

Female Body and Male Heroism in South Indian Cinema: A Special Reference to Telugu Cinema

Dr. Krishna Sankar Kusuma

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Abstract

South Indian cinema presents different aesthetics, themes, and stories when compared to Hindi cinema. The unique characteristics of Southern cinema include fans and fan clubs, cinema, politics, devotional and folklore genres, and so on. Heroism that exists in regional cinema in India is highly characterised by male dominance. The main aim of the paper is to understand and analyse the representation of the female lead roles in Telugu cinema over the years. There are very few female actors who could achieve the status of female lead roles to the stardom on par with male actors. The paper explores depiction and use of female body and male heroism in Telugu and other South Indian languages cinema. In the midst of male-dominated industry, the paper analyses female actors' depiction in Telugu and other South Indian movies.

Keywords: South Indian Cinema, Heroism, Female body, Telugu Cinema, female actors, Indian cinema, male lead roles, male-centered movies

Introduction

Heroism is a significant factor that is present in all movie industries regardless of their geographical location. In fact, the notions of 'Hero' and 'Heroism' are closely associated with all the film industries in India. Whether it is Bombay cinema or four cinema industries in South India, heroism has become an important phenomenon over the years.

Patriarchal and Male-Centric

Most films are predominantly patriarchal and have their themes around male-centric ego. South Indian movies project the male actor as super-heroes who enable the powers to fly and beat up goons in one shot and many such heroic acts. The extravagant portrayal of a hero becomes a norm in South Indian cinema. He can literally do anything. The hero of the movie was the story, dialogue, script, theme, music, everything. Heroism dominated the South Indian cinema for years and is still dominating. Needless to state that a hero will always be the hero, whatever the age and times may be. The hero will do the fights, find an appropriate girl, fulfil his family and his personal needs, compromise his lady for the never-ending demands of his family and society, etc. The importance of a female in his life, her contribution, is wholly ignored and irrelevant to the story and reinforced it as a naturalized acceptance in the society.

Dubbing Movies – Space for South Indian Movies

The phenomenon of dubbing old South Indian films to Hindi language and telecasting these on a number of Hindi television channels has created a new means of entertainment and economy. The newly released regional language films are usually dubbed in Hindi and telecast on Television and later appear on www.youtube.com. This trend has created a new space for South Indian movies in the entertainment of the Hindi speaking television audience. Exciting video trailers are created for releases of dubbed films both in cinema theatres and online streaming websites. If they are new films with famous actors (male) they find space also in theatre releases. The dubbed movies that are telecasted in Hindi entertainment channels are predominantly male-dominated. They identify with a variety of genres like action, drama, family, horror and most importantly masala (spicy- meaning mass entertainment) movies. It is not only expanding the southern cinema, but also exports its male-centric heroism. The audience will get to feel the heroism of male lead actors. The subjugated female becomes the base for building the heroism of a male hero.

Hero and Heroism Over the Years

Heroism is as old as the beginning of the cinema in the south. The concept of formal hero and heroism began to formalise with the emergence of the star system. In the film Pathala Bahairavi (1951), N. T. Ramarao who played the character of Ramudu was established continuously as the hero of the narrative with the help of the public present in the beginning part of the movie. N.T.R later shows his valour and courage through various heroic activities. In Telugu cinema, N.T.R has been a source of inspiration to have the aura of an actor and his character, which ultimately resulted in the emergence of a mighty 'hero' within the screen text and among the civil society.

During mythologies and folklore films, male actors are portrayed as responsible citizens who fight against evil. Now the male actor takes up the role of a hero who has high moral values, has good civic sense and possesses all the qualities of an ideal man in society. Even though he might act as anti-hero, it still justifies all the wrongdoing in the name of social justice.

Depiction of Females – Camera Gaze

Females are depicted as mere objects and submissive to the male dominance and their lives are never theirs, because they sacrifice every second of their lives to the males. Still, the male heroes take all the credit, and the women always are placed at the receiving end. Often, the women have been only 'eye candy' in the entire movie, and the hero remains vital to the movie. According to (Mulvey, 1975) "in cinema, the camera's gaze is congruent with the male gaze. Thus, making the spectator a masculine entity". The Southern cinema camera has been lustrous like any other industry in the world, but specifically, it is obsessed with the navel. The camera always zooms into the abdomen of the lead female actor, and hero often finds playing around it with flowers, pouring honey, sprinkling water, or birds walking across it. Noted director Raghavendra Rao is known for throwing fruits, making birds sit on her stomach. It has become a grammar of the camera gaze in South cinema. Such a gaze of the movie camera has demeaned the woman as some sexual object, some creature of lose character to be used and ignored, not to be respected, or esteemed as a powerful, splendid human being.

Concept of Hero

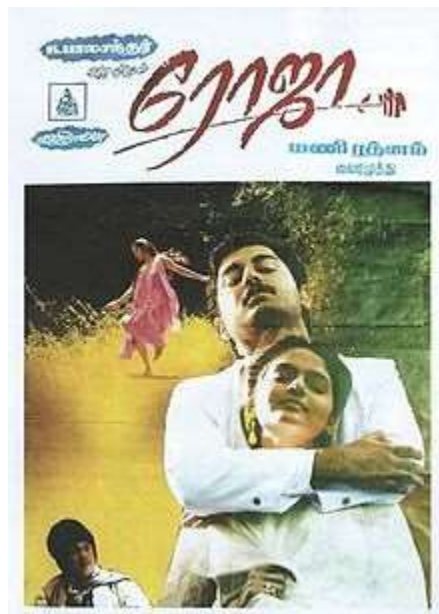
The concept of 'hero' has been experimented upon over the years across the class and caste roles. Sometimes instead of extra special or superhuman characters, the hero character is also

depicted as one among us. These characters are typical, as an auto driver, a rickshaw puller, a policeman, a cobbler, and a clerk drawn from common life, are 'everyday characters'. Even though the heroine belongs to the so-called upper class or caste in a movie, she will not have ultimately an upper hand over a hero from the poor background. Here operates a unique form of heroism in the guise of a socialist or a working-class spokesman. The fact remains that class and caste will always exist in the film, but only the way a film showcases it will vary. One example can be *Gharana Mogudu* (1992) which translates as 'Rogue husband' in which Chiranjeevi and Nagma are in the lead roles. He plays a character of a so-called lower-class factory worker as well as husband to his boss, who is Nagma. The movie revolves around showcasing his male ego rather than a class struggle.

Heroines are usually projected as part of the glamour quotient of the film, or as the hero's girlfriend, mother or wife. Persistent attempts have been made by new wave filmmakers to bring the women into the limelight, but the audience does not receive such films with the same zeal as Rajanikanth, Balakrishna, Rajkumar or Mammooty films.

Movie Actor as a Real-Life Hero

The obsession with cinema has made a movie actor into a real-life hero and considered him to be an influential personality in the society. Heroism reached its peak with fans treating them as gods and fans become devotees. Rajnikant always portrayed as the saviour of humankind and messiah for the poor. The use of Rajanikanth as 'Rajani sir' among Bombay cinema actors is an extreme example of the heroism.



Courtesy: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roja>

Roja (1992) directed by Maniratnam was the film where the hero was an ordinary man obedient and also patriotic. However, the heroic struggle and strength shown by the female actress is washed away by the bigger canvas of heroic instance of saving the pride of the nation by the male actor.

Heroic Figures

South Indian films have always been known for their heroic figures from beginning till to date. Whether it was the reign of Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao (NTR), Marudur Gopalan Ramachandran (MGR), Rajkumar, Prem Nazee or Sivaji Ganeshan, K. R. Ramasamy, Rajanikant, Chiranjeevi, Mohanlal and/or Mammooty, heroism has always been showered with the success behind the south Indian movies. Historically heroism was an attribute that has been associated only with gods, kings, folklore figures, and such. The term has been changing its nature over the years. In the absence of mythologies, folklore and devotional films, the understanding of the hero has been broadened to imagine that a hero is a person who can bring change in the society and can eradicate the social evils.

Similarly, he does that on the screen. A hero is always expected to do good to the society. The term heroism might refer to many different aspects, and it might refer to the character that the actor is portraying, or the qualities that the particular character possesses.



N. T. Rama Rao in the film *Daasi*

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N._T._Rama_Rao_filmography

In another perspective, heroism is the term primarily used because of the extreme popularity and stardom of the South Indian cinema directors, actors, and music directors. The idea of star system is complemented by the presence of heroism on the part of male lead actors. The star status becomes a moral, heroic as well as a moral burden on the star, not only for himself but also for the fans, his community or caste. It is observed that heroism is nothing but ignoring the contribution of a female and exaggerating the dominant male psyche.

Women as Sati and Shakti

Bhrugubanda, U.M. (2011) in her thesis found that the devotional movies from black and white era onwards present women both as “‘sati’ as well as ‘Shakti’, between an ideal wife and a powerful but malevolent goddess—two aspects of the Woman herself” This reinforces the social status of women in the society. However, both these aspects grew as idealistic characters than as any person in real life.

Women Centric Films

It is interesting to note that the first female director in Indian cinemas was Bahnumati, who directed her first movie with a women-centric role called ‘Chandi Rani’ (1953). This movie by a female director from the south showcased in Hindi, Tamil and Telugu languages simultaneously. There are sporadic cases where one may find a female behind the camera or cinema craft in film production.

Actresses like Sridevi, Jayaprada, Savitri, Manjula, Sharada and many more actresses of past and present mostly remain as romantic heroines than a sensible, empowered female on the screen. Vijaya Shanti is an exception to it. She acted in movies and achieved success with the movies like Pratigatana (1985), Kartavyam (1991), Osey Ramulamma (1997) etc. Interestingly, she was given titles like ‘lady superstar’ and ‘Lady Amitabh’ by the press and cinema. It is evident that her acting, dialogues, and fighting skills were able to draw the audience to the cinema halls. Some exhibitors were willing to showcase her film inspite of the film having no male hero. Probably she is a clear case of achieving the so-called ‘stardom’ among female actors. However, the trend was short-lived. From romantic heroine to action heroine roles could only get her more of such stereotype roles. Niranjana, T. (2002) observes, “Why is that this phenomenon can be observed only in Telugu cinema? Kannada, Tamil, and Hindi have a few films like this, but their success is not on the scale of that achieved by the Vijayashanthi films in Telugu.” There are films with female lead roles, but that cannot be taken as phenomena, like Vijayashanti. Malashree films sometimes follow this trend. There have also been some movies in Tamil and Malayalam where some female actors like Bhanumathi, Savithri and Lakshmi have achieved the heroic heights that only male actors are usually given.



R. Bhanumathi

Courtesy: <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/03/23/bhanumathi-actress-musician-director/>

There were a few female artists who tried to carry this trend forward, to mention a few Anushka Shetty as Rudrama Devi (2015) and Shriya Saran as Pavitra (2013) in Telugu. The trend could not grow as expected. The male heroes who attained star status could not accept such a thing in their films, due to the fear that female stardom might overshadow their characters, and this has been feared as one of the reasons for the sharp decline in their careers. There are many male stars in all the four film industries whose female co-actors were retired, and some shifted to television typically called small screen. However, we have the case of male actors who are in their late fifties and sixties still working in movies in lead roles and dancing with the young female actors. The acceptance of the audience and industry magnates is mostly patriarchal.

Women in Film Posters and Cutouts

The film poster is one of the symbolic driving mechanisms of heroism and stereotypical depiction of women. In the typical film poster, male actors generally are given maximum space compared to the females. Female actresses always showed as dancers or bodies that are ready for entertaining the audience with their voluptuous postures. In the film, *Bombai Priyudu* (1996) the 'hero' is relatively new and doesn't have any stardom like Chiranjeevi, but the actress Rambha had been acting already with most of the popular actors. It was a rare instance where a female actor's cutout was erected on the main road. Large cutouts were erected in front of cinema halls with film posters depicting Rambha in revealing clothes and swimsuit posters.

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Courtesy: <http://indylyrics.blogspot.com>

The female actors wearing a bikini, or two-piece dancing dresses always have better space than the male actors, to attract the public. This is the case of the mainstream popular female actors. Before 1990s short dresses like the bikini, short skirt or locally designed dresses worn by vamps and dance girls in the club culture or stage dancers, depicted in the film posters. For example, Jyoti Lakshmi and Jaya Malini. The 'Certified films by the Central Board of Film Certification' (CBFC) have such liberty to project their films through revealing women's body parts in wall posters. There should not be any cutouts for these films.

Adult Movies

In the case of 'A' certificate films where the female body is the only point of attraction to view for the only male audience. These movies are also called 'B' grade or 'C' grade movies. The luxury of these movies is enjoyed by only male audiences in the cinema halls. Kashinath movies from Kannada, Silk Smitha movies from Telugu and Tamil and Soft-core movies from Malayalam used to get dubbed in other South Indian languages, have carved out a new genre for itself. It is interesting to observe that Shakeela has got a different kind of stardom with her movies of this genre. Her being on the poster alone brought audiences to the cinema halls, and she gave a tough fight to the contemporary big heroes; this has created a unique situation in South Indian language cinema. In fact, all her films have been release in all the major film languages in the South.

The brighter side of the so-called decent and visible projection is during the mythologies and Bhakti movies where actresses got larger space in the film posters as well as in the movies. In fact, there are female dominated roles in religious movies visibly evident.

Fan, Fan Clubs, and Cine-Politics

The fans are religious about their actors. There are thousands of fan clubs. The fans, though irrational, are quite loyal to their actors. Sometimes heroism fuels the growth of fans and fan clubs.

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Interestingly, there are no significant female fan clubs available. In contrast to it, there were temples built for actresses in Tamil Cinema in Tamil Nadu. Actress Kushboo is one among them.

Fans and fan clubs also decide which actress should act with their favourite actor. Sometimes they take the dialogues of the female actors about their favourite hero seriously and create chaos. One example is Ramya Krishna was attacked verbally for her aggressive role opposite Rajinikanth in the film *Padayappa* (1999). In an interview (2017), she told that “her sister went to the theatre to see *Padayappa* and saw people throwing slippers at her when she appeared on screen”.

Generally, the cutouts and celebrations of film release completely overshadow the actresses in the film. The large cutouts and fan activities like garlanding of fan cutouts, blood donation, distribution of free goods etc. are done only for the male actors.

In cine-politics, male actors can convert the fans to potential voters. The cine-politicians like N.T.R, M. G. Ramachandran and others were some of the best examples. In contrary to these, female actor Jayalalitha became the chief minister, and her position was a unique example. The successful visual which had helped in showing the loyalty to M.G.R towards Jayalalitha was the colossal cutout where Jayalalitha was offering respect by bowing and touching the feet of MGR. It took years to stand firm and establish her independent identity.

The other notable female actress is Vijayashanti from Telugu film industry. She might be able to get the political advantage due to her heroic roles in her earlier films like *Karthavyam*, *Pratigatana* and most importantly *Osey Ramulamma*. Through the film *Osey Ramulamma* (1997) she could get into the heart of the poor in general, specifically the people of Telangana. Her journey started from a glamour girl to an individual fighter against patriarchy than to a powerful police officer and finally to a woman Naxalite leader, holding a gun for the cause of people, had helped her immensely to gain attention in politics. Unlike Jayalalitha who has MGR legacy in her credit, Vijayashanti could not rise to a potential opposition in the new state of Telangana, despite floating her political party called ‘Thalli Telangana’ (Mother Telangana).

The case of Jayaprada is unique because she started her career from Telugu cinema then became popular in other regional and Hindi cinema. The popular remade films from Telugu and Tamil films in Hindi she earned fame. She accelerated her political career with Telugu Desam party in Andhra Pradesh and later on to Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh. She has been in politics for more than a decade. Due to her presence in Hindi films she gained voters support in North India to sustain her in politics.

Jayasudha another contemporary actor of Sridevi and Jayaprada, started her political career late. She joined Congress party with the help of Dr. Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy and won the prestigious Secunderabad seat. She later joined Telugu Desam party after the political turmoil erupted due to the sudden death of Y.S.R. in the then Andhra Pradesh.

Roja is one of the popular actresses in the 1990s. She became popular acting in movies with Chiranjeevi, Balakrishna, Venkatesh and others. She started her career with the Telugu

Desam party then shifted to the Congress party. During the political instability after the sudden death of Dr. Rajasekar Reddy, she joined Y.S.R. Party with Jagan Reddy. She is most popular for her controversial comments. It is worthwhile to note that the actresses have been planning their future carriers in business, political ventures, and social work. Though they might not have reached the level of chief minister, they are active and balanced as artists and politicians. The political parties see them as adding charisma to the party. The parties expect to attract crowds through the actors' presence during the canvassing.

Star System in Telugu Cinema

The star system in Telugu cinema has become so apparent that every new male actor gets a tagline after few films. Then it is reflected in the film titles and media; finally, it will get legitimate among the fans and audience. The titles of the films, posters, video, trailers reflect the heroic act to support film promotion. The star system seems to be helpful in bringing value to the film.

Some of the actors and their star taglines: Krishna as Super Star, Chiranjeevi as Megastar, Nani as Natural Star, Prabhas as Rebel Star etc. The star system does not mean only titled with the star, but also titles which an actor carries for their identity and stardom.

There is no stardom attached to the female actors. Female actors get titles which explain their beauty and femininity, for example, 'Andhala Tara' (beautiful actress). Tamanna as 'milky beauty' and Illeana Deuruz as Goa Sundari (Beauty from Goa).

Interestingly, there is no such formal body to award the stardom. Chiranjeevi named as a supreme hero in the film Yamudiki Mogudu(1988), later has been called "Megastar". It is curious to probe further the origin of these titles. The directors and producers of the movie do play an essential role in attributing such titles to actors in the film industry. Actually, there are very few female directors and producers present in the South Indian Cinema industry.

Oppressive Language by Male Heroes

Language plays a vital role in establishing the hero and heroism. We can find respectable treatment to female actors on screen in the black and white era of South Indian Cinema. Characters using respectable language prevailed in those days. The language used in cinema has been mostly the coastal regions of Andhra Pradesh, the reason may be due to the film industry being dominated by the people from that region. It is a good sign that after the formation of Telangana characters started speaking in both the dialects. Shekhar Kammula movie Fida (2017) using Telangana accent entirely in the film is a new beginning of Telugu cinema. Whatever the accent may be, the treatment of the female lead roles has deteriorated concerning clothes, oppressive language, presentation of female characters in the film, etc. There are few women characters in the films from whom the audience can take inspiration. This trend has developed from 1990's. The hero possesses both the good and bad behaviours. In fact, a bad behaviour, a crazy lover, a good local goon, a rowdy police with kind heart etc. forms the 'new hero'.

The ultimate goal of the film seems to be the male actor achieving success in being 'loved' by the heroine. The hero can be as nasty as possible or can harass her, threaten her, misbehave

with her in all possible ways, forming the new mannerism, which ultimately establishes his 'heroism'. Talking about her body parts, sizes, using slang that is not treated as respectable, has become the new language of film dialogues and songs for the 'new hero'. Actors Raviteja and Allu Arjun play youthful characters, but they use stylized sycophancy on the female co-actors. It indicates the beginning of a 'new hero'. It has become a trend to call the female actors 'Osey', 'ente', 'edava' (a slang to call a female with no respect). This language is presented as a romantic discourse.

Tamil new heroes are not exceptional regarding such behavior. They have made it so that the fair-skinned actress is humiliated as a proud human being. Always a dark-skinned hero humiliates her with his harassment and language. Though it seems like a class struggle, but it demeans the body of a female actress. In Rajanikanth films, one set of women are always shown as villainous and ultimately he overpowers them in the film through his male ego.

The hero has one peculiar slang or dialogue that would get into the memory of the audience for the longest time. One example 'savaari giri giri' from a Malayalam movie by 'superstar' Mohan Lal. 'Box baddalaipoddi' (your box will be exploded) by Chiranjeevi and such, are some that show the male arrogance and sexist lingo.

New Trends in Heroism

Heroism is not only restricted to male actors, but also music directors, producers, directors, playback singers, scriptwriters etc. The posters, film release functions, and promotions will carry the names and stardom of the other creative and technical people involved in the film. Some of the films are promoted in the name of music directors. In fact, Devi Sri Prasad (DSP) is a music director, whose stamp on film posters is a must. Showcasing the full photos of film directors with actors in the posters started notably with S. V. Krishna Reddy and Achi Reddy. The female directors and singers are not found in publicity material. They are generally overshadowed by the 'stars heroes', directors, and music directors during audio functions and success meet.

The audio function and pre-launch are one of the new trends in the South Indian film Industries. During introductions and credits with each other, the producer, director, music director and the male 'hero' of the film are duly given credit. When the female actor's turn comes she only thanks all the above by each name. None of them gives any practical importance to her talent or presence. More than the mind, body or glamour has been often praised.

Conclusions

The phenomenon of heroism makes the spectator look up to the male actor playing the role of the hero not just in the narrative of the movie, but also in real life. The method that that filmmakers choose to portray heroism is usually violence. For instance, in the film Singam, the lead character wins the confidence of a girl by beating up the goons who tried to spoil her honour. Women are always portrayed according to the male gaze perspective. According to Laura Mulvey women are always portrayed in the way a male wants to see them. The audience is used to this heroism at large.

Wages or remuneration for each film has a definite difference in the film industry. The male actor or hero always gets many times more than the counterpart. The massive amounts of remunerations are also an indication of a more significant heroism. The highest paid actor is perceived as a bigger hero.

Raising any questions against these male-dominated systems can end the opportunities for the female actors. The industry works at the nexus of the network, where they come to the same line of thought concerning issues like this, even though there are differences among them on other issues.

The psyche has not changed over the years in South Indian cinema. Malapilla (1938), Kalam Marinidi (1972), Mugguru Monagallu (1994), Bunny (2005), Simha (2010), Aruju Reddy (2017) the trend has not improved concerning treading on the woman's body and her abilities. Whether the hero may be from any class or caste, the situation remains same.

Ramya Krishnan in an interview has shown some hope by saying "Indian cinema, a woman has to be submissive, she has to listen to a man - her husband or her father, and that woman is a perfect heroine...but that's not the case today," she said. "A woman can put her foot down and say I do not want to do this to her father or her husband or whomever it may be. That is a strength, I feel." Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in Malayalam film industry shows a new path for uniting women in the film industry for fighting for their issues (TOI,2017). Though it has started to fight issues related to sexual oppression, it has more extensive opportunity to lead a united movement towards the better status for women in all fields of the cinema industry.

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Dr. Krishna Sankar Kusuma
Assistant Professor (Sr.Grade)
AJK Mass Communication Research Centre
Jamia Millia Islamia
Jamia Nagar
New Delhi-110025
India kusumakk@gmail.com