

Representation of Women in Premkumar's Films

Jayashree Premkumar Shet, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia
Gulab Premkumar Shet, SiSi Academy, India

The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In the wake of waves of feminism and feminist film theories there are more expectations from the film industries, as they are considered as the mirrors of the society and as the potent ones to reform the society in the eradication of the gender inequality all-prevalent in all the walks of life all over the world. Unfortunately, no one can deny the fact that there exists persistent underrepresentation of female characters in films. This study explores whether all the eight films directed by Gulab Premkumar, are able to pass the feminist film theories such as Bechdel Test, The Sexy Lamp Test, Make Mori Test and Critical Actor Theory and Critical Mass Theory with a self-made code sheet incorporating the tenets of these theories. The findings prove that in comparison to datas collected about gender discrimination in Hollywood and Bollywood films Gulab Premkumar's 20th C films are the most progressive past with on and off-screen representation of women and less stereotyped female characters and there's less gender inequality in his sole 21st C film.

Keywords: Gender-Equality, Premkumar, Films, Representation

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Rooted to ancient Greece Waves of Feminism flourished in the U.K. The first wave of feminism (1830s – early 1900s) was centered around the sufferings of women and women’s fight for equal contract and property rights, while the second wave(1960s-1980s) broadened the debate to women’s reproductive rights, workplace, family and sexuality. The third wave of feminism (1990s – early 2000s), which can be termed as the “micro-politics” of equality for women with its varied, complex branches of feminist outlooks such as the ego-cultural feminists, the radicals, the liberal/reforms, the electoral, academic, eco-feminists etc. The fourth wave of feminism has hit the air with the aid of social media networks: The #MeToo movement and the Time Up Movement. It also wages a war against sexual harassment besides the issues put forth by the previous waves of feminism. (Cavanaugh, 2018)

According to Kracauer 1965, Like Perseus who slayed Gorgon Medusa by looking at its reflection on the shield given by Athena, the silver screen shields us by providing us mere mirror reflections of dreadful encounters and situations with the artist’s imaginative rendering of unseen dreadful real ones. Thus, such a knowledge gained may guide people when they encounter them in real life.

Hence, In real life to cultivate the crops of Gender Equality the Cinemas should prepare grounds. How much responsibility is shouldered by Director G. Premkumar in empowering women characters through his films is the study.

Research Questions: The Research Questions are:

1. Do Premkumar’s films pass Bechdel Test, Mako Mori Test, The Sexy Lamp Test?
2. Are women under represented in Premkumar’s films?
3. How much is the Critical Mass Theory and the Critical Actor Theory is applicable to the studied films?

Literature Review

Women are significantly underrepresented in film (Lauzen 2015; Murphy 2015; Shor et al. 2015). In previous research using the same data set used here, Lindner, Lindquist, and Arnold (2015) showed that films with an independent female presence earn less at the box office not because audiences dislike them but because they receive fewer resources in the production stage.

Nulman.E(2014) examined the top Box office films from the 1990s to 2014 and explore the characteristics women characters in the film and he also looked at the potential impact of that representation in the context of cultural globalization.

In their study Caradeux D and Salom L. (2013) examined fifty Spanish short films following the methodological framework proposed by Van Leeuwen (2008) about the representation of social actors and identified the latent ideological characteristics lay in discourse construction which reflect the major gender representations of the present day directors of short films.

Wright.A (2012) studied about the action women in films exploring Brown's claim (1996) that a heroine in an action role is a 'sheep in wolf's clothing' with a focus on the 1980s sword and sorcery cycle, specifically the often critically overlooked Conan the Destroyer (1984) and Red Sonja (1985). In their opinion in these films female roles are seemingly elevated from subsidiary roles to action heroines or formidable villainous roles.

Kapoor, Hansika, et al (2017) by using a qualitative approach to code dialogues, and quantifying subsequent frequencies found the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of female characters in contemporary Hindi cinema.

It's though looking like a low bar, most popular dollar winning films like Spider Man," "The Jungle Book," "Star Trek Beyond" and "The Hobbit" all fail by at least one of the criteria of the Mako Mori Test. Even a movie in which two women only speak to each other briefly in one scene, about anything trivial under the sun, gets a passing grade. And yet more than 40 percent of all U.S. films fail. Brittany (2010) in his blog listed 610 films which passed The Mako Mori test, out of which 87% passed Bechdel test too.

Fifty- Seven percent of the hundred most widely distributed films in the U.S. market between 2000 and 2009 do not pass the Bechdel Test. Movies passing the Bechdel Test earn less at the box office because they tend to have small production budgets, a key predictor of box office success (Lindner et al. 2015). Data-sharing site Silk analyzed 1,500 Films released between 2010 and 2014 using the Bechdel Test criteria. In 2014, just 55.4% of all films passed the Bechdel Test. This is down from 2013's 67.5% and 2012's 66.4%.

As every research cited above and thousands of similar studies prove women are under represented and mis represented in films. Also, many of the studies highlight the fact that many films fail the feminist film theories. But the researcher here would love to present a successful film maker's effort to produce women centred films.

Methodology

Quantitative Method as well as Qualitative Method were followed to gauge whether women are under- represented in Premkumar's films.

Research Design: Quantitative Method was adhered to check whether the women were under represented in Premkumar's films. Erigha (2015:79) explains that there are three types of representation within the film industry: numerical representation, centrality of representation, and quality of representation A numerical approach to studying women's representation might establish, for example, the proportion of all characters who appear on screen in a set of films in a given year. That's why this study along with The Mako Mori Test, The Bechdel Test, The Sexy Lamp Test, it includes other aspects such as, empowerment, Deciding Authority, Freedom and Effort, Socio& Economic Independence and Intelligence to check the quality of the representation along with the quantity of the representation. A detailed analysis and multiple viewing of the films was helpful in analyzing the films quantitatively and qualitatively as well. As a sample the number of scenes the first two lead male

characters appear is compared to the number of scenes the first two lead female characters appear in five of Premkumar's films.

An Interview with the director to get the solution to the queries to know how the 1980's and 1990's film Industry regarded women's emancipation and how it helped him to represent women in his movies positively or negatively. The interview will also bring out whether there were any woman behind the scenes in 1980's and 1990's as to put to test the selected films to Critical Mass Theory and Critical Author Theory.

Samples: Out of the 13 films listed above, the first eight are taken for the study.

S.No	Name of the Film	Year of Release	Language	Production Company	Director
1	Sayoojyam	1979	Malyalam	Aksharachithra	G.Premkumar
2	Lajjavathi	1979	Malyalam	Chandrika Movies	G.Premkumar
3	Antharangam Oomayanathu	1980	Tamil	Sri Lankal Films	G.Premkumar
4	Hridayam Padunnu	1980	Malyalam	Sri Lankal Films	G.Premkumar
5	Pooviriyum Pulari	1982	Malyalam	Cherry Enterprises	G.Premkumar
6	Pen Ullam	1982	Tamil	Cherry Enterprises	G.Premkumar
7	Kai Varisai	1983	Tamil	Sarala Agencies	G.Premkumar
8	Pirate's Blood	2010	English	Jayashree Internationals	Technical Director G.Premkumar
9	Al Boom	2008	Arabic	Jayashree International	Technical Director G.Premkumar
10	Bheeman	1982	Malyalam	Ariffa Enterprises	2nd Unit Director G.Premkumar
11	Hello Madras Girl	1983	Malyalam	J.W International	2nd Unit Director G.Premkumar
12	Agni Nilavu	1991	Malyalam	Chakravarthy Production	2nd Unit Director G.Premkumar
13	Vivahith Jeevan	2000	Hindi	TamilNadu Talkies	2 nd Unit Director G.Premkumar

Table 1. Premkumar's Films

Self-Coded Sheet: If and only the movie has: a.at least one female character b.who gets her own narrative arc c.that is not about supporting a man's story, the movie is proclaimed that it has passed the Mako Mori test. a) American cartoonist Alison Bechdel, in his attempt to identify gender bias in fiction work, created the Bechdel

Test. The test asks three questions: 1. Does the film have at least two women? 2. Do they talk to each other? 3. Do they converse anything other than men? The Sexy Lamp Test wants to test whether the woman is used as an object only. The researcher incorporated these theories besides other female feminist theories to prepare the coded sheet.

Is there at least one female character? [The Mako Mori Test]		
Does the female character get her own narrative? [The Mako Mori Test]		
Is female story is independent one or supporting a man's story ? [The Mako Mori Test]		
How many female characters are relevant to the plot of the film? [The Sexy Lamp Test]		
Does the movie have at least two women in it? [Bechdel–Wallace Test]		
Do Women talk to each other? [Bechdel–Wallace Test]		
Do female characters talk about something other than a man? [Bechdel–Wallace Test]		
Are the two women named characters? [Variation in Bechdel–Wallace Test]		
Is there at least a total of 60 seconds of conversation? [Variation In Bechdel–Wallace Test]		
Is there a female protagonist? Is she successful?		
Is the female protagonist successful on her own?		
Is the film a female-oriented one?		
	Empowerment	
Are they originally portrayed in the same stereotypic ways?		
Does the heroine become the heroic in the film?		
Do the women express their ambition?		
	Social/ Economic Independence	
Any sign of women's economic independence?		
Do the female characters as skilled / professional ones?		
	Intelligence	
Do the female express their thinking or feeling?		
Are women portrayed as intelligent ones?		
	Freedom & effort	
Do the female characters have freedom?		
Do the female characters change their lives on their own?		
Do the female characters talk /fight against inequality?		
Is the female protagonist's change not influenced by men?		
Is there any action taken by the female characters not to be a victim?		
	Deciding Authority	
Do the female characters take their own decisions?		
Are her decision put some body in trouble and make her regard as foolish or novice?		

Table 2 Self-Coded Sheet

Results and Discussion

The following is the data obtained on the detailed analysis of the eight films.

Name of the Film	Andarangam OOmeyanthu	Hridyam Padunnu	Penn Ullam	Pooviryum Pulari	Lajjavathy	Pirate's Blood	Kai Varisai	Sayoojyam
Points Obtained	27	27	27	27	27	22.5	27	27

Table 3 Points Obtained By the Films

In 2017, the Geena Davis Institute and Google developed a tool to analyze video for “a character’s gender . . . how long each actor spoke, and were on-screen” (Google, 2017). In doing so, they found that women had only 36 percent of the screen time and only 35 percent of the speaking time in the 100 top-grossing films of 2014–2016. On the contrary all the eight films of G.Premkumar not only pass the tests. Other than the English film (75%), the other seven films come out successfully with 90% of points.

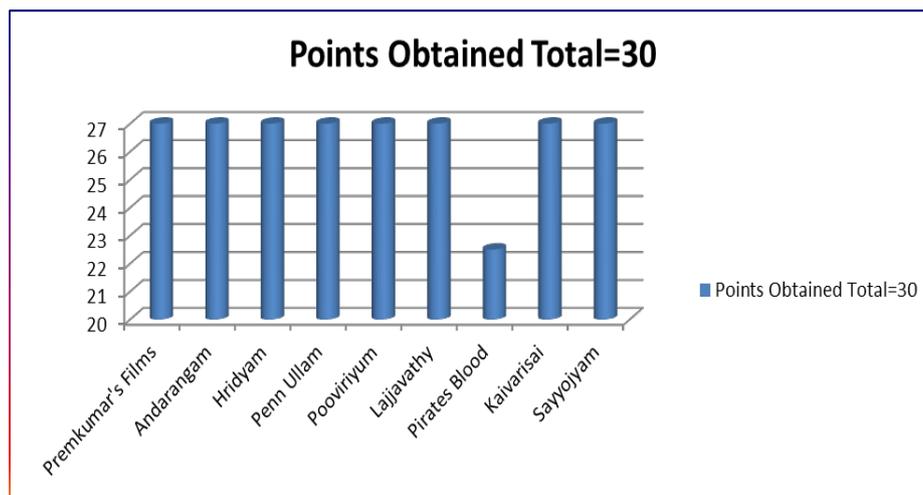


Figure 1 Points Obtained

The results obtained by Self-coded Scoring sheet proved Premkumar’s films passed Bachedel Test, Make Mori Test, Sexy Lamp Test as well as the women characters were empowered with adherence to self - dependent traits. It’s really commendable since while almost half of 2012’s top 100 grossing movies passed the Bechdel test, by only 23 passed the Mako Mori test. 21 passed both the tests. However, 47 films didn’t pass either tests. Premkumar’s films are better than Marvel films: Twenty of Marvel films released after Iron Man (2008) were analyzed by Alexis Reliford who found all of the Marvel films passed The Sexy Lamp Test, eleven of them passed Bechdel Test but only three of them passed Make Mori Test. Ant man and the Wasp and Avengers: Age of Ultron are the two films which passed all the three tests.

No Question of Under-Representation: In Sayoojyam men characters appear in 184 scenes whereas women are there in 85 scenes. Though not like the other six films the statistics isn’t that bad and more over the viewing of the film proves it’s a women

centric film. The heroines's love, the betrayal by her father, her oscillation between her love for her second husband and her child born out of her first love is the second issue. So, women appear in less than 50% of scenes it's a woman's story, undoubtedly. In Kaivarisai the hero appears in 30% of the scenes whereas the heroine appears in 36% of the scenes. And there are three heroines. In Pirate's Blood too there are three heroines. So there's no question of inequality as far as the number of scenes women appear in these three. Besides these three films the quantitative data furnished below will be evident to ascertain that in the other five films too, there was almost equal representation of women roles in G.Premkumar's films.

Film	Total Scenes	Male Lead 1	Male Lead 2	Female Lead 1	Female Lead 2	Total% For Two Characters Male	Total% For Two Characters Female
Pooviriyum Pulari	93	49	23	37	33	72	66
	100%	53%	25%	40%	35%	78%	75%
Penn Ullam	93	49	23	37	33	72	66
	100%	53%	25%	40%	35%	78%	75%
Hridyam Padunnu	101	56	25	51	34	81	85
	100%	55%	25%	50%	34%	80%	84%
Andarangam Oomayanthu	101	56	25	51	34	81	85
	100%	55%	25%	50%	34%	80%	84%
Lajjavathy	116	87	20	63	23	107	86
	100%	75%	17%	54%	20%	92%	74%

Table 4. No. of Scene-wise Appearances

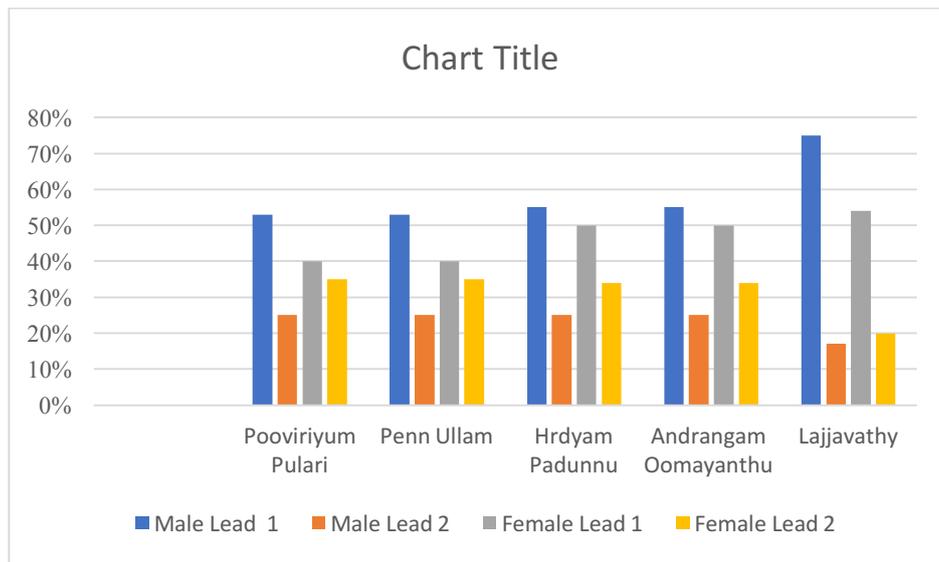


Figure 2 Number of Scene-wise Appearances

The above chart clearly indicates how the number of female characters appearances are in par with the number of male characters appearances scene-wise unlike what Lauzen's (2025) findings that women are under-represented.

No doubt, all the credit goes to the Cinema for how the women are perceived, valued and treated in the 21st century. Cinema sees to that the perpetrators of mistreatment towards women are never glorified or normalized. A villain who does evil things to women is never be emulated. It's the hero's behaviour we have to watch. All the heroes of Premkumar's eight films studied are in support of women and talk and work for women's cause.

Moreover, Tinker and Bramsen (1976) points out the economic inequality is the root cause of gender -inequality in everyday-lives. So, the economic status of female lead roles was analyzed. None of the heroines of the films studied were economically of low status. So, the stories could flow smoothly to showcase women's emancipation.

Some of G.Premkumar's films like Kaivarisai, Pirate's Blood have three heroines.

Penn Ullam, Pooviriyum Pulari, Hridyam Padunnu, Andharangam Oomayanthu, Lajjavathi, Sayoojyam have two heroines. Sometimes it's difficult to say who plays the lead role; both the heroines in Penn ullaam, pooviriyu Pulari, Hridhyam Padunnunu and Andharangam oomayanathu play very crucial roles. As there are as many female protagonists the representation is also more.

While G.Premkumar presents diverse female roles and explores gender as its major theme in his films, majority of Indian or Hollywood films fail to do so unfortunately; they assign only traditional gender roles to most of the female characters who display traditional behavior traits throughout the film. Not only Premkumar brought the actress Rajani Sharma from Bollywood as the heroine of his films: Andrangam oomayanthu and Hridyam Padunnu, he also brought Usha Khanna the Music Director to Malayalam Film Agni Nilavu as the 2nd Unit Director. Jayashree Premkumar (2020) found all the three slasher films released during pandemic times had better scintillating women characters,¹ she found that only female characters appeared only in 20, 44, 44, 55 percent of films² and she has also found that in Premkumar's Kaivarisai there was no gender discrimination. In Kaivarisai and Sayyujyam women appeared in 80 % and 50% of the scenes respectively.

Critical Author Theory Insists on women behind the screen to bring out the emotions and give a lion's share to women characters. But in spite being a male director and producer he gave much importance to women characters. Does the credit go to the state where he was born, Kerala or to the Konkani community he belonged to or to Tamilnadu, the state where he lived and shot most of the films? The director himself reasoned out thus:

In those days, there weren't many editors or directors who were fit or opted for such jobs.

Three films like Pirate's Blood, Al Boom and Hello Doctor were under female Production Company Name. that is Jayashree Internationals. Pooviryum Pulari and Penn Ullam were also under female Production company's name. Kaivarisai & Theepandangal Producers are also women. In films like Sayyoojyam, Puthira Punithama, there were always female dance masters like Girija and Lalitha besides Raghu Master. Many female singers were given chance, like S.Janaki, P.Suseela, Chitra, Vani Jayaram, L.R.Eswari. Moreover, it was he who booked the famous female music composer Ushakhanna for the film Agninilavu. he

was the second Unit Director of the film. Kerala had been a matriarchal society in the past. We can't ascertain the same now even in Kerala. Since everywhere in reality inequality towards womenfolk is on a steady increase, including in states like Kerala, probably due to wider exposure to other Indian cultures and floating population. Actually, in those days in Nair families of Kerala Matriarchal society was there. Moreover, in the southern states like Kerala and Tamandu the film industry gave much respect to actresses and almost all womenfolk. They have idols of women goddesses and the people gave much regards and worshipped female heroines.

Gulab Premkumar justifies his heroine in KaiVarisai being picturized as a brave lady, indulging in fighting in many scenes: What's wrong in women knowing the martial arts? A recent statistic reveals the bitter truth in every 15 minutes a woman is raped. That's why I always wanted the women characters to be heroic, save themselves, fight for other good causes too and be the role model for other women.

“Both men and women should feel free to be strong,” said Watson, a UN Women Goodwill Ambassador. “It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum, not as two opposing sets of ideals.”

What's Feminism? It's all about the ability, wisdom and freedom to make choices, decisions and be independent: whether one can choose to stay at home or go to work, to make choices about their studies, vocation, grooms, to have kids or not to have and have a hair-cut or not. Most of the choices we can make today, is because of progressive Directors like G.Premkumar.

Clearly, a film's quality has a lot to do with the people who are funding it. It's the producers and their concerns that decide a film's fate. G.Premkumar, the director himself is the producer of Pirate's Blood, Penn Ullam, Pooviriyum Pulari. So, it was easy for him to make his dream, imagination take the form in the media and could offer superior, edgier, women-centric films. Premkumar, the Director and Producer of 80's, 90's and also of this 21st C is an example to say filmmakers of the past had social awareness, especially, Gender Equality.

In Indian Context Cinema is the continuum where lyricists, music – composer, singers, Cinematographer, Art-Director, Choreographer, Director, Dialogue Writer, actors, dancers' special effects, dubbing artists meet. That's why the innumerable songs in Indian films where the heroine's feelings and struggles are finding the best medium in songs and certainly in all the eight films there are songs which proclaim that Premkumar is a feminist in every sense. Even in his Hollywood film one of the three heroines sings a song herself both in on and off screen.

Limitations of the Study: Besides scene-wise women representation the researcher wanted to gauge the women to women (FI) and Male to Male Interactions(MI), which couldn't be materialized due to the researcher's immobility to visit India where the films were shot due to lock-down restrictions.

Reccomendations: Future studies can be on different directors who work sincerely towards more representation of women off and on the screen.

Conclusion

Eventually, this study helps to contribute to literatures on gender discrimination in films by offering an inquiry into the gender representations in Premkumar's films of all times. The results indicate that the representations of women are highly satisfactory in his movies. At the same time, gender bias is prevalent more in movies till today and this study insists on more representation of women in films. There should be many women centric films where they should be shown in very high positions and they can be set role models in taking very significant decisions in the emancipation of women.

Acknowledgements

The researcher owes a lot to the Director of the films, G.Premkumar for his ceaseless support in giving all sorts of details about the films and making of the films as well. The research couldn't have been done without his help as the information about older films are not available in any websites.

References

- Alexis. R. (2019) The Most Feminist Movies in the Marvel Universe Besides "Captain Marvel," of course, <https://www.shondaland.com/watch/a26630738/most-feminist-movies-marvel-universe/>
- Bechdel Test Movie List Stats. Bechdel Test Movie List, URL:<http://bechdeltest.com/statistics>
- Cavanaugh, L.V. (June, 2018) A Brief History of Feminism. Progressive Women's Leadership.
- Caradeux. D.A, and Luz. G.S, (2013). Social Representation of Gender in Award-Winner Short Films in Spain. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.10.631.
- Erigha. M. (2015). Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change. *Sociology Compass* 9(1):78–89.
- Google. (2017). The Women Missing from the Silver Screen and the Technology Used to Find Them." Retrieved February 24, 2017 <https://www.google.com/intl/en/about/main/gender-equalityfilms/>.
- Hollinger, K. (2012). Feminist film studies. In *Feminist Film Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203146804>
- Lauzen, M.M. 2015. It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: On-Screen Representations of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2014, Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, San Diego State University, San Diego
- Kapoor, Hansika, et al. "The Bechdel in India: Gendered Depictions in Contemporary Hindi Cinema. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 2017, doi:10.1080/09589236.2015.1102128.
- Kracauer, S. (1965). *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. New York: Galaxy.
- Nulman. E, (2014). Representation of Women in the Age of Globalized Film. *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*.
- Premkumar, G (2020, Nov,11). Personal Interview [Personal Interview].
- Wright, Andrea. (2012) A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing? The Problematic Representation of Women and the Female Body in 1980s Sword and Sorcery Cinema. *Journal of Gender Studies*. doi:10.1080/09589236.2012.681183.

Contact email: jayashreeprem@gmail.com