

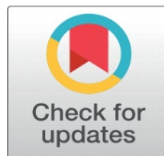
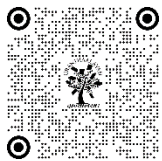
UNDERSTANDING THE PORTRAYAL OF TOXIC CHARACTERIZATION IN TAMIL CINEMA FROM A GENDER LENS

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ABSTRACT

The film is an integral part of human lives. The potential of film is beyond the functions of the mass media which are information, education and entertainment. The film media act as an agent of cultural transformation, shaping the perception, forming the ideologies and the like. Watching films with family, friends, and well-wishers has been a channel of emotional association. Watching films with family and friends gives us the liberty to explore our inner self and to share our views about the films and its content with each other. The concept of masculinity and femininity in films is not new but it has its roots in the context of gender and culture. This is a socio-cultural idea which conditions a man and woman with stereo-typical behaviours in order to fit in a predetermined cultural framework. The term toxic refers to the concepts which are harmful to the human wellbeing. This research throws light on the investigation of toxic masculinity and femininity traits and the understanding of these traits among the college going students through films. According to Live Mint (2022) It is revealed that, in the post pandemic period the frequency of theatre goers has increased. The young adults in the age group of 18-29 are the frequent film viewers. Based on the research articles, it is found that in India 15% of the people watch films in the theatre one time in a week. 8% of the people mentioned that they visit the theatre fifteen days once. Understanding the concept of toxic masculinity and femininity in films by the students is the need of the hour. Students are inculcated with the ideologies, behaviours, body language with what they see in the silver screen which subsequently is reflected in their relationships with friends and family members. In this regard, the researchers made an attempt to investigate these concepts from the student's perspective.

Keywords: Gender, Students, Films, Society, Culture



1. INTRODUCTION

In today's world the film plays a major role in shaping the perception of the audience. The film has the potential to influence social attitude and the belief system in a society. This media can be termed as an infotainment one due to its ability in transmitting contemporary social issues and also entertaining the mass audience of all the age groups. This media has the ability to provide the audience with diverse stories that captivates the minds from romantic dramas to a thought-provoking visual experience. It exposes the current situations of the society that deals with

many social evils that are still present in our society. For example: A Bollywood movie called "Toilet: Ek Prem Katha", which highlights India's toilet issue due to the cultural and social stigma. It highlights the struggles of the community women who face sexual harassments due to open defecation. This story is based on the real story of Anita Narra from Madhya Pradesh. She refused to be with her husband as there was no toilet in her marital home. The film media highlights the social realism of political, social, and psychological content to the audience.

Today the films not only depict the present issues of the society but at the same time it is instilling the positive and negative beliefs among the viewers. The films take the audience to an imaginary realm where it becomes difficult to identify the realities and the imaginaries that are inculcated in the minds. From an historical perspective, the portrayal of the women in the movies is of a disputable topic. They are often shown as an object of desire, helpless and shown in a stereotypical role. Violence, stalking, harassments are shown in a normalised manner. In recent times, we can see the patterns of toxic masculinity in recent films that are much in debate. The Wire (2023) Authoritarian Masculinities can be explained to relate the situation where the relationship between the father and son who are not emotionally connected. This kind of situations leads to misogyny, violence, dominance over the other. This kind of behaviour is reflected on women in most cases. It is found that, in order to prevent such behaviours, it is suggested that, the father and son relationship should be healthy and positive one. It will eliminate the toxic characteristics from the minds of the men.

There is an increase in the usage of anger and violence appeal in the films like RRR, Pushpa, Kabir Singh, and Animal. This toxic masculinity concept is based on the cultural pressure posted on the men to behave in a masculine manner that incorporates harmful qualities. It promotes men to be tough and avoid expressing their emotions which affect their mental health. There are many definitions of this concept. Based on research, there are 3 main elements in this toxic masculinity. The first one is toughness which emphasizes on being strong emotionally, emotionally and behaviourally aggressive. The second one is antifemininity attribute which deals with the rejection of any vulnerable activities like seeking help, showing feminine emotions like crying etc. The third one is the power, which focuses on the concept that men must work towards obtaining power and status.

In contrast to the concept of toxic masculinity, there is toxic femininity. It is not known exactly when it originated but the sources suggest that it entered the main stream in 2018 by a social psychologist Devon Price. She is a journalist, educator, speaker who published an article based on this topic in "The Sydney Morning Herald". The concept denotes restricting one's behaviour based on stereotypically feminine qualities. According to the Health Line (2024) which mentioned the effects of toxic femininity by Monica Vermani who is a clinical psychologist stated that it affects the physical and mental health by increasing the stress and losing one's own identity, having unhealthy relationships etc.

Meghan Rice, who is a licensed therapist, stated that toxic femininity can be explained when a woman is told to behave in a certain way which is based on the traditional stereotypes. It also means to influence the women to be confined in their traditional roles and expectations. These perceptions are instilled in the minds of the woman by the opposite gender.

Both toxic masculinity and femininity are interrelated concepts which are rooted in internal misogyny. Toxic masculinity focuses on being dominant, aggressive, and violent. The toxic femininity silently reinforces the acceptance of violence, domination in order to live. It pressures the women to be gentle, polite, submissive and to be

attractive etc. Deccan Herald (2023) one of the important gender researcher Judith Butler who did a groundbreaking work called “Gender Trouble” where she examines gender representations and identities. She mentioned how the behaviours are learned based on the constructed gender identities. Based on the research it is found the Indian cinema doesn't give a clear picture on the concept of feminism. The real meaning of feminism means treating all the gender in an equal manner.

According to Merriam Webster (2024) the word feminism denotes the theory of political, economic and social equality of both the sexes. In the movies, the plots are made based on women who are cheating, illegal affairs, having sugar daddies. The protagonists are shown behaving in a manner which is not justified in terms of gender. If a crime is committed by a person, then, it should be considered as a crime. Normalising crime cannot be termed as an empowerment. Movies like Thank you for coming, Dear Zindagi, Made in Heaven series, Jee karda series, Lipstick under my burkha, Four more shots etc. These movies and the impact of this deceptive concept in the movies that not only act as an entertainment but also it gets influenced in the minds of the young audience in an indepth manner. It makes the audience believe that behaving in a harmful way is an acceptable one due to its narrative style. Such portrayal in the mass culture increases the risk of propagating the harmful stereotypes and contributes to the existing domestic violence along with gender based discriminations. In the current time, it is not the sole responsibility of the film makers who make films of this kind but it has to be viewed critically. The films should empower the audience promoting the gender equality for a harmonious social environment. There are movies which showcases the women empowerment and the portrayal of masculinities and feminities in through responsible narratives.

1.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) To identify the gender-based interpretations of the films based on students' perspectives.
- 2) To empower the students with critical analysis for effective film viewership.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Duy Tuan Dinh et al. (2022) did a study on the impact of toxic masculinity. The study found that due to toxic masculinity there are also mental health issues that are associated with this. One of the important attributes of masculinity is to be successful. To be successful one becomes more competitive to prove who he is. By winning the men get their motivation and sometimes it also contributes to their violent side. It makes the men disobey which subsequently leads to aggression and also in depression.

Aldi Pramudiya (2023) did a study on the representation of masculinity in the media. The researcher made a significant point by emphasising the awareness of the toxic masculinity representation in the media. The study also stated that media plays an important role in shaping the audience belief system and attitude. It advocates positive and inclusive portrayals in the mass media. The researcher stated that, in future the research should be based on the multi diversities of the toxic masculinities. It should also shed light on the impact of the this in the minds of the people in the society.

Palistha Ranjitkar (2023) The important social concepts that make a man and women inferior and dominant are the presence of stereotypes created based on

gender. A man is seen like a leader, path finder, emotionally rigid, brave and the like. The patriarchal culture makes the boys feel like they are bestowed with values. The study concludes that men and women should be seen in an equal manner from the lens of a culture.

Brittany Leigh Bahl (2022) mentioned about the toxic rhetoric in the media content. Its influence is very subtle. The viewers overlook these subtle influences and it gradually changes the perception of the gender. They notice more on the dialogue which the protagonist speaks. The research scholars are able to identify those patterns through repeated viewing of the films. It enables the researcher to gain an indepth understanding. The toxic rhetoric boasts harmful stereotypes and dangerous ideologies.

Seyyed Mohammad Reza Miremadi (2023) According to this study, the toxicity in the film characters are harmful for the society, family and entertainment. It seizes the physical, emotional and spiritual rights of women. Based on the literature reviews it is found that, the toxic attributes that are assigned to the genders can cause severe harm in the marital relationships. Healthy masculinity and femininity will create a harmonious and equality in the society.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The feminist film theory is one of the important theories in film studies. It deals with the portrayal of women characters in films. It involves many theoretical combinations of semiotics, Marxism, lacanian psychoanalysis. Addition to this theory, Laura Mulvey's classic essay "Visual Pleasure and narrative cinema" 1975, mentions how the genders are portrayed by the film medium. Mulvey stated that film medium is not only for entertainment but also delivers a symbolic communication of how one should behave in a society in terms of gender. Some writers in this theory feel that the parameters that are used in this theory possess the traits of psychoanalytic theory.

Still, writers in feminist film theory commonly assume Mulvey's basic parameters and take some version of psychoanalytic theory as a desideratum.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research is based on qualitative research design. It aims to understand the level of gender-based concepts from an in-depth manner. So, the researcher used in-depth interview method to collect the data in a qualitative manner. Totally 20 students are selected for the study. From under graduation there were 5 boys and girls. From post-graduation there were 5 boys and 4 girls. From Ph.D one scholar was there in this study. A semi structured interview schedule is created to collect the data. The interview questions are framed based on the objectives and in an unbiased manner.

5. DATA INTERPRETATIONS

The study utilized a qualitative method for the gender interpretation in films from a socio-cultural perspective. An interview schedule was constructed to collect the data from an indepth manner. Totally 10 questions were asked to the respondents. The overall observations are presented below:

1) Understanding the term gender:

According to the students, the term gender is associated with the cultural values that are assigned during the birth. Gender is a broader perspective. From the male respondents, the qualities include providing support, to heap each other, helping tendency, to have a respectable behavior. The female respondents mentioned gender traits as from the social and cultural norms followed through the generations. Hence the term gender includes the diverse expressions and identities people choose to associate.

2) The perception of masculinity/femininity:

In this concept, the male respondents termed masculinity as strength, acceptance, independence, assertiveness, and competitiveness. While the female respondents termed it as nurturing, bold, empathy, cooperation, and emotional expressiveness. However, the respondents possess a wide range of traits on characterizing their gender identity.

3) Awareness of the term gender/masculinity/femininity:

Being aware of the reality that men, women, boys and girls have different responsibilities, tasks and desires. The characteristic of masculinity requires a person to be strong, self-confident, financial support, aggressive and bold. The femininity traits include grooming, soft spoken, nurturing, caring, lovable, loyal and cooking.

4) Toxic behaviour in human communication forms in male and female characters:

Unhealthy communication can lead to negative impact in relationships between men and women. Many of the male students mentioned about the toxic human behavior like breaking nearby things, blaming, yelling out loud, calling names using their language and being defensive. Whereas female students replied that they scream, shout, harm themselves, crying, and seclude themselves from others.

5) Film viewing pattern:

The students mentioned that movies are a part of entertainment in their day-to-day life, after the pandemic, people started to prefer OTT platforms like Disney plus, Amazon Prime, Netflix etc. Based on the OTT platform, the students said that they watch one movie daily.

6) Students preference of their favourite actor/actress:

According to the data it is found that, most of the students prefer Actor vijay as their favorite actor and least preference to actor Simbu. Actress Trisha was given highest preference followed by Nikhila Vima for least preference.

7) Expression of toxic femininity and masculinity in the films with reference to the recently watched films

Toxic masculinity and femininity in films are expressed in violence, aggressive, emotional illiteracy, more dominant and unemotional than female character.

Figure1



Figure 1 (Reference Movie Clip from the Movie - Lover 2024)

The sentimental dramatization digs into the complexities of a relationship that has taken a harmful turn over the long time. The film unfurls as the protagonist's possessive and borderline onerous behavior fills the blazes, taking off his sweetheart looks. She moves on without her or her partner.

Figure 2



Figure 2 (Reference Movie Clip from The Movie - Lover 2024)

Portraying Manikandan as the harmful partner, feared by Sri Gouri's character. Kanna Ravi steps into the part of a travel vlogger, including interest as Manikandan suspects him to be a potential equal partner in the relationship.

Figure 3



Figure 3 (Reference Movie Clip from the Movie - Love Today 2022)

Pradeep is not comfortable with Nikitha talking to her best companion Revi. He respects Nikitha for being all lovey-dovey in the track 'Saachithale', but taunts her for tending to her ex-boyfriend as 'Mamakutt-yyyyy'.

Figure 4



Figure 4 (Reference Movie Clip from The Movie - Viduthalai 2023)

A gigantic wrong doing that included hundreds of police and woodland authorities entered and scoured the whole town. The harm done to their properties can be switched, but the sexual ambush on eighteen women cannot be ignored.

When the police enquire to discover a lead on the fundamental target, they begin by enquiring the ladies. They are beaten in a harsh way, stripped, and mortified to get the truth from them.

Figure 5



Figure 5 (Reference Movie Clip from The Movie - Jai Bhim 2021)

The custodial torment of rajakannu, iruttappan and mosakkutty numerous times over, the violence is escalated. It has amplified scenes of sexual savagery and mortification. Sengani as well stands up and makes a commotion each time she is beaten.

8) The level of appropriateness and inappropriateness of the toxic representation in films and in personal lives:

From the gender point of view toxic communication and behavior is inappropriate in our daily lives as it will ruin our relationship and the bonding between one another. The toxic behaviour is very harmful and there is no appropriateness or inappropriateness in it. It should not be shown in films. Toxic communication is literally inappropriate where it causes a person to an emotional distress, it creates low self-esteem, leads to bad mental health. Such behaviours can lead to physical health deterioration.

9) Measures or suggested ways to refrain our minds from getting influenced by the gender-based mass media messages:

Few measures are suggested to refrain our minds from getting influenced by gender-based messages like inserting disclaimer based on gender in the beginning of any media content, creating awareness on the toxic behavior and their violation, and avoiding words that reinforce the gender stereotypes.

6. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The study concluded with some interesting findings. The male respondents termed masculinity as strength, acceptance, independence, assertiveness, and competitiveness. While the female respondents termed it as nurturing, bold, empathy, cooperation, and emotional expressiveness. There are Gender based differences found in the discussion. Being aware of the reality that men, women, boys and girls have different responsibilities, tasks and desires. It is found that the characteristics learned from the movies are stereotypical. Unhealthy communication can lead to negative impact in relationships between men and women. It leads to self-harm and damaging household products. Toxic masculinity and femininity in films are expressed in violence, aggressive, emotional illiteracy, more dominant and unemotional than female characters. It stresses that from the gender point of view toxic communication and behavior is inappropriate in our daily lives as it will ruin our relationship and the bonding between one another. Toxic communication is literally inappropriate where it causes a person to an emotional distress, low self-esteem, and leads to bad mental health. It also causes physical health deterioration. So, it is the need of the hour to make the students have gender

sensitization in their lives so that there can be peace and harmony in interpersonal relationships.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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