

CHARACTERISTICS OF POST-FEMINISM: PORTRAYAL THROUGH SELECTED TAMIL FILMS FROM 1980 TO 2015

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The term *post-feminism* was coined when an article called “Voice from the Post-Feminist Generation,” was published in New York Times. The goals of post-feminism are different from the first and the second wave feminism. Post-feministic ideas went viral through the campaigns happened in social media and even before that in the basic forms of media like print and visual media. The South Indian Tamil film industry, better known as *Kollywood*, featured these concepts of portraying strong female characters from 1980s. Hence the researcher has chosen Kollywood films from 1980 to 2015 and attempts to analyse the characteristics of post-feminism found in these movies through textual analysis.

Keywords: Feminism, Post-feminism, Tamil films, Textual analysis.

Post-feminism

The term ‘post-feminism’ was first used in 1919 in the journal called “Female Literary Radicals” in which radicals of the day declared that, “We’re interested in people now – not in men and women, that moral, social, economic, and political standards should not have anything to do with sex, that it would be pro-woman without being anti-man and that their stance is called post-feminist” (Cot, Nancy 1987:128). However, the term gained popularity when an article titled “Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation” written by Susan Bolotin was officially published in New York Times magazine in the year 1982.

During this period, post-feminism started to spread in the Western countries. Critic Amelia Jones wrote that the post-feminists’ texts, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s had portrayed the second-wave feminism as a monolithic entity and overtly generalized in their content. Some contemporary feminists, such as Katha Pollitt and Nadine Strossen told in the simple terms “women are people”. The views that take apart the sexes rather than bringing them together are considered by these writers to be sexist rather than feminist (Cot, Nancy 1987: 45).

Post-feminist views are a new form of empowerment, individual choice, independence, consumer culture, fashion, hybridism, humor and (sexual) pleasure, and their renewed focus on the female body can be considered important for this contemporary feminism. Post-feminism lies within the world of academic paradigms and can be located on the connection between post-modernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism. In the present scenario, post-feministic views are applicable

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in any field a person could possibly think of. Brooks in his book *Post-feminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (1997) states that “post-feminism is not against feminism, it’s about feminism today.”

Characteristics of Post-feminism

In the early 1980s, the media began to classify women in their teens and twenties as “post-feminist generation”. After twenty years, the term post-feminist is still used to refer young women. Post-feminism is a highly debated topic since it implies that “post” means “dead” or “after” (feminism). After 1992, critic Rebecca Walker coined the term to highlight the third wave’s focus on queer and non-white women but it is similar to post-feminism. The concept is used in the famous TV series *Sex and the City* in the US and it has many viewers all over the world. Post-feminism celebrates sexuality and says that women can also be empowered through working in the sex industry as strippers and adult film stars. Post-feminism is fuelled by advances in abortion, employment and fertility laws and concentrates on furthering the idea of empowerment, celebration of feminists, freedom of choice and liberation, etc.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis method comes out of the work of the theorists known as the French structuralists in the 1960s, particularly the works of Roland Barthes (1915-80), who believed that any kind of popular cultural product could be ‘decoded’ by reading the ‘signs’ within the text. It is one of the most important tools that media researchers use to understand the meaning extracted from any media text.

Media theorist McKee says that textual analysis is a way for a researcher to gather information on how human beings put together the intelligence of the whole world. It is a methodology – a data-gathering process – for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of what they are and how they fit into the world in which they live.

Textual analysis is a toolkit for examining the media forms such as advertisements, films, magazine and television. It is also a toolkit for media reaction that wants to convey a certain message or that tries to convince audiences to think in a certain way. For the purpose of this research paper, the researcher conducted the textual analysis method on films. In this analysis, the researcher looked for the characteristics of post-feminism portrayed in selected Tamil films from 1980 to 2015.

Sample

The study focuses on the characteristics of post-feminism as depicted in the selected Tamil films made in the years 1980 to 2015. The researcher carefully selected films which depict empowering and dominating female characters. For the study

the researcher chose the following seven films which resonate with the characteristics of post-feminism:

- *Thanneer Thanneer* (1981) directed by K. Balachander
- *Chirai* (1984) directed by R.C.Sakthi
- *Karuthamma* (1994) directed by Bharathiraja
- *Kalki* (1996) directed by K.Balachander
- *Aaranya Kaandam (2011)* directed by Thiagarajan Kumararaja
- *36 Vayadhinile* (2014) directed by RosshanAndrrews
- *KakkaMuttai* (2015) directed by Manikandan

Avoiding Stereotypes

Avoiding the stereotyping of women, which is a hallmark of post-feminism, is an important element of the film *Chirai* (1984). The story revolves round Bhagirathi (Lakshmi), wife of a village Brahmin priest. The drunken landlord Anthony (Rajesh) rapes her. After that her husband (Prasanna) rejects her. This concept is seen totally different from other Tamil films of those days. A section of society could not agree with this theme but the movie was well-received all over the state of Tamil Nadu. After getting raped by Anthony, Bhagirathi stays in his house rebelling against the social norms and this makes him realize his mistake and starts to respect her. Later, Anthony dies due to some health problems. The story comes to an end when Bhagirathi's husband wants to reunite with her. She refuses to live with him again and prefers to be known as Anthony's widow. The film was produced at a time when the society did not have gumption to accept the ideas portrayed in it. R.C.Sakthi, the director of the film, used post-feministic concepts in this film avoiding the social stereotypes prevalent in most of the contemporary films in Tamil.

Support for Female Characters

There are many films which have females as their important characters. One such film is *Thanneer Thanneer* directed by K. Balachander. It is a political drama and the story revolves around a dry rural hamlet near Kovilpatti in Tamil Nadu. This film is about the sufferings of villagers owing to the negligence of rulers and to excessive bureaucratic regulations. The movie shows uneducated rural women struggling for water. One of the leading characters is played by Saritha. She is a married woman and has a baby to care for. Despite this situation, she fights for the villagers' rights putting her family at risk. Her character was well-received by all over Tamil Nadu. The director K. Balachander's films give importance mostly to female characters. They depict courageous women and their enthusiasm in spite of odds faced by them in dire situations. Saritha in this film excels in portraying post-feminist traits.

Karuthamma (1994) directed by Bharathiraja is a film which deals with the concept of feminine infanticide and the hatred that surrounds the birth of female babies in poverty-stricken communities. The plot is set in a rural village. The story focuses on the importance and honour attached to women in social strata. *Karuthamma* has received rave reviews from critics for the propagandistic effect the film has generated.

Sexual Rights

Kalki (1996), directed by K. Balachander, narrates the story of a lead character Chellamma (Geetha), a singer wedded to a chauvinistic and sadistic industrialist named Prakash (Prakash Raj). Chellamma is unable to beget a child and because of that she has been scolded by Prakash and his mother. Prakash also prohibits her from singing, and it is the last straw for her and leads to their divorce. He marries Karpagam (Renuka), a doormat wife, while Chellamma stays single with a cook Kokila around to help her. Kalki (Shruti) works in an ad agency and is relentlessly pursued by co-worker and model Paranjothi (Rahman), but she not only rejects him but discredits love and sentiments. Chellamma becomes friends with Kalki. After a few encounters Kalki moves in with Chellamma as a paying guest. But she strikes up a friendship with Prakash and it results as an affair with him. Later, she ends up bearing his child. In the end of the movie, Prakash, who gets married two times also, has an affair with Kalki and gives birth to a child. It is totally different from Tamil culture but a post-feminist point of view is that women have sexual rights beyond men.

The film *AaranyaKaandam* (2011) directed by Thiagarajan Kumararaja was conceptualized on 18th December 2008. And, it had numerous issues in the territorial board of film certification in Chennai. The board raised a protest against the film, giving it a grown-up rating other than asking for 52 cuts. However, the film had its reality debut on 30th October 2010 at South Asia International Film Festival. There the movie won the Grand Jury Award for the Best Film. The film opens with the maturing hoodlum, Singaperumal, compelling himself on a young lady, Subbu. She is forced to live with the old man Singaperumal, who is very powerful in the city. The character of Subbu is very different from conventional female roles and has a relationship with a young man. The end of the movie answers to the questions like how the hapless woman escapes from the gang. In the climax all the gangsters die because of a gang war and Subbu is the only person who escapes from the mess and becomes free.

Woman as Individualist

The main goal of post-feminism is a woman's individualism. Mc Robbie introduces a new 'female individualism' which dismisses the 'old' feminism. Feminism itself is seen to belong to the past which characterizes the post-feminist woman of popular

culture in individualism, sophistication and choice. *36 Vayadhinile* is directed by Roshan Andrews. Protagonist of the film is Vasanthi, played by Jyothika. The crust of the story is how an ordinary workingwoman in a government office is managing her family peacefully. Her husband and daughter have gone to Ireland to settle down but she could not go with them. Without her family to support she faces many problems in her office. Then she gets inspired by an old friend in the past. Then she starts terrace gardening project by her own effort and becomes successful. The film ends by showing autographs of the world-famous women of India who have made a mark for themselves. And with one blank space, the director implies that a female in the audience can be the next successful woman. The 21st century women are achieving a lot in all fields. Their duty is not only to manage their family but also to be successful women in the society. This story inspired many married women. This is the reason why post-feminism supports individualism.

In a little concrete-and-tin city slum live two young brothers with their mother and granny in the film *Kakka Muttai* (2015) directed by Manikandan. With the boys' father in jail for unknown reasons, they spend their time in games and stealing eggs from crows' nests. Their love for these eggs leads them to call themselves "Periya Kakka Muttai" (Crow's Egg the Elder) and "Chinna Kakka Muttai" (Crow's Egg the Younger). The director provides a terribly powerful character for the mother role by Aiswariya. She is a self-employed woman in the city. She shows that a mother can run a family and handle any difficult situation without a man's support. So this character influenced the female audience in a positive way.

Discussion

Of late, Tamil films have been elevated to international standards and recognized by the countries all over the world. Many films are made for commercial purposes to entertain the audience. The female lead actors are not only being portrayed as sexually attractive but have also been given powerful or domineering roles comparable with other language films produced in India. Tamil culture is very rich and respects women. When we compare Hollywood with Kollywood (the popular pseudonym for the Tamil film industry, Kodambakkam in Chennai being the hub of film studios and laboratories), Tamil films give more importance to female leads and post-feministic concepts than Hollywood. A large number of people watch films in theatre and television as a means of entertainment. A Tamil film in general runs for two to two and a half hours. Even the Tamil films have recently shaped the destiny of the people in Tamil Nadu, for they have elected in a row two lead actors of Tamil films as their Chief Ministers. This is mostly due to the aspect of fixation in which the particular theme and characters get fixed in audience's minds. This is how the post-feminist concept is getting into the viewers' belief and trust.

Conclusion

The concept of post-feminism has both its positive and negative aspects since it has been a debatable topic. One of the wide spread negative assumptions is that it is suitable only for the Western countries, which is wrong. At present, many directors support post-feminist views and ideas in Tamil films. People also support the media for its work just like how a good idea is appreciated all around the world. The present study is a pointer to the fact that features of post-feminism is available in the selected Tamil films from 1980 to 2015, and they tend to change people's mindset with every new film launch in the Tamil film industry.

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