

**"INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM IN THE SOUTH INDIAN BIOPIC "THALAIVI" –
A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE"**

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Abstract:

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American professor, coined the term "intersectionality" to describe how various individual characteristics such as race, class, gender, and other factors overlap and intersect with one another. Intersectional feminism is a subset of feminism which recognizes the distinct identities and experiences of all women and acknowledges that all forms of discrimination overlap. Its ultimate goal is to achieve social and political equity by addressing the social stratification based on class, gender, race, sexual orientation, creed, disability, and age. Though initially a movement intended to explore female oppression, intersectionality has been criticized for being too broad, with its focus on subjective experiences making it difficult to identify shared sources of oppression. The south Indian biopic Thalaivi serves as an example of intersectionality in action, as it portrays the story of the actress and former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Dr. J. Jayalalitha, who finds the courage to challenge societal norms and celebrate life.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Film, Gender, Biopic, South Indian Films

Introduction and Review of Literature

Intersectionality is an expansive framework aimed at understanding the interconnectedness of various marginalized experiences and identities such as disability, race, class, gender, and sexuality. Intersectional feminism is an important concept that acknowledges that not all women will face the same struggles and highlights how these overlapping structures of oppression will disproportionately impact certain vulnerable segments of the population. The term intersectionality was originally coined by African-American legal scholar and social theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in her 1989 paper "Demarginalizing The Intersection Of Race And Sex: A Black Feminist Critique Of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, And Antiracist Politics." Intersectional feminism seeks to analyse how multiple forms of discrimination intersect to disadvantage individuals and communities, taking into account intersectional classifications like race, class, disability, gender, religion, creed, age, and sexual orientation. The purpose of intersectionality is to understand how the combination of all these types of oppression create unique and complex forms of discrimination. This understanding can be utilized to promote social and political equality by recognizing how those experiences differ from person to person and by addressing the specific needs of those experiencing marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectional theory, an offshoot of feminism, seeks to explain and eradicate the unequal treatment and subjugation of people of colour and other minority populations. The idea is that prejudice and oppression transcend single aspects of someone's identity, such as "female" or "black," and are instead informed by the intersection of multiple identity markers. This intersection creates a complex web of power dynamics that manifest in different ways for different people. By understanding how this works, advocates for social justice are better equipped to address oppressive systems. Intersectional theory began as an exploration into women of colour's experiences, but has since broadened to include everyone who is disadvantaged by intersecting identity markers, such as LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, and more. It is more critical than ever for activists and organizations engaging in activism to join in conversations about these complex identities. Seeing these matters through an intersectional lens is a way to empower ourselves to stand up against systemic oppression. This theory is a major reason people are seen, heard, and respected, and is fundamental to achieving true equality (Crenshaw, 2003).

In India, it is often seen that men have more authority and control over different roles such as political leadership, moral authority, social advantages, and ownership of property (Mukherjee, 2019). This clearly articulates the patriarchal nature of the environment in which women exist. Manusmriti, a major authority on social conduct in Indian society, firmly states that a young girl should begin to follow the guidance of her father (Sharma, 2019). This is seen as a major aspect of the patriarchal system of Indian society since traditionally, women were expected to be devoted to their husbands at a young age, after which they were expected to be devoted to their children once the father had passed away, never having the chance to gain independence. According to Manusmriti, a woman should take responsibility for the safety of her home, take care of her housework properly, and clean the utensils thoroughly. Even after her husband's passing, she must still respect and obey him faithfully. This is seen in the way traditional roles for women have been portrayed in both Indian commercial cinema and biopics about women achievers. This demonstrates the impact that Manusmriti has had in terms of promoting patriarchal values in Indian society (Kaur et al., 2020).

Methodology

This paper seeks to evaluate the interrelation between various intersectional factors, such as gender, religion, caste, age, education, occupation, income, and the way they contribute to the portrayal of female characters within the women biopic *Thalaivi*. McCall (2005) discusses the implications of intersecting identities are diverse, totalling to a multifaceted, nuanced understanding of a person's experience. Further, accumulations of these distinct qualities not only inherently shape individual's lives, but can also influence the narrative, character building and representation of gender in various forms of media, including film (Collins, 2000). Through the critical lenses of intersectionality, there will be an exploration into the ways in which these factors play a role in the depiction of female characters in *Thalaivi*.

Findings

Intersectionality in the film *Thalaivi*:

Thalaivi is a biographical South Indian Tamil movie about the late Dr. J. Jayalalitha and her inspirational voyage throughout her life. Beginning as a young actress in the Tamil film industry, she ultimately ascends to a powerful and revolutionary political position, *Thalaivi*, while struggling against the male-dominated political scene.

The movie has 10 female characters, each with their own unique traits, as highlighted in the accompanying table.

S. No	Character	Character Traits
01	J. Jayalalitha	Independent, Fearless, Ambitious, Stubborn, Caring, Determined, Focussed, Intelligent, Humorous, Generous, Friendly, Versatile, Enthusiastic, Bold, Authoritative, Beautiful, Bossy, Feminist, Confident.
02.	Sandhya (Jaya's Mother)	Caring, Affectionate Mother, Single Mother, Ill-health
03.	V.N Janaki (MGR Wife)	Loving, Caring – Wife,
04.	Sasi (Sasikala)	Middle class Women, Supportive
05.	Indira Gandhi	Calm, Intelligent, Powerful
06.	Saroja Devi	Arrogant, Beautiful, Princess, Love towards MJR, Disrespectful
07.	Rajammal (R.M. Veerappan Wife)	House Wife, Voiceless, Dutiful to the husband.
08.	Secretary (Prime Minister's Office)	Modern, Working, Calm, obedient
09.	Lady Doctor	Poor, Child Labour, School Dropout, Educated, Caring
10.	Actress (Vidhya Pradeep)	Actress, Dutiful Wife to Hero, Emotional

A biographical picture about the life of Dr. J. Jayalalitha has been portrayed in the movie Thalaivi. Therefore, my analysis will focus on the primary character of the cinematic work.

Gender:

The biopic Thalaivi gave us a glimpse into the struggle of the female protagonist, Jaya, to deal with the patriarchal society she lived in. The film begins with a powerful scene of her being physically abused by an opposing M.L.A in the Tamil Nadu assembly, showing the disrespect and lack of dignity women often faced. Jaya's attempts to ally with the Congress Party and her highly successful mission of convincing the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, were not appreciated and she was eventually expelled from the party, illustrating men's domination over her. In another scene, Jaya is pushed away while the body of her husband, MJR, is transported to its final resting place, from which we can draw the conclusion that her husband's male relatives took control of the situation, making it clear that women were not to have a say. Lastly, at the end of the movie, Jaya has been appointed Chief Minister of her state, yet she is still expected to be controlled by the men in her party, who have the power to dictate her actions, unable to break the cycle of male dominance.

Marital Status & Family Status:

The book of Manusmriti promotes the idea that Indian women should be devoted to men, and that they will be respected if they are a part of a family unit with their husbands or fathers. In the biopic, the main character, Jaya, displays a strong sense of independence, residing with her mother in the early stages of her life, and then continuing to lead a solo existence when her mother passes away. Additionally, since Jaya works in the film industry - an area notorious for its gossip and disrespect towards women - she is even more empowered by having an experienced mentor in the form of MJR who guides her through both the film industry and politics. This sparks rumours about their relationship, given that Jaya is a young and independent woman who is still unattached.

Occupation

The biopic Thalaivi tells the story of Jaya who, at the start of the film, is a successful actress in the male-dominated film industry. When she fails to greet influential filmmaker MJR upon entering a studio, the producer RNV warns her mother that it may be her last movie. Despite obstacles and disrespect, she breaks through barriers and achieves superstar status.

In the course of the movie, the character Jaya plays the role of a politician. Within the political arena, her intellect, self-assurance, and expertise enable her to bring positive change to her party and to bring about initiatives for the welfare of the underprivileged and young people. Unfortunately, many of the male members of the party were keen on getting rid of Jaya because she was becoming increasingly popular, thus undercutting their own power and influence. At one point, Jaya aspired to be the Chief Ministerial candidate of the party, but many men within the party opposed this as they did not want to have a woman being over them.

Jaya faced a difficult situation on March 25th, 1989 while in the assembly as an opposition leader. Men from both the ruling party and the opposition, mistreated her and dragged her from the Tamil Nadu assembly after slapping her. In her pain and humiliation, she made a vow to return only when she was the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. Even in her suffering, Jaya made an analogy to Draupadi of the Mahabharata who was also disrespected by men. While fighting for her goals and dreams, Jaya withstood the resistance from both parties i.e., from her own party and her opposition party and eventually rose as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, despite the hardships and trials she had to endure.

Knowledge:

Though men and women are equal in every way, in this male-dominated world, men fail to recognize or appreciate the knowledge that women possess. Men tend to take for granted the invaluable wisdom and insights that women bring to the table, even though it is the same knowledge that adds

to the wealth of the entire society. In this day and age, it is more important than ever that gender equality be championed and that men and women be treated as equal partners when it comes to sharing their knowledge and experiences. It is only by valuing every individual's contribution that true equality and progress can be achieved.

At one scene in the meeting, all the political party members present were anxious about attending a public meeting at Thirunchendur. Jaya then made a poignant remark, suggesting that the king should not proceed ahead of the dalapathi when war is imminent. Her profound wisdom was proven, and Jaya accompanied the team to the public event. There, she demonstrated her aptitude and utilized her intellect to aid the people in understanding the contentious issue at hand and helping them make their decision in favour of her political party.

When the situation arose that necessitated a strategic alliance with the center, it seemed that no man in the party was capable of doing it. But to the surprise of many, Jaya was able to bring about a successful linkage cleverly and articulately with the Congress party. This served as testament to her being highly intelligent and skilled. Despite her undeniable intelligence, Jaya has not been given the appropriate recognition for her understanding and aptitude by the men around her. In lieu of this, this particular scene truly illustrated her strength of knowledge and sharpness of mind.

Physical Appearance:

The character Jaya in this biopic highlighted how female physical appearances are held to a much higher and more critical standard than those of men. In the beginning of her career, Jaya was depicted as slim and attractive, likely reflecting the expectations from production companies that she takes on leading-lady roles. As she aged, however, opportunities for her to act as the heroine began to diminish, and she was instead offered the role of the protagonist's sister. This is a phenomenon that has become far too common in the industry, but one that typically does not impact male actors who tend to remain in leading roles regardless of their age.

Conclusion:

Through this exploratory intersectionality analysis of this biopic, it became evident that historically, women have not been presented in the same manner as men. Consequently, the director of this film showcased the main character, Jaya, in a manner that was distinctive from the male biopics. By portraying Jaya as a woman of power and determination, her story aimed at highlighting the many obstacles that women must face due to their gender, physical appearance, knowledge, and family and marital status in society. Jaya is portrayed as an individual with intelligence, knowledge, stubbornness, care, and focus, with her dialogue to the MLAs at the end of the biopic serving as a testament to her strength and courage. She stated that if they treat her as a mother, she will take care of them, while simultaneously noting that they may also view her as a woman, an allusion to the oppression she faced in her journey. This message was critical in demonstrating to viewers the power of resilience, despite the discrimination and inequality.

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