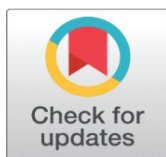
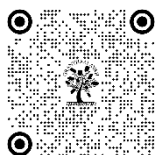


MALE DIRECTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WOMEN EMANCIPATORY CINEMA: A PENTADIC ANALYSIS OF TWO INDIAN FILMS

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ABSTRACT

With filmmaking being democratized, social imperatives are becoming central theme in cinema. In the Indian context, cinematic narratives are now trying to be inclusive of issues of importance. There are instances where men have offered stories and narratives that profoundly depict issues related to women. These instances, though limited, yet demand an academic attention. This paper analyses two films that portray gender issues; one Malayalam and the other, Hindi, both released on OTT platforms Neestream and Amazon respectively. It investigates the constructive elements in both the narratives employed by the filmmakers, both men, to underline the silent patriarchy existing in the society.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Male Directors, Burke's Pentad, Feminism, Patriarchy, Indian Cinema, Regional Films, Emancipatory Media, Representation, Portrayal, etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the recent years there has been an intrepid effort by some filmmakers to break free from the archaic layout of portraying genders, particularly the female gender. This paper focusses on two of such films brought out by two, rather strong, branches of the Indian film industry, *The Great Indian Kitchen* by the Malayalam film industry and *Sherni* (transl. Lioness) by the Hindi film industry.

The rationale of the study, hence, stems from this need to highlight these efforts by filmmakers where female centric narratives are put forth for raising pertinent questions regarding any kind of anomaly in society. In India, the quest for achieving

equality of genders is not new and has remained since long. Hence, this research paper reflects upon these female centric narratives by male directors and uses Burke's pentad to analyse the five rhetorical elements of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose.

The study works around two main objectives which include analysing female portrayal and highlighting female perspective in films directed by male directors. This has been done using Burke's pentad for identifying the elements (agent-act-agency-scene and purpose) and defining dominant ratios and metaphors in the texts.

2. WOMEN CENTRIC CINEMA

The "prolonged mistreatment" [Rath \(n.d\)](#) of women in Indian cinema has been discussed and in the recent years there have been conscious efforts by some filmmakers to bring out the desired change. Hence, to completely discard the efforts of the filmmakers commenting on issues relating to gender would be a wrongdoing. There are some filmmakers who through "patriarchy smashing" [Jain \(2021\)](#) narratives have tried to change the chronicling of gender in Bollywood. An article in [scoopwhoop.com](#) discusses thirteen feminist films which are worth watching. Some of these films are *Sandeep aur Pinky faraar* (2021), *Sherni* (2021), *Thappad* (2020), *Bulbul* (2020), etc., [Jain \(2021\)](#). However, the present-day commercialised version of feminism in so called feminist cinema makes it palatable to the masses, but removes the crucial things that make women-centric issues and storylines engaging and thought provoking [Thusoo \(2020\)](#).

With films like *Thappad* (transl. Slap, 2020), *Tumhari Sulu* (transl. Your Sulu, 2017), *Jalsa* (transl. Bash; Party, 2022), *Aiyyaa* (transl. Oh My!, 2012), English Vinglish (2012), *Bulbbul* (transl. Nightingale, 2020), etc. narratives regarding women have seen a thematic expansion; the themes included, a woman seeking divorce after getting slapped amidst a party when this was the only offence committed by her loving husband, a married woman's longing to have a career which makes her a radio-jockey for a night show, a noted journalist accidentally becoming an offender in a hit and run case the implication of which is directly prejudicial to her house-help, a middle class Marathi girl's fantasies, a mother while learning English trying to reclaim her dignity and conquer her fears, a child-bride becoming a victim of abuse, both physical and mental, etc. An interesting thing to note here is that out of the six films mentioned above four films, *Thappad*, *Aiyyaa*, *Tumhari Sulu* and *Jalsa* have been directed by male directors, Anubhav Sinha, Sachin Kundalkar and Suresh Triveni. Suresh Triveni has directed both *Tumhari Sulu* and *Jalsa*.

Therefore, the efforts of those storytellers who are striving to change the equations of power and offer narratives that delve into the female consciousness should not be ignored. In addition to this, if these efforts have been brought out by men for women emancipatory cinema, then the probe into these filmic texts becomes more interesting.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical base for this research lies in the Emancipatory Media Theory discussed by McQuail in the book *Mc Quail's Mass Communication Theory* (1987). With the democratization of filmmaking, the upsurge of different local and regional platforms and the society's engagement with the social media, cinematic narratives have expanded to include issues of social importance.

The emancipatory media theory is that branch of critical theory that espouses the potential for small-scale, grass-roots communication in channels independent from dominant mass media. The guiding principles of this theory are 'participation, interaction, smallness of scale, locatedness, cultural autonomy and variety, emancipation and self-help' [McQuail \(2010\)](#). Emancipatory cinema, also called the Third cinema, is loosely defined as cinema that exists outside of the imperialist, capitalist, bourgeois and colonial framework of narratives, distribution, and sales. Also, John Downing's (2000) expression 'rebellious communication' can also be used for this cinema. Such a cinema 'operates in a positive way in the critical tradition [McQuail \(2010\)](#).

One of the tasks of such cinema can be female emancipation. Contextualising this theory to the current film scenario in India, one can see that independent filmmakers are donning small budget films with significant issues; media abundance courtesy social media and other local and regional platforms, like Neestream, Sunnxt, AMBECine, etc., can also be noted.

4. METHODOLOGY

The research paper uses rhetorical criticism as the core methodology. It is a qualitative research methodology that is designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of the symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding the rhetorical processes [Foss \(2018\)](#). The method used under this methodology was Pentadic Criticism explained in the subsequent paragraphs.

4.1. METHOD

4.1.1. SELECTING THE TEXT

The rationale behind choosing these two films for analysing the female gaze centred around three primary points. First, both the films break age-old stereotype of the Indian films of following the formulaic representation of females and their issues. The Great Indian Kitchen, doesn't fit the common layout of Indian cinema so much so that "it was rejected by Netflix and Amazon" [Pandey \(2021\)](#) and was initially streaming on Neestream; for Sherni, an article in the Times of India writes that if anyone is "expecting the roar and rumblings of a regular Bollywood film, this one is far from it" [Sengupta \(2021\)](#).

Second, both films stimulated, in the media, a response, both written and spoken, that indicated that the public had associated both movies with having an uncommon tone that is generally absent in Indian films. The third reason was the ready availability of these films on the OTT platforms that made it possible for the researcher to watch them a repeated number of times for conducting the analysis. The thoughtful inclusion of the female point of view, in the selected films, is a rare sight in Indian cinema, which can be cited as the fourth reason for choosing these films. [Kapoor \(2023\)](#)

4.1.2. ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE

Films are, after all, rhetorical as well as dramatic constructs. They attempt to influence the way we think and the way we feel; and more broadly they attempt to persuade us of their own truth and value. Viewed from this angle, films are arguments, and so it would seem worthwhile to consider, in relation to film, some of the tenets of rhetoric-the formal discipline which has argument as its subject

Behrens (1979). Hence, this paper uses the Burke's Pentad, one of the perspectives of Rhetorical Criticism, to analyse the two films.

Pentadic criticism is rooted in dramatism, the label Burke gives to the analysis of human motivation through terms derived from the study of drama. As rhetors describe their situations, they do so by using the five basic elements of a drama—act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose Foss (2018). For identifying all the five elements, entire lengths of the films were viewed multiple times to make notes. The first few viewings helped in identifying the five elements, while later viewings helped in identifying the dominant ratios between the any two elements in the films. Hence, three operations were performed by the researcher: (1) labelling the five terms of agent, act, scene, purpose, and agency in the artifact; (2) applying the ratios of the terms to identify the dominant term; and (3) identifying motive from the dominant term.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1. TEXT 1: THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN

The Great Indian Kitchen (2021) is a story of a newlywed girl, whose name has not been revealed in the story. The film, through minimal dialogues, reflects upon the dilemmas of this newly wed woman. The story, by using the kitchen and its allied activities as a metaphor, showcases her indecisiveness and gradually, as the narrative progresses, her disgust to choose between her dignity and the expectations of society.

5.1.1. PENTADIC ANALYSIS OF TEXT 1

- **Agent:** The researcher identified a duality regarding the agents in the film. The first set of agents in the film are the newlywed girl, played by actor Nimisha Sajayan, and other women who appear from time to time to structure the narrative for exploring and highlighting patriarchy. Though not all these women share the same perspective in the story, yet their presence makes the audience realise of the similarity in the life of womenfolk. These women, apart from the protagonist wife, are the mother-in-law, the house help, *Ammai* (the husband's aunt), and newlywed girl's mother. The internalization of patriarchy is seen in these women's characterization. Whether siding with Nimisha's character or otherwise, all women are engaged in similar kinds of work which makes a ground for the second basic element—the act of the narrative.

However, before discussing the acts, it is pertinent to highlight the second set of agents, in the absence of which the director would not have been able to make a point he is intending. This set includes the men in the narrative, the husband, the father-in-law and the annoying uncle who is preachy and obsessive about black tea and priest along with his followers.

- **Act(s):** As mentioned above, the act(s) of the story, as carried out by the women, is the unending and taxing work. These acts are done by the protagonist wife, and the other women in the narrative, the mother-in-law, the cook who comes to help in the kitchen on various occasions, *Ammai* (husband's aunt) who visits to provide help during Nimisha's menstrual cycle and the women in Nimisha's father's house. The film highlights the homogenous lives of all the women. The only anomaly can be seen in Nimisha's dancer friend whose husband, while sitting on the stairs, discusses his lunch plans which he is going to cook.

The act of the film unfolds in the repetitiveness of the close-up shots of the hands engaged in chopping, cooking, mopping, cleaning, etc. These acts in close-up and accompanied by the real diegetic sounds, give the required verisimilitude to the film, making it relatable to the Indian audience. The 'acts' corresponding to men were exercising, eating food, reading newspaper, going out for work and leisure, demanding comforts, etc. Also, these acts didn't have any sound. There was a complete silence while these acts were shot symbolically emphasising calmness, security, slow-pace, etc.

- **Agency:** The means and instruments (the agency) used by the wife and other women to accomplish the aforementioned act(s) include urgency and sense of duty. Both these ideas emerge from the aforementioned concept of the 'internalization of gender roles'. Though, the female protagonist in the film, comes from a liberal upbringing yet she emulates her mother-in-law (and mother, which is implied), in assuming her role as a homemaker. Hence, the self-proclaimed servitude, often misunderstood as care and compassion, is the agency which determines most of the acts in the film. The agency used by men in the narrative is an exact opposite of the urgency seen in the women. Theirs is a slow, laid back, peaceful pace sans any urgency and sense of duty. Their idea of duty, as highlighted in the text, is mainly proprietorial and top-down, manifested through acts like managing and locking the jewellery by the father-in-law before the mother-in-law's travel to their daughter's house, the husband instructing the wife on what can be shared on the social media, religious duties, like going to the pilgrimage, etc.
- **Scene:** The scene in the film, as identified by the researcher, is the girl's rendezvous with the inequality that comes as hushed deal after marriage. The film throughout its course through various acts establishes the scene, highlighting the disgust, which is metaphorically shown as repugnance for smelly hands, of the newlywed at being at the receiving end of things. It sketches her need and urge for self-identity; simultaneously also delineating her annoyance and abhorrence that paves a way for an unexpected closure.
- **Purpose:** The Purpose of the narrative is to probe into the unequal power relationships that prevail between men and women in the Indian society. It also proposes a gape into the internalization of this typecasting by women since generations, so much so that any radical thought is received unpleasantly by them. The narrative's drive to look into the gender dynamics critically and reveal the hegemony is significant. With examples like denying basic needs of religious emancipation, cleanliness, and sexual pleasure the underlying hegemony is unveiled.

5.2. TEXT 2: SHERNI

Sherni (2022) is a story about, Vidya Vincent, a jaded Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) in the Indian Forest Service, who has spent 9 years in the service awaiting a promotion. Vidya is tasked with the capturing of a man-eater tigress. In her quest to save the tigress and her cubs from being hunted by the hunters who are working in close coordination with the head of the forest range, she faces challenges of all kinds. The tigress is hunted down by the hunters, yet Vidya manages to save the cubs. Through her struggles, the narrative highlights the problems faced by women in

their workplaces, even when they are in higher administrative positions involving exercise of delegated legislations and discretions.

5.2.1. PENTADIC ANALYSIS OF TEXT 2

- **Agent:** A close look at the text reveals that the main agent in the film is the forest officer, Vidya Vincent, who doesn't seem to find her work ethics and life concepts making any sense in her place of work. The director has cleverly and purposively decided on a female 'agent' as it gives a point-of-view that is generally missing in the films, 'the female gaze', on things, systems, and people. The "female gaze" is a term used in recent years to describe art that subverts the ubiquitous male perspective [Smith \(2020\)](#).

Though, Vidya, makes the main agent in the film yet there is another agent, Hassan Noorani, played by noted actor Vijay Raaz, whose presence solidifies the narrative in the favour of inclusivity of all forms of life in (re) thinking development. These agents, Vidya and Raaz, are the key players who question the veiled hegemony in the system with respect to supremacy of the human race, which pushes animals to the periphery and makes them the receivers of human whims and vagaries.

When looking at the duality of agents in the narrative, the researcher observed that the characters opposing Vidya's disposition, majorly the men, the hunter, the ex-MLA, the sitting MLA, the boss and Mr. Nangia have to be accounted for when analysing this text. Vidya and her boss (and some subordinates), are disposed in opposing ideologies vis-à-vis the feminist dialogue which is manifested in the boss, Mr. Bansal, bending before powerful men in the film and snubbing off any suggestions given by her. Another ideological dichotomy is visible between Vidya and the hunter, Ranjan Rajhans aka Pintu Bhaiya. His complete disregard for the *female* forest officer is apparent in his demeanour manifested in his dire need to take things in control and offering solutions which a female forest officer would not be able to provide. Hence, the two-fold characterisation, and as a result the two kinds of agents in the film are cleverly designed by the auteur to make the desired point.

- **Act:** The subtlety of Vidya's character makes the most important act of the film. Despite all odds, the audience never finds her overwhelmed. Her 'acts' of conducting her duties well, which manifest in her giving a show-cause notice to the defaulting contractor, helping Mr. Noorani organise an event for educating the villagers of the interdependence on nature, relentlessly trying to locate the tigress with her cubs and finally doing everything to save the cubs from the insensitivity of the system. Her protestive acts, a way of silent dissent, include hiding the oil bottle which her boss is desperately trying to find, denying the hunter any help, deciding to not bear children, etc.

Inspecting the other set of agents, the men in the narrative, except Mr. Noorani, the acts done by them correspond to insensitivity, being control freaks, bending before power structures, opportunism, etc.

- **Agency:** The instruments and means used by Vidya to carry out the act in the film is her resilience. Whether it is being subject to the skewed power structures at the workplace and being pushed to the periphery by her seniors by the virtue of being a female; or at home, agreeing to her mother-in-law's request to wear some jewellery before going for a dinner get-together, she maintains a calm and balanced demeanour. Nonetheless, she spots all the inequality and registers her protest when required; at work by being honest to her work and at home by confiding in her husband. Resilience, patience and light-heartedness, are the elements of agency used by Mr. Noorani, the

zoologist. He, like Vidya, despite all odds remains committed to change the narrative regarding man-animal conflict by conducting awareness drives to instil sensitivity amongst the villagers dealing with animal conflict on a day-to-day basis.

- **Scene:** The scene in the film, as noted by the researcher, is every woman's quest to sustain herself in a male-dominated world. This has been demonstrated in the film through Vidya's character, employed in a work place predominated by men. The scene, denotatively, discusses a man-eater tigress's containment and its challenges; yet connotatively it touches aspects of human reality seeing-through power structures latent in society that ultimately lead to gender inequality and insensitivity, male domination, market forces that exploit nature, political motivations fostering these power set-ups for self-profit, etc. The film's scene touches so many aspects that actually are intertwined when being looked from the vantage point of an audience. The scene also showcases the media's intervention only to sensationalise the entire issue for attracting eyeballs and playing the TRP game.
- **Purpose:** The Purpose of the story is to highlight the female portrayal and female perspective in the status quo, where women, even when they are holding significant positions in the system, are at the receiving ends of the whims and caprices of the patriarchal structure.

5.3. RATIOS IN BOTH TEXTS: IDEALISM AND REALISM

The dominant pentadic elements in Text 1 and 2 symbolize realism and idealism respectively. Realism, in Text 1, is highlighted by the use of Act-Act ratio. This ratio seems to predominate the narrative. The 'act' in the film, as explained earlier, corresponds to two agents, the men, and women, highlighting the dichotomy of gender roles. The film looks like a collage of close-up shorts of hands (of women) uninterruptedly engaged in household chores primarily, chopping, washing, brooming, cleaning, cooking, tempering food, etc. Also, the act emphasises on the detailing in cooking, establishing metaphors of unhindered work with monotony and hegemony. The monotony here, is two-fold, one is the humdrum of urgency in contrast to the routine of self-care symbolising exploitation and liberty respectively. Realism makes the narrative credible for the Indian audiences and provides a deep and uncommon gaze at the routine affairs of homemaker women; tasks that do not get the requisite consideration.

In Text 2, the virtue of Idealism is put forth using the Agent-Act Ratio, where we see both primary agents, Vidya and Noorani, working tirelessly towards the fulfilment of their duty. Additionally, this ratio also investigates the "connection between character and behaviour" [King et al. \(2021\)](#) and hence the acts done by these agents become significant. The subtle but firm acts performed by the agent(s) underscore the virtue idealism through honesty, dutifulness, sensitivity for every creature and responsibility towards environment. These qualities are placed diametrically opposite to the characteristics of the other agents, and make the main fabric of the film, for the audience rely on these agents throughout the narrative in hope for a moral conclusion. The film's commentary on ecofeminism is significant and uses the agents to highlight the anomalies present in society.

5.4. SYMBOLISM IN THE TEXTS

Both films, ingeniously, make use of connotations to accentuate the female portrayal and female point of view. In Text 1, the houses of both families, the husband's and wife's, furnish a symbolic dichotomy. The houses of both families are diametrically different; the husband's house looks more like the Kerala (the Indian state, where the film is set) household, both structurally (and ideologically). The traditional architectural style of the houses in Kerala is called Nalukuttu where *nalu* means four and *kettu* means blocks; it refers to a rectangular structure where four blocks are linked by an open courtyard H.S. (n.d.). On the other hand, the wife's house has a modern architecture with a lawn, porch, and a contemporary front elevation. Second symbolism is offered in the yellow car, which initially is placed as dowry representing patriarchy while in the last scene its placement symbolises liberation when Nimisha's character uses it for commuting to her workplace. The third symbolic element are the stairs; in one instance when the newlywed girl gets a call from her friend, the stairs become an image here to give a vantage to the audience where one setting shows ascendancy while the other shows the protagonist's descendancy. The fourth imagery is seen when the newly wed makes her way out of the house; she passes by a group of people who are protesting for "*preservation of religious customs*" in context of the Sabrimala¹ Controversy, the camera then pans to a nearby wall with the picture of Che Guevara, submitting that in a democracy voice(s) of dissent of all kinds exist together.

Text 2, *Sherni*, has a slower pace, yet there is psychological urgency felt by the audience as everyone in the movie, the forest friends, Vidya, Mr. Noorani, ex-MLA, sitting MLA, villagers, etc., are all trying to find the tigress. This pace is the primary symbol which connotes the lull before the storm. Another symbol can be spotted in the museum where Vidya is in-charge, there are a lot of stuffed animals and there is a tranquillity; this calm is different from the silence of the forest, as it denotes stagnation. The close-up of 70 years old stuffed tiger inside the glass cubicle cross-cutting to Vidya's close-up, metaphorically shows two victims of patriarchy. This visual also connotes the trapped tigresses that Vidya is, highlighting the tokenistic women empowerment; it connotes that patriarchy appreciates tigresses (read women) that are dead and toothless, hence showing acquiescence to its set up and being a showpiece for wider spectatorship. The close-up of a touch-me-not plant, closing itself, in the film, is another symbol suggesting over-exploitation and voicelessness of the browbeaten.

6. DISCUSSION

The two films studied for this research paper focus on gender centric discussion, to be precise. These films are a response to the growing concerns in the academic corridors for a just and accurate representation of the gender dynamics in the Indian society.

Subtlety and minimalism are the two significant choices made by both auteurs belonging to two different linguistic and regional groups; thus emphasising, that to be heard it is not always important to make a loud noise. Both films, using each component of the pentad make visible the hegemonic structures present in society that we sometimes tend to ignore.

The posters of both films are also minimalistic and simple with no punch lines. The posters of the *Great Indian Kitchen*, are unassuming and show the newly-weds in different settings, as a happy and content couple. The kitchen forms the

background in one poster. The posters of *Sherni* are also unpretentious and show Vidya Balan amidst the jungle, with the wilderness being the main backdrop in all the pictures. The posters of both films do not give any peep into the complex narratives that these are.

Both films provide a counter-hegemonic culmination, which gives a sense of empowerment to the spectator. However, in text 2 i.e., *Sherni*, Vidya calls out the hypocrisy of the senior, which is quite empowering, yet as a result of this valour, ends up serving in a museum; gets confined to a workplace that requires less public dealing.

The decision of both auteurs to use females as the main protagonists in their films, has upheld the entire conversation by providing the female point of view and thus making an anti-essentialist narrative. Thus, both films stand out from the array of films that stereotypically represent genders. Another significant observation was that in both films the protagonists are opinionated and agentic, and do not require male support and agency to voice and realise their issues.

7. CONCLUSION

The happenstance of feminine point of view, in cinematic narratives in India, should be acknowledged, more so when these have been offered by male auteurs. The instances, though limited, where the male directors have given a considerable thought to female portrayal and female perspective, give hope and optimism. Such empathetic narratives would pave a way for a just and fair world, for empathy is a pre-requisite for equality. The films discussed in the paper are two such gems of Indian cinema that provide a profound look into issues faced by women at home and in workplace.

NOTE

Sabrimala is a temple in the state of Kerala, India, dedicated to God Aiyappa. The temple practices ban on women aged between 10 years -50 years entering the premises. Women above 50 years can enter the temple.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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