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The Image Representation of Existential Crisis in life of Women – Recent paradigm shift in Tamil Cinema

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ABSTRACT:

Tamil cinema also referred as Kollywood cinema in Indian film industry had drastically changed its style of portraying women in recent times. The mass consumption of films may change the very idea of treating women in a society. Cinema is like a mirror that reflects our people and life style. The conservative tag that is attached towards female characters is redefined by the audience. Audience accepted female centric films and encouraged the film makers to think about female centric characters. Films played a crucial role in changing our views, thoughts, ideas and values. The one director name that sounds loud in Tamil films for his bold scripts is director K.Balachander like *Aval oru thodarkathai* were a lower middle class girl struggle to bring up his family and in the movie *Arangetram* a poor Brahmin daughter take up prostitution job to give good education for her siblings which not only stirred the stereotype portrayal of women in films and also made other directors to think of women centric films. The male dominant film industry in recent times have produced noteworthy women centered films like *36 vayathinillae*, *Irudhi sutru*, *Aruvi*, *Aram*, *Magalir Mattum* and *Amma kanakku*.

The researcher adapted feminist theory to understand the fictional discourse and gender inequality. This is a qualitative study and the researchers used narrative analysis to analyze the story structure of recent screen shift in Tamil films.

Keywords: Marginalized Women; Feminism; Cinema; Kollywood

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INTRODUCTION

Tamil cinema is known for being India's second largest film industry after Hindi cinema, in terms of revenue and worldwide distribution. Tamil cinema has through the years introduced people of its state with history, important social issues, culture and tradition apart from simply entertaining them. But all throughout Tamil cinema has reflected the Tamil society in various ways, including the status of women. A study of representation of women in Tamil cinema since its inception is a sincere effort to study selected films from different stages of Tamil cinema, in which either the themes spin around women or the women characters and their treatment reflect the social norms and traditions of the Tamil culture. The researcher, in the process of the research, wishes to understand how some of the leading Tamil film makers have characterized women in their films, and how well is it in conformity to the traditions, customs and status of women in the society of Southern part, especially Tamil Nadu.

Silent movies were produced in Chennai since 1916 and the era of talkies dawned in 1931 with the film 'Kalidas'. By the end of the 1930s, the State of Madras legislature passed the *Entertainment Tax Act 1939*. Tamil Nadu cinema has had a profound effect on the film making industries in India, with Chennai becoming a hub for the filmmaking industries of other languages, including Telugu cinema, Malayalam cinema, Kannada cinema, Hindi cinema, Sinhalese cinema and Sri Lankan Tamil cinema in the 1900s, which makes it a legal claim to be the real Indian film capital, ahead of Mumbai. Tamil language films are even made in other countries. Today, Tamil films are distributed to various overseas theatres in South Asia, including Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Malaysia; East Asia, including Japan and South Korea; as well as Oceania, Southern Africa, Western Europe, North America, etc.

The present study aims to closely analyze the representation of women characters in some selected films with women centric or socially relevant themes. Through the study, the researcher wants to find out if the general paradigm about the status of women in Tamil Nadu is truly reflected in Tamil cinema and how the filmmakers portray women in conformity to the universal essence of womanhood, their problems and their strengths. The study also hopes to examine whether the women characters, being portrayed in Tamil films (focusing on the chosen films), have undergone changes through the time and how gender sensitive are the filmmakers. The study aims at closely viewing selected films by some renowned and some new film makers of Tamil Nadu and analyzed major women characters in those films with main focus on the representation of women. Also the treatment of women characters and the genre of these films have been

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discussed. Most of the chosen films are either woman centric, reflecting upon some social issues concerning women and traditions in our society or, films where women play a primary role in dealing with social issues strongly affecting or disturbing the Tamil society.

A study of the portrayal of women in Tamil cinema is a huge task as women in any society, especially in Indian states can belong to different social or religious groups with different cultural norms or economic status. Here, it becomes very important to compare how a woman is portrayed in the film and how she actually is in her real life; and to identify if the depiction of women falls in context with the social and cultural norms of the character.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The main focus of this research is to encourage women to plan careers and have confidence to aim high, to understand their leadership potential along with mentoring, to foster women's belief in themselves, as well as to develop a big picture of women's work. Film is used as an ideological tool, which counteracts the stereotyped image of women presented by the male – dominated media and women awareness of their inferior position in this patriarchal society, where women are generally relegated to a subservient role. Women are usually given supportive role rather than key role. The reworking of psychoanalytic theory may provide a new model from which feminists could work.

Study on few specific filmmakers has been done on Tamil cinema in relation to representation of women in Tamil films as a whole. In the present study, the selective sequences of the films have been analyzed, where women characters have been interpreted according to the cultural conventions and codes conveying meaning on symbolic and indexical levels.

Analysis of films in relation to the representation of women on screen , which means only the leading female character , but also the other significant women characters in the chosen films, represented in those films, including, how the women characters are positioned versus the believed status of women in the Tamil society has been done. Furthermore, the objective was to investigate the role of cinematic language with regard to construction of gender. The reasons for undertaking such a research are several and they lie mainly within the salience of gender within cinematic discourse. The data source consists of a set of films which are mostly women centric produced during the last three years. The sample movies selected for the study based on the purposive sampling. The movies selected for the analysis of the study are Magalir Mattum, Aramm, Aruvi, Iruthi Suttru, Amma Kannaku, and 36+ Vayathinale .

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FACTORS ANALYZED FROM THE BELOW SELECTED MOVIES

- Audacity
- Dominant
- Problem solver
- Confidence
- Decision maker (makes important decisions regarding the course of a relationship, family and home life, or career decisions that greatly gives an impact on the storyline or in life of the movie characters)

SELECTED MOVIES

Magalir Mattum (2017)

The pivotal role in the movie, 'Magalir Mattum' is played by Jyothika, whose character is a documentary filmmaker. She plans to execute an all-girls trip with her mother-in-law's school friends (played by Urvashi, Saranya Ponvannan and Bhanupriya). Upon her return from her marriage-induced hiatus, Jyothika had declared that she would only participate in films that treat women with respect and importance. Along came Magalir Mattum, with the kind of feminism that smacks you in the face, demanding to be noticed, emerging from behind the walls that constrain women's lives. This film repeatedly points out how women and their dreams get vanished in the "trap" called marriage. The film is about the story of every woman, seeking little acts of progress, every day.

Aramm (2017)

The character, an honest Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer who serves as the District Collector in a drought-hit village, is the hapless representative of an incompetent establishment. In the course of her efforts to save the life of a young girl who has fallen into a bore-well, she stands up for the people, takes on a powerful mafia, commands a police force and makes difficult decisions – much of it without the melodramatic portrayal of achievement shown in films with male heroes. The feminism showed in Aramm is so strong and invulnerable. As a cinematic endeavour, Aramm breaks the shackles of how women are usually portrayed. The film is entirely about Madhivadani's work – she is seen in just two outfits throughout the film, she has no romantic interest and no one speaks for her or paraphrases her. She

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commands respect and gets it, mostly by the virtue of her post. Yet, towards the end of the film, she breaks into loud sobs because she realizes her own failings. She is not ashamed or scared of being a woman.

Irudhi Suttru (2016)

Wrestler-turned-actor, Ritika Singh, made a stunning debut with Madhavan, a sports drama, 'Irudhi Suttru'. She was also a pretty big part of the film as a female boxer while Madhavan guides her from the sidelines as her coach. She is feisty, emotional and fun as Madhi, a roadside fish-seller who has a penchant for beating people up. Her relationship with her coach Madhavan is something to watch out for and many critics claimed that no other actress could have pulled it off like Ritika. In a way, 'Irudhi Suttru' was a strong, empowering film for women.

Aruvi (2016)

Aditi Balan starring 'Aruvi', has played the central character to its best on screen and has given a splendid performance. This is a story which holds a mirror to the issues in society that are often misunderstood. The film is a rare portrayal of a woman who lives life on her terms alone without giving a damn of what people think.

Amma Kanakku (2016)

Amala Paul starring 'Amma Kanakku', is a simple story of Shanti, a poor woman and her girl, Abhinaya who is studying in the tenth standard. Amma Kanakku is all about women empowerment. The movie has an emotional journey of a mother and her daughter as Abhinaya (Amala Paul's daughter), discovers how much her mother sacrifices to educate her. The concept of this movie is to provide education not only for young girls, but also for grown women, because education is common and primary for all. Both Amala Paul and Yuva Lakshmi looked stunning on screen as they portrayed their roles realistically and with such ease.

36+ Vayadhinalaye (2015)

How many of you treat women with respect, respecting her dreams and allowing her to fulfill her path and not just looking at them as a house maker? For many women, being the best home maker could be their dream and they feel fulfilled and happy, but what if they were fooled to believe so. It is important

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that they get a chance and sadly a chance which is their right, to realize their full potential. How many of you as fathers, brothers and husbands give women in your family equal status and demand yourself to ask her what she really wants? In this age of Facebook and Whatsapp, do you let the older traditions be an excuse and not challenge the limitations that bar the women to come out and lead? The movie is a reflection of our society and how we have to treat women around us with equality and understand their dreams and give them the opportunities to achieve them. So everyone needs to take a minute in and think about how their words, actions, beliefs are belittling the efforts and contribution of the women around them. Let's not wait for the government to introduce a policy or some women leaders to inspire us. We should self understand the long deserving dream of a woman and give her chances. There is always a woman in your family who can possibly achieve and gather pride.

PLEA TO FILM-MAKERS

- Film is a powerful medium that can convey strong messages in a disguised form. It has been noted that commercial cinema is an active instrument of social stability in which it “mitigates the trauma of the masses’ encounter with the new by preserving the illusion of a persistence of tradition”. This insistence on perpetuating traditional values and, as we have seen in this study, using the ‘female ideal’ as the main tool to achieve this continues to be at the fore of feminists concerns about valid female representation in the media.
- Those who create movies, especially blockbusters seen by millions and millions of people, should be conscious of the message they present to the public. Strong messages, advocating the abilities and strengths of women, need to be put on screen.
- Much progress needs to be made in the positive portrayal of women on the silver screen. This progress or lack of progress should be monitored with continued studies in order to call attention to possible future areas of improvement in the portrayal of women on film.

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CONCLUSION

After K. Balachander, who defied all rules and was canny in showcasing women from different walks of life, often too close to reality, Mani Ratnam followed suit. His stories have given equal prominence to both genders. The sad truth of today's Tamil cinema is that most heroines are content with gracing the screen with the same roles but with skimpier outfits.

Considering the fact that women in India are not a homogenous group – they belong to different religions, castes, class and socio-economic status. They have different kinds of ambitions and desires as a result of which they lead different lives, it is improper to conclude that women on Indian silver screen have been portrayed in an identical manner. The portrayal, of course, has to be sensitive to the category to which they belong. For instance, an urban middle class woman's story would be entirely different from that of a woman living in a village. Thus, films have to be responsive towards the context in which they locate women characters. Women characters should possess agency to dismantle the existing power structures as well as be able to negotiate their own position within this structure. It is time that cinema seeks a redefinition of women as objects of male gaze.

Going beyond the stereotypes will do a great help to the cause of women in Indian society. Cinema has to create a separate and independent space for Indian women to help them realize their dreams. Cinema's only end is not to entertain. Instead it must begin a quest for social change through entertainment. As a media product identified to accelerate the process of modernity, cinema should not stick to the formula in film. It should come up with more progressive representations of women. Such portrayals would do justice to women and their role in the society.

As far as the question of transition of women protagonists through the decades remains, it is not very distinctive, except in case of costumes and on role of women pursuing some profession outside the home, which is reflected more in the films under contemporary phase in the study. As mentioned above, the basic traditional and cultural values remain the same, while the women are mostly shown with strength of character, intelligence, motivated, powerful and wisdom as their traits along with tolerance.

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