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ranj.krishnakumar@gmail.com

The secondary role played by women in Tamil films – both on and off screen – has been widely discussed in journalistic circles and academia. Nair's assertion that in Indian films 'women exist only in relation to the men, as their mothers, their wives, and especially their lovers' is true of Tamil film narratives too (Jain and Rai 2002: 52). This portrayal of women has led to her social and cultural identity relying heavily, if not solely, on her being able to marry the right man. Moreover, the highly gendered Indian nationalism, relegating women to the 'inner sphere' and expecting them to remain pure (Chatterjee 1993), vests the responsibility of upholding culture in women, often subjecting them to standards higher than those set for men, the 'outer sphere'. Weidman (2005: 754) adds that not only is inner sphere versus outer sphere a matter of men versus women but 'as a difference between kinds of women: the respectable middle-class "family woman" and the lower class "prostitute"', establishing idealised notions of womanhood that are manifested in tangible ways such as acceptable behaviour, appropriate language and appreciable clothing. In this paper, I explore the role of clothing in cinema in establishing such an identity for a Tamil woman over the years. With specific emphasis on the role of a woman as a spouse, I aim to investigate how clothing (jewellery and makeup) contributes to the marriage-worthiness of a Tamil woman in films over the century.

Introduction

The representation and participation of women in cinema ever since its beginning in the early 20th century has been shallow to say the least. In a study about the ‘fictional construct’ that is a woman in Indian cinema, Mathur (2002: 68) goes so far as to say ‘Indian cinema’s failure to emphasise the significance of women’s participation in the general scheme of human advancement and progress is its singularly weak point’. Categorising female roles in Indian cinema, she argues that women continue to be portrayed as either damsels in distress, demented feminists or glamorous dolls whose sole ambition is to attract male attention.

Implicit in this sort of portrayal of women as mere properties in a male oriented narrative is women having ‘no sphere of their own, independent identity, no living space’ (Mathur, 2002: 66). Thus, her relation to a man becomes pivotal to a woman’s identity: that of a mother, wife or love interest, making marriage and family central to her existence.

While Mathur makes her observations primarily based on Hindi films, I believe the framework is useful for Tamil cinema too. Tamil film narratives also assume a masculine orientation, relegating women to roles of mothers, wives and love interests. Even in pursuit of a suitable husband, as Nakassis and Dean (2007: 79) point out, a ‘women’s public expression of desire is considered transgressive in “Tamil culture” may be gleaned from

ancient literature, colonial reform movements, contemporary mass media, proverbs, and everyday conversation.’

Therefore, even though her ultimate ambition is seen as to be married and have children, any voluntary efforts by her to achieve it is also restricted in the name of social mores. Thus, within filmic narratives, women are left with no choice but to showcase themselves as ‘marriageable’, thereby attracting the right man to desire her. It is important here to distinguish between marriageable and desirable, as in most cases, the two ideas could mean the opposite of each other.

In this paper, I explore the ‘marriage-worthiness’ of a woman – that of being desirable only to the husband, suitable for domestic and marital relationship, respectful of (extended) family, and capable of prospective motherhood. The intention of this paper is to explore how the identity came about and to critique this kind of identity that is entirely around a woman’s dependence on a man. I do not look for positive or negative images of female identity for the caution of adding a ‘truth value’¹ to such imagery, which is fa

¹ Diane Waldman (1978), raising the question of looking at images as positive and negative adding truth-value to them, argues that on the one hand ‘positive’ may mean ‘concerned with real’ and on the other it also means ‘affirmative’. Therefore ascribing positive characteristics to certain depiction may be understood as accepting them as reality or true, which may turn out to be counter productive in dealing with sexism.

from my intention. In the next section entitled 'The Marriageable Tamil Woman', I trace her history across time to establish her importance and position within film narratives. In the section thereafter, I delineate the three characteristics that constitute the marriageable Tamil woman's identity, creating a framework for my final analysis that follows, regarding the role of clothing (jewellery and make up) in establishing that identity.

The Marriageable Tamil Woman

1930-1950 – Historical/Mythological Films Period

The rise of cinema as a popular entertainment medium over stage dramas attracted drama company actors and performers to make the move. This mass exodus came to cinema with the mythological or historical themes that were popular on stage. So much so that several early films were merely recorded stage plays on videotape like *Gavalarishi* (1932) (Baskaran 2009: 30). Stories for a majority of the films in this era, the one I classify as the historical/mythological films period came from tales of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Sathyavan-Savithri, Kovalan-Kannagi, Sathya Haricchandran, and so on.

Therefore, the female protagonists in films of the 1940s and 1950s, drawing entirely from the mythological stories being depicted on screen, could be squarely fit into the Kannagi-Vasugi paradigm. The unrelenting devotion of

Kannagi to her (unfaithful) husband, the unquestioning subservience of Vasugi, the modesty of Savithri and the auspiciousness of a marital relationship crystallised the Kannagi-Vasugi archetype as the Tamil woman's identity. This also perpetuated the dependence of a woman's identity on her relationship with a man – her suitability as a marriageable single woman or her compatibility as a wife. Even Avvayar's identity as a widowed devotee of Lord Murugan is derived from her rejection of marriage and acceptance of sainthood.

Drawing simply from mythology, the single dimensional identity of a Tamil woman did not receive much questioning from the writers of this time. In this era, almost without exceptions, being a subservient, unquestioning wife was the most important, if not only, purpose in a Tamil woman's life.

1950-1975 – Dravidian Films Period

The post-independence social revolution sparked by the Dravidian movement introduced themes of social uplift into the films of the time, including fervent political propaganda and Dravidian rhetoric. C.N. Annadurai pioneered the Dravidian movement on screen with his films *Nalla Thambi* (1948) (Hardgrave, Jr. 2008, 62) and the more popular *Velaikari* (1949). Immediately after, M. Karunanidhi, another founding member of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), one of the first Dravidian political parties, made a

grand entry into films with *Parasakthi* (1952). Pointing fingers at the inherent hypocrisies of Tamil society, caste-based inequalities, degradation of the glorious Tamil culture and the immediate need for its revival, *Parasakthi* brought the DMK's rhetoric to the mainstream.

About the same time, M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) rose as the mass hero and the ideal Tamil man. As Pillai (2012: 82) notes, 'MGR's persona was carefully constructed from the 1950s by a team of writers, directors, and producers...with the staple of the melodrama of indigenous folklore or the mythos of an Oedipal son who could balance the excessive *attachment toward his mother with the taming of the shrew(s) and freeing the downtrodden.*' (Emphasis mine)

The dominant narrative of this era revolved around the "reaffirmation of the phallus not only as a 'privileged signifier' but also as a 'signifier of privilege' its status being the 'marker of complex of psychic, social, political and economic differences'", retaining the secondary position for the Tamil woman, often merely that of the hero's love interest (Silverman in Kaali 2000: 170). Examples are available in films such as *Vivasaayee* (1967), *Pattikkaada Pattanama* (1972) and *Raman Ettanai Ramanadi* (1970).

Though the films of this era were dominated by themes of liberation, social justice and regaining the Tamil pride, the female identity was one of subservience and insignificance

against the larger worldly pursuits that defined the Tamil man. Respect for a Tamil woman was earned by being 'marriageable' – by staying out of the man's way, being supportive of his noble pursuits and uncomplainingly bearing his children.

Though a majority of the films during this period were made by filmmakers belonging to Dravidian political parties such as the DMK, Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK) and affiliate political inclinations, it would be gravely erroneous to leave out one of the most disruptive directors of the time – K Balachander (KB). He wrote some highly successful films of the time, writing female characters that aimed to break traditional boundaries.

While for the time, KB's films caused great uproar by questioning the status quo; in retrospect I would classify them within the Dravidian themes too. Upholding female subservience as ideal, reconciling deviation in a woman's purity through death or marriage to an inadequate man, imposing employment on a woman only when there is a male lack in providing for the family are a few themes that recurred in KB's films during that period, which I consider very close to the Dravidian narrative. Films such as *Iru Kodugal* (1969) and *Aval Oru Thodarkadhai* (1974), though revolved around strong female characters, resort to the ideas of subservience and familial

duties as a resolution of the conflict in the story.

In this era, though a woman on screen wasn't Kannagi or Vasugi as before, most female characters could be fit squarely into that archetype, with little scope for deviation, if any. Marriage-worthiness, subservience, support for the man's ambitions, dedication to familial duties continued to be the role of a woman in film narratives.

1976-1980 – Neo-nativity Films Period

In his analysis of the corpus of films from 1976 to 1980, Sundar Kaali explores the evolution of Tamil 'nativity'² and the reaffirmation of the phallus. He argues that neo-nativity films displaced the hero as the 'narrational agency' with that of the village as a 'collective actant'. While in Dravidian films, the hero single-handedly upheld Tamil identity by eliminating or reconciling any deviations, in the neo-nativity genre, the village or the environment contributed to restoring the equilibrium. The village is seen as a bound entity with a

collective identity and the power to push the narrative forward.

Drawing from his argument that, 'there is a significant displacement of actantial energy/agency from the figure of the hero to that of the village collective' (Kaali 2000: 176), my submission is that the identity of a marriageable Tamil woman remains, only the phallic reaffirmation is conducted by the collective actant – the village. In several cases, though deviation from the ideal Tamil woman mould was permitted through the course of the film, it invariably caused the disequilibrium, which is reconciled only through marriage to a seemingly inadequate man or death. The suicide of the deviant wife in *Rosaappoo Ravikkaikkaari* (1979) and marriage to the socially inadequate Sappaani in *16 Vayathinile* (1977) are exemplary of this phenomenon.

Though most distinctive films of this era fall under the neo-nativity genre, KB's films continued to be successful, making him one of the few prominent directors of the past who survived the downfall of the studio system in the late 70s. His films, while exploring issues of women and having a prominent place for them in the story, continued to portray themes of female subservience, honour, abstinence of deviation from social mores (or reconciliation through punishment). For instance, in *Nizhal Nijamaagirathu* (1978), though the female protagonist is portrayed to be a strong, confident and self-sustaining woman with

² Benegal (in Velayutham 2008: 179) argues that Tamil cinema uses certain characteristics that are specific to the region as a way to anchor Tamil identity; these characteristics come to be understood as 'nativity' in south Indian film circles. Nativity films, often hailed as those with *mann vaasanai* (scent of the soil) – where the soil itself represents the purity of the rural as against the 'norms of urban civility' – played a central role in defining the Tamil identity of the time (Pandian 2008: 132). Also see Sundar Kalli (2000) for detailed analysis of nativity films.

independent interests, through the course of the film she comes to be understood as a haughty, man-hater in denial who gets tamed by the male protagonist, in places through physical force even, in the end giving up her past and taking over life as a subservient wife.

This short period of five years, at the downfall of the studio system in Madras and the domination of MGR and Sivaji, witnessed a significant change in film language and technique. Outdoor location, less than ideal characters and gray areas dominated this era promising the scope for drastically rewriting film traditions. However, perhaps owing to the few female writers and creators, the roles of women continued to reflect long-imbibed ‘Tamil culture’.

1981-1990 – Urbanisation Films Period

The 1980s rearranged Tamil cinema around the next generation of superstars. Rajnikanth with the release of *Billa* (1980) and Kamal Hassan with *Sakalakalavallavan* (1982) established themselves as the two powerhouses of popular Tamil cinema (Chakravarthy 1996: 290). The rising industrialisation and the shift away from agriculture created the sense of an identity crisis within the Tamil cultural milieu. Films of this era reflected this confusion.

While the reaffirmation of the phallus, a la the Dravidian films, returned in *Sakalakalavallavan*, a similar hero in *Raja Chinna Roja* (1989) is seen to be more

accommodating of the urban life albeit disapproving in several occasions. Also distinctive of this era is the successful filmography of two popular directors – KB and Visu. KB had by now shifted to dealing with the political, cultural and social impact of urbanisation on the Tamil community.

Varumaiyin Niram Sigappu (1980), *Manathil Urudhi Vendum* (1987) and *Unnal Mudiyaum Thambi* (1988) were all stories of (un)employed men and women in post-industrial Tamilnadu. Visu, on the other hand, directed family dramas set within a rapidly urbanising Tamil state – *Samsaram Adhu Minsaaram* (1986), *Thirumadhi Oru Vegumadhi* (1987), *Penmani Aval Kanmani* (1988) are exemplary.

The individual’s reconciliation of the rurality-centred Tamil identity with urbanisation was recurrent in films of this period; bringing about the redefining of ‘nativity’ to include the shift to an urban livelihood. Several films traced the relocation of the hero to the urban milieu to take up a non-agricultural job (albeit reluctantly) and make peace with the urban while still attributing a nostalgic romanticised status to his rural background.

This reconciliation of rurality with urbanity led to a forceful reinforcement of the identity of the woman as secondary to that of the man, restricting her to the home or in a troubled employment which she takes up only to make up for the male lack in her family. While films

of this era did portray women as liberated – employed, independent and outspoken – the negative consequences of this liberation were explored in great detail, bringing a woman's right place back to home.

In the 1987 film *Manadhil Urudhi Vendum*, Nandini, the female protagonist chooses the 'service' of being a nurse (as opposed to any other self-serving career) when faced with a bad marriage; Jyothi of *Pudhu Pudhu Arthangal* (1989) returns to her abusive husband when he reaches out to her after being physically disabled in an accident.

1990 onwards – Neo-nationalistic Films Period

With the arrival of the 1990s, the anti-Hindi, anti-national and anti-urban rhetoric within Tamil cinema witnessed a decline. Filmmakers such as Kamal Hassan, Mani Ratnam and Shankar invested their urban sensitivities into their films, shifting the stage of the activity to the cities. 'The ushering in of liberalisation in the Indian political economy under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi and the emergence of Mani Ratnam as a filmmaker in the mid-1980s are eerily simultaneous' (Hariharan 2013). Since his first hit film, *Mouna Ragam* (1986), Mani Ratnam has subverted two main aspects of Tamil filmic storytelling – the demonization of the urban and alienation of the non-Tamil. By placing his characters across the country and giving them an urban identity,

Mani Ratnam normalised the urban Tamil while also smoothly driving the movement towards the Tamil nation's filmic reconciliation with the Indian nation, which was until then problematic, owing to the troubled history of the Tamil nation's relationship with the Indian nation.

This is the seminal period in Tamil film history that I would like to call neo-nationalistic films period. I call it neo-nationalistic so as not to confuse with the pre-independence films with nationalistic fervour. The films of this era also progressively featured themes of globalisation – NRIs returning to India, characters working in foreign companies and professions such as software engineering were becoming commonplace.

However, redefining the Tamil woman's identity is sparse in this era too. Female characters written during this time also fulfilled the simple role of being the right woman to marry. Moreover, the Satyavaan-Savithri archetype in *Roja* (1992), the Vasugi of *Gentleman* (1993) and the native Tamil woman from *Sivaji* (2007) perpetuated the theory that has been crystallised in Tamil minds historically.

Identity of a Marriageable Tamil woman

George A. Huaco (in Bhaskaran 1981: 97) argues that 'under given socio historical pre-conditions, a stylistically unified wave of film

art charged with a certain political ideology appears and lasts as long as the pre-conditions endure'. Basing mine on that argument, I've classified the history of Tamil cinema into smaller waves to establish marriage-worthiness as one of the defining attributes of a woman's existence in filmic narratives. Being a suitable spouse was the most important, if not the only, pursuit for a woman. In this section, I aim to delineate the descriptive attributes making up the identity of a marriageable woman as inclusive of but not limited to:

Chastity

Modesty

Nativity

Chastity

Chastity or '*karpu*' means more than sexual fidelity; it means following the husband through thick and thin, however weak or cruel he may turn out to be. It means above all the power of patience (*porumai*) and endurance (*tankum sakti*)' (Egnor in Wadley 1980:15). It is often used as a 'device to ensure that the Tamil film *kata~na~yaki*...remains entrapped within cultural notions of womanhood constructed by the patriarchal order in Tamil society' (Chinnaiah 2008: 29).

Throughout the history of Tamil cinema, one can observe the emphasis on virginity and chastity as a prerequisite for a woman to be married. A marriageable Tamil woman is

expected to uphold her purity till the wedding, seek to support the man in his endeavours and entertain while he is not busy with his noble pursuits.

Films following the Kannagi-Vasugi paradigm have placed exacting importance on the chastity of a woman. Not only was a chaste woman respectable and marriageable, a *pattini* (chaste Tamil wife) gained power through undeterred devotion and subservience to the husband. A Tamil wife's power to bring her husband back from the dead like Saavithri or burn the city that unjustly killed her husband like Kannagi was a direct result of her chastity.

Pointing to the irony of *karpu* in Dravidian films, Lakshmi (2008: 16) observes 'The Tamil woman of these films spoke alliterative dialogues; called her lover by his name; sang songs recreating the *kalavuneri*³, but was constantly in danger of losing her *karpu*; had to deal with wayward husbands and wait for their return; and bring up her sons and daughters preparing them for battles and marriage respectively'.

The neo-nativity films of the 70s showed no interest in redefining the role of chastity as the definitive of a Tamil woman's identity. Though it may seem as if the chastity of a marriageable Tamil woman was given the lenience of compromise, sexual desire in itself continued

³ *Kalavuneri*: "Period of courting in Tamil literature is referred to as the code of morals where stealth is in practice" (Lakshmi 1990: 78)

to cause disruption in the narrative, therefore establishing any deviation from a chaste existence as troublesome. *16 Vayathinile* (1977), the story of a young unmarried girl who disrupts peace by having a sexual relationship with an outsider, *Ponnu Oorukku Puthusu* (1979) of an outsider who disturbs the guarded village by marrying the rustic hero and settling down there, *Kallukkul Iram* (1980) of the trouble caused by desires of two women, *Rosappu Ravikkaikaari* (1979) and *Poottaadha Poottukkal* (1980) of the modernity of the female protagonist and her journey. While a few of these deviant women found reconciliation to their 'despicable act of desire' by marrying an inadequate man as a compromise, a few others found it in death (more often suicide than murder, also establishing desire as something to regret). Though deviation from the chaste Tamil woman status was allowed as part of the narrative, the reconciliation for the disturbance caused by such deviation was often treated as a punishment to be suffered by the women, holding chastity still sacrosanct to peaceful life.

One would expect movies that accepted urbanisation to be more lenient in allowing a woman her sexual freedom. Urbanisation films only brought with them a more fervent reinforcement of chastity as the most important part of a woman's marriage-worthiness. In fact, the reconciliation of Tamil nativity with the inevitable urbanisation was achieved by

reaffirming her purity in spite of the changes in her milieu.

For example, in *Raja Chinna Roja* (1989), the hero is a village *therukkootthaadi* or stage artist who moves to the city with the dream of becoming a film actor. As an intermediate appointment, he agrees to act as his friend's estate manager. The family of the estate owner is rich, urban and progressive. This urbanisation/progressiveness leads the eldest daughter of the household to fall into drug abuse. In one scene, her supplier asks her to undress in order to be sold the pills she is addicted to. The hero enters to fight the villains and save the girl, who thanks him later for saving her *maanam* (honour) and in turn her chastity. What is important here is that the hero's distance from 'rurality' (until recently a very important part of one's identity) grew to be acceptable, a woman's deviation from chastity (even when she is manipulated and forced) is frowned upon.

Chastity is so highly held as a prerequisite for marriage that in *Rhythm* (2000), the story of a widow who seeks to remarry, it is made abundantly clear that her first marriage has not been consummated and the son she is raising is indeed adopted as an implicit explanation for the film's ending in her happy union with her lover.

Modesty

Part of a woman's happy marital life is her ability to live within the means of her husband. Therefore, financial and sexual modesty is seen as important for a woman's marriage-worthiness. Films from the beginning of time have impressed upon living within the means of a husband as an important quality of a good wife. As a corollary, the desire for additional income is seen as undue greed that would bring the downfall of the family entirely.

Stories of wayward husbands and modest wives have been ubiquitous since the cinema of the mythological films period. Kannagi herself allowed her husband to spend their entire fortune (including what she brings into their marriage as dowry) on his other romantic pursuit Madhavi. When he loses everything and returns to Kannagi, she gives him her last piece of jewellery, an anklet, to help him rebuild his life.

The Tamil woman of the Dravidian films era, in part because of the socialistic political climate at the time, was expected to be modest. Modesty – seen in poverty and humility – also includes romantic/sexual modesty, which prohibited her from actively desiring a man. Romantic/sexual desire is seen as a distraction of a man's noble pursuit and therefore the woman is expected to be modest while desiring and clandestine about it until his pursuit is successful. Nakassis and Dean (2007: 79) choose *Anbe Vaa* (1966) to elaborate the idea of 'non-transgressive expression of desire',

however, several films featuring MGR during this period can stand as examples.

The urbanisation era saw similar stories. The 1981 film *Kudumbam Oru Kadambam*, written by Visu and directed by S.P. Muthuraman traces the story of three families that are grappling with employment and family issues against the backdrop of urbanisation. The employment of Kannan's wife, Uma, causes jealousy and rift in the family. In order to restore her husband's faith in her chastity, Uma resigns her job to stay at home and raise their only daughter. Paramasivam, a struggling real-estate agent, gets into trouble for borrowing money from a loan shark and his wife Parvathi is forced to find an employment in order to repay this loan. Srinivasa Raghavan is told by his daughter Mythili that he has no rights as a father since he has never provided for them financially. Angered by this, he finds a job to regain his honour. On the one hand, the male honour is understood in terms of his ability to provide for the family, while on the other, a woman's ability to do so is seen as being disruptive, unchaste and immodest. A woman's job is seen as a burden – Raghavan's wife Lakshmi in fact develops tuberculosis due to her extended exposure to flames from the cooking equipment at her job. The collective moral of the story is that 'modesty' is key to peaceful life and the greed for additional income is doomed to make life miserable.

Several films until very recently reinforce a woman's modesty as key to Tamilness.

Thirumalai (2003) is the story of an arrogant rich woman giving up her bourgeois lifestyle to find happiness in the modest life of a commoner she has fallen in love with.

Nativity

Nativity, predominantly understood as affinity to the native/ rural, has long been seen as necessary for a woman's marriage-worthiness.

Any distance from the native, understood as modernity or progressiveness is seen as unwarranted and unacceptable. To contrast nativity and modernity, I borrow Sundar Kaali's (2000) analysis of the nativity film *Pattikkaada Pattanama* (1972), in which the London-educated modern woman marries a rustic hero; her modernity disturbs the household. Her distance from nativity (i.e. modernity) is seen in various ways: her clothing (which is discussed later in this paper), her tastes (she replaces an ancestral plough, a symbol of fertility, with a cactus plant, a symbol of non-fertility, while redecorating their house) and behaviour (she walks out of the bathroom in a state of undress, consumes alcohol and dances).

Women who incline towards modernity were either deemed not worthy of a marital relationship and therefore rejected, or coerced into the nativity side before being awarded the honourable status of marriage and motherhood.

For instance, in *Velaikari* from the Dravidian films era, the good Tamil woman is seen in stark contrast against the modern bad woman who is rejected, while in *Pattikkaada Pattanama*, the modern heroine is violently tamed and shifted into her nativity mould.

The conflict between the native and the modern was central to narratives in the neo-nativity films era too, albeit in a sophisticated manner. As the village itself assumed an important character in several of these films, conflict between the pure rural and the intrusive modern was often reconciled by destruction of such intrusion; for instance, the couple departing the village in *Poottaadha Poottukkal* (1980) or the heroine's acceptance of the worldly unwise Sappaani (and a rural life with him) in *16 Vayathinile* (1977).

The era of urbanisation films witnessed the most disruptive redefining of nativity. While until the 1980s, the nativity of a Tamil woman was measured through her affinity to 'rurality', the industrialisation and mass shift to urban living required certain adjustments to this definition. While Tamil women were still expected to adhere to the cultural norms of the time, the strict boundaries of 'rurality' were loosened to include the urban too.

The film *Sindhu Bhairavi* (1985) is an interesting lesson in the modernisation of a Tamil woman's identity. Bhairavi, the hero's wife, is the chaste, modest, native Tamil woman and Sindhu is the 'other woman' in the

story. However, Sindhu is not the sexy temptress but the intellectual companion to the hero. Sindhu influences the hero not by going away from the mould of a marriageable Tamil woman, but by strictly adhering to it. She is also chaste, intelligent, well read, and enjoys the elite art of Carnatic music. However, she bridges the gap between the elite Carnatic music and Tamil nativity by urging the hero, a musician, to sing in Tamil. Here, she is inculcating Tamil nativity to elitism. As a result, she is not the hated temptress to be destroyed but a marriageable Tamil woman unfortunately in love with a married man. In fact, on one occasion, Bhairavi even invites Sindhu to marry the hero and live with them, as a stamp of approval of her marriage-worthiness.

While there are several ways in which one can express any of these attributes, in this paper I choose to explore the role of clothing in achieving the same. In the section that follows, I explain why clothing gains a special place in the overt expression of one's identity.

Clothing as a Signifier

Treating women as upholders of tradition, Weidman (2003: 754) notes that 'Idealized notions of womanhood...came to be inscribed on the bodies of women by regulating how they should look and dress'. Costumes, clothing and makeup play a significant role in defining a character for the audience.

Andersson (2011: 103) argues, 'Clothes are a key feature in the construction of cinematic identities and one of the tools filmmakers have for telling a story'.

The clothing of a character is part of the story. Clothing places the character within a fenced milieu 'condemning it to the forced task of representing a social role, position or hierarchy'. As such, clothing can be a device of 'correspondence between surface appearance and social order' (Calefato 2004: 2). A closer examination of a character's choice of clothing reveals the 'state of mind, motivations and how the character wishes to be perceived' (Wyckoff in Andersson 2011: 103). Much of these 'motivations' could be political inclination, social or economic status, caste identity, gender perception, etc.

As the most visible aspect of one's personal expression, clothing plays a non-intrusive yet telling role in establishing one's personality. With repeated attribution of certain meanings to certain type of clothing, cinema helps crystallize identities like no other mass entertainment medium has. In the next section, I will analyse with evidence the impact of different types of clothing on a Tamil woman's identity in cinema.

The Marriageable Tamil Woman and her Tryst with Clothing

Chastity

In their discussion around female desire in Tamil cinema, Nakassis and Dean (2007: 79) observe that chastity plays a central role in a woman's expression of desire, portrayed through '...easily identifiable behavioural repertoires (e.g., demeanour indexicals such as dress)'. One of the important aspects of clothing and jewellery that exhibits her chastity is the *thali*.

Thali is the auspicious thread the groom ties around the bride's neck at their wedding that identifies her as a married woman. Not only is the *thali* expected to ward off men who desire her, it also bestows in her respectability and auspiciousness of being a '*sumangali*' – the wife of a living man – which is lost on losing the husband.

Several films over time found ways to reinstate the position of the *thali* as the symbol of respectability of a Tamil woman, for instance *Thalibaggyam* (1966) and *Thali Kaattha Kaali Amman* (2001). The valorisation of the *thali* is seen in the use of language too – '*thaaliyai kaappaathuvadhu*' (saving the sacred thread), '*thaali picchai*' (granting *thali* in alms), '*thali baagyam*' (the boon of a marital life) etc.

An iconic film by K. Bhagyaraj, *Antha Yezhu Naatkal* (1981) restored the indomitable power and auspiciousness to a Tamil woman's sacred thread in what is now deemed to be one of Tamil cinema's most compelling climax scenes. In the film, Vasanthi marries Dr.

Anand unwillingly while in love with Palakkad Madhavan. Seven days after her wedding, Madhavan offers to take her away on a condition that she must return her *thali* to her husband as a symbol of their marriage having ended. After a long dialogue between the two and repeated close-up shots of the *thali* itself, she refuses Madhavan's offer deciding to stay in her marriage whether or not she wished for it in the first place. Not only the *thali* sacrosanct irrespective of either party's willingness to stay in the marriage, a chaste Tamil woman never removes the *thali* (or ends her marriage) out of free will.

Staying on 'consent' as unnecessary to a marriage, in *Chinna Thambi* (1991), Nandini manipulates the worldly unwise Chinna Thambi to tie three knots of the *thali* around her neck, which he does so without understanding the symbolism of it. In spite of it, the film holds this marriage valid, which is even accepted after much disapproval by Nandini's family.

The modern urban rebellious couple from *Alaipayuthey* (2000) has an interesting encounter with the *thali*. In a scene where the hero Karthik hides the sacred thread that he had asked his newly wed wife Shakti to remove the previous night because it caused disturbance during their intercourse. Startled at having lost it, Shakti looks frantically all over the house asking him to help her find it. He

refuses to help her and teases her for treating 'symbolism' as more important than him. She retorts with, "Yes. It's the *thali* I want". At this juncture, their landlady then walks into the house to find the *thali* hanging from the mirror frame and doubts the validity of the marriage of a woman who removes it. The landlady can be read as a representative of the society, which does not approve of the *thali* being removed, even if the married couple themselves didn't think much of the custom. However, the song *kadhal sadugudu*, which occurs immediately after their wedding and moving into a house of their own, shows Shakti wearing the *thali* prominently over her urban, modern clothing.

The converse of a married woman wearing a *thali* is also its removal for a widowed woman. On the death of her husband, a married woman's chastity is reflected in her rejection of worldly pleasures by not wearing the *thali*, coloured clothing, grand jewellery, or a *pottu* (the dot worn on the forehead of a married woman, often in *kunkumam*). By making herself undesirable as reflected in her looks, she upholds her purity, dedicating her life to the memory of her dead husband and the upbringing of her children, if any.

From *Avvayaar* of the mythological films era, several widowed mothers and grandmothers have shed their hair, clothing and *pottu* as proof of their chastity. In fact, in the film *Chinna Thambi* (1991), the villains aim to

torture an old widow for information by throwing colour on her white sari, applying *kunkumam* on her forehead and jasmine flowers on her hair. When she doesn't budge, they bring a mentally challenged man to tie the *thali* around her neck as if it were the worst insult a chaste widowed woman could suffer. To add to the misery, the villagers who were reluctantly watching this act until then shut their windows and refuse to even look at this injustice meted out to someone. If she still didn't budge, the villain threatens her with '*shanti muhurtham*' (the first sexual intercourse between a couple post marriage, often treated as the woman's respectable loss of virginity). At this point, her son arrives to save her life, before which his first task is to throw away the *thali*, erase the *pottu* and remove the jasmine flowers from her hair, giving her her rightful chaste widow status before fighting the villains off.

The *pudavai* or sari as the ideal attire for a marriageable Tamil woman is central to the understanding of growing up to be marriageable in the Tamil context. Sari or *pavadai-dhavani* (half sari) is often symbolic of a girl attaining puberty. In the film *Mahanadhi* (1994), Krishnaswamy, who is in jail, learns of his daughter Kaveri's attaining puberty by looking at her wear a '*dhavani*', '*pottu*' and 'jasmine flowers'. As the first step to becoming marriageable, several films across

time have represented a young girl's coming of age in her clothing.

A little closer to marriage, *ponnu paarkkum padalam* (the ritual of parading the marriageable woman to the prospective groom's family) is a classic example of the transformation a woman must go through to be marriageable. I draw from *Alaipayuthey* (2000) again to illustrate this point. In a scene, Poorni – Shakti's elder sister – is visited by her prospective groom's family. Shakti is dressed in churidar and is seen comfortable in her place. When the prospective groom's brother expresses interest in Shakti, her mother immediately rushes her to the room to 'get ready' to be seen by her prospective groom's family. The mother insists on 'wearing a silk sari' and 'little jewellery'. Shakti returns sari-clad, jasmine flowers adorning her neatly tied-up hair, a red *pottu* and some jewellery. While the ritual is seen as an 'occasion' in which the woman must dress in a special manner, the transformation of a woman's appearance and behaviour to become marriageable is not to be missed.

In the film *Periya Idathu Penn* (1963), the female protagonist is seen as a rich, young, educated woman as reflected in her western clothing. However, she sheds her modernity and adopts the traditional sari immediately after her marriage to the hero. In *Velaikaari* (1949), the good woman – a marriageable Tamil woman – is dressed in a simple sari

(indicative of her poverty) while the bad woman – from the city wears pants (indicative of her financial high hold) (C.S. Lakshmi 2008). In several MGR films including *Kanavan* (1968) and *Vivasaayee* (1967), the hero 'tames' a non-conforming, educated girl, who eventually becomes a 'chaste' Tamil woman, sari-clad.

The transformation is not subtle in every case. In a scene in *Vivasaayee* (1967), a peasant aims to molest the heroine apparently incited by her t-shirt. To protect her, the hero covers the woman's bosom with a towel implying that her clothes were to blame; and *pavadai-dhavani* or sari is respectable clothing that would have prevented her from being groped, stared at, mocked or teased, thereby restoring her chastity.

The female body is often treated as the husband's rightful property that he alone has the privilege of seeing or otherwise utilising, establishing anything to the contrary as unchaste. In the 2006 film *Sillunu Oru Kadhal*, the hero accidentally rips the heroine's churidar in an attempt to save her from a road accident. Instead of expressing relief or gratitude at her life being saved, she goes away embarrassed about her torn dress. A few scenes later, explaining her discomfort, she says, "*Nee mattum pakka vendiya odamba oorukke kaattittiye*" (you have shown the world my body that you alone are entitled to see), in an act that expresses her interest in him.

KB's *Aval Oru Thodar Kathai* (1974) was a film that is considered to have changed the portrayal of working women for the better. Chandra is a liberated woman who indulges in liberated activities that get her pregnant. A popular scene that shows her baring herself in the bathtub and talking to a sari-clad heroine is a classic metaphor for liberation and Tamilness. She is seen as modern and uninhibited by societal norms. However, towards the end of the film, her modernity is shed (Chandra falls at her newly married husband's feet wrapped in a sari) in her transformation into the ideal Tamil woman (Lakshmi: 2008).

The role of sari, *pottu* and jasmine flowers in making a woman marriageable is exemplary in a popular scene from *Singaravelam* (1992). In the film, the rustic hero moves to the city to persuade and marry the modern heroine. He harasses her until she is tired and she considers his love. While she is on the verge of accepting his advances, he informs her that she is unworthy of marriage in her current avatar and marrying her would be equal to falling in a dilapidated well. Questioning her femininity he asks, "Do you know to wear a *pottu*? Wear flowers? Wear a sari?" Though outraged at being teased in the beginning, she succumbs to his allegations and wears a sari, jasmine flowers and *pottu* to make herself feminine and suitable for marriage. Similar is the story of urban, modern heroines *Naattaamai* (1994),

Suryavamsam (1997) and *Singam* (2010) who duly convert to sari-wearing wives almost immediately after the wedding.

In an iconic scene in *Nayagan* (1987), the male protagonist marries a prostitute by applying *kunkumam* on her forehead before knotting the *thali* around her neck. Radical though for its time, the *kunkumam* and the *thali* imply the beginning of her auspicious life as a wedded woman. That she begins to wear a sari soon after goes without saying. Unchaste as she was before the marriage, her virginity clearly not in place, the marriage – the *thali*, *pottu*, sari and jasmine flowers inclusive – reinstate her chastity and its auspiciousness.

In another curious scene in *Manadhil Urudhi Vendum* (1987), the hero beats the heroine black and blue in a romantic effort to kindle her desire to accept his marriage proposal. When she refuses to say the words, he asks her to wear jasmine flowers on her hair if she likes him, which she does in surrender. Here, the heroine is divorced, thereby losing her auspiciousness, which the hero reinstates with the jasmine flowers.

Chastity – sexual purity before marriage and fidelity post marriage – is not a trait that can be easily expressed or visualised for screen. Therefore, films resort to symbolisms (several of which a clear reflection of real life) such as *thali*, sari, *pottu* and jasmine flowers to portray a chaste woman in films.

Modesty

The modesty of a Tamil woman can be best seen in films that adapt the Kannagi-Vasugi archetype in some form. Most films that took on the Kannagi archetype in their female characters had to adopt the temptress Madhavi character too. While the Tamil wife is a simple person from a poor family, the temptress is rich and extravagant.

For instance, in the film *Parasakthi* (1952), both the good women – the hero's love interest and his sister – are seen in simple clothing and minimal jewellery while the dancer who robs him off his money is seen in bright dresses and loud jewellery. In the song when she seduces him, she sings, “Oh rasikkum seemane vaa jolikkum udai anindhu kalaikkum nadanam purivom” (Oh, rich admirer, let's dance till we tire in *shining attire* – emphasis mine).

Another film of the time, *Rathakanneer* (1954) accentuates this contrast too. In a scene, the male protagonist Mohan (who is in fact the anti-thesis of the ideal Dravidian man) describes his wife's behaviour of wearing turmeric on her face and refusing to ‘crop’ her hair as unacceptable and *pattikkaadu* (rural). The wife and Mohan's mother are both equally outraged at this suggestion as a Tamil woman would never wear artificial makeup or cut her hair. The film ends with Mohan being defeated and with him, all his radical theories.

In the 1985 film *Chinnaveedu*, the hero is not attracted to his wife who is simple and

modest in her clothing but is drawn to another modern woman in shorts, t-shirts, sleeveless blouses and revealing saris. While the film revolves around the heroine's body weight being undesirable, much of her clothing and makeup is devised as a way to accentuate her weight and add to her undesirable state. The attractive other woman gets introduced to the audience in a sari, no doubt, but in bright red one, wears distinct makeup and red lip gloss. Her clothing evolves into skimpier attire through the film almost in parallel with the hero's understanding of her true character as the mistress of several rich men. Towards the end, however, it is the chaste, modest and native wife who the wayward husband returns to.

Even in films where there is no Madhavi, make up is generally frowned upon. *Bama Vijayam* (1967) is the story of a family whose new neighbour is a popular film actress. In a scene where the wives of the three brothers in the family apply makeup to look prettier, the head of the family – the father of the brothers – comments that makeup is unsuitable for ‘family women’.

In *Aval Oru Thodar Kathai* (1974), the heroine takes up employment to fill the inadequacies of the men in the family. Considerable screen time is allocated in the film for her dressing, undressing or applying makeup in front of a mirror. Towards the end of the film, when the heroine looks to transfer

familial responsibilities to her brother, she is seen as discarding her cosmetics, which she calls ‘*cumaikal* (burden) that she had to bear due to her position as a working woman’ (Chinnaiah 2008: 39).

The 1980s Tamil women were taught modesty by repeatedly stating their (perceived) inability to strip their upper body in public, making them subordinate to the alpha male who can flaunt his chest without inhibitions. The song ‘*Poomalai*’ from the film *Thangamagan* (1983) is the song-and-dance narration of this theory, which plays out as a competition between a man and a woman, which the woman loses for reasons we now know. A similar conversational encounter also occurs in the film *Vikram* (1986).

An immodest woman causing the degradation of Tamil culture is summarised (even if caricaturised) in the 1996 film *Irattai Roja*. A middle-class woman, Uma goes outside her marriage-worthy Tamil-woman mould and dreams of being ‘rich’, ‘wearing glossy clothing and jewellery’, ‘attending parties’ and ‘speaking English’. To achieve this, she coaxes her husband to remarry a rich woman, Priya. Upon marriage, Priya drops her rich, modern attire and demeanour to become a sari-clad, *pottu*-wearing housewife while Uma takes up the extravagant life. Priya becomes popular in the household and Uma loses her ‘woman of the home’ status to her. At this juncture, the contrast between Uma and Priya

is explicit in their clothing as much as in their language and behaviour. Even though Priya does evolve into an ideal Tamil wife, her entry into the family was a result of her bourgeois arrogance, the reconciliation for which must come from her elimination. Priya leaves and restores the family back to its Tamil household. Uma promises to return to being the ideal Tamil wife, modestly dressed.

Here, we will see repeated references to Uma’s greed that brought about the downfall of the family. The greed is also seen to have led to the blurring of a Tamil woman’s real purpose – raising children, cooking for the husband, applying the sacred ash on the man’s forehead before he leaves for work etc.

Several films of this era, perhaps in parallel with the raising globalisation, emphasised on the need for a woman to live within the means of her husband. *Varavu Ettana Selavu Patthana* (1994), for instance, traces the journey of a greedy woman who causes disrepute to herself and her family. In many of these films, though a woman’s greed is not seen as her desire to find employment for herself but as her pressuring her husband to earn more, albeit through immoral means. The immodesty is often symbolised in her wish for extravagant clothing and jewellery, and that is unacceptable in a Tamil woman worthy of marriage.

Nativity

While we have discussed the nativity of the wife/girlfriend during the Dravidian era, the overturn of the characterization in the neo-nativity films cannot be ignored. Exemplary is the use of clothing to signify modernity (or anti-nativity) in the film *Rosappu*

Ravikkaikaari (1979). Literally meaning the woman with the pink blouse, the film traces the troubled journey of a modern heroine's marriage to a rustic, emotionally inadequate hero. Her modernity, totally alien to the rural community, is symbolised in her dress and makeup among other signifiers. 'This creates a series of disturbances in the hero's household and the community at large (when for example, the village women try to emulate the heroine by wearing undergarments and makeup), ultimately leading to the collective anger of the village against the hero' (Sundar Kaali 2005: 178).

In the film *Devar Magan* (1992), the hero engages in a stick fight with the villain's men who make snide remarks about his virility. Of course, he wins the fight and breaks into song-and-dance in celebration. Trumpeting his victory the hero sings, "*saandhu pottu sandhana pottu edhuthu vechukka maama, poo mudichu oru selaiya kattu ini nee vaettiya kattikkalaama*" (Wear a sandal *pottu* on your forehead, wear flowers on your hair and drape a sari around yourself, can you wear a *vaetti* anymore?). The song celebrates the hero's

valour as manliness, mocks the villain's defeat in a stick fight as lack of valour/ womanliness and establishes the code for such womanliness through clothing. It is also interesting to note that the woman playing his love interest in the song is a modern city-bred person. While most modern women of the films in the previous era are seen in a negative light, *Devar Magan* projects her modernity on her clothes but not on her behaviour as earlier films did. She is simple, says kind words, speaks to elders with respect and conducts herself agreeably.

In spite of it, the hero's father looks her at disapprovingly; she finds difficulty in sitting on the floor in her modern attire, making her a misfit to the milieu, in other words 'not native'. While the hero also enters the village as a modern man unsuitable for and uninterested in the village, he makes the transformation from the modern to the rustic by exhibiting his *sutthatamil veeram* (pure Tamil valour).

Though she is not the modern shrew who needs to be tamed, she is unworthy of marriage to a rustic Tamil man who later chooses to marry a native Tamil woman from within the village.

The 1995 film *Sathileelavathi* was the story of a married man attracted to a younger woman – but in this case the younger woman is not a temptress or a prostitute. The evil in her is subtle – she merely seeks to marry a rich man who will fill the inadequacies of her (imagined) poverty. She is a modern working woman – she wears modern clothes such as pants, skirts and

sleeveless blouses, leaves her hair loose, wears bright lip colour and plastic jewellery. While her clothing alone does not establish her as the evil woman, in contrast with the Tamil wife, she is seen as progressive (willing to marry a married man as long as he is rich) and therefore wrong. The nativity of the wife is superior to the modernity of the other woman, to say nothing of the reconciliation being achieved through her marrying a not-so-rich man she deliberately rejected earlier.

Mannan (1992) reinforces the nativity of a Tamil woman as the prerequisite for marital satisfaction (even in cases where the wedding is not of mutual consent) as against her previous modern self. Heroine Shanti Devi is seen as modern and progressive in spite of her dressing in saris throughout the film. Her glossy colourful saris, free-flowing *thalappu*, untied hair and sticker *pottu* symbolise a non-native identity that is seen as unsuitable for a Tamil family (combined with her bourgeois upbringing, arrogant demeanour and lack of respect for fellow Tamilians seen here as factory employees). Though she is married mid way through the film, she isn't in a happy conjugal relationship with her husband owing to her unworthiness of it.

However, at the end of the film when she is tamed, she wears a simple sari, her hair is tied behind in a towel (which is seen as a symbol of washing one's hair on the morning after consummating one's marriage), wears the

traditional Tamil red *pottu*. The drastic change from the arrogant entrepreneurial Shanti Devi to the subservient wife, accompanied by her shift to modesty and nativity, completes her transformation to a marriage-worthy Tamil woman.

The urban themes of the 1990s brought with it a great many changes in women's costume design and styling as it did to the definition of nativity itself. Women of the city wore pants, shirts, skirts, and blouses. Churidars were beginning to be seen as acceptable and no more signifying the extravagance of the bourgeoisie that it did in the 1960s and the 1970s. The urban (sometimes elite) heroines of several films of the 1990s and later – *Singaravelan* (1992), *Devar Magan* (1992), *Kalaigani* (1993), *Thenali* (2000), *Aaytha Ezhuthu* (2004) etc. wear western clothing, often without the negative connotations associated with it in the past.

However, modern clothing wasn't always accepted as appropriate. The 1993 film *Vandicholai Chinnaraasu* had an elaborate, harassing song that defines a Tamil woman's dress code. The modern-dress clad female protagonist is given a lesson on dressing like a Tamil woman. An interesting portion of the second stanza alludes to *karpu* (chastity) to clothing. The song analyses every piece of her clothing and her demeanour to elaborate on ideal Tamil behaviour and attempts to rationalise it as apt for Tamil culture.

Sentamizh naattu tamizhachiye, sela udutha
thayanguriye

Nesavu seiyum thirunaattil, neechal udaiyil
alayiriye

Kanavan mattum kaanum azhagai,
kadaigal pootu kaaturiyey

Elandha kaatil porandhava dhaaney,
London model nadai edukku?

Kaanjeepurangal jolikindrabodhu, kaathu
vaangum udaiyeduku?

Udambu vaerkum ushnanaatil, urasi
peesum style yeduku?

*Oh, Tamil woman, why do you hesitate to
wear a sari?*

*In a country of weavers, why do you parade
in swimwear?*

*Why do you display your bodily beauty that
your husband alone must see?*

*Oh, rustic Tamil woman, why do you walk
like a London model?*

*While silk saris shimmer here, why do you
wear such skimpy clothes?*

*In a hot land like ours, why do you have a
touchy-feely demeanour?*

*Takkar kungumam manakum naatil, sticker
pootu unakuyeduku?*

*Karpu enbadhu pirpoku illa, kavas am
endre therinjanum*

*Kaatril midhakum kaarkuzhal pinni,
kanaga pookal aninjanum,*

Pazhamai vaeru, pazhasu vaeru,

vaerub(p)aarka arinjanum,

Indian (1996) is a classic case study in modern representation of modernity and marriage-worthiness. In a song sequence for a fashion show, Sapna, the female lead who the hero does not intend to marry, sings “*akkada nu naanga udai potta, thukkada nu neenga eda potta, unakku thada*” meaning a modern woman rejects any criticism about her carefree clothing. While the liberated Sapna wears revealing modern clothing, it is the sari/churidhar-wearing Aishwarya that the hero chooses for marriage.

Padayappa (1999) is a story of nativity winning over modernity. The hero rejects the vamp Neelambari who is modern. In explanation, he says that he wishes to marry a ‘woman,’ which she is clearly not.

*In the land of pure kunkumam, why do you
wear sticker pottu?*

*Chastity is not outdated, it is your armour,
Tie your hair and braid it neatly, and
wear flowers*

*Antiquity and tradition are two different
things. You must learn the difference.*

On a closer look at the characterisation of Neelambari, one is to understand that un-Tamil demeanor is a derivative of her bourgeois arrogance – which reflects heavily in her clothing. Bright colours, short skirts,

trousers, high heels etc. are to establish the contrast with the heroine – a simple, *paavadai-dhavani* wearing servant maid – the hero eventually chooses to marry. This clearly marks the kind of clothes one must not wear if they are interested in marriage to a Tamil man.

While Ko (2011) doesn't make the modern woman a vamp, it definitely makes her unworthy of marriage and discards her. Here, Ashwin is a close friend of Saro, who is in love with him. She is a brat (not shrew) – a characteristic exemplified by dressing in jeans and t-shirts (along with carefree demeanour and lack of inhibitions in casual physical contact with men). But Ashwin is in love with Renu who is delicately dressed in saris most of the time. In a curious scene, as an effort towards impressing Ashwin, Saro tries to emulate Renu by wearing a sari only ending up being laughed at for her unsuitability in becoming one. In another scene, where Renu is lighting firecrackers – what can be understood as the festival of lights Deepavali – dressed in traditional Tamil attire (sari, *pottu*, jasmine flowers etc.), Saro is in capris and a T-shirt. In the film, it is Renu's proximity to Tamil nativity, which in this case is resting more on clothing than any other determinant, which is seen as her worthiness of marriage.

Conclusion

While on the one hand, the Tamil woman shoulders the great responsibility of upholding the Tamil pride, on the other she is merely a passive seeker of marriage. However, it is in upholding culture that she gains her marriage-worthiness, which comes to define her identity. Her marriage-worthiness is explicit in three characteristics: chastity, modesty and nativity.

In this paper, I define a marriageable Tamil woman as chaste – saves her virginity for her husband-to-be and swears her undeterred devotion to him; modest – lives within the means of her husband and wishes for no more than is absolutely necessary for a simple life; and native – adheres to societal norms and inculcates in herself a value system that does not challenge the incumbent values of the village or the city she is part of.

Keeping that framework in mind, I draw parallels to clothing as a signifier of a Tamil woman's suitability to marriage over the century-old history of Tamil cinema. The sari, pottu, jasmine flowers, sober colours, simple cottons and silk (on special occasions) stand out as the clothing and accessories that define a marriageable Tamil woman. While from time to time, the modern or the western may have come and gone, the superiority of the native Tamil clothing over the modern is perpetuated to this day. While churidars and kurtas have come to be accepted from time to time, like the married heroine in *Vaaranam Aayiram* (2008),

this narrative seems to be overruled by the popular narrative of successful cinema.

As a study of close to a century of filmmaking, this paper is limited to popular and successful films made until recently. In studying popular culture, one runs the risk of ignoring alternate film movements, which

intended to question the status quo this paper aims to point out. Also implicit in writing such pieces that comprise of a century of films is the inherent bias that ignores what does not fit into the mould of the researcher's problem statement, even if relevant to the argument. 🧐

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