

Reception of Gynocentric Films: Based on the Film Reviews of the Tamil Film *Gargi* published in *The Hindu* and *The News Minute*

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Abstract

Gynocentric films have started becoming a trend in Tamil cinema recently with various films such as *Soppana Sundari* and *Sembi* achieving critical acclaim and commercial success. Moreover, various aspects of these films such as the performances of the lead actors and screenplay have been discussed and debated by the people and critics; leading to an increased recognition for these types of films. This study will be analyzing how the film reviews of the Tamil gynocentric films are written by critics in the print and online media and what are the similarities and differences between the film reviews of these films with respect to their content and structure. It would also be studying about which aspects of the female centric films were accorded more importance in these reviews and the study has adopted a methodology of qualitative content analysis of the film reviews from the Tamil film *Gargi* (2022) written and published in the newspaper, *The Hindu* and the online media organization *The News Minute*. The theoretical framework of this study will be the framing theory.

Keywords

Film Reviews, female-centric films, gender, Tamil films, framing

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Introduction

Tamil cinema has always been known for producing and making Tamil female-centric or gynocentric films such as *Meera* (1930), *Vannakilli* (1958), *Chithi* (1966), *Aval Oru Thodar Kathai* (1974), *Puthumai Penn* (1983) and *Magalir Mattum* (1994) from a variety of genres and addressing a variety of issues of females such as their independence and the problems which they face in their workplaces. However, such films have always been directed and produced only sometimes.

However, this has changed now, and recently gynocentric films have started being produced and released frequently with recent examples being films like *Nadigaiyar Thilagam* (2018), *Sembi* (2022) and *Farhana* (2023), garnering critical and commercial acclaim. This trend could be traced back to the initial slew of the Tamil gynocentric films featuring the Tamil actress Nayanthra in the lead role such as *Maya* (2015), *Aramm* (2017) and *Kolamaavu Kokila* (2018) which were small scale films featuring her in different roles such as a single mother, a collector and a girl being involved in drug dealings to earn money for her family respectively. They also became commercial successes and led her to acquire the tag of a superstar.

Gradually Nayanthra also started doing gynocentric films on a variety of subjects such as *Mookuthi Amman* (2020) and *Connect* (2022) while also starring in superstar led films such as *Bigil* (2019) and *Annathe* (2021). She is “said to be the only female actor who could guarantee houseful Friday morning shows” and an actor who could get a wide release (Menon, 2021).

Sowmya Rajendran, a film critic of *The News Minute* explained about how female-centric films have been assumed to be about patriarchal oppression. However, Nayanthara’s gender was purely incidental in her films and Sowmya also noted that how she has been getting introduction scenes like for male stars and the scripts also contained references to her previous films. This was usually a privilege reserved for male stars as doing this would mean that the audience were familiar with the actor’s work. Sowmya also noted how Nayanthara had been positioning as a “mass” star than as an actor creating a niche space, while also acting in films featuring big stars and with big budgets (Menon, 2021).

Her stardom and the commercial success of Nayanthara’s gynocentric films have resulted in an increase in popularity for the female-centric films in Tamil cin-

ema and many other leading actresses of Tamil cinema like Jyothika, Trisha, Amala Paul, Keerthy Suresh, the veteran actress Kovai Sarala and Aishwarya Rajesh have also followed suit and started acting in Tamil female-centric films now. The release of these films have resulted in the increased recognition and popularity of the female centric films in Tamil cinema.

With such an increase in the production and release of gynocentric films in Tamil cinema and these types of films becoming a very popular genre in Tamil films, the most interesting and yet at the same time, pertinent questions concerning these types of gynocentric films are: How are these types of films critically received and analyzed by the critics from a wide variety of media platforms such as print, broadcast and online media platforms and what aspects of these films do the critics focus on while reviewing or critiquing these films?

This is due to the reason that various genres of films such as action thrillers, romantic comedy and sports drama films have defining and essential features which are integral to the films belonging to the specified type of genre and also play a key role in letting the critics and the audience to know that they are films from this particular genre.

Although sometimes these features might not be present in these films, or might be defied, excluded and subverted in the films, they are often crucial parts of the reviews and analyses written by critics, from a variety of media platforms, who explain or analyze them in the films about how this aspect or excluding it has been successful in the film and make the films interesting to watch or not or how have they been not included or subverted, along with reviewing other aspects of the films such as the performances of its cast members, music, cinematography and production design etc.

For instance, many sports drama films feature the hero or heroine rising against various obstacles and problems to win important championships or matches on their own and become successful in their professional lives and the film reviews might discuss about this aspect in these sports drama films (if they revolve around this plotline) and how it has or has not worked well and contributed to the success of these films along with its other aspects such as the cast, screenplay and story.

These questions become more significant in the wake of the rising popularity of gynocentric films in Tamil cinema and also the notion that these films also constitute a genre of their own such as horror comedy films, mystery thriller films and horror films etc. in Tamil cinema.

What are key elements or specific tropes of these types of films? How are they written about and viewed and analyzed by the film critics and reviewers from a wide variety of media such as the print, broadcast and media platforms and what are some of the similarities or differences in the film reviews written by critics from the print or broadcast media organizations as compared to the online media organizations? What are some of the highlights and drawbacks of the films belonging to the genre of gynocentric films in Tamil cinema?

Another pertinent aspect of analyzing the film reviews of Tamil gynocentric films is to analyze how the female protagonists or the lead actors of the films are written and analyzed by the film critics. This is due to the fact that since most of the Tamil films are hero-centric films or have the hero as the focus of their stories, the film reviews tend to place a major focus and explain about how the role male protagonists or heroes in the films, their character traits and how the actors have portrayed them and then they move to explain about the female characters and the performances of the female actresses portrayed by them and then the other aspects such as the music and the production design etc.

However, it is interesting to study and analyze about films which are helmed by female protagonists which is actually a reversal of the traditional and normal hero-oriented films and which have become common in Tamil cinema these days. How have the film critics focused and written or analyzed the female protagonists and the performances of the lead actresses in these type of films?

Have they made the heroines the prime focus of their reviews as compared to the films helmed by the male protagonists in which the heroes are the focus? In addition to this, how have they written about the male characters or the actors portraying them in the gynocentric films in their film reviews? Have they focused a lot on them as compared to the female characters or do they receive the secondary focus after the female protagonists?

The aim of this study is to study and seek the answers to the above questions by analyzing the critical reception of a Tamil gynocentric film *Gargi* (2022) by

analysing the film reviews about the film written and published by critics in the newspaper *The Hindu* and the online media organization *The News Minute* and analyze how they have written about the film and most importantly, how the female protagonist in the film and the lead actress were written about and reviewed and also which aspects of the film were given importance to by the critics in their film reviews.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to study and analyse the film reviews of the Tamil gynocentric film *Gargi* (2022) written by the film critics in *The Hindu* and *The News Minute* to understand how a gynocentric film was written and reviewed by critics in the print and online media organizations.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study include:

1. To study and analyse how the film reviews of a gynocentric film was written by the critics in *The Hindu* and *The News Minute* and how were they framed.
2. To analyse what aspects of a gynocentric film were focused upon by the critics in *The Hindu* and *The News Minute*.
3. To analyse how was the protagonist of a gynocentric film was reviewed and written by the critics in *The Hindu* and *The News Minute*
4. To compare and analyze the similarities and differences in the film reviews written by the critics in *The Hindu* and *The News Minute*.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the framing theory to analyze the film reviews of a Tamil gynocentric film *Gargi* written by film critics in *The Hindu* and *The News Minute*. The theory explains how the media focuses attention on certain events and suggests that how something is presented to the audience (also known as the

frames) influences the choices that the people make about how to process it (Davie, 2014).

Frames are abstractions which work to organize or structure message meaning and the most common use of them are in terms of the frames the media organizations place on the information which they convey to their audiences and they are also considered to influence the perception of news by the audience such that it could be construed as a second-form of agenda-setting (Davie, 2014).

Griffin (2003) described framing as the process of calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others; which may lead to different reactions and Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) refer to framing as the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion in the media agenda when a particular object is discussed (Koon et al., 2019).

According to Spratt, Bullock and Baldasty (2007), while previous research has exposed that the media frames support status quo positions on social and political issues, almost no attention has been paid to how newsgathering practices and journalistic norms differ between different types of media and how these differences affect framing. Spratt et al. (2007) have explained how news is socially constructed and how it reflected not only what had happened but also the context within which it was gathered and processed (Koon et al., 2019). The type of events covered or not and how they are covered are influenced by many factors such as law, economics, power relations, culture, race, structure of media organizations and work routine of journalists (Koon et al., 2019).

Tankard (2008) explained several news features that commonly convey frames which are headlines and kickers, subhead photographs, photo captions and leads etc. Wong (2004) has also explained about the four main components of framing which could be studied which are the presentation of news items (their size and placement), news topic items (or the issues included in the frame), cognitive attributes (or the specific details of issues included) and affective attributes (tone of the picture) (Koon et al., 2019).

Methodology

This study employs the methodology of qualitative content analysis through the theoretical framework of framing theory to analyze the film reviews written by critics of the Tamil gynocentric film *Gargi* (2022) in *The Hindu* and *The News Minute* respectively. They were analyzed on the basis of their content, writing style, framing and structure of the film review.

Qualitative content analysis is a research method to analyze and interpret the content of textual data such as written documents and other forms of communication. It also provides a systematic manner to identify patterns, concepts and larger themes within the textual data to gain insights about the meaning and context of the content. As compared to quantitative content analysis which systematically measures the presence and frequency of specific words, phrases or themes in a large sample of texts, qualitative content analysis through the processes of coding, counting and interpretation, explores the subtleties of the data and it answers the questions of “why”, “how” and “what”.

The reviews written by the film critics from *The Hindu* and *The News Minute* have been chosen for the purpose of this study as the newspaper *The Hindu* and the online media organization *The News Minute* are very well known and established media organizations in their respective fields. Thus, analyzing the reviews from these two organizations would be suitable for analyzing how the film critics in the print media and online media organizations have reviewed and written about a gynocentric film and also to analyze and study the similarities and differences between the film reviews written in the print and electronic media organizations by studying the film reviews published in *The Hindu* and *The News Minute* as a sample.

The film reviews written and published in *The Hindu* and *The News Minute* about the film *Gargi* were chosen for this study. This is due to the reason that among the Tamil female centric films such as *Sembi*, *Raangi*, *Driver Jamuna* and *Cadaver* which were released in the same year, *Gargi* was the film which had received positive reviews from various media organizations and had the highest IMDb ranking among all of the other such female centric films. (It had received a ranking of 8.1 on IMDb). Interestingly, the name of the film was the name of the female protagonist and it had also dealt with a serious problem concerning both women and girls; sexual assault.

The film *Gargi* was released on 15th July 2022 and was written and directed by the debutant film maker Gautam Ramachandran. The cast of the film includes the actress Sai Pallavi in the lead role and actors such as Kaali Venkat, R.S.Shivaji, Sudha S. and P.Rajalakshmi in the supporting roles. The plot of the film is about how a schoolteacher Gargi (Sai Pallavi) struggles to prove the innocence of her father, a security guard (R.S.Shivaji) when he is arrested for molesting a child.

Findings and Analysis

Content analysis of the film review of *Gargi* published in *The Hindu* newspaper

The film review of *Gargi* was written by Srinivasa Ramanujam for *The Hindu* newspaper and it was published on 14th July 2022 and updated on 22nd July 2022. The title of his review is “Gargi’ movie review: Sai Pallavi stars in an outstanding film that questions perspectives” and he has written his review in a factual and informational tone. The review also contained a table of the basic facts of the film.

It was framed in such a way that it praised the film as an amazing film which had questioned perspectives and the performances of the leading actors.

Ramanujam began his film review by drawing a comparison of the plot of the film to that of the film “Rocketry: The Nambi Effect” by explaining that the plot of the former film was about how a rocket scientist got embroiled in an espionage case and asked what if something like that happened to a security guard. Thus, he had drawn attention to the father of the female protagonist, Bramaananda (R.S.Shivaji) rather than the female protagonist herself from the beginning itself.

He went on to explain about the basic plot line of the film and praised the writing of the film and how the film showcased that a small change in perspective could make the people see things differently. Interestingly, the aspect of perspectives in the film is one of the focal points in the review which he also mentioned later in his review that it kept on focusing on the “prying eyes of the media, the judgmental eyes of the system and keeps asking questions.” He also

stated that the film made the people think about what they would have done if they were in Gargi's place.

He also praised the other aspects of the film such as music, cinematography and how it had went on "peeling the layers of the characters". He also praised the performances of the actress Sai Pallavi and Kaali Venkat: calling the former's performance as a wholesome performance that few actresses had given recently and interestingly while complimenting Kaali Venkat that he gave his best performance in the film, also noted that he "gets as much time as the female protagonist".

He had praised the film maker for having avoided casting a younger person in Kaali Venkat's role and not having inserted a romantic angle between the two leads (Sai Pallavi and Kaali Venkat). Thus, Ramanujam had indirectly mentioned Kaali Venkat as one of the principal protagonists of the films and gave him equal attention and space along with Sai Pallavi in his film review.

Except when he had commented about Sai Pallavi's performance, stating that she always went ahead in the film despite being frustrated and asking what the viewers would do if they were in her situation and also indirectly referred to her towards the ending of the film review by stating that "there was a father whose daughter is waiting to get married", Ramanujam's major focus was towards the writing of the film and its idea of perspectives.

Content analysis of the film review of *Gargi* published in *The News Minute*

The film review of the film was written by Sowmya Rajendran for *The News Minute* and it was published on 15th July 2022. She has written her review in the first-person narrative and employed an informal and personal tone.

Her review was titled "Gargi Review: Sai Pallavi is outstanding in an important, brilliant thriller" and it was followed by a disclaimer (emphasizing that the review was not commissioned with anyone associated with the film and the independence of the editorial) and a note about the writer.

The review was framed in such a way that it praised the film as a vital and "brilliant thriller" and the performance of Sai Pallavi. Sowmya placed a lot of

emphasis on the actress Sai Pallavi by praising her performance in the initial paragraphs of the film review and regularly mentions the name of the female protagonist in her article.

Interestingly, Sowmya also has written her film review in a high-level language by using words like 'voyeuristic', 'red herrings' and 'stock characters' and she also started her review by stating that how difficult it was for her to write a review for a film which "leaves your hands shaking" and also explains the reason as this was due to the fact that the film resonated so strongly with the growing up in a female body, which was an acknowledgement rarely given by cinema (Rajendran, 2021).

Thus, she had established a personal connection with the readers with the opening paragraph itself and she also gave an interesting explanation behind the name of the film itself which was mentioned in the Vedic texts : Gargi was the daughter of a sage and was a person of "great intellect with second to none." In addition to this, she was also considered to be one of the feminist icons.

She also returned to this explanation later when she explains about Gargi's father Bramaananda by saying that he was a security guard, unlike the sage. She also established that the film was a typical courtroom drama by explaining about how the director made use of the assumptions that viewers would normally have about such types of films and that it contained the typical characters associated with a film in this genre.

Sowmya also praised the casting of the film, including the trans woman who had portrayed the role of the judge and also noted that the police officer who was investigating the case of sexual assault against Gargi's father , who is named as Bennix Jayaraj, which is actually a combination of the names of the two men who had died in custodial violence in Tamil Nadu two years ago in 2020.

She had expressed her displeasure at how the sexual assault scenes were shot in the film; although she had acknowledged that it was more sensitive than the average film which had "voyeuristic sexual assault scenes". However, she called the focus on the blood pooling from beneath the body of the victim and the men taking off their shirts as unnecessary. She also made an important point that depicting graphic violence desensitized the people to the crime.

She concluded by saying that *Gargi* was an important film which has various takeaways and stating it deserved to be watched for “its unflinching portrayal of uncomfortable truths”.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although most of the Tamil films features actors in the lead roles, the Tamil gynocentric films reverse this by featuring the actresses as the female protagonists and actors portraying supporting roles to them. Many Tamil female centric films have been released both in the theatres and OTT platforms. The success and prominence of these films have led to debates and discussions about the various aspects of the films such as the story, screenplay, writing and the performances of the lead actors etc.

The review of the film *Gargi* which was published in *The Hindu* was written by Srinivasa Ramanujam, a male while the review of the film which was published in *The News Minute* was written by Sowmya Rajendran, a female.

In their reviews of the film, both Srinivasa Ramanujam and Sowmya Rajendran have praised the director Gautam Ramachandran, the performance of the protagonist *Gargi* (Sai Pallavi), how the film works as a courtroom drama and a thriller and the casting of the film especially casting a transwoman as the judge investigating the case. Thus, both of them have written in praise of the female protagonist in the film.

Both the critics praising how the film works as a courtroom drama is in accordance with the findings of the study of film reviews carried out by Leggett (2005) that the notions of genre play an important role in the reviewing of the film by the film reviewers. They had also interestingly followed a free and unstructured format of reviewing the film and did not rate the film.

However, there are some differences between the two reviews. While the film review written by Ramanujam and published in *The Hindu* was written in the perspective of the third person, Sowmya had frequently using the word “you” in her review, thus directly addressing the viewers.

There is also a small column about the details of the film such as the title, cast, director and storyline and interestingly the film review was written by the film critic before the release of the film, as he had mentioned in the review that the film would be releasing in theatres on the succeeding Friday.

Interestingly, although Ramanujam had mentioned about how the film had raised important points about sexual abuse in a couple of lines and praised the performance of Sai Pallavi, his major focus was on the writing of the film, its focus on perspectives and how it had worked very well as a courtroom drama and thriller. He had also praised the music and photography of the film.

He had also started his review by comparing it with the plot of the film *Rocketry* which was directed by the actor R. Madhavan and said that the plot of the film *Gargi* was about what happened to a security guard (Gargi's father) who had been arrested in a case of sexual assault of a child. Thus, he had shifted the focus of the film towards the male character (Gargi's father) and introduces and informs the readers about the plot of the film in this aspect before moving on to discuss about the film and even the performance of the female protagonist.

Ramanujam had also praised the performance of the actor Kaali Venkat who had essayed the role of a lawyer who helps Gargi to argue the case against her father and noting that he had as much screen time as the protagonist and also praised that the film has utilised his performance to the maximum and also urged the audience to watch him delivering a particular dialogue in the film.

Thus, Ramanujam had placed focus and attention on the male characters (Gargi's father and the lawyer) while reviewing a female centric film and praising the performance of the female protagonist. However, he had pointed out the flashback portions of the film, the character of the female journalist and the characters of Gargi's other family members ought to be fleshed out better as some of the drawbacks of the film.

Sowmya who had reviewed the film for the *The NewsMinute*, wrote the review in a first person narrative and it was like as if she was talking and engaging with the readers about the film *Gargi*.

She had written about the film and engaged with the film *Gargi* on a personal level as a female, as compared to a film critic. She spoke about how shocked

was she to discover a film which connected so well with the experience of her growing in a female body and noted that this was a rare acknowledgement given by cinema and also mentioned that the film makes a strong statement about sexual assault, agency and empathy.

She also noted that this was a vital film which should be watched which has many takeaways and it had also portrayed uncomfortable truths and she placed a lot of emphasis on the female protagonist by praising her performance and also mentioned that how her excellent performance led the audience into a different situation in the film at the same time making them believe that they know what was transpiring in the film. She also focused upon how the film addresses issues of sexual assault and agency and how it had worked as a courtroom drama.

The film review written by her for the online media organization also contained the Twitter link of the writer and also the links of the article on various social media websites such as Twitter (now known as X), WhatsApp and Facebook. Thus, readers could also share the film review on social media.

Thus, it has been observed through the analysis of the film reviews published in a newspaper and an online news media organization of a female centric film that while the film review published in the online news media organization contained the social media links of the author and article, followed by a disclaimer that this review was not commissioned by anyone linked with the film and an introduction of the film.

Although the review of the film which was published on the newspaper did not have links of the social media websites, it was written before the release of the film.

It was also observed that the gender of the reviewers played a role in the nature and type of analysis of a Tamil female centric film as, while both of the critics praised the film and the performance of the heroine, Ramanujam who had written for *The Hindu*, focused a lot on the writing of the film and how it addressed the ideas of perspectives and Sowmya while writing for *The News Minute* had focused a lot about how the film resonated with her as a female and also how she was engaged with the performance of the protagonist.

The limitation of the study is its very small sample size and further studies could be carried out with various reviews of two or more gynocentric films from Tamil or other Indian language female centric films. Further research could also focus on how female critics have written for a gynocentric film directed by a female director as such type of films would express the ideals of feminism and female characters even better and strongly.

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