

## Fitmus Test Analysis of Women Centric Tamil Films by Women Filmmakers

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### ABSTRACT

*Films have always been a successful medium of conveying messages to audience of all classes. While it is glorified for the recreation it gives to its audience, it cannot be denied that they are also carries of powerful messages. Cinema is often said to be a reflection of the society in an exaggerated version and many films try to convey impactful messages to the society aiming at some reformation in the way people think. False beliefs and ideologies are often criticized in movies even in the early 70's and continue to remain even now. Apart from a strong story line, women have always remained as the main source of entertainment in movies. They are represented as sex objects and submissive to the protagonist who accepts patriarchy even in crudest form and still enduring patience. While majority of the movies glorify women as sex objects, few movies have taken women in the lead role and have tried to convey that women are no less than men. While there are many yardsticks that help determine whether a film really talks about women empowerment, like the Bechdel test (1985), The Mako Mori test (2013), Sexy Lamp Test (2013), Furiosa test (2015), these tests are more suitable for movies of the west. The Fitmus Test (2017) is designed for Indian films which is a combination of all the tests and additionally says that a film must have 'female character integrity, and that they are not for mere 'male utility'. The test also demands that the films should have cultural sensitivity. This study aims to analyze women centric Tamil movies directed by women film makers and see whether they really empower womanhood.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Ever since its inception films are considered to be a great source of recreation to the mass. Though it mainly provides entertainment, its role in education, politics, social and moral life has great significance. It is interesting to note that our Indian Cinema has always remained vibrant all these years with eminent directors who have touched us emotionally about the harmful effects of our superstitious and patriarchal beliefs. Vivacious directors have represented issues of women and worked towards women empowerment post independence. Our society which is largely patriarchal has accepted these films, thus evident that such thoughts are welcomed by our society. Hence it is interesting to study how these films have portrayed feminism amongst their audience. While there are many tests to analyse feminism in films, the Fitmus test gives lot of scope to analyse movies in the Indian context. Hence this research paper attempts to review women centric movies by women filmmakers.

### WOMEN FILMMAKERS

Our Indian society has witnessed many powerful directors. Though India is a patriarchal country, women have never left any field unturned and proved that they are at par excellence to men. Apart from famous male directors like A.P. Nagarajan, P. Madhavan and Bhimsingh, Tamil Cinema has witnessed female directors even in the pre independence era. Famous works of directors like Savithri, Jayadevi, Banumathi, Anjali Devi, Lakshmi and Sripriya to Jeya Chitra, Revathy, Rohini and Gayathri Pushkar in recent times have made their way to box

office. These directors have amused the audience with their own style of storytelling which also had strong messages.

### FEMINISM IN FILMS

Feminism – the less spoken topic in any patriarchal society has been discussed in Indian films to some extent. More than the female directors, male directors have shown great interest in directing women centric movies. These movies often have the lead character or the protagonist as the female and the story usually revolves around her sacrifice or hardships that she faces in her life. While male directors have made attempts to emphasis feminism in the mind of the audience of a particular society, it is quite anxious to know whether the great female directors of tamil cinema have made an attempt to show the true potential of womanhood.

### TESTS TO EVALUATE FEMINISM IN FILMS

Often films have their own representation of 'feminism' which mostly relate to sexist images of women. The society has by and large failed to raise any comments against such objectification of women as the general mind set of the audience is that cinema is a medium of entertainment and whatever is shown is just for fun. Most of the films we see on screen have abusive men who stalk the heroine, pass lewd comments, kidnap women and threaten them, dance with scantily dressed women and yet wins over the heart of the women. Unfortunately most of these films are marketed under the banner of women empowerment. To understand whether a film really empowers women, few tests have been proposed.

**THE BECHDEL TEST (1985)**

Also referred as the Bechdel-Wallace Test it requires a movie to have the following three things

- a) Two female characters (preferably named)
- b) Who Talks to each other
- c) About something other than a man.

These rules appeared in a comic strip “Dykes to watch out for” by Alison Bechdel. The test was criticized widely as many films which were not showing women positively also passed the test, as it does not require moral or ethical judgment or the depth of female characters in the movie.

**SEXY LAMP TEST (2013)**

This interesting test measures the importance given to the role of a female character in a film. The test says that if the main female character of the movie is replaced with a sexy lamp and if the story still doesn’t change, then it fails the test. This test has got nothing to do with a woman being scantily dressed or appears sexy. If a story does not pass the sexy lamp test it means that the plot would still remain the same even if the female character was replaced with a sexy lamp. Such a movie can be considered as a poor representation of feminism.

**MAKO MORI TEST (2013)**

This test named after a character in the movie ‘Pacific Rim’ was considered a suitable alternative to the Bechdel test by many as it had parameters which could justify feminist films. The Mako Mori Test suggested that the film should have the following in order to pass the test:

- a) At least one female character
- b) Who gets her own narrative arc
- c) That is not about supporting a man’s story.

The test was not proposed as an alternative to the Bechdel test, but as an extra tool to analyse women representation in films.

**FURIOSA TEST (2015)**

A step ahead of the sexy lamp test (2013), the Furiosa test demands a movie to have the following:

- a) Female who gets her own narrative arc
- b) Clear female orientations to the happenings on screen

This test was considered to be the most difficult test than the other three and was criticized as being very feministic. In short it was considered that if a film was boycotted by men then it passes the Furiosa test.

The above tests are largely applicable to the films of the west, as most of the Indian films would surely fail these tests. This leaves Indian cinema with a lack of theory to test Indian films. It is also understood that when western theories are applied on Indian films, there are great chances that many aspects of Indian cinema will fail to get noticed. Hence the Fitmus test was introduced as an attempt to study Indian films in Indian Context.

**FITMUS TEST (2017)**

The ‘Female Integrity, Male utility sensitivity test’ or the ‘Fitmus’ test is a summation of the four previous tests and additionally it demands that the movie should have the following in order to pass the test.

- a) The films should have female character integrity
- b) The female character should not be present for male utility
- c) The female characters have to be handled with cultural sensitivity.

This test has been gaining popularity amongst feminists and research scholars working on women empowerment as it helps analyse a movie in the Indian context. It helps bring out whether the women centric films really convey the message that they intend to the Indian audience.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study was build up on the qualitative content analysis of women centric Tamil movies by female filmmakers using Fitmus test. There were many female directors in Tamil cinema since 1930. Many female filmmakers have worked on bold subjects and captivated the audience in various plots. However, only few of them seemed to have concentrated on women empowerment. It was found that three movies had women centric characters directed by women in Tamil cinema. Hence those movies were taken for analysis using the Fitmus test.

**FILMS TAKEN FOR ANALYSIS**

The films chosen for the study are:

S. No	Movie	Director	Year
1	Indira	Suhasini Maniratnam	1995
2	Aarohanam	Lakshmy Ramakrishnan	2012
3	Irudhi Suttru	Sudha Kongara	2016

**PARAMETERS**

The following parameters were considered for analysis of the films chosen for the study.

S. No	Parameter	Description
1	Female character Integrity	Consistency of the female character throughout the movie
2	Male Utility	Whether the character does any important action(s) or makes any decision for the male character of the film
3	Cultural Sensitivity	Analysis of anything that portrays the culture of the particular group shown in the plot (like the costume, slang, rituals etc.)

## RESULTS

When the Bechdel test was applied to the movies selected for the study, it was found that all the three movies had clearly passed the test, with female protagonists who were named like *Indira* (*Indira*), *Nirmala* (*Arohanam*) and *Madhi* (*Irudhi Suttru*). *Indira* from the movie *Indira* talks boldly in various situations with courage and exhibits fearlessness. She discusses about saving the lives of her villagers and takes care in their welfare. *Nirmala* in the movie *Arohanam* is portrayed as a woman with bipolar disorder. To suit the plot she is depicted as a divorced mother who takes care of her kids with hard work and determination and the discussion mainly revolves around the children and their welfare. Similarly *Madhi* from *Irudhi suttru* is portrayed as a woman from the slum who earn hard for their living but still good at boxing. She is shown to discuss about family welfare and about boxing with other characters in the movie. All the three movies had female characters apart from the protagonists who were named discussed some topics other than a man with them.

These movies easily pass the sexy lamp test also as these movies wouldn't move an inch further if the female characters are replaced by a sexy lamp. Indeed it was interesting to note that such characters were present as male members of the film in the movie '*Arohanam*' where the plot of the story wouldn't have changed if few male characters in the movie were substituted with a sexy lamp.

Applying the *Mako Mori Test* (2013) to these movies indicate that the movie *Indira* and *Arohanam* did not have any major motive of action that supported a man's story. However the movie '*Irudhi Suttru*' had the main Protagonist *Madhi* orienting towards the male character (coach) of the movie. All the three movies had their female characters with their own narrative arcs.

*Furiosa Test* (2015) demands the movies to have clear female orientations to the happenings on the screen apart from having their own narrative arc. The movies selected for the story not only follows a women's story but shows them with all the might and anger of the women involved in the plot in various situations involved in the plot. Hence these movies clearly pass the *Furiosa Test*.

After analysis of the western tests, the films were analyzed for the Indian *Fitmus Test* and the parameters are discussed.

### FEMALE CHARACTER INTEGRITY

This main parameter of the *Fitmus test* was applied to all the movies selected for the study and it was interesting to note that all the three protagonists (*Indira*, *Nirmala* and *Madhi*) of the three movies had maintained their character integrity throughout the films. Consistency of their character was shown in various situations.

### CHARACTER STUDY OF INDIRA

*Indira* is shown as a fearless girl, in childhood even when her friends play pranks with her by burying her till neck. She seemed to exhibit a sense of belonging to the development of a peaceful society amongst her villagers, with a hope that children can create a change in the society. She refuses to go with *Thiyagu*, her fiancé, when he calls her to leave everything behind and come with him to lead a good life without worries about the upper caste and the lower caste. She was an active participant in the election campaign of her father and after his

death, slowly takes up charge, knowingly in some places and unknowingly in some other situations.

*Indira's* courage was shown in various places where she crosses the river to save the life of a pregnant woman. She says that a river is a common property and she has all the rights over it like the upper caste people. When violence breaks out in the village for crossing the river, and she was criticized by her uncle for her stupid actions without knowing the consequences, she apologizes to the villagers for causing trouble to them. But *Indira's* mother, who has also been shown as a bold lady right from the start of the movie, tells her daughter that even if her father was there he would have done the same thing that *Indira* did and she says that it is because of her that the pregnant mother and her child are alive now. Everyone praises her courage and boldness and she feel that what she does is right, seeking social approval. *Indira* also talks to the villagers and make them realise that they were wrong in burning the house of the upper caste men.

However in certain situations she feels that she is incompetent to fill her father's place and men from her own family, like her uncle will take care of the village administration. After some time she is shown restless at home about the happenings in the panchayat and decides to have a visit there, where she feels that there were unwanted discussions and she talks to the villagers in front of her uncle saying that they have to go for the auction for fishing as it is an important source of their livelihood. When the villagers are happy with her final word, she feels that they have left even before her uncle has given the final verdict, which shows that she does not want to be the leader but at the same time cannot keep quiet to injustice.

She also talks boldly to the minister and says that the reason for all the burning issue is that their generation cannot keep quiet like their ancestors, silently witnessing the suffering that they endure. She even takes all the lower caste children to the upper caste village river and makes them bathe in it as the upper caste men shaved the head of two lower caste children for bathing in their river. When the antagonist advices her to learn cooking and stay at home to be away from politics and trouble, she maintains a calm temperament and asks him why he killed her father, and she is not able to forget that incident.

Towards the climax, she even meets the Antagonist at his residence, even after she was molested by a group of upper caste men. She talks to him about finding a solution to the problem which has been burning with the two castes for many years, for which the antagonist clearly refuses to cooperate. She tells him that the future generation will be free of any caste bias which shows her consistency in character right from childhood. She also remarks that it is not caste but lack of humanity which is the main reason for the problem, which shows her maturity in handling the situations and character consistency throughout the movie.

### CHARACTER STUDY OF NIRMALA

*Nirmala*, the protagonist of the movie '*Arohanam*' also exhibits character consistency throughout the movie. As a young divorcee, and mother of two kids, *Nirmala* shows strong will power in bringing them up without the help of her husband who left her for her bipolar disorder. She does various jobs like selling vegetables in a tricycle, selling food and also being a LIC agent. When she is called for the parent teacher interview,

she asks the son's teacher whether the teacher needs a policy as she is an agent.

*Nirmala* shows strong character consistency right from the beginning, even in places where her bipolar disorder is shown. She never wanted to stay with her mother, even when she was separated from her husband. She always keeps the children with her even while working and selling vegetables in the streets. She is depicted as a caring mother who is ready to do anything for the children and at the same time an angry mother with bipolar disorder who cannot tolerate the mistakes of her kids. Those were very well depicted in scenes where she burns her hand to punish the son for visiting her husband without her knowledge and when she empties the whole vessel of food on the floor when the child refuses to eat it. She dances happily in the pub, which was later explained again as a reason of bipolar disorder and when the singer stops singing she gets wild on her as well. On the whole, *Nirmala* exhibits clear character consistency throughout the movie.

### CHARACTER STUDY OF MADHI

*Madhi* from '*Irudhi Suttru*' is a girl from the slum area of Chennai, who is also well versed in boxing. She sells fish for her livelihood and the whole family is dependent on the police job that the elder daughter *Lakshmi* would get out of sports quota in boxing. However the coach finds out *Madhi's* real talent in boxing and trains her to be a champion. Initially *Madhi* does not like him as she feels that he is a womaniser and just agrees to learn boxing from him only to get the money he pays to teach her the art. Her consistency in character is well established when she tells the coach not to touch her and speak and addressing him as old man. She also tells her sister that she agreed to the deal just because she wants their family to be happy with the money she gets from the coach. This is also justified in scenes where *Madhi* loses the match willingly after her sister gets selected, just to reassure the coach that she is not interested in getting training from him.

*Madhi's* concern towards her family, her sister and their well being is shown in various scenes where she does not question her sister when she breaks her hand before getting ready for the match. What cannot be quite convincing is the fact that she tries to impress the coach with fish curry which she made and wears a *saree* while trying to express her love towards him, which makes it quite stereotypical. However the coach replies that he finds her beautiful only in the boxing suit with an ugly mouth guard on her face. On the whole *Madhi* is depicted as determined woman who does what she wants and at the same time concerned about the welfare of her family too.

### MALE UTILITY

The next interesting part of the Fitmus test is the male utility test, which says that a film fails the test if the female characters are present for male utility. The three movies selected for the study were analysed for any male utility present and it was found that both the movies *Indira* and *Arohanam* did not have any male utility. However, the movie '*Irudhi suttru*' seemed to exhibit 'Male utility' to a large extent.

*Thiyagu*, the male character of the movie *Indira* is only found to support her in various occasions. When *Indira* gives up courage to face the situation after she was molested, *Thiyagu* replies that she is completely alright and the villagers need her as she is the right person to guide them. He also acts as a moral support to her trying to build up the character of

*Indira*. Even in places where *Indira* is shown to take up the responsibility of her father, it is not shown as something that she is doing for her father, but it comes as a blend of her character consistency. So it can be clearly read that the movie sans any male utility and clearly passes the test.

Similarly in the movie '*Arohanam*' *Nirmala* fights against all odds only for her children and has nothing to do with her husband. Whatever she does for her children is also to show him that she can run the family without his help. The other woman who married *Nirmala's* husband also seemed to exhibit kindness towards *Nirmala* and does not justify his action of leaving *Nirmala* and marrying her. She nurses her in the hospital and consoles the children when they search for their missing mother. Such scenes depict that there is clearly no male utility in the movie '*Arohanam*'

The movie *Irudhi Suttru* was found to have lot of male utility factors where it is shown that *Madhi*, the protagonist, fights the match only for her master. Initially when she showed dislike towards him she does not respect him and loses a match willingly to show his hatred towards him. Later when she learns that he is trying to do good to her, she changes her mind and falls in love with him. Certain dialogues like that she will play for her '*Prabhu* master' who believes her, and telling in the press meet that she can win anyone if her *Prabhu* master is with her, clearly exhibits male utility. After she wins the final match she hugs her coach leaving the audience to wonder whether it was really a student – Teacher relationship or love between them which make them so emotional. Though *Madhi* is shown as iron fisted, strong and determined, it is depicted that she is a big failure without her master. Hence this movie clearly exhibits male utility and fails the Fitmus test.

### CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

When talking about cultural sensitivity, each film had its own style of representing it in its beautiful form. The movie *Indira* had its own beauty of the rural atmosphere, accompanied with its rich culture and customs. Being a story based on caste, the director has very well established the age old customs and traditions that our people follow. The dressing style and the ornaments of the villagers are very well portrayed with emphasis on traditional music and dance. When *Indira's* mother is widowed, there was again a ceremony showing the custom of removing bangles, *bindhi* and draping a white *saree*. There was also a traditional function of sowing the seeds in the land on a particular month so that the harvest is bountiful. This festival called as '*Nalleru*' is usually done by the eldest son or daughter of the village and *Indira* is requested to do so by the villagers. The seeds, the cow and the land are considered very sacred and the same is shown in the movie too. The slang of the people used in the village is also maintained throughout the movie. Hence *Indira* does give lot of importance to cultural sensitivity.

*Arohanam* too had its own style of expressing cultural sensitivity clearly demarking it between the upper class society and the lower class society. While *Nirmala* who toils the whole day to make her both ends meet is shown with cotton saree in bright colours, big *bindhi* and flowers in her hair, *Sandy*, another female character from the upper caste is shown as someone who feels that marriage, children, tradition etc are not her cup of tea. *Nirmala* is always shown to decorate the house with colourful rangoli and advices *Sandy* and her friend to wear colourful bright sarees and keep big pottu (*bidhi*) like her. She is mostly found in the temple whenever she is angry.

The movie *Irudhi suttru* too had its own blend of cultural sensitivity depicting the life of people in the slum. Usage of words, addressing someone without respect, though no offence is meant is all portrayed so well in the movie. The dress code, the slang, and the life style are all flawless in the movie. *Madhi* is shown as a fan of the hero *Dhanush* and carries his photo always in her purse and later replaces his picture with the picture of the coach. Overall the movie passes the cultural sensitivity test as the life of a girl from the slum and her way to world championship in boxing.

## DISCUSSION

The Fitmus test analysis gives a new perspective to analyse Indian movies. This test can be applied to any movie and tested for women empowerment portrayed in the mainstream media. It also helps in understanding how patriarchy is passively given to the audience and make the women in the society believe that they are really empowered. Though the films have strong female characters, it is somewhere injected in the mind of the audience that women empowerment is all about forgiving the worst form of patriarchy and living for the male gender of the society. The Fitmus test guides us to the feminist perspective and makes us understand what real woman empowerment is all about.

## CONCLUSION

From this study it is observed that women empowerment is a topic that is less spoken by women filmmakers. In this era of globalization and modernization women have become even more vulnerable to criticisms. The real meaning of women empowerment is often misunderstood and there is a wrong assumption that putting down men or imitating their actions and gestures is the meaning of women empowerment. Real women empowerment is so much more than these and films as a medium of mass communication must try to teach this to the society. Filmmakers should be more responsible in insisting the positive side of women rather than always showing her as an attractive sexy tool. More female filmmakers should come up with ideas that empower women and create confidence to the rural folks too, as cinema is a medium which is easily reached by all the class of the society. Men must be shown to respect womanhood rather than stalking her, threatening her, abusing her and finally marrying her. Women must also be shown in a positive way rather than being sex objects and glorifying the violence of the hero by acknowledging that as bravery. It has to be understood that our ancestors showed great respect to women and we have deviated to this patriarchal form after so many changes that the society underwent. Nevertheless woman has to be praised and glorified for all that she has endured and feminism has to be portrayed in the correct sense to the female folklore of the society and reinforced time and again to everyone, as cinema is the potential medium to create the change in an easy and understanding way.

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