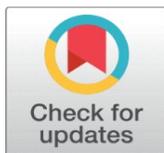
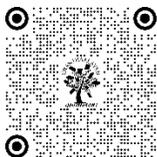


FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION: STRUGGLES AND CHALLENGES OF RATHAKANNEER

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ABSTRACT

The notion of freedom of expression, in Tamil films unsimilar to other film industries is a frequently debated topic. Tamil cinema has encountered controversies and obstacles concerning the aspect of freedom of expression over years. Lately there has been an increasing recognition and discussion, about the importance of freedom of speech in Tamil cinema. This struggle for freedom of Expression isn't that new to Tamil cinema that the dates back to decades before. That is when the wave of Dravidian cinema emerged the Tamil cinematic sphere faced the notable adherent struggles and challenges for expressions on screen. This research delves into the complexities of freedom of expression in Indian cinema, focusing on M.R. Radha's "*Rathakanneer*". Employing qualitative analysis, the study explores the challenges faced by the film due to its progressive ideas, enduring censorship, and controversies. Radha's Theatre of Cruelty intensified societal critiques. It underscores art's power to challenge conventions and navigate political and societal pressures, revealing the intricate interplay between cinema, socio-political influences, and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Freedom of Expression, Dravidian Cinema, M.R. Radha, Rathakkaneer, Theatre of Cruelty

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1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of freedom of expression in the field of filmmaking is complex and varied, involving a wide range of socio-political viewpoints. It basically involves the intrinsic right of writers, artists, and creators to express their thoughts and narratives through their work, but also taking into account the broader cultural and political ramifications of their subject matter. This matter is characterized by its dynamic and contentious nature, a terrain where cinema's freedom of expression is profoundly shaped by cultural, political, and societal influences. Achieving

equilibrium between the creative liberties of filmmakers and their societal responsibilities, all while navigating the effects of political pressures, remains an ongoing challenge within the film industry. Striving for a middle ground that respects diverse viewpoints, nurtures creative expression, and safeguards against potential harm is a central objective in the broader socio-political discourse surrounding cinema. [Rathakanneer \(1952\)](#)

In the context of Indian cinema, freedom of expression emerges as a complex and nuanced topic, heavily influenced by the nation's profound cultural diversity, political climate, and socioeconomic complexities. It poses a formidable challenge: reconciling the need for artistic autonomy with the imperative to maintain societal harmony and cultural sensitivity. It serves as an exemplar of the broader tension existing in a multicultural and pluralistic country such as India—a tension involving the interplay between democratic principles, individual creative expression, and societal responsibilities. Likewise, freedom of expression within Tamil cinema, which finds its origins in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and has wielded significant cultural influence over the years, confronts similar complexities and challenges. The industry grapples with the delicate task of balancing artistic freedom with various constraints, be they political, cultural, or social in nature. As a result, when it comes to openly expressing ideas and narratives, Tamil film has had its fair share of issues and difficulties. The problem of film freedom of speech is a multidimensional one that crosses national and regional boundaries. It demands a sophisticated and intelligent approach that acknowledges the different perspectives of both producers and fans while also considering the larger socio-political milieu in which it functions.

2. CINEMATIC FREEDOM IN INDIA: CULTURAL PLURALISM AND IDENTITY

In the context of India, a culturally diverse nation encompassing a rich tapestry of languages, religions, and cultural traditions, the issue of freedom of expression within the realm of cinema takes on a significant role. Indian cinema, a true reflection of this vast diversity, serves as a means to both celebrate and safeguard distinct cultural identities. However, this endeavour is not without its challenges, as it necessitates a delicate balance between the imperative of portraying varied cultures and the potential pitfalls of cultural appropriation or misrepresentation. Examining the historical trajectory of film censorship in India reveals that movies have been banned or censored due to several key factors. These include depictions of sexuality, political themes, religious content, communal conflicts and inaccurate portrayals of individuals or subjects and excessive violence. [Panda \(2017\)](#)

The oversight of films in India is vested in the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), an entity with a historical record of film censorship. The CBFC is responsible for granting approval for public screenings of films within the nation. On occasion, the decisions made by this body have come under scrutiny, as they have been perceived as influenced by political pressures, a situation viewed by some as encroaching upon the realm of artistic freedom. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that, in addition to the federal government, regional governments hold sway over cinematic productions, resulting in disparities in censorship standards and regulations across various states. Indian cinema has a storied history of engaging with pressing societal issues, including but not limited to caste-based discrimination, gender inequities, and poverty. Filmmakers frequently employ their craft as a powerful medium to disseminate awareness and stimulate social transformation. It is noteworthy that the tensions arising from the juxtaposition of artistic expression and societal values are exemplified by the occasional critique and

opposition that films tackling sensitive subjects encounter from interest groups or political organizations. [Ramaswamy \(2020\)](#)

The process of film censorship in India reflects the enduring adherence to traditional norms while also acknowledging their potential for evolution over time. Although norms are not inherently fixed and can change, the prevailing reality often outpaces these established norms. Consequently, authorities may find themselves compelled to adapt and modify these norms in response to the evolving societal context. [Panda \(2017\)](#)

Film censorship, in the context of politics refers to the involvement of bodies in the film industry aiming to regulate and control the content displayed on screen. This regulation primarily focuses on three areas; sex, violence and politics. In India there has been an approach towards censoring violent content in films resulting in graphic scenes of violence and explicit depictions of rape being shown. However, controversies have arisen regarding the portrayal of content in movies. Additionally, instances of censorship are becoming more prevalent in India. This article raises awareness about the existing limitations regarding tolerance and sensitivity, within the censorship system while emphasizing the importance of addressing these concerns [Bhowmik \(2002\)](#). In summary, the cinematic landscape in India, marked by its multifaceted cultural fabric, showcases the intricate dynamics of freedom of expression. While it serves as a platform for the preservation and portrayal of diverse cultural identities, it also navigates the intricate terrain of censorship, political influences, and the imperative to address social issues. The constant interplay between artistic expression and societal norms underscores the multifaceted nature of cinema's role in Indian society. [Subagunarajan \(2018\)](#)

3. STRUGGLES AND CHALLENGES OF DRAVIDIAN CINEMA

The realm of Dravidian cinema faced an ever-seen crisis from the Board of Film Censor during its initial phase. Scholarly articles and other available sources emphasize Parasakthi's struggle as one of the first and foremost struggle for its freedom of struggle. Though its preceding narratives of the movement namely Nallathambi, Velaikkari, etc., faced criticisms on their initial release Parasakthi was the first one to face the most criticism. Pandian's (1991) study of "Parasakthi" sheds light on the early challenges faced by it. It explores the film's opposition, involving religious, political, and governmental entities, mainly due to its candid portrayal of social and political issues. This resistance highlighted the conservatism in Tamil society during that period, reflecting broader sociocultural and political divisions in Tamil Nadu. "Parasakthi" release led to instant controversy and calls for prohibition. The Congress-led Madras government led by Rajaji, received appeals against the film. Brahmin-influenced press criticized the film. [Perumal \(1954\)](#)

Inbavaanan, an associate director of filmmaker Vetrimaran, discussed the ongoing challenges faced by their team concerning the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). Their renowned projects, namely Visaaranai, Asuran, and recently Viduthalai, have been subjected to numerous claims and disputes with the censor board. These narratives often delve into issues related to the subaltern and caste annihilations, aligning with Dravidian ideologies. Inbavaanan emphasized that the CBFC's attitude has remained unchanged since the British colonial era. Regardless of the film's narrative, the CBFC consistently avoids engaging with discourses critical of the ruling government. This pattern mirrors the experiences of filmmakers associated with the Dravidian movement in the past. Such practices continue to raise questions about the freedom of expression within the cinematic sphere. In contrast, Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms operate under significantly

different conditions, with lenient restrictions and no oversight from the CBFC or similar institutions. ([Inbavaanan, Personal Communication, 2023](#))

4. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study seeks to delve into the arduous journey and obstacles encountered by M.R. Radha's film, "Rathakkanneer," with the aim of unraveling the chronological events that shaped the trajectory of the film's career. Furthermore, this research endeavors to closely examine the manifestation of a "Theatre of Cruelty" within the film, identifying it as a pivotal driving force behind the numerous challenges and hurdles faced by the production. For which the Paper employs Qualitative analysis of articles, and criticisms on the film. Further the study also investigates the other debates and discussions on the film. The vacuum of Primary data is nullified with expert interviews.

5. RATHAKANNEER: LIFE AND TIMES

Quite after the successful breakthrough of his plays *Lakshmi Kandhan*, *Izhantha Kadhal*, etc. M.R.Radha ventured with the famous Dravidian playwright *Thiruvaaroor K.Thangaraasu* for the play *Rathakkanneer* by the year 1949. Though the play had an ever-seen reception among the audience it was not an exception for critics and oppositions similar to the earlier ones. ([Somashundharam. \(2021\)](#)).

"*Rathakkanneer*," a renowned theatrical production from the repertoire of M.R. Radha, exerted a lasting influence on Tamil theatre, persisting as a cultural force even beyond the playwright's lifetime. This play holds a special place as a pioneering script that encapsulated the ethos of the Dravidian ideology, credited to Thiruvarur Thangarasu, a playwright associated with the Dravidian Self-Respect movement. Its enduring impact has solidified "*Rathakkanneer*" as an enduring classic in Tamil theatre. ([Parasakthi \(1952\)](#))

The play enjoyed numerous successful runs during M.R. Radha's lifetime, but what truly distinguishes it is its posthumous legacy. Even after the playwright's passing, "*Rathakkanneer*" continued to captivate audiences, a testament to its enduring relevance. Remarkably, "*Rathakkanneer*" achieved a rare feat by being staged consistently, despite having been adapted into a film, a milestone unparalleled in Tamil theatrical history. This unique distinction underscores the unparalleled popularity and cultural significance of "*Rathakkanneer*," as it not only survived but thrived on both stage and screen. It is worth noting that the play's reception was notably heightened following its cinematic adaptation, solidifying its place as a cultural phenomenon in Tamil history ([Somasundharam, Personal communication, 2023](#)).

6. RATHAKANNEER: HARDSHIP AND DILEMMAS

- **Struggles for the Play:** The agitations and manifestations against the script of *Rathakkanneer* as a play was quite similar to that of M.R. Radha's other plays before. *Rathakkanneer* play was in particular criticized for the climax scene and the unique newspaper scene which was purposefully rewritten for each and every show by M.R. Radha.

Somasundharam (personal assistant of M.R. Radha) in his personal communications reveals that the News Paper scene had an equal reception and Repudiation as he used to criticize the contemporary political encounters then. Since political reps of the right-wing parties were often offended and criticised, the

scene was the prime crowd puller for the show and at the same time the same was criticized a lot. [Paavendhan & Subagunarajan \(2009\)](#)

In the authoritative biography of M.R. Radha, an insightful commentary on "*Rathakanneer*" highlights that the dialogues within the play served as a powerful conduit for reformist ideologies. These progressive ideas faced staunch opposition, particularly from theists and individuals adhering to traditional beliefs. Consequently, the play endured extensive criticism and encountered significant resistance. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the government displayed a palpable eagerness to suppress the play, going to the extent of implementing Section 144 to disperse crowds gathered to witness the performance. This marked a concerted effort to curtail the impact and reach of the play

- **The Censor Board:** The film "*Rathakanneer*" endured a total of 60 cuts imposed by the censor board. The most prominent controversy surrounding the censorship process was the deletion of the portraits of Periyar and Buddha from the film's opening sequence. Initially, the film featured images of Buddha, Periyar, and Gandhi before the narrative began. However, the censor board mandated the removal of the representations of Buddha and Periyar, allowing only Gandhi's image to remain. Interestingly, M.R. Radha was resolute enough to eliminate Gandhi's image from the film as well ([Somasundharam, Personal communication, 2023](#)).

The scenes and dialogues which condemn the ruling party were purposefully omitted by the censor board, only a very few with less intended content were permitted on the screen. Radha termed this as a disgrace to his Self-Respect. The censor board's decision to trim two significant scenes from "*Rathakanneer*" created turmoil among the dedicated fans of the play who had been regular patrons. Both of these scenes vehemently criticized superstitious practices within the Hindu religion. One scene targeted the belief that God resides within the Rudraksha seed, while the other scene scrutinized the tradition of offering gifts to Brahmins who conducted rituals for the deceased, with the notion that the departed would receive these offerings in heaven in the same way they were presented to the Brahmin. The Hegemonic censor board had its scissors on these two scenes which is a mere denial of Freedom of Expression. [Periyar. \(2001\)](#)

7. STRUGGLES AND CHALLENGES PRE AND POST RELEASE

Thiruvaaroor Thangaraasu (1954) the screenplay writer of "*Rathakanneer*," provided a comprehensive overview of the formidable struggles and challenges encountered by the entire film production team during its creation. The production process spanned an extensive four-year period, thereby affording ample time for critical scrutiny. In the aftermath of its release, the film faced a barrage of seemingly irrational criticisms, with the primary point of contention being its title. Given that the title "*Rathakanneer*" literally translates to 'Blood Tears,' numerous newspapers and periodicals cynically insinuated before the release, that the choice of this title foretold or symbolized the arduous emotional toll that the project had exacted or would demand from the entire crew. [Eeswaran & Thirunavukkarasu \(2020\)](#)

Another significant point of criticism revolved around M.R. Radha himself. Despite his prior experience on the silver screen, considerable anticipation surrounded "*Rathakanneer*," primarily due to the fame it had garnered. However, detractors voiced their concerns, specifically targeting Radha's acting abilities. Critics contended that M.R. Radha's penchant for raising his voice on the theatrical stage, a practice generally deemed suitable for live theatre, was less amenable to the

medium of cinema. The criticism levied against him asserted, "Radha was known for his penchant for false statements in the newspaper scene, a factor that contributed to the play's popularity. Such embellishment, however, is deemed unfeasible in the film adaptation, potentially leading to a substantial failure". This commentary on the newspaper scene, which is alleged to intentionally disseminate false information, ignited animosity among members of right-wing political parties and individuals who were opposed to the principles of the self-respect movement. Within this context, criticisms were directed towards the governing party, its policies, and M.R. Radha's character in the play. It's noteworthy that M.R. Radha's character was scripted to respond to the criticisms and protests surrounding the self-respect movement and its unfolding events within the framework of this scene.

Thamizhan Kural (1954) a journal edited by M.P. Sivagnanam shortly known as Ma.Po.Si robusted critique of the film, particularly focusing on its narrative structure. The critique opined, "The film is characterized by a compelling storyline marred by elements of vulgarity and un-preferred ideologies. It espouses certain ideologies that were not well-received at the time. It becomes disconcerting to witness Radha, as a citizen of a democratic nation, criticizing political parties by likening them to business entities. Similarly, despite being part of the film industry, Radha engages in critiques of fellow filmmakers and producers. These instances of self-expression by Radha serve to diminish the film's overall standing and quality". This critique appears to have a connection with the newspaper scene in the play, which was earlier critical of Ma.Po.Si.'s actions regarding the self-respect movement. Additionally, within the play, a dialogue was introduced in a scene where Radha's character mourns his mother's passing. In this dialogue, the protagonist expresses his lament, saying, "It is deeply saddening to witness Ma.Po.Si. still alive while you have departed. What a tragic irony." [Somashundharam. \(2021\)](#)

Gurusamy (1954) pens his perspective on the critics of the film "Viduthalai," a well-known publication associated with Periyar's ideology. Gurusamy's article appears to be a rebuttal to the string of criticisms directed at the film "Rathakanneer." In essence, the article conveys that "Rathakanneer" is a bold and audacious endeavor, second only to "Parasakthi," and it successfully navigated a rigorous evaluation process with the censor board. The article underscores the significant challenges and adversity that "Rathakanneer" faced during its production. In an industry dominated by right-wing ideologies, it was exceptionally challenging to create a film like "Rathakanneer." Furthermore, in a market saturated with heavy traffic, finding a space for a rational narrative was deemed nearly impossible. Nevertheless, despite the formidable struggles and obstacles encountered both before and after the film's release, the endeavor is commendable.

8. RADHA'S THEATRE OF CRUELTY

Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" marked a significant departure from traditional theatre, aiming to create a profound sensory experience for actors and audiences. His revolutionary ideas, detailed in "The Theatre and Its Double," challenged established theatrical norms, shaping the avant-garde and experimental theatre. This article categorizes Artaud's insights into distinct dimensions. [Finter & Griffin \(1997\)](#).

In his initial reference to the "theatre of cruelty", [Artaud \(2018\)](#) underscores pain and terror as the pivotal elements integral to any form of theatrical performance or cinematic work. M.R. Radha, portraying a character with negative traits in the film, skilfully endeavours to elicit both disdain and fascination from the audience through his performance. In doing so, he pioneers novel avenues for

exploring the concept of cruelty. While embodying the role of the antagonist, Radha takes centre stage to communicate the principles of the Self-Respect Movement, thus infusing depth and dimension into the portrayal of villainy. [Bermel \(2014\)](#)

By aligning with the principles and parameters of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, M.R. Radha's portrayal of Mohan in "*Rathakanneer*" showcased the pinnacle of his acting prowess. Through his performance, he effectively engaged the audience and compelled them to recognize the inherent cruelty of a male chauvinist, utilizing his remarkable acting skills to drive home this message. M.R. Radha challenged the limits of conventional Tamil theatre by experimenting with unorthodox and provocative methods. Radha was noted for giving intense, emotionally-charged performances that frequently left an effect on the audience. M.R. Radha's portrayal in "*Rathakanneer*" is characterised by unadulterated, unedited emotion. The protagonist goes through a wide spectrum of strong emotions, including grief, fury, and despair. The concepts of the theatre of cruelty, where emotions are not restrained but rather intensified to generate a tremendous impact, are in line with this unfiltered emotional expression. M.R. Radha's body composition and passion throughout the movie define his performance. His exaggerated and highly theatrical facial expressions, body language, and gestures highlight the character's internal conflict. The theatre of cruelty is known for its physical expressiveness, which makes the body an effective means of expressing strong emotions. Ratan's psychological state changes significantly during the movie. M.R. Radha portrays the character with great depth, delving deeply into his inner struggles, fears, and obsessions. A crucial component of the theatre of cruelty, this psychological nuance gives the character additional dimension and a sense of complexity that draws the audience into the character's emotional world. [Annadhurai. \(2009\)](#)

He addresses wide spectrum of socio-cultural and political issues, harnessing the power of the theatre of cruelty as a means to do so. He delves into the realms of atheist philosophy, challenges and dispels unwarranted wedding customs and traditions, and openly ridicules the ruling government for its inadequate public services, including the state of road constructions and the Metro Water supply, among other things. The film reaches its pinnacle in the climax when the protagonist makes the heartfelt decision to have his wife marry his friend, Balu. It's plausible that Radha's utilization of the theatre of cruelty as a vehicle for conveying the ideologies and rational perspectives of the Self-Respect Movement was a significant factor contributing to the film's struggles and challenges. This deliberate approach may have incited strong reactions from the members of the prevailing ruling establishment during that era.

It is illogical to expect that Radha was aware of and intentionally embraced Artaud's theatre of cruelty as his style. However, his theatrical exposure and acting nuances align with the parameters of the theatre of cruelty. Radha's approach to acting, even without formal knowledge of Artaud's theories, resulted in a new style within the existing theatrical and cinematic sphere. This innovative approach became a vital force for both the audience and the ruling sphere, prompting them to confront the issues addressed in the film. Notes of [Ooduruvi \(1954\)](#) in *Rathakanneer* Special issue highlights that the film is a wiper of social disputes and sickness. The writer has attempted to address the most unjust practices of the society and Radha through his modern acting skill has intensified the same. The appreciation of Honorable Justice Mr. [Shastri \(1954\)](#), highlights that Radha wisely employs his comic and villain tone to address various social issues. That actually fuels the attention of audience. Though there are a few predecessors of *Rathakanneer* in the realm of Dravidian cinema Radha's theatre of cruelty addressing the social issues

and criticising the ruling party has geared the struggles and challenges for *Rathakanneer*.

9. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the issue of freedom of expression within the realm of filmmaking is a complex and multifaceted matter, deeply influenced by socio-political dynamics. Achieving a balance between artistic autonomy and societal responsibility remains an on-going challenge in the film industry. This challenge is especially pronounced in Indian cinema, given its cultural diversity and the influence of political pressures on film censorship. Tamil cinema, a significant part of Indian cinema, also grapples with similar complexities, striving to uphold creative freedom while adhering to various constraints.

The struggles and challenges faced by Dravidian cinema, exemplified by "*Rathakanneer*," highlight the enduring tension between artistic expression and societal norms. The play and film faced opposition and censorship due to their progressive ideologies and critiques of existing practices. An interesting perspective on Radha's acting style and its alignment with Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty is despite the lack of direct knowledge or intentional embrace, Radha's natural theatrical exposure and nuanced acting techniques appear to resonate with the core principles of the Theatre of Cruelty. Although Radha was not conscious about Radha's theatre of cruelty, their approach resulted in a fresh and innovative style within the established realms of theatre and cinema. This innovative approach, rooted in Radha's unique acting style, had a significant impact on both the audience and the societal sphere. By addressing issues through this unconventional method, Radha's performances encouraged viewers and societal authorities to confront the challenging themes presented in the film. Antonin Artaud, in his pioneering exploration of the "theatre of cruelty," emphasized the importance of pain and terror as essential elements of theatrical and cinematic experiences. M.R. Radha, through his portrayal of Mohan in "*Rathakanneer*," harnessed the principles of the Theatre of Cruelty to engage the audience and compel them to confront the inherent cruelty of a male chauvinist. His remarkable performance, aligning with Artaud's vision, pushed the boundaries of creative expression.

Ultimately, "*Rathakanneer*" serves as a testament to the enduring significance of art and its power to challenge conventions and spark societal discourse. Despite the obstacles it encountered, the play and film left an indelible mark on Tamil culture, emphasizing the intricate interplay between creative expression, socio-political influences, and societal values.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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