lightness, the lack of amped-up drama, I think, is intentional. Even within the cage of a Superstar movie, Ranjith is trying to be subtle. Another filmmaker would have given Yogi (a very ill-at-ease Dhansika) a rousing introduction, given the weight this character carries in the story. But she comes in like an afterthought, and it isn't until interval point that we realise who she is, what she's doing here. But again, this sounds better than how it plays out. We aren't emotionally invested in anything, anyone.

Except, maybe, Kumudhavalli, Kabali's wife, played by Radhika Apte, is a part of what is ostensibly the second (and far more interesting) narrative thread of *Kabali*, about the man's personal life. Apte doesn't have much of a role, but she does get one scene that makes you see why Ranjith wanted an actress of her calibre. It's a scene where she breaks down after seeing Kabali after a very long time, and she makes us see a long-dormant volcano erupting suddenly with everything that was buried deep inside.

Ranjith's filmmaking is different too, and not in a good way. *Kabali* does have some of his trademarks: the way he introduces characters and their circumstances in a prologue-y rush at the beginning, or the way he uses little flashbacks to fill us in on what really happened. But the life that infused his earlier films is missing. (Santhosh Narayanan's excellent songs are relegated to the background.)

Kabali doesn't have the lovely rhythms of *Attakathi* or *Madras*, where Ranjith gave us a sense of life being lived with micro-shots of people just... being. This isn't to say Ranjith is coasting. He's still trying to stage scenes. A scene where someone tries to assassinate Kabali could have just been about the assassination, but the way Ranjith stages it carries an element of surrealism. But yet again, it works better on paper than on screen.

Superstar magic

And what about the big star at the centre?

He does well, though his age is beginning to show: both in his physicality and dialogue delivery. There's a scene where someone asks Kabali why he is a gangster when he is so educated. He removes his glasses. The camera moves closer. He gives this look, at once hard and wistful. He makes you wish for more such shots that studied his face. What a great still camera subject this face makes. Still.

Another favourite shot of mine came when Kabali is in a hotel in Chennai, and the camera captures him not as a gangster but a father. The earlier edge is gone.

There is so much warmth here, you feel this is what he must look like with his grandkids. And though we have the slo-mo walk and the staccato laugh, it is nice to see this star act his age: he kicks ass and yet, he's vulnerable. He could use someone looking after him. *Kabali doesn't pander to his fans. No comedy. No punch lines. And yet, it must be said that Rajinikanth does more for the movie than the movie does for him.*

Possible Exercises and Guidance

- 1) What is the importance of a right title for any essay or article? Do you think the title of any essay or article can capture the essence of the article?
- 2) Read the article fully first and then underline the difficult words or terms that you don't understand.
- 3) State the main idea of each paragraph.
- 4) What do you think is the essence of the article? What is the writer Baradwaj Rangan saying in the article?
- 5) What does the word 'superstar' mean? Who is a superstar according to you?

Note: Even as you read the article by Baradwaj Rangan, please make notes – a) some of the things you are able to follow, understand, b) things you are not able to follow or understand, and c) difficult words.

Decoding the film review by Baradwaj Rangan - Some guidelines

Applying the 'Who, What, How, and Why questions?

Introduction to the Essay

- a) **Who** is Baradwaj Rangan?
- b) **Who** is Pa.Ranjith?
- c) **Who** is Rajinikant?

Instructions: Do a brief research on all the 3 above. Introduce each of them in 4 lines maximum. This will form the introduction to your essay.

The Essay may be divided into 3 Parts

Part 1 is about the film; What is the film about? – a) It is about the history of the Tamil people, they are now referred to as Malaysian Tamil who have settled in Malaysia over many years, b) The Original Malaysians or Malays who have always been in Malaysia. **Your task here is to research this**, do research on i) Malaysian Tamils and ii) the Malays. After researching this, write a few lines, 5 to 6 lines on Malaysian Tamils and the Malays and their history. For example, find out why there is tension, mutual dislike between them. What has caused this tension? What is Kabali's background? Why does he dress that way?

Part 2 is about the film's director Pa.Ranjith; How is Pa.Ranjith's direction in the film? – a) his direction, b) His style as a film maker director, c) Why did he get the jitters? Expand on this while you write.

Part 3 is about Rajinikant the superstar; Why has he been caged? **Why** has he not been used effectively? – a) Rajinikant's role in the film, b) has Rajinikant been used effectively in the film? Why not? Discuss this in your essay.