



# Evolving Female Agency In Contemporary Tamil Cinema (2020–2024): A Content Analysis Of Women-Centred Narratives, Representation, And Emotional Realism

S Parthasarathy<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. V. Sundararaman<sup>2</sup> And Priyapalanmurugan<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of Communication, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli - 627012, Tamil Nadu, India. Mail ID: parthasarathy.sa@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli - 627012, Tamil Nadu, India. Mail ID: vsundararaman@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup>Research Scholar, Dept. of Visual Communication, Meenakshi Academy of Higher Education and Research (Deemed to Be University), Chennai. Mail ID: priyaofficial2205@gmail.com

**Citation:**S Parthasarathy et al (2024). Evolving Female Agency In Contemporary Tamil Cinema (2020–2024): A Content Analysis Of Women-Centred Narratives, Representation, And Emotional Realism, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1) 01-09  
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i11.11204

## ARTICLE INFO

### Received on:

12.08.2024

### Accepted on:

25.10.2024

### Published on:

04.11.2024

## ABSTRACT

This research looks at the evolving patterns of female agency in contemporary Tamil cinema, produced between 2020 and 2024, focusing on women-centred narratives, representational strategies, and emotional realism. It examines how recent films have positioned women within the narrative structures, how autonomy and decision-making processes were distributed, and how emotional depth and psychological authenticity were depicted. This study employed qualitative content analysis to investigate a purposive sample of landmark films such as Soorai Pottu (2020), Ponmagal Vandhal (2020), Saani Kaayidham (2022), Natchathiram Nagargiradhu (2022), Good Night (2023), and Parking (2023), in addition to selected OTT releases. Scene-level coding, character arc mapping, and thematic clustering were used to discover recurring patterns and emergent deviations.

The findings showed that female characters were increasingly placed in the center of narrative progression, often driving conflict resolution and professional, domestic, and socio-political identity with more nuance than in previous decades. Women were shown as entrepreneurs, lawyers, activists, and emotionally complex partners, consequently bucking older stereotypes of passive femininity. Secondly, the study showed emotional realism rose, trauma, mental health, relational strain, and resilience were depicted with a heightened sensitivity. Representations of grief, moral dilemmas, sexual autonomy, and interpersonal communication demonstrated a significant shift towards authenticity and everyday lived experience.

While these developments are progressive, the analysis showed that some mainstream productions still carried traces of patriarchal framing, wherein female agency was either partially restricted or framed in relation to male characters. Tokenistic feminism or the use of traditional moral codes restrained full autonomy in some films. However, OTT platforms offered more freedom for bold themes, intersectional perspectives, and experimental storytelling. Overall, this study creates a compelling case that in the period of 2020-2024, Tamil cinema underwent a remarkable transformation, showcasing women with expanded narrative authority, emotional depth, and relevance in society. These shifting patterns of representation hint at a broader cultural reimagining of Tamil womanhood and offer concrete insights for feminist film scholarship, media studies research, and interdisciplinary research on gender and visual culture.

**Keywords:**Tamil cinema; female agency, women-centred narratives, gender representation, emotional realism; content analysis, feminist film theory autonomy.

## Introduction

### Background

The representation of women in Tamil cinema has traditionally been shaped both by patriarchal norms and by culturally prescribed gender roles. Earlier films portrayed women as idealised figures such as devoted mothers, sacrificial wives, or romantic interests without much agency in the narrative (Baskaran, 2013). Later on, particularly from the 1980s and 1990s, Tamil cinema did indeed give rise to more complex female characters, though such portrayals, more often than not, remained subservient to male-dominated storylines (Pandian, 2015).

A significant turn happened after 2010. With the emergence of women-oriented films, genre diversification, and altering audience expectations, new narration for women began to occur (Arun, 2017). This further accelerated with the expansion of OTT platforms post-2019, offering creative freedom and allowing alternative audience options where bold narratives against traditional gender roles could be pursued (Chakravarthy, 2020). Therefore, contemporary Tamil cinema is more and more populated by women with psychological depth, professional identities, and multidimensional emotional arcs.

### Rationale for the Study

There was a noticeable growing trend of women-led narratives and films that dealt with themes of agency, trauma, resilience, and emotional authenticity in the Tamil cinema between the years 2020 and 2024. This period also coincided with global trends in feminist filmmaking and regional movements that were demanding better representation of women in media (Menon, 2021).

However, despite such visibility, scholarly analysis of the ways in which female agency and emotional realism have evolved during this particular period remains scant. This paper tried to fill this lacuna by analyzing the emerging trends in representation through systematic content analysis. The research is useful for media studies, gender studies, and Tamil film scholarship since it helps understand the ways in which cinema reflects and shapes cultural constructions of womanhood.

### Problem Statement

Although recent Tamil films seemingly portray women with greater independence and complexity, the degree and frequency of this shift remain less documented. The issue explored here was how contemporary Tamil cinema depicts female agency and what other narrative or emotional configuration emerges from those depictions. This research also attempts to find out if such representations really challenge the patriarchal frameworks or continue reifying those in a subtle manner.

## Research Objectives

### The objectives of this study were fourfold:

- To analyse female agency in Tamil films released between 2020 and 2024.
- To explore emotional realism and psychological depth in the representation of female characters.
- Assessing the narrative, thematic, and stylistic treatment in women-centered stories.
- Mapping representation patterns across domains, such as work roles, social identities, trauma, autonomy, and resilience.

### Research Questions

- This research focused on the following questions:
- How were the women characters positioned in the plot structure in post-2020 Tamil cinema?
- How did films construct emotional realism, empathy, and psychological vulnerability?
- In what ways did narratives support or confine female autonomy?
- What socio-cultural themes emerged from the content analysis of women-centred films?

**Scope and Delimitation** The research therefore focuses on those Tamil releases that came out between January 2020 and December 2024. Only women-centred films or films featuring very strong female leads were included within the sample. Films driven essentially by commercial action formulas were excluded, except where these films presented more substantial portrayals of female agency. The analysis itself looked at narrative, thematic, and representational axes rather than audience reception or box-office performance.

## Literature Review

### Representation of Gender in Indian Cinema

The representation of gender in Indian cinema is traditionally developed according to patriarchal norms, moral codes, and visual conventions that emphasized idealized femininity (Dwyer, 2006). The position of women in classical stereotypes was often within the frames of objects of desire, sacrificial caregivers, or moral compasses, hence narrowing down their contributions within narratives (Gokulsing&Dissanayake, 2012).

These portrayals were reinforced by the “male gaze,” a concept introduced by Mulvey (1975), which argued that mainstream cinema positions women as spectacles that are visually created for male pleasure. While feminist film theory articulated this critique by analyzing the ways in which narrative structure, visual framing, and symbolic representation underpin gendered power relations, scholars noted both continuity with, and deviation from, Bollywood patterns in the case of South Indian cinema, including Tamil cinema. Early Tamil films frequently portrayed women in domestic or romantic roles, but from the 1980s onward, filmmakers did occasionally experiment with stronger female leads, though still within moral boundaries (Baskaran, 2013). The shift accelerated in the 2010s due to urbanisation, technological change, and the emergence of diverse storytelling formats, leading to more psychologically complex portrayals of women (Rajagopalan, 2020).

### **Female Agency and Narrative Power**

The character's agency refers to the possibility of the character to make choices, take action, and influence the plot of the storyline. Agency in a cinematic context would then manifest as autonomy, decision-making capability, emotional independence, and acts of resistance. As posited by Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity, agency can emerge through subversion of expected gender roles.

Laura Mulvey's (1975) critique of objectification urges consideration of how women negotiate visibility and narrative control. Martha Nussbaum's (1997) formulation on personhood and dignity provides the philosophical underpinning for examining agency as morally anchored autonomy. The idea of intersectional feminism, presented by Crenshaw (1989), draws attention to the fact that women's narrative power becomes constituted not just by gender but equally by caste, class, sexuality, and social identity-factors very salient for the socio-cultural milieu of Tamil cinema. These frameworks provide the basis for considering the women-centered narratives in the contemporary films.

### **Emotional Realism in Film Studies**

Emotional realism concerns those cinematic portrayals that accurately reflect psychological states, lived experiences, and everyday emotional complexity (Plantinga, 2009). Cognitive film theorists establish that viewers engage with characters by recognising authentic emotional cues, inner turmoil, and relational tension (Smith, 1995). Affect theory furthers this account by describing how films elicit visceral responses, empathy, and emotional resonance (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010).

In the Indian context, emotional realism emerged increasingly in new-wave regional cinema as trauma, mental health, domestic stress, and social injustice were all discussed with an added nuance. Recent women-led films also introduce or often integrate aspects of emotional realism in narrating lived experiences in grief, workplace pressure, gender-based violence, and resilience. These depictions align with global trends in feminist storytelling, which emphasizes authenticity over spectacle.

### **Content Analysis in Film Research**

Content analysis is a systematic way through which patterns, themes, and meanings are identified within visual and narrative texts (Krippendorff, 2018). This approach is very effective in studying the representation of gender because it allows the researcher to analyze character roles, indicators of agency, dialogue patterns, and symbolic portrayals across many films. Content analysis has been one of the most widely used methods among film scholars for analyzing gender portrayals in Indian cinema, regarding stereotyping, screen time, and narrative functions. A limited but growing number of studies on South Indian cinema have applied content analysis to trace changes in shifting gender roles, newer influences of new-age storytelling, and the rise of women-led narratives. This method thus provides a robust framework for evaluating contemporary Tamil films and mapping evolving patterns of female representation between 2020 and 2024.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The study used the qualitative content analysis framework to assess the portrayals of female agency and emotional realism in contemporary Tamil cinema. Qualitative content analysis allowed for systematic identification of patterns within the visual, narrative, and symbolic elements while permitting interpretive depth rooted in feminist and film theory (Krippendorff, 2018).

Thematic coding was followed, where the scenes, dialogues, and character arcs of the films were analysed for recurring motifs with regard to autonomy, emotional expression, and narrative significance. The portrayals are contrasted using a comparative analysis approach across films that were released between 2020 and 2024. This design helped the study to capture both common trends and divergent representational strategies amongst women-centred Tamil films.

### **Sampling and Film Selection**

A purposive sampling strategy was used to guarantee that the selected films meaningfully represented women-led narratives. Three criteria guided the selection of films:

- (1) presence of a female protagonist or central female character,

- (2) be released within the 2020–2024 timeframe, and  
 (3) Thematic relevance to agency, autonomy or emotional realism.

#### The final sample included landmark films such as:

- SooraraiPottru (2020) – highlighting Bommi’s entrepreneurial initiative;
- PonmagalVandhal (2020) - When Legal Agency Meets Justice and Resistance;
- SaaniKayidham (2022)-trauma, revenge, and survival of a female.
- NatchathiramNagargiradhu (2022): A movie dealing with sexual autonomy and political identity;
- Good Night (2023) - capturing emotional realism within the domestic setting;
- Parking 2023-billed as a look into work-life balance, relational pressure, and unspoken burdens.
- Some optional texts were Siren (2024), JigarthandaDoubleX (2023), and select female-led OTT series for supplementary thematic comparison.
- This sample size of 6–10 films allowed for sufficient depth in comparative thematic exploration, while maintaining analytical feasibility.

#### Coding Categories

This analysis used a structured coding matrix, derived from previous frameworks in feminist film theory, narrative analysis, and media representation studies (Smith, 1995; Mulvey, 1975). Coding categories included:

- Story Role: hero, co-lead protagonist, catalyst, oppressed or sidelined character.
- Agency Indicators: decision-making, goal pursuit, independence, resistance, conflict resolution.
- Representation Type: domestic roles, professional roles, socio-political identities, emotional/relational roles.
- Emotional Realism: Truthful representation of trauma, loss, mental health, day-to-day difficulties, and relationships.
- Dialogues / Screen Time / Autonomy Cues: verbal assertiveness, narrative centrality, and symbolic gestures of agency.
- Each film was analyzed scene-by-scene to allocate codes consistently across the dataset.

#### Data Collection Methods

##### Data collection involved several qualitative methods:

Scene-level coding involves identifying key moments that reflect either agency or emotional complexity.

- Dialogue analysis - statements that denote character autonomy, self-expression, or relational dynamics.
- Character arc mapping involves tracing transformations, motivations, obstacles, and resolutions across the story.
- Visual and symbolic analysis: this involves looking into cinematography, costume, setting, body language, and framing to interpret implicit gendered meanings.
- These multilayered methods granted a holistic understanding of the representational patterns, both explicit and implicit.

#### Data Analysis

##### Data analysis proceeded through several stages:

- Initial coding of scenes and characters, according to the predefined categories.
- Thematic clustering: codes were grouped into broader themes of, for example, autonomy, vulnerability, relational tension, or socio-political struggle, using Braun and Clarke's 2006 approach.
- Cross-comparison among films highlighting common motifs and differences in portraying female agency.
- Pattern recognition includes highlighting narrative trends, symbolic consistencies, and deviations throughout the films. Interpretive analysis: Findings were contextualised by using feminist film theory, male-gaze theory, intersectionality, and cognitive film theory. The analytical process thus allowed representations to be interpreted not only descriptively but also theoretically, embedding insights within established academic frameworks.

**Table 1. Overview of Selected Films and Key Themes (2020–2024)**

Film Title	Year	Female Lead / Key Character	Core Theme to Related Agency	Emotional Realism Elements
<i>SooraraiPottru</i>	2020	Bommi	Entrepreneurial autonomy, economic decision-making	Ambition–marriage conflict, resilience

<i>PonmagalVandhal</i>	2020	Venba	Legal agency, pursuit of justice	Trauma narrative, courtroom confrontation
<i>SaaniKaayidham</i>	2022	Ponni	Revenge-driven agency, reclaiming power	Grief, violence trauma, psychological rupture
<i>NatchathiramNagargiradhu</i>	2022	Rene	Sexual autonomy, political identity	Identity struggle, social stigma
<i>Good Night</i>	2023	Anu	Emotional labour, relational balance	Anxiety, self-worth, family tension
<i>Parking</i>	2023	Aadhira	Domestic planning, emotional negotiation	Stress, communication breakdown
<i>Siren</i>	2024	Nandhini	Investigative strength, moral courage	Grief, caregiving burden
<i>JigarthandaDoubleX</i>	2023	Mallika	Social resistance, symbolic agency	Loss, aspiration conflict

**Table 2. Coding Categories and Operational Definitions**

Category	Operational Definition	Indicators Used
Narrative Role	Degree of centrality to plot progression	Protagonist, co-lead, catalyst, sidelined
Agency Indicators	Action capacity and decision-making power	Choices, resistance, independence, conflict-solving
Representation Type	Social domain in which female character acts	Domestic, professional, socio-political, emotional
Emotional Realism	Accuracy of psychological depth and lived experience	Trauma portrayal, mental health cues, relational authenticity
Autonomy Cues	Verbal/non-verbal markers of independence	Assertive dialogue, symbolic gestures, screen time

**Table 3. Narrative Role Distribution across Films**

Film	Protagonist	Co-Lead	Catalyst	Sidelined
SooraraiPottru	(Secondary central protagonist)	–	–	–
PonmagalVandhal	(Main protagonist)	–	–	–
SaaniKaayidham	(Main protagonist)	–	–	–
NatchathiramNagargiradhu	–	–	–	–
Good Night	–	(Co-lead with male protagonist)	–	–
Parking	–	–	–	–
Siren	–	–	–	–

**Table 4. Agency Indicators Identified (Cross-Film Comparison)**

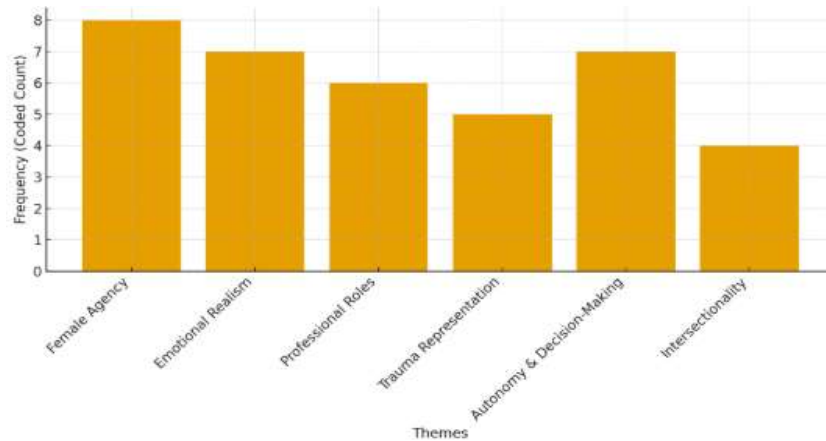
Film	Decision-Making	Independence	Resistance	Conflict Resolution Role
SooraraiPottru	High	High	Medium	Medium
PonmagalVandhal	High	High	High	High
SaaniKaayidham	Medium	High	Very High	High
NatchathiramNagargiradhu	High	High	High	Medium
Good Night	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium
Parking	Medium	Medium	Low	Low–Medium
Siren	High	Medium	Medium	High

**Table 5. Emotional Realism Scores**

Film	Trauma Accuracy	Mental Health Depth	Relational Complexity	Overall ER Rating
SooraiPottru	Medium	Medium	High	High
PonmagalVandhal	High	Medium	Medium	High
SaaniKaayidham	Very High	Medium	Medium	Very High
NatchathiramNagargiradhu	Medium	Medium	High	High
Good Night	Low	High	Very High	High
Parking	Low	Medium	High	Medium
Siren	High	Medium	Medium	High

**Table 6. Key Patterns and Deviations Identified**

Pattern / Theme	Description	Films Showing Pattern
Strong female-led narratives	Women drive plot progression	PonmagalVandhal, SaaniKaayidham, NatchathiramNagargiradhu
Socio-political identity as agency	Characters fight social structures	NatchathiramNagargiradhu, Siren
Emotional labour as central theme	Domestic stress, guilt, care work	Good Night, Parking
Trauma-driven agency	Revenge, justice, survival	SaaniKaayidham, PonmagalVandhal
Professional autonomy	Entrepreneurship, legal power	SooraiPottru, PonmagalVandhal
Limited agency due to domestic framing	Female influence restricted	Parking, some scenes in Good Night

**Figure 1. Thematic Frequency across Selected Tamil Films (2020–2024)**

### Procedure

The research will follow a multi-stage qualitative research procedure to systematically analyze the representation, agency, and emotional realism of women characters in Tamil cinema from 2020 to 2024. A purposive sampling strategy will first be used to identify 6–10 films that feature women as central or co-central protagonists. Full screening of selected films, with repeated viewing of key sequences involving decision-making, conflicts, emotional arcs, and character development, will be done. Scene-by-scene notes will be prepared, followed by documentation of all relevant instances of dialogue, plot progression, visual framing, and symbolic motifs.

Next, a coding sheet was developed based on predefined thematic categories, which included narrative role, agency indicators, representation type, emotional realism, and intersectional identity cues. Each film was coded independently using these categories to ensure that character actions, narrative function, and emotional portrayals were captured with consistency. Following this, the data were organised into thematic clusters to identify patterns, similarities, and deviations across films. Further, comparative analysis was done to see how portrayals differed across genres, platforms (OTT versus theatrical), and social contexts depicted in the narratives.

The findings were then interpreted through the use of feminist film theory, intersectionality, and affective film studies as analytical frameworks. This use of theoretical triangulation ensured that both the dimensions of narrative structure and socio-cultural meaning were catered for during the interpretation of results.

### Results / Findings

This section synthesizes coded data from the selected Tamil films of 2020-2024 into systematic thematic patterns that emerged with regard to female agency, representation, and emotional realism. The findings are organized around emerging narrative trends, representation patterns, agency indicators, emotional realism, and OTT-specific developments.

### Narrative Trends

Specific analysis of the selected films revealed a strong narrative change toward profession-oriented female protagonists. Characters like Bommi in *Sooraraipottru* (2020) and Venba in *PonmagalVandhal* (2020) functioned actively to promote plot development by their occupational and ethical devotion. Unlike the widespread domestic roles of pre-2010, films from 2020 onwards displayed multi-layered career identities—lawyer, entrepreneur, activist, writer, or political performer.

In the sample, female characters increasingly assumed central narrative functions, driving often the core conflict and resolution rather than serving as emotional support for male protagonists. This was especially evident in *SaaniKaayidham* and *NatchathiramNagargiradhu*, where the narrative was anchored around the woman's perspective, trauma, and social position. At the same time, some films did retain a dual-protagonist structure, integrating the traditional relational narrative with contemporary subjectivities, as seen in *Parking* and *Good Night*.

### Representation Patterns

The content analysis unveiled a greater predominance of emotionally layered portrayals, moving away from idealised depictions of femininity. Characters were increasingly shown to navigate layered vulnerabilities—economic, psychological, caste-based, and relational. Despite this progress, a few traditional tropes persisted, especially in mainstream commercial cinema, where women occasionally returned to caregiving or sacrificial roles during big emotional turning points.

Class and caste intersectionality appeared more prominently in films like *SaaniKaayidham*, in which systemic violence formed the arc of the protagonist. Even the urban–rural divide made a difference in representation: OTT films normally presented urban, educated women with greater freedom of expression, while theatrical releases often retained conservative familial expectations.

### Representation of Agency

Women protagonists across the dataset proved to be strong decision-makers, especially when the films foregrounded some legal, social, or moral struggles. Examples are Venba's courtroom resistance in *PonmagalVandhal* and Rene's assertion of ideological autonomy in *NatchathiramNagargiradhu*. Most of the protagonists resisted patriarchal values through active resistance by way of career choices, boundaries in romance, and refusal of imposed gender roles.

Nevertheless, the analysis also discussed certain structural limitations to agency. Various narratives in the study reflected how family pressure, caste hierarchy, or patriarchy at the workplace circumscribed female choices. In a few commercial films, empowerment remained performative, deployed more for box office appeal than as a serious narrative investment.

### Emotional Realism

A significant discovery was the increased psychological precision with which trauma, stress, and healing were depicted. While films like *SaaniKaayidham* portrayed intergenerational trauma as visually gut-wrenching, *Good Night* captured the banality of emotional exhaustion and the miscommunications that occur within relationships. Relational dynamics played out realistically in many of the films—engagements with intimacy, conflict resolution, and unresolved emotional baggage.

Mental health themes emerged through subtle but consistent delineation: anxiety in *Parking*, workplace stress in *Sooraraipottru*, and social alienation in *NatchathiramNagargiradhu*. Unlike the earlier cinema, these portrayals avoided melodrama; instead, they underlined lived experiences and affective detail.

### Trends across OTT Platforms

There was more narrative experimentation with OTT-released films and series, especially in themes of sexuality, consent, identity, and political expression. Women-led narratives on OTT tended to embrace psychological realism, long-form character development, and socially bold themes that theatrical cinema often avoided due to censorship and market pressures. These narratives also provided a space for non-linear storytelling, complex female friendships, queer identities, and multi-generational emotional arcs—all largely missing in mainstream Tamil cinema.

## Discussion

### Comparison with Pre-2020 Tamil Cinema

Yet these findings show a marked contrast to the representational tropes that defined the earlier decades of Tamil cinema. Conventionally, women's figures were idealised as nurturing or sacrificial, or even decorative, and thus often excluded from furthering the story narrative or plot tension. Since 2010, but much more pronouncedly after 2020, these changes have ensured that women play expanded, key narrative roles as leaders in driving plot and conflict resolution. This is supportive of broader cinema-wide shifts throughout India, with a greater trend toward woman-centered storytelling emerging throughout.

The earlier tropes of comic objectification, feigned innocence, and sexualisation that were more characteristic of the 1990s and early 2000s have markedly declined in the films under analysis. Instead, female characters show professionalism, emotional depth, and socio-political awareness, pointing to a shift away from victimhood narratives toward critical resilience (Chakravarthy, 2020).

### Contradictions and Limitations in Representation

Despite progressive shifts, there are still contradictions. A number of mainstream films use token feminism whereby women's empowerment is depicted superficially without actually restructuring the Patriarchal narrative frameworks. This illustrates Mulvey's (1975) male gaze whereby women may be apparently central but remain framed through masculine desire or moral expectation.

Similarly, patriarchal norms continue to inform emotional arcs in, especially commercial cinema, where women frequently return to tropes of self-sacrifice, familial duty, or relational compromise. Such persistence thus indicates that even as representational models may have changed, structural cinematic patriarchy is alive and well, circumscribing the scope of genuine female autonomy (Nair, 2021).

### Theoretical Interpretation

#### Feminist Film Theory

This rise in women-driven narratives shows a partial shift in filmmaking perspective away from the male gaze. However, the findings also illustrate that at times, cinematic language—such as camera positioning, framing, and romantic subplots—continues to centre patriarchal perspectives, a finding that supports feminist critiques claiming representation does not equal agency.

#### Intersectionality

Intersectional patterns were strikingly in evidence, particularly in those films dealing with caste oppression, economic marginalization, and social vulnerability. This corroborates the argument of Crenshaw (1991) that identities are constituted by intersecting social hierarchies. Films such as *SaaniKaayidham* demonstrate vividly how gendered violence intersects with caste-based trauma.

### Emotional Realism & Affective Film Studies

This study further indicates emotional realism in the way characters show psychological intricacy, relational conflict, and genuine vulnerability. This confirms cognitive and affective film theories, which indicate that narratives emotionally rooted in character allow for greater audience empathy (Plantinga, 2009; Smith, 2017). The recent development of trauma, healing, and mental health in Tamil cinema signals a broader cultural pivot toward lived emotional experience.

### Socio-Cultural Implications

The changes in representation seen within 2020–2024 reflect a broader cultural rethinking of Tamil womanhood. Given that cinema is both a mirror and a producer of meaning in society, contemporary images of independent, career-oriented, emotionally expressive women hold real potential for reshaping public perception about the role of women. Especially, OTT platforms have expanded the discursive space in which the identities of Tamil women are explored—foregrounding sexuality, consent, class conflict, and political subjectivity. These narratives are contributing to cinema as a site for reimagination that challenges conventional boundaries and presents more inclusive forms of Tamil femininity.

## Conclusion

This study explores the evolving representation of women in Tamil cinema between 2020 and 2024 through a qualitative content analysis of selected films. The findings indicate that female characterization, visualization, and integration into narrative structures reflect a marked alteration. Women are increasingly cast in the roles of protagonists, as well as playing other key roles, with increased decision-making powers, and reflecting emotional intricacies. These portrayals mark a strong departure from historical trends evident in Tamil cinema, where women were often relegated to secondary or supporting roles, their positioning defined by domesticity, sacrifice, or ideal femininity.

One of the major findings of this research is the increasing visibility of occupation-based, socially engaged, and psychologically rich female characters. Films like *PonmagalVandhal*, *SooraiPottru*, *SaaniKaayidham*,

and NatchathiramNagargiradhu signal a movement toward layered narratives that foreground women's autonomy, trauma, professional aspirations, and political consciousness. Emotional realism emerged as another trend: contemporary films framed mental health struggles, relational conflicts, caste-based violence, and everyday stress through an aesthetic of realism rather than melodrama. The OTT platforms expanded the cinematic possibilities even further, allowing for bolder explorations of gender, identity, and intersectionality. The new forms of female agency that this period witnesses thus carry wider ramifications for the cultural and industrial trajectory of Tamil cinema. As representation moves toward empowered and multidimensional portrayals, Tamil cinema contributes to reshaping the public discourse on womanhood, autonomy, and socio-political participation. This work thus complements feminist film scholarship by underlining how contemporary Tamil cinema negotiates the tension between progressive gender narratives and persistent patriarchal story conventions.

However, the study has its limitations. The sample was confined to a select set of films between 2020-2024 and did not cover audience reception studies or box office dynamics. Some mainstream films continue to reflect tokenism or partial compliance with patriarchal framing, which suggests that representational change is uneven across genres and platforms. Further, the analysis was restricted to Tamil cinema only; there are no comparative insights from the parallel industries. Future research may delve into comparative studies across Malayalam and Telugu cinema, which have also undergone changes in women-centric narratives. Other questions may involve looking at the differences between OTT and theatrical releases, analyzing queer and non-binary representation, or even conducting audience-based studies to understand how these emerging gender narratives are viewed by viewers. A longitudinal study beyond 2024 would clarify whether the present trend indicates sustained change or a transition in Tamil cinema.

### References

1. Arun, A. (2017). *Cinematic realism and the Indian New Wave*. Springer.
2. Baskaran, S. T. (2013). *The eye of the serpent: An introduction to Tamil cinema*. Westland.
3. Chakravarthy, K. (2020). *Narratives of Indian cinema*. Routledge.
4. Dhananjayan, G. (2022). *The art and craft of South Indian cinema*. Virgo Publications.
5. Hardgrave, R. L. (2008). *Essays on Indian cinema*. Oxford University Press.
6. Pandian, M. S. S. (2015). *Tamil cultural modernity and the politics of representation*. Oxford University Press.
7. Rajadhyaksha, A., & Willemsen, P. (2016). *Encyclopedia of Indian cinema* (Rev. ed.). Routledge.
8. Srinivas, S. V. (2019). *Politics as performance: A social history of the Telugu cinema*. Permanent Black.
9. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
10. Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
11. hooks, b. (2000). *Feminist theory: From margin to center* (2nd ed.). South End Press.
12. Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18.
13. Nussbaum, M. (2001). *Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
14. Young, I. M. (2005). *On female body experience*. Oxford University Press.
15. Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.
16. Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2016). *Film art: An introduction* (11th ed.). McGraw-Hill.
17. Plantinga, C. (2009). *Moving viewers: American film and the spectator's experience*. University of California Press.
18. Smith, M. (2017). *Film, art, and the viewer: Affective approaches to cinema*. Oxford University Press.
19. Grodal, T. (2009). *Emotions, cognition, and cinema*. Oxford University Press.
20. Verstraten, P. (2009). *Film narratology*. University of Toronto Press.
21. Brundha, S. (2021). Women's agency in contemporary South Indian cinema: A thematic review. *Journal of Media & Culture Studies*, 12(2), 55–72.
22. Menon, N. (2021). Gender, agency and spectatorship in contemporary Indian cinema. *Journal of Media Studies*, 15(2), 45–60.
23. Pillai, M. S. (2020). Reimagining womanhood in Malayalam and Tamil films. *South Asian Review*, 41(3), 201–218.
24. Srinivasan, R. (2022). Representing the marginalized: Caste and gender intersections in Tamil OTT content. *Indian Journal of Screen Studies*, 8(1), 33–49.
25. Athique, A. (2020). *Digital transactions in Asia: The rise of OTT platforms*. Palgrave Macmillan.
26. Chakraborty, S. (2021). Streaming identities: Gender, youth, and self-representation on Indian OTT platforms. *Media International Australia*, 179(1), 125–139.
27. Joshi, H. (2022). The changing dynamics of Indian streaming culture: Representation, regulation, and reception. *Journal of Digital Humanities*, 10(4), 80–98.
28. Rajan, D. (2023). Women in web series: Narrative freedom and the politics of representation. *Asian Cinema*, 34(1), 56–70.