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GENDER AND CINEMA: AN ECO FEMINIST READING OF SOUTH INDIAN FILM SONGS

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ABSTRACT

Audio-visual media have simultaneously constructed and deconstructed patriarchy's historical domination over women and the environment. To consider how gender and nature operate as social constructs in subverting the 'androcentric' approach of environmentalism, ecofeminism rests on the belief that environment is a feminist issue. The paper attempts an ecofeminist reading of select South Indian film songs. The songs of one representative film, released post 2015, from the three major South Indian film industries are chosen for analysis. The movies selected include: *Baahubali: The Beginning* (Telugu, 2015), *I* (Tamil, 2015) and *Pulimurugan* (Malayalam, 2016) among others. The study observes the manner in which the environment is portrayed on screen, the intricate relationship between woman and nature, their commodification and objectification, and the visual impact it has on the audience, among other aspects, with prime importance to the scenes, settings and cinematography of the film songs. The lyrics are not much under consideration.

**Key words:** cinema, commodification, ecofeminism, hypermasculinity, gender, objectification, scopophilia

Introduction

Cinema, a powerful mirror to the contemporary society, derives its sustenance, ideas and imaginations from its surroundings. The phantasmagorias cinema constructs, need to be in sync with the societal aspirations and basic urge of humanity for recreation and entertainment. Several studies have observed how film songs commonly integrate diverse styles to establish a hybrid format and aesthetics that might be understood both as eclectic and cosmopolitan, bridging the Indian and the foreign, the local and the global. "Rarely has cinema in general been viewed through an ecocritical lens, nor has there been much evidence in the main venues of ecocriticism of the sustained application of ecocritical strategies to film and cinema studies" (Ivakhiv 1) and the range of films that have been selected for such an analysis has been narrow, with critics concentrating mostly on films that "portray nature and its defenders positively" (Ivakhiv 1)

Emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement, ecofeminism is broadly referred to as the third wave of feminism. "It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women." (Mies) Though the term

was first used by the French feminist Francoise D'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), it became popular only in the context of several protests and activities against environmental destruction, sparked-off initially by recurring ecological disasters. Ecofeminism perceives a linkage between the misuse and dilapidation of the natural world and the oppression and subjugation of women.

The concept of gender is commonly used to theorize on the relationship between humans and the natural world. Ecofeminism uses the parallels between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women as a way to highlight the idea that both must be understood in order to properly recognize how they are connected. These parallels include but are not limited to seeing women and nature as property, seeing men as the curators of culture and women as the curators of nature, and how men dominate women and humans dominate nature. Ecofeminism uses the basis tenants of equality between genders, a revealing of patriarchal structures and a view of the world that respects organic processes, holistic connections and the merits of intuition and collaboration. To these notions ecofeminism adds both a commitment to the environment and an awareness of the associations made between woman and nature. It also examine the effect of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over woman and nature.

### Discussion

Every flower is a soul blossoming in nature; so is every woman, a miracle constantly repeated with beauty, her fair inheritance from Mother Nature. The two prominent ways of identification of nature, especially in cinema, are with a nurturing mother, a kindly beneficent female who provides for the need of mankind and also with the wild and uncontrollable nature that can render violence, storms, droughts and general chaos. Both the notions were identified with the female sex and were projections of human perceptions onto the external world.

Nature always wears the colors of the spirits. This beauty and grandeur of nature is eloquently portrayed in A.R.Rahman's melodious composition, "*Pookkalae Sattru Oyivedungal*" from Aascar Films's Tamil blockbuster 'I'. The letter 'I' is portrayed as various characteristics with regard to beauty, charm, greatness and glory in the song. Owing to P. C. Sreeram's exceptional cinematography, well aided with graceful and vivacious movements, the song sequence depicts the feminine beauty, reflecting the magnificence natural world, which is indeed a visual feast to the audience. The visual frames goes along with the lyrics, taking the viewers through a journey along with the song. A notable instance being the wide shots of flower meadows are shown when "*Pookalesatruoyive dungal..*" comes. The costume synced with nature or rather the surroundings is established with the wide angle shots; with rotating camera movements which flows along with the song making it appealing to the audience. There appears two notable syncs, namely, the dress sync of male and female characters and the sync of dress with the nature or surroundings. Art direction is also done accordingly. Close shots of female actor and surroundings, including the bright flowers and green leaves, establish a relationship with themselves. One notable instance is when the choice of green dress when the heroine lies down in a bamboo boat while playing in water filled with green algae and plant parts. In yet another scene, her red dress matches with the red colour of Red Beach, one of the major locations of the movie. The use of bright contrasting colours in various shots also add to the visual appeal of the song.

The choice of costumes and colours are also significant as it can be examined in correspondence with the "five great elements" of the philosophy of Hinduism, namely, earth, water, fire, air and aether. Green, the prime colour of the world and that from which loveliness arises, becomes pivotal to the visual imagery signifying the Mother Earth. Robed in passionate green, the gorgeous Diya (Ami Jackson) flies over the mountains, smooching her beloved. Fantasy elements and slow motion scenes further supplement colors to the storyline. Symbolic of the water element, the cool and calming blue displays creativity. The splashing water droplets and the visual imagery highlights the blue outfit whereas red, the powerful colour packed with emotions of love and passion, also complements to the allure of the frame. The close up shots emphasize the details and emotions of characters. The fire element is manifested in her red outfit complimented by an aesthetic landscape and incessant love for her beloved that symbolises the miraculous synchronisation of

beauty and modernity. Often associated with perfection, the colour white is also crucial in augmenting the charisma of the actress. Cladded in white, allegoric to the air and a ether elements, the beautiful lady epitomizes purity personified. The incorporation of Natural elements are also greatly involved. The Eagle in Vikram's hand is a clear example. Camera movement is made along with the body movement of the characters. Often close-ups and mid shots are used with camera angle of 45degree along with camera movements. Steady frames are negligible whereas numerous aerial shots were made use of.

The magical potential of cinema through its rendering of special effects to conjure up other worlds underlines the development of Indian cinema amongst other nations. Nature and its magnificence offered a fantastic medium for epic cinema to explore and represent the supernatural potentials of fabulous figures, encounters, transformations and miracles par excellence. The astounding visual effects and performances in the song "Dhivara" from S. S. Rajamouli's epic film, *Baahubali: The Beginning* (2015), is a remarkable example. The song introduction is done in an establishing shot; wide with tilt up. The efficient use of vfx in addition to visuals of nature creates fantasy. The picturization of mountains and waterfall, the beauty of the day sky and night sky, among others, takes the breath of the audience as the Indian film industry have never seen such splendid picturization in recent times. Draped in flowing white, the diva spreads an enchanting aura that echoes an Angelic image. With the aid of graphics, the blue-violet butterflies in colour contrast with white covering her body, the backdrop of waterfalls, the romantic moonlight, all attribute the divine qualities that showcases her splendor as the princess of nature. She becomes an expression of nature and her attractiveness inspires the man to conquer the natural barriers with full ease. Shivadu's (Prabhas) frequent efforts to reach her by competing with natural barriers heighten her to the status of a mythical influence, an unattainable beauty. Enhanced with vfx, those barriers are represented as great works of nature. The frequent use of wide shots eloquently reveal the whole scenic beauty. Its sequel *Baahubali: The Conclusion* (2017) also portrays a melodious song "Hamsa Naava" with a placid elephant ship that resembles a swan that transcends water and air carrying the loves, the moonlight that adds to the visual beauty of their romantic smooch and intense romance, the graceful movements of the vivacious Devasena (Anushka Shetty) in flow with the waves of the sea, all corresponds to the ecofeminist assumption of women's relationship of care and compassion with nature.

The role of women in most commercial Indian movies can be regarded as secondary in nature, often meant for the male gaze. In his essay *On Sexuality: Three Essays*, Freud isolates scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. Nature has no significant role to the core of the film than to have a scopophilic pleasure or rather a visual appeal. So is the case with the female body. From the perspective of the male audience, a woman's femininity resides in the clothes she wears, her skin colour and the number of shots of her body. From the lyrics of "Dhivara", it is evident that 'Like a stream possessed by the intensity of Shiva emanating from the glacier, he clashes, intertwined like a braid and decimating his challengers, he rushes towards her'. The entire act glorifies the heroic deeds of the man who over shadows the graceful lady who has not much role than to enhance the aesthetics of the song sequence. Hence the woman is projected as the victim of man's gaze and the object of his sexual desire.

Ecofeminism acts as a lens through which the cause of marginality of women and nature The capitalist patriarchy permeates, in "Dhivara", through the objectification of the sensuous woman whom the man carves out of the sand. This projects the anthropocentric approach where man becomes the centre, the sole authority. Here, in the song, man overpowers God and becomes the master craftsman whose creative genius results in the apparition of the beautiful woman, the outcome of the fits of his imagination. The use of vivid colors with extravagant sets, sensual costumes and the exemplary art direction exemplifies the picturesque beauty of the scenes. Yet another song "Pachabottesinapillagaadaneetho" from *Baahubali: The Beginning* (2015), picturizes nature at its ultimate glory and grandeur. The grand depiction of flora and fauna, the greenery and the use of vivid colors takes the viewers to a fairy land where man and nature exist side by side. The song begins with an establishing shot of a heaven like paradise of Nature thickly filled with bring flowers the flush green leaves, swan boat floating in the stream, trees, monuments, statues and other settings

that which adds depth to the scene. A very many close up shots of Avanthika decorating herself with jeweler made from different beautiful elements of nature, eventually makes her look like a princess. The body painting sync made when the couple come closer adds to the bond btw them also tells the tales of nature.

The song sequence also celebrates the consummation of their divine love. From K. K. Senthil Kumar's cinematography and M. M. Keeravani's music to lyrics, (*Kaana lo nuvvu-nenuoka menu kaaga; konalopratikommamurisenugaa*) it is evident that every branch in the valley is blushes as become one-body in the jungle. The bliss of the woman is reflected in the nature thereby showcasing the intricate connection. But the irony involved is that nature become just a property as the makers have made use of graphics and artificial settings that imitate nature. The beautiful and graceful Avantika (Thamannah) is painfully objectified when Sivudu (Prabhas) makes love to her, but this very act is glorified. The ending scene in which flowers are running down with water on a statue and eventually a flower get stuck in the hands of the woman statue gives silent meaning to the plot.

The commoditization of nature as well as the female body is quite visible in the song sequence as Shankar's 'I' movie features the love story of supermodels, Lee (Vikram) and Diya (Amy Jackson) and the whole song is portrayed as a part of their add shoot where both the beauty of the landscape and the body of the heroine are used to promote the intended commodities in market. Hence, both nature and the female body becomes commercialized for marketing purposes in the visual media. As a result, there occurs the representation of nature, with the aid of graphics, even in the song, "*EndhiraLogathu Sundariye*" of sci-fi movie like 2.0 (2018). *Endhiran*, the prequel to 2.0, also showcases the unison of woman with nature in the song, "*Kilimanjaroo*", where the stylised tribal outlook of Sana (Aishwarya Rai Bachan) is highly creative thereby commodifying the tribal community.

Ecofeminism sees all humanities as embodied and specific focus is laid on the role of sex inequality in the construction of human nature relationships. In the picturization of the song, "*Pachabottesinapillagaadaneetho*", there are aspects of women's bodies and social experience that can usefully understand the current imbalance in human nature realities. Hyper masculinity is a concept which dominates films thereby subjugating women in films, not just because they're weaker but due to the social notion that women are meant to be controlled and tamed. The concept is so heavily embedded in the song sequence that portrays its heroine femininity personified. It even has an infamous scene, where Sivudu while making love with Avantika, drags her below the waterfall till she becomes *fair enough*. It is such actions which are etched in the minds of individuals which makes the Indian society obsessed with fairness.

There exists a symbiotic relationship between man and nature which is portrayed in a negative light in "*Ennodu nee Irundhal, Uyiroodunaanlrupen*" yet another song in the movie 'I', These lines are significant when understood in the light of man's relationship with the non-human world. Inspired by the Beauty and the Beast fairy tale, the song is picturized in such a way that the beast is portrayed in an objectified manner and the beauty develops strong feelings of fear and dislike towards the beast. The animal world is portrayed in a negative light. The abjectification of the beast becomes significant. *Pulimurugan* (2016) has an animal as the antagonist and the story goes through the emotions of the human and the animal. Hence the title track that glorifies the heroic Murugan (Mohanlal), the hunter while subjugating the tiger as the fierce antagonist.

Ethnic people play a significant role in conserving the biodiversity in and around localities of their natural habitat since the beginning of civilization. The forest wilderness, the clearest way into the nature, and its association with man becomes a key image in many of the recent South Indian films, the best example to the case in point being the song "*KadaniyumKaalchilambe, Kaanana Maine*", from *Mulakuppadam* Films's Bollywood blockbuster *Pulimurugan* (2016). Cinematographed by Shaji Kumarhe, the highlighting feature of the song sequence is the lead characters played Murugan (Mohanlal) and Maina (Kamalini Mukherjee) and their familiarity and togetherness with the forest. They consist of individuals who subjectively considers themselves to be indigenous, engaged in shifting or permanent cultivators, herders, hunters, gatherers, fishers and handicraft makers who adopt a multiuse strategy of appropriation of nature. Described as the adorning anklet of the forest, the non-glamorised heroine involved in the mundane affairs of the village life is effectively

portrayed in the song, “*Kaadaniyum Kalchilambe*’ song, composed by Gopi Sunder. The glorified forest imagery, wild berries and honey, all adds to the picturesque lyrics by Rafeeqe Ahmed. The dialectical relationship between culture and nature involves local communities and their immediate environment. The ‘Idukki song’ in *Maheshinte Prathikaram* is noted for its sensuous lyrics that personifies nature as a graceful and vivacious lady, young and beautiful, full of life. The natural landscape, the vegetation, the climatic conditions, the livelihood and nature of the villagers are vividly presented in the song.

### Conclusion

“The media, in its various forms, functions as one of the major strategies through which cultural communication is achieved and social images built up, exerting tremendous impact upon society by playing a pivotal role in shaping the culture and lifestyle of the masses.”(Georgy) Cinema, being one of the most popular media, is highly influential among the Indian audience. The intricate relationship between woman and nature has often been portrayed through numerous song sequences in the South Indian cinema. Over the years the method of expression, of nature and sexuality, has changed to a considerable extent. The aesthetic sense of the filmmakers have widened in order to serve the visual appetite of the viewers. Rarely do the industry portray nature in its real essence without any enhancing techniques. The wild and the indigenous seldom find a place in the movies. The state of the contemporary South Indian Cinema can be roughly classified as a technologically driven period where all cinemas with respect of any theme or outfit largely depend on technology in its all phases of production. The nature and the natural are often overshadowed by artificial settings. The use of special effects and technologies in cinematography has opened a new trend where nature becomes a sheer commodity that is used to impart beauty to the scenes shot. Through explicit portrayal of sexuality and body shots, women become the victim of gaze and are objectified for inducing scopophilic pleasure which can be considered as a chief attraction that drags audience to the theatres. Therefore the role of both nature and woman has been diminished as a mere commodity, tactfully used for the marketing of the movies. Hence, the select songs for the study exemplifies the remarkable trends, with respect to the portrayal of woman and nature that are prevalent in the contemporary South Indian Film industry.

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