

“BREAKING STEREOTYPES: MALE PROTAGONISTS IN THE CINEMATIC WORLD OF SUDHA KONGARA”

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Abstract:

This paper looks at how the male protagonist character has changed over the course of three films directed by Sudha Kongara: *PaavaKadhaigal* (2020), *SooraraiPottru* (2020), and *IrudhiSuttru* (2016). Through an examination of the roles, motives, and development arcs of these characters, this study seeks to understand the ways in which Sudha Kongara represents masculinity and the socio-cultural aspects influencing these characterisations.

In the movie *IrudhiSuttru*, R. Madhavan portrayed the character of Prabhu Selvaraj, a disgraced boxing trainer who wants to get his life back by helping a poor girl. His persona emphasizes themes of resilience and personal transformation with its rugged appearance and hidden kindness. The transformation from a hard-drinking, aggressive figure to a committed tutor exemplifies Kongara's early investigation of masculinity through a redemption arc in the characterisation of Prabhu Selvaraj. *SooraraiPottru* introduces NedumaaranRajangam the character portrayed by Suriya, is a figure based on the life of G. R. Gopinath. Nedumaaran's aim is to make air travel affordable for the common man shows him as a visionary leader. His persona strikes an equilibrium between profound concern for the underprivileged and unwavering determination in expressing bigger societal ideas. This film reflects Kongara's trend towards portraying varied individuals with complex personal and professional lives.

Sathar (Kalidas Jayaram) is a transgender lady who is rejected by society and her family in the "Thangam" chapter of *PaavaKadhaigal*. Sathar's personality represents both strength and vulnerability, defying gender stereotypes. Her journey is a moving exploration of humanity, love, and the fatal implications of social discrimination. This portrayal deviates significantly from traditional masculinity, emphasizing the terrible reality experienced by India's LGBTQ+ minority.

A comparative analysis of these films indicates a dynamic and developing depiction of male protagonists. Kongara's characters are broad and multidimensional, ranging from personal salvation to social influence and questioning the stereotypical norms. This progression not only reflects her professional development as a filmmaker, but also larger shifts in societal ideas regarding masculinity and gender roles in South Indian films.

Keywords:

Gender Representation, South Indian Cinema, Masculinity, Tamil Cinema, Gender Stereotypes, LGBTQ+ identities.

Introduction& Review of Literature

Tamil cinema, which makes up a sizable component of South Indian cinema, is widely acknowledged as a powerful storytelling medium that both reflects and creates social and cultural conventions. The depiction of male characters in Tamil film as representations of power, stoicism, and aggression contributes to conventional views of masculinity (Dwyer, 2006; Rajadhyaksha&Willemen, 1999). Because these depictions have historically upheld rigid gender standards and expectations, they have contributed to the broader cultural understanding of what it means to be a man.

Sudha Kongara is a well-known Indian filmmaker known for her unique storytelling style as well as profound character development. Her films frequently address challenging societal issues through well-crafted plots and multidimensional characters. This study examines the development of male protagonist characterisation in three of her major works: *IrudhiSuttru* (2016), *SooraraiPottru* (2020), and *PaavaKadhaigal* (2020). These films not only illustrate Kongara's development as a director, but also reflect wider cultural shifts in attitudes on masculinity and gender roles.

IrudhiSuttru depicts the story of Prabhu Selvaraj, a humiliated boxing trainer who seeks redemption by mentoring a little girl from a poor family. *NedumaaranRajangam*'s voyage in *SooraraiPottru* is inspired on the real-life aviation entrepreneur G. R. Gopinath, highlighting the protagonist's goal to make air travel more accessible to the general public. Sathar, a transgender lady, is featured in the "Thangam" portion of *PaavaKadhaigal*. Her story defies traditional gender standards and shows the hard reality experienced by India's LGBTQ+ population. Kongara's portrayal of male characters progresses from personal salvation and social influence to tackling deeply ingrained gender inequalities.

This study examines the roles, motives, and growth arcs of these characters in order to better understand how masculinity is portrayed in Kongara's films and the socio-cultural aspects that influence these portrayals.

IrudhiSuttru gained critical accolades for its unique storyline and exceptional performances. Scholars have observed the film's deviation from typical sports dramas, which focuses on the mentor-mentee connection and the protagonist's personal redemption journey (Nair, 2016). Prabhu Selvaraj's role is described as a combination of roughness and tenderness, reflecting a change in the representation of masculinity in Indian film (Menon, 2017).

SooraraiPottru is based on G. R. Gopinath's autobiography and follows the protagonist, NedumaaranRajangam, on his ambitious trip. The character's representation has been investigated in terms of leadership and social entrepreneurship (Kumar & Thomas, 2020). The film promotes empathy and perseverance, offering a multifaceted portrayal of masculinity that combines personal sacrifices with professional goals (Rao, 2021).

PaavaKadhaigal is an anthology film that examines themes of sin and salvation through four separate stories. The "Thangam" part stands out for portraying a transgender protagonist. The narrative has received accolades for its sensitive and empathic portrayal of transgender difficulties in Indian society (Joshi 2020). Sathar's character defies established gender standards and offers a profound remark on contemporary biases against the LGBTQ+ community (Desai, 2020).

These studies show a shift in the portrayal of male protagonists in Indian film, with more varied and inclusive representations. Sudha Kongara's films are part of a larger trend, reflecting cultural shifts and providing a more multifaceted and compassionate perspective of masculinity. This research attempts to add to the ongoing discussion on gender representation in South Indian cinema by analysing these films.

Methodology:

A qualitative analysis of a few chosen Tamil films released between 2015 and 2020 directed by Sudha Kongara is used in this study. The selection of films centred upon their widespread appeal, critical reception, and thematic pertinence to the notion of change in masculinities. The study uncovers significant trends and changes in the representation of male characters through narrative analysis, character analysis, and theme investigation.

Analysis and Discussion:

In Tamil Cinema Male Actors (Heroes) are worshipped as demigods and idols who inspire and influence the audiences in the society through their characters in the films. The hero characters in the Tamil cinema depicts who are strong, independent and larger than real life characters but now recently the characterisation of the hero (Male) characters has undergone a significant change and currently the heroes are characterised as person who is more caring, vulnerable and emotionally expressive.

1. *IrudhiSuttru* (2016):

Character: Prabhu Selvaraj (Portrayed by R. Madhavan)

Background of the character: A disgraced boxing trainer seeks redemption by giving training to a poor and talented girl who wishes to achieve in boxing.

Characteristics of the character:

- Prabhu in the beginning of the film, shown as a drunkard, aggressive person, expressing his displeasure with the corrupt sports system.
- As a mentor his interaction with the female protagonist, Madhi, displays his deep compassion and dedication to boxing.

- Through his training and the success of his student Madhi, he is able to rediscover himself and showcase his potential to the corrupted sports authorities and also showcasing the themes of resilience and transformation.

Developmental Arc of the character:

- **Initial State:** Prabhu is shown as a person who has given up on the system, displaying irritation and hatred. His relationships are distinguished by sarcasm and a lack of trust in the institutions that surround him.
- **Mentorship Role:** When he discovers Madhi, a talented but immature women boxer, an iconic moment occurs. His tough-love attitude and intensive training techniques demonstrate his dedication to the sport and a strong desire to see true talent thrive.
- **Redemption:** Prabhu's redemption arc takes form as Madhi begins to succeed. His trip is as important to his own salvation as it is to Madhi's achievement. Prabhu grows into a more hopeful and contented person by the end of the film, having discovered a purpose beyond his personal failings.

2. SooraraiPottru (2020):

Character: NedumaaranRajangam (Portrayed by Suriya)

Background of the character:Based on the real life character of Mr.G.R.Gopinath, the founder of Air Deccan Air lines. The film shows Nedumaaran's aim of making air travel cheap and affordable to the common man in the society.

Characteristics of the character:

- Nedumaaran is a visionary person who is driven by a desire to change the aviation in India.
- His character exhibits tremendous empathy for ordinary people as well as unwavering determination to face numerous obstacles in achieving his goal.

Developmental Arc of the character:

- **Initial Stage:** Maara in the initial beginning of the film portrayed as a man with an amazing dream who faces opposition and various challenges. His experience as an Air Force pilot instils in him a strong sense of discipline and responsibility.
- **Struggles and Sacrifices:** Struggles and Sacrifices: the narrative portrays Maara as he continues to pursue his dream, despite financial, bureaucratic, and personal hurdles. Despite several setbacks, he remains firm in achieving his goal.
- **Empathy and Leadership:** Empathy and Leadership: Maara's character, unlike Prabhu's, is extremely compassionate, as seen by his relationships with local villagers and his staff. His leadership is focused not just on attaining his goal, but also on elevating others lifestyle around him.
- **Resolution:**Maara's eventual success in setting up a low-cost airline demonstrates the success of vision over challenges. His journey is distinguished by a balanced depiction of personal sacrifice and professional commitment.

3. PaavaKadhaigal (2020) – "Thangam" Segment

Character: Sathar (Portrayed by Kalidas Jayaram)

Background of the character: A transsexual woman coping with societal and familial rejection in a conservative and stereotypical culture.

Characteristics of the character:

- Sathar's characterisation portrays both strength and vulnerability at the same time defying the gender stereotypes in the society.
- The character also depicts the reality of how LGBTQ+ people were being treated in India.
- Sathar's story is a moving gaze at the empathy, love and the effects of social discrimination.

Developmental Arc of the character:

- **Initial Stage:**Sathar is described as a kind-hearted individual who has faced significant societal and familial rejection because of her gender identification. Her personality is characterized by a caring personality and a longing for love and acceptance.
- **Struggles:** Struggles: The story revolves around Sathar's everyday struggles with cultural stereotypes and the harsh reality of being a transgender woman in rural India. Her connections with family and friends are filled with conflicts and unfulfilled dreams.

- **Courage and Tragedy:** Courage and Tragedy: Despite the opposition, Sathar's character demonstrates remarkable courage, notably in her relationship with a childhood friend. Her narrative ends tragically, emphasizing the persistent nature of societal prejudice.
- **Empathy and Vulnerability:** Sathar's character exhibits a dramatic blend of empathy and sensitivity, questioning traditional male stereotypes and emphasizing the interconnectedness of gender and society expectations.

Comparative Analysis of The Three Characters:

1. Evolution of Heroic Traits:

- Prabhu's character transitions from personal power to relational growth, stressing the value of mentoring and dependency.
- Maara's persona combines classic heroic drive with empathy and emotional depth, demonstrating a more holistic approach to leadership.
- Sathar's character deviates from standard masculine hero cliches, showing a transgender woman whose heroism comes from her vulnerability and acceptance in the society.

2. Challenging Stereotypical Masculinity:

- Prabhu challenges the idea of the indestructible hero by depicting serious character weaknesses and growth via mentorship connections.
- Maara combines visionary ambition and empathy, demonstrating that heroic leaders may be humane and emotionally linked.
- Sathar redefines the definition of heroism beyond traditional gender roles, emphasizing the need of living truthfully and challenging cultural biases in the society.

3. Broader Societal Reflections:

- These characters indicate a greater social change toward more inclusive and multidimensional depictions of heroism. These films provide a more genuine and empathic picture of human experience by breaking away from conventional images, recognizing that true heroism frequently requires vulnerability, emotional depth, and the fortitude to challenge established societal norms.

Conclusion

Sudha Kongara's films represent a substantial divergence from typical hero stereotypes, favouring a more nuanced and inclusive approach to character development. Kongara's protagonists, Prabhu, Maara, and Sathar, question traditional ideals of heroism, mirroring greater cultural changes toward empathy, vulnerability, and sincerity. Her work emphasizes the value of relational dynamics, emotional depth, and a determination to fight towards traditional stereotypes, providing a new and realistic view on what it means to be a hero in today's culture and society. This shift in characterisation not only enhances the cinematic experience, but also adds to a more inclusive and compassionate depiction of human tales in film.

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