

A Textual Analysis On Portrayal Of Women Characters - Exclusive Focus In Mani Ratnam Movies

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Abstract:

With an audience of over 70 million, The Tamil cinema industry or popularly known as Kollywood is the second largest movie maker in India behind Bollywood. Despite catering to such a large audience, Tamil movies have a bad reputation for its over the top - over dramatic - logic lacking masala movies, Hero worship, plagiarism, objectification of women etc. Known for its male dominated characters, Tamil movies are known to depict the feminine character just for amusement serving no real purpose to the plot of the film.

The popular Indian filmmaker Mani Ratnam has been a exception in this regard though. The general consensus on the the movie making style of Mani Ratnam is that he is someone that has managed to redefine the method of story telling in Tamil cinema and is also known for the portrayal of strong women characters in his movies. The primary aim of this study is to shed light on the depiction of women characters from some of the movies of Mani Ratnam using textual analysis techniques.

Key Words: Mani Ratnam, Kollywood, Portrayal, Feminism

Background:

Mani Ratnam truly belongs in the upper echelon of elite filmmakers, his body of work is a blessing not just to Indian cinema but to world cinema as well. With a career spanning almost four decades, he is a true pioneer in every sense and regard. Technically sound and known to be a very character oriented director, Mani Ratnam's movies document the platitudinous events of the protagonist and often link them with characters from Indian mythology.

This study is aimed to elucidate the portrayal of some of the many such Feminine characters from Mani Ratnam's filmography. Mani Ratnam's cinema has usually portrayed women in a rather poignant light yet these characters have managed to deliver an exhilarating experience to the consumer. The women characters from his films are routinely described as self willed, impulsive, independent and way ahead of their times.

Introduction:

While the norm in Indian cinema is to portray the role of the female character as mere object of desire , Mani Ratnam has managed to reformulate the function of the heroine to something much more important. (Shahina K.2014) Perhaps it's cultural or perhaps it's psychological but depiction of women in modern arts usually carry a sexual connotation.

Male dominance and Patriarchy has a strong influence on the Indian movie making style. (Aashi Thukral, Anoushka Jaipuria 2020) Despite decades of feminist movements, misogyny and poor treatment of women on and off screen still very much exist, For eg: Me too movement.

The stereotype that a woman character being defined as an object of male gaze has to be broken for the betterment Indian society and production of better Indian films. (Nidhi Shendurnikar Tere 2012)

Some of the diaspora in the rural regions of the country still very much take what they see on screen to be real, The influence a movie is able to create psychologically in the mind of the consumer is undeniable.

Objectives:

- ❖ To scrutinize how women roles are portrayed in select filmography of Mani Ratnam
- ❖ To interpret the intrinsic message the director has conveyed through women role in the film

Review of Literature:

According to Dalvi Mahananda Chandrakant (2015) The Indian version of feminism is a corollary of western left wing progressivism. Education of women, democratic rights, empowerment of women, after marriage treatment of women, abortions etc were and are some of the components behind the Indian version of feminism. Though the starting phase of the feminist movement in India can be traced back to as early as the days of the British Raj, when it comes to the portrayal of women in arts especially Cinema, the role is bereft of any selfdom and is only used for providing glamour and dillydallying the length of the movie. (Samien Kidwai 2016)

The author Tejaswini Niranjana examination on Mani Ratnam portrayal of women is appropriate here: "Ratnam's heroines appear to be uninhibited, high-spirited, and self-assertive, never at a loss for words. These are women, whom in a certain sense, feminism has made articulate, but they are reconfigured into the very spectacularisation that feminism would like to challenge." (Shahina K 2014)

Research Questions:

- ❖ What is the relationship of the women character with the plot of the film?
- ❖ What is the message the director conveys through the women character?
- ❖ What kind of reality is constructed in the film for the audience ?

Methodology:

This is an experimental analysis on the depiction of women roles from some of the really popular Mani Ratnam movies. The study makes use of the Textual Analysis technique to explicate the representation of the female characters from some the movies of Mani Ratnam.

Textual Analysis

It is a method used by researchers to describe and interpret the characteristics of a visual art. The purpose of this technique is to shed light on the content of the message contained in the art. One of the approaches to textual analysis is through Rhetorical criticism, its purpose being better understanding and appreciation of the communicative act.

This study focuses on three prominent films of Mani Ratnam: **Bombay, Iruvar and Roja.**

Analysis and Interpretation:

Movie: **Bombay**

Question 1: What is the relationship of the woman character with the plot of the film?

Played by Manisha Koirala, the character of Shaila Banu is unconventional, charming, ahead of its time and indeed captivating. Although the role of Shaila Banu can be simply reduced down to the love interest of the protagonist, the individuality and the influence of the character's actions on the plot of the film is undeniable, at least in the first half of the movie. One such notable scene is when Shaila Banu decides to abandon her faith and family and leaves for Bombay in pursuit of her romantic dreams. Unworried about the repercussions of her actions, Shaila Banu reaches Bombay, marries and starts a family with Shekar, the protagonist. Their children are brought up in a secular manner, devoid of religious dogma. The Shaila Banu character reaches her crescendo when she reunites and makes peace with her family however from this point on, the character is lost in obscurity and the story of the film shifts from the romantic happenings to the communal clashes.

Question 2: What is the message the director conveys through the women character?

Set in the backdrop of the 92-93 Bombay Riots, a time when communal clashes were at a peak, The movie Bombay documents the “forbidden” romance of an inter faith couple. The protagonist Shekar, a journalism student, falls in love with a Muslim woman Shaila Banu. Love at first sight despite the difference in faiths, The director does a masterful job of convincing the audience that love is innocent and knows no boundaries.

Question 3: What kind of reality is constructed in the film for the audience ?

The movie Bombay is yet another attempt from Mani Ratnam where he experiments with the idea of nationalism and secularism. Inspired by the aftermath of the Babri Masjid incident, Mani Ratnam invokes the patriotic spirit by discarding the religious differences. One such conspicuous scene from the movie is when the protagonist Shekar declares that he is an Indian, not a Hindu or Muslim. The ending of the movie, where a human chain is formed by people from all backgrounds to end the violent riots suggests the secular idea of practicing religious harmony.

Movie: **Iruvar**

Question 1: What is the relationship of the women characters with the plot of the film?

* Played by Aishwarya Rai, the character Pushpavalli is the wife of the protagonist Anandan. A rather brief appearance, the focus is centered on the beauty and the innocence of the character. One such scene to look back on is when Anandan who expresses discontent over marriage, changes his mind immediately when he sees Pushpavalli for the first time, enchanted by her beauty. Later in the film, Pushpavalli dies from a mysterious fever and Anandan is deeply wounded by this incident.

* Played by Revathi, the character Maragatham is the wife of the antagonist Tamizhselvan. Yet another brief occurrence, the character serves not much of a purpose to the plot though a couple of noteworthy scenes involving this character sets the tone for the film in first half. The first such noteworthy scene is the marriage ceremony of Maragatham and Tamizhselvan which is shown to be completely against orthodoxy setting the revolutionary narrative for the film. Their wedding night is another such scene, Maragatham is about to fall on the feet of Tamizhselvan however Tamizhselvan does not allow her and tells her that Men and Women are equal and such “regressive” practices must be discarded.

* Played by Tabu, the character Senthamarai is the romantic interest and second wife of the antagonist Tamizhselvan. Senthamarai abandons her family, leaves her native place and everything else behind to be with Tamizhselvan. She is very moved by Tamizhselvan’s poetry. In one scene when they are together Senthamarai asks Tamizhselvan about their relationship and Tamizhselvan responds that She is the love of his life and a friend.

* Played by Aishwaraya Rai again, the character Kalpana is the romantic interest of the protagonist Anandan. Anandan is perturbed when he sees Kalpana for the first time because of her resemblance to Anandan’s late wife Pushpavalli. Though uncomfortable initially, the two make a connection and form an affair after Anandan reveals Kalpana’s resemblance to his late wife. The scene where Kalpana refuses to pay her respects and tributes to Anandan (a famed senior artist), citing such practices are not fair in a democracy is noteworthy for it’s progressive tones.

Question 2: What is the message the director conveys through the women character?

The movie *Iruvar* has several women characters that are connected to the plot of the film. Revolution and Progressiveness are the recurring motifs in the movie and the women characters are portrayed to convey these narratives in a rather subliminal fashion.

Question 3: What kind of reality is constructed in the film for the audience ?

Though politically incorrect and historically inaccurate, the movie *Iruvar* is allegedly a representation on the lives and events of the Tamil Dravidian Politicians. Although we are given the “all persons and events in the movie are fictitious” disclaimer, one that is aware of the politics revolving in Tamil Nadu can easily figure out where the director draws his inspiration from. Set in the 1950s, Post Independence India, the movie revolves around Dravidian ideologies, the friendship and scuffles between the protagonist and antagonist. Before *Iruvar*, Mani Ratnam’s depictions on Indian politics strictly brought out ideas and messages such as Nationalism, Secularism, rejection of religious differences etc. A regular viewer of Mani Ratnam’s movies would have expected the director to draw out the nationalistic sentiment even out of Dravidianism, However in *Iruvar*, Mani Ratnam fails to deliver his usual patriotic message and rather focuses on the narrow Dravidian ideologues.

Movie: **Roja**

Question 1: What is the relationship of the woman character with the plot of the film?

Played by Madhoo, Roja is the primary character of the film. The movie revolves around the challenges Roja faces hence the movie is named after the character. Roja is portrayed to be strong headed, adventurous and a courageous personality despite having a village upbringing. She wishes to pursue higher education however She is married at the age of 18 and leaves her village to live with her husband. Brought up in Madras, Her husband Rishi is a cryptographer who flaunts his “sophisticated urban” intellect to the dismay of Roja. Though initially, Roja feels uneasy she later develops a fondness with her husband and they are shown to lead a happy marriage. Roja accompanies Rishi to Kashmir where he is designated to work with the Indian Army to interpret terrorist intelligence. However, the terrorists manage to take hostage of Rishi and Roja’s world is turned upside down in a land alien to her.

Alone and anxious, in search of her husband, Roja fights a lone battle where she goes through several perplexing circumstances, encountering military official to the minister to have her husband freed. Her efforts are triumphant in the end and she reunites with her husband.

Question 2: What is the message the director conveys through the women character?

Taking influence from the ancient tale of Savitri and Satyavan from the Mahabharata, The movie *Roja* is the story of a young married couple who’s lives end up in turmoil in a land far away from home. Roja’s love enables her to face any type of confrontation and she is able to go to great lengths to rescue her husband despite being in a place foreign to her where she can’t speak the language either. The Roja character draws parallels to Savitri from Mahabharata.

Question 3: What kind of reality is constructed in the film for the audience ?

Kashmir separatism and terrorism has been an ongoing dispute for well over three decades now. The nationalistic sentiment is summoned early in the movie with the Indian army capturing a notorious terrorist. Later in the movie, the hero is abducted by a group of separatists and they raise slogans such as “Azadi” and “intifada” denotative of the ongoing struggle. The hero is portrayed as a patriot who views the Kashmir separatism movement as a threat to his country while the heroine is portrayed as a larger than life character whose love for her husband is supposedly greater to her than the national issue at stake.

Conclusion:

Portrayal of women in Tamil cinema has been majorly downsized to roles of an item number, a romantic interest, some sentimental insignia that of a mother or sister. While this not the right way to go about, there exists another notion that the modern feminist woman is someone that does not adhere to the patriarchal norms and desires to smash orthodoxy and past ideas that have served society well. While such depictions are rather new and scarce, the idea is picking up steam. However, both such portrayals are extreme and are often subject to ridicule and criticism.

Mani Ratnam's representation on women though has stood out from the rest. Well balanced and sensible, The women from Mani Ratnam's cinema have managed to retain their femininity yet have been able to add value to the plot of the film. Ahead of their times and memorable, Characters such as Roja, Shaila Banu or even earlier characters such as Divya from Mouna Ragam are still remembered to this day. Such can be the impact of a rational and realistic illustration.

In the words of Mani Ratnam itself: "They are not heroines, they are characters. They all have a mind of their own".

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