Shifting Identities and Changing Images in Tamil Cinema

Amutha Manavalan
Asst. Prof. Department of Media Studies, Christ University
Dr. Shailashree B
Associate Professor, Dept. of Mass Communication, Bangalore University

ABSTRACT: *Tamil popular cinema has been a reflection of political, cultural and ethnic ideologies creating a Tamil identity among the fans for many decades. It has been instrumental in creating images of genders through visual culture and visual representations which has led to stereotyping the identity, culture and appearances of the Tamil populace. For decades the identity of the man has been portrayed as the torchbearer of Tamil identity while the woman has been more of a passive submissive subject providing a constant support to the male dominant character or protagonist. The article focuses on the shifting identities portrayed through cinema and how it has left a void in Tamil society and culture at a time of ethnic crisis.*
The paper would be discussing stereotyping portrayals and its effects on perception leading to the above mentioned factors of identity, crisis and stereotyping.
KEY WORDS: *Tamil popular cinema, visual representation, culture, identity*

I. INTRODUCTION

Films have played a very important role in India, and even today remain the most popular form of entertainment and recreation. They have also played a crucial part from time to time in promoting educational and reformative values. They have proved to be a major source of linguistic and cultural integration. Indian films have gone beyond the geographical boundaries. They have come out of the epoch of love and fantasy and learnt to work on experimental plots. The effect of globalization of Indian cinema is applicable not only to the Bollywood, but also to the regional film industries of the country.

The Tamil film industry has always responded to the rising sun (the political party symbol of DMK). For decades and even now Tamil films have been used as a prime medium to attract and diffuse Dravida ideologies. The Tamil film industry emerged as vehicle for propaganda for all those nationalists who challenged the Hindi-speaking North India and the local upper caste.

Describing the significance of cinema in Tamil society, Theodore Bhaskaran, film scholar, points out the 'over the years of its existence, Tamil cinema has grown to become the most domineering influence in the cultural and political life in Tamil Nadu.' As far as Tamil cinema is concerned, it has a number of distinct characteristics that are unique to this industry. First, it has to be said that language is a critical maker of distinction. Though Tamil is recognized as one India's national languages it is not the lingua-franca of India. The language is widely spoken in the state of Tamil Nadu. At the same time however like the other well known regional cinemas of Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka, Tamil cinema, has a distinct political and social content that sets it apart from Hindi cinema. The reverberation and articulation of Dravidian identity and Tamil nationalism are profound in Tamil cinema.

The paper is an understanding that over the years this identity has gradually changed and has shifted to a more diluted understanding of the Tamilness which is less effective and less influential in cultural replacements. Even though big banner releases with scripts that are tailored for the Superstars and the mass hero's are still a craze, it is like a monsoon shower for movie lovers to watch cinema of transition type. This kind of cinema is accepted by one and all.

New wave/ Third wave or transition cinema has been defined as cinema for a newer generation, a society which has been deprived of realistic cinema. All these films, whether comedy or tragedy, achieve an allegorical quality which becomes a distinctive trait of the entire movement: the ability to speak of subjects on more than one level at the same time, of the present while talking of the past, for example, or of politics while talking of religion (*The Oxford History of World Cinema*-The Modern Cinema 1960-1995, pp.427-435). This transition has given a shift in identities and the usage of socio-ethnic symbols in films today. There are few highlights which are discussed with regard to this in this paper.

Tamil katha nayaki and identity

Neo- nativity films also show case the portrayal of the female lead who is the onscreen representation of the Tamil woman by an large. This character is mostly submissive, obidient, relentlesly trying to please the male protagonist be it the father, brother,husband,son or even the lover. Take for instance the female leads in most post popular Tamil films- *Tupakki, Nanum Rowdy Thaan, Aegan, Aadhavan* who are the ultra modern women every Tamil women hailing from the urban sectors would want to be but cannot be. Looking further into this new identity of the Tamil women, Sathyavathi Chinniah states that the period after 1990 ushered in great changes to the Tamil film scnen, which resulted in a major revamp of Tamil film content. Greater proliferation of television into rural areas and later video and cable televison provided audiences with not only a spectrum of programs and films to choose from but also the convenience of watching films at their own leisure. Hence it became necessary for filmmakers to produce films that attracted audiences. As a result, emphasis on film content was replaced with elements of glamour. The entrance of internationa beauty pageant winners like Aishwarya Rai, Sushmita Sen and Priyanka Chopra, Yukta Mookhey served the purpose. With the Indian liberalisation new global elements were infused into the films content. This led to the emergence of a narrative that was distinctly different from earlier film types, thus emerged the new heroine or kata nayaki of Tamil cinema (Chinniah, 2008)

The Tamil Katha Nayaki is most often a very fair, slender very urban looking nayaki who cannot express herself eloquently in her mother tongue Tamil the Tamil katha nayakan is a complex identity to refer to also. Considering the fact that the modern portrayal of women in Tamil cinema is in the search of providing to its viewers a Puthumai Penn (refer to Mahakavi Subramnia Bharatiyar) unfortunately it limits to only western dressing and trends, eloquent use of the English language and glamour.

The Katha Nayakan of Tamil cinema

Tamil cinema has always contributed to the idolizing the Nayakan and Nayaki of cinema. Portraying actors in characters which the audience can look up-to and sometimes identify themselves to which is the primary task of cinema.

Pitching against the earlier versions of the Katha Nayaki and Nayakan of Tamil cinema of yesteryears we have an identity created by the Madurai hero- one who is violent, aggressive, has a criminal record to his credit or who is still trying to identify his ego. Today's Tamil Katha Nayakan is most often recognized and understood as Bala's *Sethu* (Sethu-1999),or *Nandha* (Nandha- 2001), Ameer's *Paruthiveeran* (Paruthiveeran- 2007) or Sasikumar's *Azhagar* or *Paraman* (Subramniapuram- 2008). This genre and description is of one kind which gives us an understanding of a perfect Tamil Katha Nayakan. In contrast to this we have Karthik Subaraj's Micheal (Pizza- 2012), Pa.Ranjith' Kali and Anbu (Madras 2014), Hari's Aaru (Aaru- 2005) or Jeeva's Karthik (Unnale Unnale- 2007) just to name a few have the contrasting images of urban Chennai Tamil Katha Nayakan. As Tamil cinema has got a wider band of viewership when comparing it with the other south Indian language films it leaves a void and misconception in the minds of people.

Tradition Vs Modernity- Comparison of the older Tamil cinema with present day films

The silent era of Tamil cinema has always portrayed women in a softer characterization and had mostly, films based on the mythology with men playing the role of women in some films. With the talkies emerging Tamil cinema saw the portrayal of women as mothers, warrior princess, sisters and dotting daughters. The men were often portrayed as brave-hearts, warriors and valiant soldiers often saving the damsel in distress. In both these scenarios there was a third portrayal- that of the antagonist of the film. Tamil cinema as mentioned earlier has always been a vehicle of political, cultural propaganda. Tracing back to the times of DK- Dravida Kazhagam media was used effectively and efficiently for propagating the anti-brahmin ideology. With DMK and AIADMK branching from DK found entertainment medium effective to propagate socio- political ideologies also the party manifesto. Films like '*Parasakthi*', '*Thirumbi Paar*', *Velaikari*, Or *Iravu* etc., exhibited socio-political ideologies along with addressing socio-ethnic issues mainly as part of the party manifesto. Adopting an attitude of empathy towards women in their attempt to gather public support, DMK filmmakers largely related the underprivileged position of women in society by treating them as a subset within the larger category of the downtrodden. Hence the reference to the representation of the female as a 'passive subject' was useful in helping them achieve this objective. (Chinniah S. , 2008)

In comparison to these films the recent Third Wave films portray a vivid understanding of Tamilness and identity. In all these plots and sub-plots the main aspect has been 'violence' with gender stereotyping along with more emphasis given to control of the woman. The shift of identity of woman portrayed as a pleasurable object in Tamil cinema from the 70's has been maintained by the Third wave films.

Using cinema as a platform to discuss conventional ideas and challenging wisdom, stereotyping could be taken into consideration. Cinema has been instrumental in typecasting genders- as mentioned earlier the heroine or the female lead is most of the time a spectacle of voyeuristic pleasure of the film viewer or the village women portrayed as a subordinate to the hero. Third wave cinema also portrays women as a pleasure symbol but as the modern urban women viewers often relate to screen representations filmmakers are faced with a challenge to show women as daring and progressive and with unconventional screen characterization. In Ameer's 'Paruthiveeran' the heroine who is love with the hero is gang raped and left to die when the hero finds her. Here the heroine's character is unconventional and she asks the hero (her lover) to actually cut her into pieces and report to the police and his photograph would be published in the newspaper, as per his desire he would then become a popular figure in the village and people would start to respect and fear him. Here again we see that even a bold woman still desires to be a object of pleasure for her lover once again a very gory and violent form of representation.

New Identity- challenging convention

Cinema glorifying caste is not a new thing to many Tamil cinema viewers. The Third wave of Tamil cinema is mainly about the violence, miscreants and antagonistic values and practices. The character of the antagonist in the earlier years always portrayed the negative aspect of a human behavior and was in the end 'tamed' by the male lead of the film. This is also a kind of stereotyping which is being followed in Indian cinema. But majority of today's commercial Tamil films have an anti- hero perspective which actually captures the imagination of the viewers. The film is most often set in the background of *Thoonganaram* or Madurai district which is the visual narrative space or the other option would be in Chennai. Very rarely do you find narrative space of other southern districts of Dindigul, Kanyakumari, Sivangangai, Theni, Tuticorin, Ramanathapuram and Virudhunagar.

As Rajan Krishnan mentions that the south in Tamil Nadu is a comparison to the North of the state which is quite similar to that of the Italian south famously known as *mezzogiorno*. It is a normative dichotomy between a modern civic Chennai and a backward, less civic south that is portrayed in the Tamil film narratives (Krishnan, 2009).

Set in these narrative spaces are the deviant characters often playing the role of the Tamil hero. Sometimes it is the village urchin, sometimes it is a petty thief, sometimes it's a common man- one who goes unnoticed yet is a part of the society we live in. These characters are similar to the one's we may come across in our daily life yet not give much importance to. This kind of cinema with such characterization is called as "neo-nativity film" by Sundar Kali. The neo- nativity film of the transition period here transfers mental inadequacy, normally reserved for comedians or minor characters, to the figure of the hero, and so precludes the hero's moving away from infantile maternal fusion and immature sexuality to adult make status, culminating in his getting married and assuming the role of the father (Mulvey 1989). It also functions as assign of social insufficiency, or, to put it in Silverman's terms (1990:114), social castration, a representation of the hero's deficiencies in terms of education, class and /or caste. Grounded in his rurality, the perceived locus of such lack, this mental condition of the hero is never completely cured in the Neo-nativity film, despite the heroine's unrelenting attempts. (Kali, 2013).

II. CONCLUSION

If cinema has been instrumental in creating perceptions in the minds of people over generations about the rich culture and ethics of the language and its people then today's Tamil cinema leaves a void in the minds of people who are not followers of this culture and also to the urban Tamil population.

Here a reference to the social identity (Tajfel 1979) can be taken into case where one set of description of the Nayakan and Nayaki can be pitched against the other set of descriptions found in cinema narratives and stories. Social categorization of these characters portraying the Tamil culture and richness of the language leads to prejudices which are often not made very clear by the story and its narration. Hence this leads to prejudices, stereotyping and shift in identities of the characters in the films themselves which reflects severely. As Communist party MLA Nanmaran recollects "In Chennai, people, after knowing that I come from Madurai, in a curious tone but reluctantly asked me, do people in Madurai always carry sickles behind their shirts?" "This is what Tamil cinema's representation of Madurai seems to look," like he candidly remarked (D.Karthikeyan, 2011).

The article is an attempt to understand the changing identities of the Tamil state and its people who are represented and to an extent even stereotyped on screen by their favorite actors. With cinema having an overbearing effect on the audiences a balanced portrayal would probably lead to a stronger identity of Tamilness and the Tamil *kalacharam* in the minds of the viewers.

REFERENCES

[1]. Chinniah, S. (2008). The Tamil film heroine. In S. Velayuthum, *Tamil cinema- the cultural politics of Inida's other film industry* (pp. 32-33). London- New York: Routledge.

[2]. Chinniah, s. (2008). The tamil film heroine-from a passive subject to a pleasurable object. In S. Velayutham, *Tamil Cinema- the cultural politics of india's other film industry* (pp. 29-43). oxon: routledge.

[3]. D.Karthikeyan. (2011, may 02). Madurai 'formula' films and social realities. Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.

[4]. Kali, S. (2013). narrating seduction: vicissitudes of the sexed subject in Tamil nativity film. In R. Vasudevan, *making meaning in Indian cinema* (pp. 168-189). new delhi: oxford university press.

[5]. Krishnan, R. (2009). Imaginary geographieshe making of the 'south' in contemporary Tamil cinema. In S. Velayutham, *Tamil Cinema- the cultural politics of India's other film industry* (pp. 139-153). New York-London: Routledge.