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Hegemonic femininity in Tamil movies: exploring the voices of youths in Chennai, India

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Abstract

The media often showcase culturally normative forms of masculinity and femininity. This paper explores the portrayal of femininity in Tamil movies and examines the youths' views on these portrayals. The data for this paper came from a content analysis of forty movies (1961 to 2012) and thirty face-to-face interviews with undergraduates in Chennai, India. Women's roles in Tamil movies can be regarded as secondary in nature, and meant for the male gaze. These roles emphasize traditional feminine ideals. Tamil movies are cautious about challenging the deeply rooted traditional feminine ideals of Tamil society. The strong maintenance of traditional femininity is one of the reasons why it is seen as a form of hegemonic femininity: that is, a form of femininity that holds ascendancy when compared to other forms of femininity. Youths sometimes question the stereotypical portrayal of women, but are not always able to resist them.

Keywords: content analysis, emphasized femininity, item songs, male gaze, masculinity

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Introduction

Connell's (1987, 1995) idea of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity is important in understanding the portrayal of men and women in the media. Connell (1995: 77) defines hegemonic masculinity as

...the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.

Masculinities that are different from the hegemonic masculinity are seen as subordinate masculinities. Femininity is always constructed in the context of subordination of women to men; hence no femininity is considered hegemonic and the most valued form of femininity is referred to as emphasized femininity. Emphasized femininity describes social relations that involve subordination to men, and accommodates their interests and desires. Similar to masculinity, there may be many types of femininity in society (Connell, 1987). According to Connell (1987: 188),

Femininity which is organized as an adaptation to men's power, and emphasizing compliance, nurturance, and empathy as womanly virtues, is not in much of a state to establish hegemony over other kinds of femininity.

One of the critiques of Connell's conceptualization of masculinity is the under-theorization of femininity. Empirical research also showed that femininity and masculinity are more complex and multi-faceted in everyday life compared to what was initially conceptualized by Connell (Wedgwood, 2009). Therefore, Schippers (2007) used Connell's concepts to develop the notion of hegemonic femininity to explain the role of femininities in sustaining gender relationality. She described hegemonic femininity as:

...characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Schippers, 2007: 94).

Schippers therefore, recognizes that not only hegemonic masculinity is dominant, but also that femininities may be organized in a hierarchy offering a more dynamic form of power relations between femininities (Charlebois, 2011). Alternative femininities are seen as femininities which resist hegemonic gender relations while pariah femininities are femininities which are contaminating but less threatening to hegemonic gender relations (Schippers, 2007).

There are three major approaches to exploring how the media influence the lives of its consumers. All three approaches are based on the assumption that the popular media often portray a relatively uniform image of society and division of power, in terms of gender, class and race (Bufkin and Eschholz, 2000). The dominant ideology model sees the audience as passive consumers. The viewers do not question the portrayals in the media, and they help to reproduce the status quo. The interpretive reception approach, sees viewers as being capable of decoding the messages portrayed in the media and take an active role to question the assumptions and portrayals found in the media. They are able to resist dominant cultural or stereotypical views presented in the media. The third approach emphasizes that, not all viewers are able to question or find meaning different from the status quo. Researchers argue that producing alternative meaning becomes even more complicated in the media-saturated environment of today (Bufkin and Eschholz, 2000). Nagappan (2005) while discussing the portrayal of social suffering in Indian popular cinema (by analysing two Tamil movies) posits that Indian viewers showcase a high level of participation and emotional involvement in the movie theatres, but they are not easily manipulated into accepting filmic messages and are able to discern purely filmic representations.

Tamil movies have a high volume of consumption and have taken a central place in the life, politics and culture of the Tamil society (Jesudoss, 2009; Nagappan, 2005); hence these movies were chosen for this study. The number of movie-goers in Tamil Nadu is the highest in India (Jesudoss, 2009). This paper explores the portrayal of women and femininity in Tamil movies, and how youths understand or decode the messages presented in these movies. It argues that emphasized femininity portrayed in Tamil movies can be identified as a form of hegemonic femininity. It explores the extent to which youths question the stereotypical portrayal and status quo of the movies.

Traditional femininity in Tamil Culture

Tamil is a language spoken predominantly in, and is the official language of, Tamil Nadu, India. In the early 21st century more than 66 million people spoke Tamil around the world (Tamil language, 2013).

In Tamil culture, the *nanghu kunangal* [four ideals] represent traditional feminine virtues. The four ideals highlighted in Tamil culture for women are *acham*, *madam*, *naanam* and *payirpu*¹ (Lakshmi, 1997). *Acham* and *naanam* can be translated as timidity and bashfulness, respectively. *Madam* refers to innocence. *Payirpu* (physical sensibility) is related to chastity and may be understood as devotion only to one's husband, and distancing oneself from other men (Lakshmi, 1997).

Embedded in these four ideals is the notion of *karpu* (chastity), which is often seen as the utmost important quality for a woman (Sivakami, 2004). The power of *karpu* is clearly shown in *Chilappatikaaram* which was written by Ilanko Atikal in 5th century C.E. (Parthasarathy 1993). The highly esteemed example of a 'perfect' Tamil woman is Kannagi, the main character in *Chilappatikaaram*. She is seen as the epitome of chastity. Her devotion to her husband is celebrated among Tamils and this gives her a divine status. When her husband was

wrongly punished by the Pandyan King, she goes to court to challenge the King. This showcases her courage and some researchers have claimed that this is a transgression against the traditional ideals (Arivunambi, 2008). However, I believe that this is not a departure from the four traditional ideals, but rather a manifestation *of* these ideals. Even though Kannagi challenged the King to save the honour of her husband, but she did not question her husband when he was unfaithful. Furthermore, in Hindu culture, power is not entirely a masculine attribute. *Shakti* or power is a feminine principle and women often have far greater power than men. The realization of ultimate power, however, happens only through a woman's devotion to one's husband (Jacob 1997). Therefore, Kannagi's transgression still falls within the boundaries of traditional feminine ideals.

Methods

The objective of this study was to explore the portrayal of femininity in Tamil movies and how youth identify or question such portrayal therefore, the data for this study came from two sources. The first of these was a content analysis of forty Tamil movies produced between 1961² and the first half of 2012. They were selected using a simple random sampling method. The sampling frame with more than 4,500³ films was created based on searches using five different Internet search engines.

Content analysis was used to describe the portrayals of femininity in Tamil movies. The researcher focused on how women are depicted in these movies: for example, whether actresses are shown to follow traditional feminine ideals or otherwise, and to what extent. This is done by looking at mainly (but not limited to) the portrayal of the heroine. This portrayal is not limited to one or a few scenes, but looks at the overall portrayal of the heroine. Another focus was on other issues related to these ideals, such as portrayals of rape, patriarchal violence and widowhood, and the visual presentation of women in the movies.

Another part of the data collection, involved in-depth interviews with twenty female and ten male students at a public university and two government colleges in Chennai, India. The students were aged between 19 and 23 and were selected using a purposive sampling method. All participants are from Chennai and commute daily from their home to their college/university. Eighteen participants admitted that they are from a middle class family. They have at least one parent who is a professional or civil servant. Nine participants said that they are from a working class family with at least one parent working in the service sector, as a labourer, lower ranked civil servant, and business-person. Two participants said that their fathers are retirees. Most participants come from a single-income family.

Some of the issues discussed during the interviews were the 'four ideals'; if/how/how much these ideals are relevant to their life; features that they like/dislike in Tamil movies; why they like/dislike these features; how men and women are portrayed in movies; the roles that heroes and heroines play in movies; how they feel about these portrayals. The data from the interviews were used to gauge how youths read and feel about the portrayals. In addition to this, the researcher used the interview data to gauge if these portrayals were merely cinematic or whether – and to what extent – they resembled femininity in everyday life, based on their understanding and experiences.

All interviews were transcribed and translated to English. In translating these interviews the researcher tried to maintain the style used by the youths – hence some interview excerpts quoted in this paper may not be grammatically correct. After transcription the researcher went through the transcripts for familiarization, before coding the data. After the data was coded, the researcher identified themes relevant to the objectives of the study.

Analysis of the Interviews

Initial findings showed that all participants were aware of the traditional feminine ideals. Even though some participants were unable to explain the specific meaning of *madam* and *payirpu*, collectively they felt that these four ideals emphasize that a woman should be humble, naïve, timid and patient. All participants had a good understanding of *acham*, *naanam* and the notion of *karpu*. Most male and female participants agreed that *karpu* is the utmost important virtue for a woman. A few participants – while not totally rejecting *karpu* – were more cautious in identifying it as the most important virtue. Participants felt that these ideals are still relevant in their lives and are often reminded of these values in their everyday life. This however, does not mean that the participants reject the importance of women's empowerment and independence. They however, emphasized that women need to be empowered but should not reject the traditional ideals. The female youths in this study described this as 'empowerment within the traditional boundaries'. Banu, for example, explained:

I get a lot of freedom at home. But my mom often tells me that things may be different when I get married. I may not act the same. She always advises me to be more tactful and conform to the practices in my future in-laws' house. By doing this, you will be able to do what you want...it is foolish to reject everything outright. It will create conflict in my married life.

The participants felt that alternative femininity (such as Barathi's⁴ *pudhumai penn*) is something that exists in a Utopia or literary debates, and that women's empowerment needs to be done in the boundaries of traditional feminine ideals.

Meena explained:

Women can pursue education and career but when it comes to marriage and family, I think it is easier and practical to follow the norms. Living as a *pudhumai penn* is suitable for literary debates or in poetry, not in real life.

Many participants criticized the sexual objectification of women in Tamil movies. Sexual objectification of women happens when women's bodies are used for the pleasure of others (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). They identified various ways in which women are objectified in movies. Madhavi explained:

There is much sexual content in the movies. This is not only about the sexy clothes or dance moves. It is more than that. It is about how women are treated in the story line or even the words used in the movies and songs...if she is a beautiful girl, she is a 'figure'⁵, if she is not seen as a respectable woman, she is an 'item'⁵... Many dialogues used in comedy have double meaning and most of the time, the second meaning is sexual in nature.

They felt that many scenes objectified women and are contradictory to their cultural and family values. The phrase 'can't watch it with family' is commonly used to by the participants because they felt such scenes are inappropriate for children and felt embarrassed when watching such scenes with older members of their family. Some participants for example, termed the dance in *En Peru Meena Kumari* [item song⁶ in *Kandasamy* (2009)] as being vulgar. One participant called it 'soft pornography'. Lakshmi, a female participant explained:

Songs like [Sirithu, sirithu vantha] Seena Thaana [in *Vasool Raja MBBS* (2004)] is not something you can watch with your family. I feel embarrassed if someone

walks in when I am watching such songs. I am surprised why [such] songs are not censored.

In relation to the portrayal of rape and sexual violence in movies, participants were concerned about the use of rape in comedy scenes and the misconception in the portrayal of rape in movies. Vani, a female participant was very unhappy with the use of rape in comedies in Tamil cinema. Even though not all movies portray rape in a humorous way, there are a considerable number of movies that use rape as part of a comedy scene. She explained:

In one movie [Ayya (2005)], Vadivelu⁷ [a popular comedy actor] is shown to be very proudly admitting to raping a girl in the police station because his friends told him that if he admits, they would not do anything to him, only make him marry that girl. I find that sick. I know people laugh at it but I just feel there are so many other things to joke about, why joke about something like this?

Other participants were unhappy with the misconception of rape portrayed in Tamil movies. They gave examples of movies where a rape victim (women) would marry the perpetrator on the principle that she had lost her virginity to the perpetrator. This again emphasizes the importance of *karpu*, because in rape the loss of this virtue is seen as a bigger issue than the trauma of rape. Such portrayals seem to suggest that rape is a synonym to sex and does not give any significance to the trauma experienced by the victim. Another misconception identified is that rape is shown as a consequence of love: that is, the perpetrator raped the victim because he is in love with her. Participants have identified the movie Kalaaba Kadhalan [2006] and Aval Peyar Tamizharasi [2010] as examples.

Anitha, explained these misconceptions.

... in the movie *Kalaaba Kadhalan*, the heroine's sister is raped by a guy who is in love with her. Her whole family expects her to marry him. When she refuses to marry him, they were upset with her. I know in the movie, she tries to seduce her brother-in-law but that does not mean that rape is not traumatic to her or that she should marry him. It is hard to believe that in this day and age, people still show such things in a movie.

Content Analysis of Movies

In most movies the roles played by heroines are secondary in nature and are used to emphasize the importance of the hero's role. Only five movies focused on a life of a woman while all other movies are hero-centric. Among these five movies, three movies portrayed women who challenged traditional norms while two more *Naanum Oru Penn* (1963) and *Bhuvana Oru Kelvikuri* (1977) portrayed characters which conform to traditional norms. The three movies showed urban, educated and empowered women. *Aval Oru Thodarkathai*⁸ (1974) was a movie about an urban woman who is the sole wage-earner of her family. Her role as the breadwinner brings many complications into her personal life, as it contradicts the traditional social boundaries of Tamil society – especially at a time when Tamil society was changing from a predominantly agrarian society to a more industrial one. This movie showcased the struggles of the changing of the gender roles and the conflicts that arose in the heroine's family. The family members were uncomfortable with her transgressions but tolerated her because of their dependence on her. This movie was identified by many participants as a movie which showcases the theme of Barathi's *pudhumai penn*. Some participants named other movies which showed empowered women such as *Manathil Uruthi Vendum* (1987), *Sindhu Bhairavi* (1985), *Avargal* (1977) and *Aval Appadithan* (1978) but

pointed out that they hardly find similar movies after the 1980s. However, these movies often imply a sad undertone in these women's lives as they are often bitter, alone and devote their lives to service.

The movie *Sila Nerangalil Sila Manidhargal* (1974) shows the struggles of a rape victim i.e. someone who does not fit into the traditional expectation of purity of a woman. She is disowned by her brother and violated by her uncle. Even though she is successful in her education and career, the stigma of being a rape victim haunts her life. In *Vidhi* (1984), Poornima Jayaram goes to court to establish the paternity of her child when her boyfriend, Mohan refuses to acknowledge that he is responsible for her pregnancy. The court establishes the paternity of the child and gives Poornima Jayaram the choice to marry Mohan. She however, refuses to marry Mohan and this is a challenge to the notion of traditional femininity.

Patriarchal values

Patriarchal values are pervasive in Tamil movies. Portrayals of women in Tamil movie emphasize their role as a mother or a wife. It reinforces (through happy endings of 'devoted wives' and sad endings of those who transgress these ideals) that the only way a woman can be successful or even happy is by following these ideals.

It is common in Tamil movies, to hear a male character saying that he has the right to hit his wife, or a female character admitting that her husband has the right to hit her. Hitting a wife or girlfriend is seen as a right that comes with the relationship and not as a form of violence. In the movie *Pazhani* (2008), Barath slaps his girlfriend for suggesting that his sister should leave her abusive husband. He further explains that a man who allows his sister or daughter to live as a *vaazhavetti* (a woman who is separated from her husband) is not a man. In other words, masculinity is defined as the protector of traditional feminine ideals. Barath stops his

elder sister, Kushboo, from leaving her husband, who not only has an extra-marital affair, but tries to kill her because Barath believes that a woman should live with her husband. This is a strong manifestation of patriarchal values where Barath wishes to do something that he thinks is the best for his sister, regardless of what she thinks. The film emphasizes that women are expected to be dependent on a male figure.

The Family Health Survey 2005-06 showed that in Tamil Nadu, 65.5 per cent and 52 per cent of women and men aged 15-49 agree to wife beating for being disrespectful to the in-laws, neglecting the house and children, refusing sex, and having extra-marital affairs (Kishor and Gupta 2009). The acceptance of traditional gender norms in Tamil Nadu by women, ensures the continuance of such norms because women are often the cultural carriers in a society. Conforming to traditional gender roles gives women some privileges based on their relationships to the patriarch in the family. The act of conforming helps to institutionalize men's dominance and allows women to be in a familiar and manageable setting (Connell 1987).

In the movie *Mannan* (1992) for example, Vijayashanthi, a successful industrialist, is portrayed as being arrogant and rude. Rajini Kanth, an obedient son, follows his mother's wishes and marries Vijayashanthi, even though he is in love with Kushboo. In the end, Vijayashanthi is tamed and becomes a 'good' wife and a homemaker who prepares lunch for her husband, while Kushboo remains single and manages Vijayashanthi's company. Even though Kushboo's decision on the surface looks like a portrayal of alternative femininity, it is still accompanied by the idea of a self-sacrificing Tamil woman – in this case for the man she loves, Rajini Kanth. This notion is shown by her request to Rajini Kanth to be allowed to take care and be of service to his mother who is ill. The idea of taming an educated, modern, and independent woman is also showcased in *Priyasakhi* (2005). *Priyasakhi* (2005) uses motherhood as a means of disciplining woman. This is very similar to Kaali's (2000) analysis

of the movie *Pattikaada Pattanama* (1972), where motherhood was shown as something that makes a woman 'natural' and tames her to accept the phallic authority.

Even in recent movies, the 'suffering' wife is celebrated. In *Mayakkam Enna* (2011), Dhanush is portrayed as an eccentric, talented photographer. He suffers from addiction and depression and abuses his wife, Richa. He hits his wife (without knowing she is pregnant) and she miscarries. Even though she suffers from constant abuse, she supports her husband and helps him realize his dream of being a successful photographer. She stops talking to him but carries his child. She only talks to him again when he wins an award for his photography, and acknowledges her sacrifice for his success. In this movie, the heroine's role as a wife who fulfils both the physical and emotional needs of her husband is emphasized. Her feelings and pain are made to look secondary. The message here is very clear: the duty of the wife is to be self-sacrificing and devoted to her husband and to support him to be successful no matter what her conditions are.

The above examples emphasize the extent of the patriarchal values that are showcased in Tamil movies. These movies emphasize that transgressions against traditional roles and values by women are often accompanied by negative consequences and the need to 'return' to the boundaries of accepted norms. This return is often guided or 'forced' by men, further legitimizing their superior position. Women who transgress traditional boundaries are associated with impurity and evil. On the other hand, women who followed these values to the fullest are admired and seen as divine: for example, Kannagi. Such instances are then used to draw boundaries for gender relations and to maintain patriarchal values in society.

Male gaze and the objectification of women

Participants' descriptions regarding sexual objectification of women was supported by the content analysis. In Tamil movies, the camera is often fixated on the heroine's body: legs,

breasts, waist, midriff or back. In the heroine introduction scene in the movie *Thilalangadi* (2010), the camera moves through various body parts (back, legs, hand, waist, and breasts) of the heroine before showing on her face. The camera also pauses when focusing on her breasts. Heroines are often seen wearing clothes that are very sexy and seductive. For example, in the movie *Kandasamy* (2009), Shreya is shown to be coming out of a bath tub, dressed in a towel and dancing in a sexually suggestive manner for the *Meow Meow* song. This is similar to Mulvey's (1999) discussion on traditional cinema, where the male character plays an active role while the female character is often passive, powerless and the object of desire of other characters. Women are used as passive objects of the active male gaze. Their presence is meant to satisfy visual pleasure of heterosexual males on or off the screen. In this scene however, she is not passive nor submissive but is shown as a temptress seducing the hero, hence is used to satisfy the male gaze of the audience.

Other than using heroines for visual pleasure, 'item songs' are common in Tamil movies. The word 'item' is an indication of the level of sexual objectification of women in these songs. Some examples of item songs identified are *Sirithu, sirithu vantha Seena Thaana* in *Vasool Raja MBBS* (2004), *En peru Krishnaveni* in *Nagaram Marupakkam* (2010), *En peru Meena Kumari* in *Kandasamy* (2009), *All thotta Poobathi* in *Youth* (2002), '*Honey, honey*' in *Aayan* (2009) and '*Daddy mommy*' in *Villu* (2009).

Using women to gratify the male gaze, and the high level of sexual objectification of women, are ways of using and portraying femininity to satisfy the desire and interests of men, particularly heterosexual males. In classical portrayals of women (e.g. in mythologies), they transgressed the four qualities, to save or honour their husbands but in Tamil movies the transgression in terms of dressing is meant to fulfil the desires of the heterosexual male audience. While this seem different but both shows that femininity is always constructed as a subordination to men.

The interesting question here is that if Tamil movies are presented for a male gaze, why are these movies accepted and enjoyed by the female audience? The media, being a strong socializing agent, legitimizes the male gaze and – together with other socializing agents such as family, school and peers – makes it something acceptable and taken for granted by women. Women are socialized to treat themselves as objects and often take what we might term a ‘gazer’s perspective’ to view themselves. Women, through their experiences, learn that their physical self is often looked at and appreciated by others (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Therefore, when women are showcased in the movies, this perspective is accepted as the norm. Hence, movies that are produced for the male gaze are consumed and enjoyed by both male and female audiences. More women, however, feel uncomfortable watching such scenes with other family members. Participants’ reservations regarding some portrayals of women in Tamil movies show that audiences do recognize stereotypical portrayals in the media. Similar to Nagappan’s (2005) discussion on Indian audiences, these participants are able to identify filmic representations, but it is not clear how much they resist such portrayals or try to find meanings that are different from the ones shown in the movies. The fact that many participants emphasize the need to conform to traditional ideals – while pursuing women’s empowerment and liberation – shows that the resistance to the stereotypical portrayal of femininity is not very strong.

Trivialization of rape

Similar to participants’ discussion on trivialization of rape, the content analysis showed that rape is used as part of a comedy scene. In *Giri* (2004), Vadivelu is the owner of a bakery. Reema Sen comes to the village and claims that the bakery belongs to her. Vadivelu tries to get rid of her and, as a last resort; he plans to rape her as a way of ‘owning’ her and the bakery. The following day, he proudly tells his friends that he has accomplished his mission

only to realize that in the dark he ended up being with his employee, Aarti. Everything related to this was done in a humorous way; hence it may be taken very lightly by the audience.

Even though it is hard to prove a direct relationship between rape in real life and rape in movies, studies have consistently shown that media content related to rape often shapes the audience's definition of rape (Ramasubramaniam and Oliver, 2003). Trivialization of rape ignores the ugly reality of rape in real life and helps the perpetuation of rape myth over time (Bufkin and Eschholz, 2000).

Conclusion

Many scenes in Tamil movies clearly emphasize patriarchal values and are designed for the pleasure and gaze of heterosexual males. It cannot be denied however, that, while Tamil movies have included various elements of the changing life-styles in Tamil Nadu, they are still cautious about challenging the deeply rooted traditional feminine ideals. In the public arena, Indian feminists have made much progress in challenging gender bias laws and practices, but here, too, challenging notions like chastity has not been easy. The progress that has been made in the form of law reform is often diminished by an interpretation of these laws based on assumptions about chastity and traditional gender roles (Gangoli, 2007). Any challenge to the notion of *karpu* is largely unacceptable in Tamil Nadu. Kushboo's (a famous Tamil heroine in 1990s) comments on pre-marital sex and virginity created a major controversy in Tamil Nadu (BBC, 2010). Resistance to such views shows that chastity is seen as a fundamental value in Tamil society, and consequently female characters in Tamil movies often re-emphasize traditional values although they are clad in 'modern' clothes.

Based on the above discussion, the author believes that traditional femininity in Tamil culture is a form of hegemonic femininity. When discussing hegemonic masculinity, Connell (1987: 184) emphasized that hegemony 'does not refer to ascendancy based on force, [but] it is not

incompatible with ascendancy based on force'. She explained further that, ascendancy embedded in religious doctrine or practices and mass media is a form of hegemony (Connell, 1987). The strong emphasis on traditional feminine ideals in cultural products (from classical literature to contemporary movies) shows that these ideals hold a higher position against other forms of femininity. Similarly, the continuous emphasis on these ideals in everyday life – either through cultural or religious practices – seems to give ascendancy to the traditional form of femininity in Tamil society.

Participants' discussion on *pudhumai penn* shows that it has some similarities with Schippers' alternative femininity. It challenges the hegemonic gender relations but at the same time, it is not as stigmatized as pariah femininities. It is a kind of femininity that is looked up upon and seen as one that exists in a perfect world. Therefore, it is socially undesirable not because it is stigmatized but because it is unrealistic. *Pudhumai penn* symbolizes liberated femininity and in some aspects is similar to Budgeon's (2013, 2015) new femininities which focuses on empowered and individualized femininity.

The youths' descriptions show that they were not ready to openly challenge hegemonic gender relations and female participants were very selective of elements of a *pudhumai penn* that are expressed overtly. These social actors are trying to 'camouflage' elements of liberated femininity to look similar to hegemonic femininity. So, here liberated femininity is remade through acts of conformity to give them some room to resist hegemonic gender relations. Therefore, it allows some variation in femininity, but any type of femininity that contradicts and contests the core of the traditional ideals is strongly opposed in the family, movies and in everyday life. 'Empowerment within the traditional boundaries' may be an example of what Budgeon (2015) sees as new femininities which are versions of hegemonic femininity but expressed using a language of choice and autonomy. Many participants also agreed that women's empowerment is important, but without traditional ideals she would not be seen as a

woman. This view naturalizes traditional feminine ideals in an essentialist way: women are naturally made with these qualities. Even in the feminist movement in India, there are women who believe that feminism has to be bound by core values such as chastity and devotion to family (Gangoli, 2007).

Even though many legal barriers have been broken by women in Tamil Nadu, breaking away from traditional femininity is seen as the death of Tamil culture. This re-emphasizes the ascendancy of this form of femininity against all other alternatives. This may explain why many men and women hold on very strongly to these ideals.

Significance and Limitations

This study shows the ascendancy of traditional femininity over other femininities giving some empirical evidence to the concept of hegemonic femininity. Scholars have highlighted that masculinity has been studied more intensively than femininity (Budgeon, 2013). In addition to this, most studies on alternative femininity have focused on sub-culture but this study shows that some forms of alternative femininities (such as *pudhumai penn*) are not necessarily only accepted by a particular sub-culture. It may have a wider acceptance but may be practised in a way that does not overtly challenge hegemonic femininity. One of the limitations of his study is that it only used movies produced in Tamil Nadu. Also, this study explored urban, educated youths' views on femininity, and did not specifically explore the caste dimension in how femininity is portrayed or constructed. Therefore, future studies should focus on how femininity may be constructed and experienced by women from different socio-economic background and age group. In addition to this, study on Tamil movies should include Tamil movies produced in the countries such as Malaysia and Singapore which has a big Tamil population.

Notes

¹ The notion of *acham*, *madam* and *naanam* as feminine ideals is discussed in Tolkappiyam (Sivakami, 2004) which was composed between the 1st or 2nd century BCE and the 5th century CE (Zvelebil, 1973). *Payirpu* was not discussed in Tolkappiyam and was added much later (Sivakami, 2004). For a detailed discussion on these ideals see Author (2015).

² The year 1961 was chosen for two reasons. First, movies made since 1961 are still available for research. It is rather difficult to find movies which were produced prior to this era for analysis. Secondly, movies from the 1960s are still popular among Tamil movie fans and are regularly shown on satellite television channels which specialize in Tamil and Indian language programs.

³ A list of movies available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Tamil-language_films was used as the sampling frame. Wikipedia was only used to create a sampling frame of movies because there is no official list of Tamil movies produced in India from the 1960s to present.

⁴ Bharathi (1882-1921) is considered one of the greatest poets in Tamil literature. His works mark the beginning of modern Tamil Literature (Zvelebil, 1975). In his poem *Pudhumai Penn* (A New Woman) he describes women who are brave, liberated and educated.

⁵ Colloquially, the word ‘figure’ refers to a beautiful woman or a woman with a good figure. ‘Item’ is used to refer to a woman with loose morals, or a sex worker.

⁶ Item songs are songs with dance sequences that are not relevant to the plot of the movie, usually showcasing sexily dressed women performing dances with very suggestive moves.

⁷ Actors’ real names or screen names (rather than the character name) are used in this paper.

⁸ For discussion on *Aval Oru Thodarkathai* (1974) and *Aval Appadithan* (1978) see Lakshmi (2008).

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