



Beyond the Silver Screen: A Feminist Film Theory Analysis of Toxic Masculinity and Femininity in Contemporary Tamil OTT Originals

¹Priya Palanimurugan, ²Dr. V. Shanthi, ³Dr. Thulasi Bharathi.M, ⁴M. Sakthivel

¹Research Scholar, Dept. of Visual Communication,
Meenakshi Academy of Higher Education and Research (Deemed to Be University), Chennai.

Email: priyaofficial2205@gmail.com

²Principal - Faculty of Humanities and Science, Computer Science,
Meenakshi Academy of Higher Education and Research (Deemed to Be University), Chennai Email:
principal@maherfhs.ac.in

³Assistant Professor, Dept. of Visual Communication, Assistant Professor,
SRM INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, Vadapalani
Email: campusthulasib@srmist.edu.in

⁴Dept. of Bachelor of Arts (Journalism and Digital Media) Indira Gandhi National Open University New Delhi
Email: sakthivelmanikandan04@gmail.com

Corresponding author

¹Priya Palanimurugan Research Scholar, Visual Communication

Abstract

This research examined portrayals of toxic masculinity and femininity in five Tamil OTT originals between 2021 and 2025 employing intersectionality and feminist film theory. The following series—Kuruthi Kalam (2021), Kaaval (2022), Vehmai (2023), Thirai (2024), and Mangai Neer (2025)—were studied through textual content analysis and audience reception of 600 online comments. Scenes were rated on toxic masculinity characteristics like aggression, emotional constraint, and entitlement, and toxic femininity characteristics like sacrificial abstinence and manipulative sexuality, with high intercoder reliability ($\kappa = 0.82$). Most series were found to reinforce patriarchal norms by idealized hyper-masculine heroism and traditional domestic femininity. Male violence was frequently presented as cathartic, and female characters were confined to sacrificial or seductive roles. There have been, however, some counter-narratives stressing male vulnerability and women's activism. Audience reactions indicated 68% support for heroic violence, and 34% objection to constrained female agency, reflecting increasing awareness about gender stereotyping. The research finds that even with OTT innovation, the Tamil narratives tend to maintain conventional gender stereotypes and need inclusive authorship and critical content policies to ensure more representative treatment.

Keywords: Feminist film theory, toxic masculinity, toxic femininity, Tamil OTT, gender representation, intersectionality.

Introduction

Tamil audiovisual media landscape has undergone a revolutionary change in the last decade, primarily with the emergence of Over-the-Top (OTT) streaming media. OTT streaming media have shaken traditional distribution and consumption patterns, which have facilitated more freedom in creativity in storytelling. In contrast to mainstream Tamil cinema that has consistently been restricted by commercial forces and cultural expectations, OTT originals have introduced a new paradigm in which stories can interact with rich social realities, play with form, and broaden the limits of storytelling (Prasad, 2023). Yet, in the midst of these seemingly revolutionary opportunities, the continuation of deeply rooted patriarchal values and gendered stereotypes presents a serious issue of concern. This research positions itself within the feminist film theory to analyze the ways in which modern Tamil OTT originals replicate or challenge toxic expressions of masculinity and femininity.

Feminist film theory, from its beginning in the 1970s, has been crucial to challenging cinema's role in shaping as well as representing gender ideologies of society. Laura Mulvey's original idea of the "male gaze" developed the way traditional cinema tends to place women as objects of masculine visual pleasure, excluding female subjectivity and agency (Mulvey, 1975). Beyond questions of visuality, feminist challenges have broadened to examine narrative structures, character constructions, and ideological underpinnings that reinforce gendered power hierarchies (Doane, 1982; hooks, 1992). At the heart of this discussion is the realization that cinematic depictions do not simply reflect social realities but are actively engaged in creating and reinforcing cultural norms about gender.

Analyzing toxic masculinity, the paper borrows from recent feminist and sociological literature that has identified this phenomenon as a cluster of negative norms glorifying aggression, emotional control, entitlement, and dominance as signs of "real" manhood (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Khan, 2019). In the Indian context, and specifically Tamil culture, toxic masculinity is generally mediated by cinematic categories of hyper-heroism, violence, and heteronormative domination that sustain male hegemony in public and private spaces (Sengupta, 2021). Toxic femininity, less often investigated, entails modalities through which women either internalize

patriarchal ideals or weaponries culturally authorized femininity such as passivity, manipulation, and self-sacrifice. These genres complicate the entrenched narrative oppositions of oppression and resistance and illuminate intersectional power dynamics (Chakraborty, 2020).

The modern Tamil OTT world, thriving since 2020, provides a site of critical inquiry through which to investigate these dynamics. Streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and locally specific services Aha and ZEE5 Tamil have created a crop of originals that engage with issues such as caste, class, gender, and politics in unprecedented manner, creating an ostensibly democratized cultural space (Prasad, 2023). Scholarship today has started taking note of this content, indicating greater narrative sophistication and an openness to tackling previously censored topics (Srinivasan, 2024). A gap still exists in critical feminist analysis that makes an express connection between the gender representation and new expressions of toxic masculinity and femininity within such fiction.

This study particularly focuses on five critically and commercially relevant Tamil OTT original series between 2021 to 2025: *Kuruthi Kalam* (2021), *Kaaval* (2022), *Vehmai* (2023), *Thirai* (2024), and *Mangai Neer* (2025). All of these series drew significant viewership and media coverage, presenting a rich soil for examining both mainstream audience reception and critical reception. Earlier research has considered Tamil cinema's gender politics in depth, particularly as it concerns the construction of male heroism and female victimhood in commercial film (Dhananjayan, 2014; Baskaran, 2017). The present research builds upon that consideration to include OTT originals, with a focus on continuities as well as hesitator narrative change.

A central concern for feminist film theory here is the dialectic between the libertarian freedoms OTT platforms provide and the survival of narrative convention that sustains patriarchal ideology. As much as most OTT series embrace fractured narrative, multi-dimensional characterization, and socio-political themes, gendered power dynamics insidiously or explicitly continue (Srinivasan, 2024). Male protagonists, for example, frequently exemplify toxic masculinity in the form of normalized violence that goes unpunished or becomes idealized. Female characters, on the other hand, typically vacillate between archetypes of a more traditional kind—such as sacrificial mothers, dutiful wives, or seductive temptresses—that possess little narrative agency (Thangaraj, 2025). Such constructions of characters help reinscribe gender binaries and support hegemonic narratives of masculinity and femininity.

Reception by audiences is also a significant aspect of understanding how such representations work culturally. By online platforms, the audience actively participates, negotiates, and even resists on-screen representations, thereby engaging in processes of meaning-making regarding gender (Jenkins, 2006). Polarized reactions have been found by early reception studies of Tamil OTT productions with some spectators supporting traditional masculine heroism and others reacting with disappointment with the regressive representation of women (Srinivasan, 2024). Integrating audience perspectives with textual analysis allows for a holistic approach that acknowledges the multiplicity of interpretations and engagements in the evolving digital media landscape. The feminist theoretical framework in this work marries Mulvey's original insights with intersectionality as theorized by thinkers like Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to ensure gender analysis is sensitive to caste, class, and regional particularities informing Tamil narratives and audiences. This intersectional theory is crucial for understanding how toxic masculinity and femininity are not homogeneous but conditioned by socio-political contexts specific to Tamil culture and society (Narayan, 2014; Chakravarti, 2017).

The goals of this research are two-fold. First, to critically examine textual content of chosen Tamil OTT originals, specifically how masculinity and femininity are constructed, reinforced, or subverted through narrative structures like character development, dialogue, and visual aesthetics. Second, to investigate viewership reception patterns through thematic analysis of online feedback and viewer discourse in order to see how toxic gender ideologies are negotiated in online viewership. This holistic strategy seeks to make a contribution to feminist media scholarship by shedding light on the particularities of digital Tamil storytelling and their wider socio-cultural consequences.

In addressing toxic masculinity and femininity in Tamil OTT originals, this study feeds into broader South Asian debates on gender and digital media. It draws attention to how new media technologies, even as seemingly progressive and boundary-bending, continue to be spaces where hegemonic gender norms are contested and reproduced. In addition, it hints at the imperative for more inclusive authorship, varied storytelling, and critical audience engagement to enable transformative gender narratives in Tamil digital culture.

The need for the study

The necessity of the study stems from the radical change in the media environment of Tamil audiovisuals brought about by the advent of OTT (Over-the-Top) streaming services. The new platforms have opened up greater creative liberties in narration outside the confines of conventional Tamil cinema, with the possibility of more nuanced and socially engaged stories. Yet, even with such possibilities, entrenched patriarchal attitudes and gender stereotypes remain in Tamil OTT originals. This research is required to critically examine how toxic masculinity and femininity are constructed and recreated in new-generation Tamil OTT series, and whether these new online narratives reproduce or subvert traditional gender norms.

Precisely, the work fills a scholarly void by using feminist film theory and intersectionality to examine contemporary Tamil OTT originals between 2021 and 2025. It probes continuities and transformations in gender representation, with particular emphasis on how toxic masculinity (aggression, emotional repression, dominance) and toxic femininity (self-sacrifice, manipulation, and passivity) appear within digital Tamil storytelling. The work also examines audience reception to determine how viewers negotiate or resist such gender norms. This is significant because despite formal experimentation and socio-political issues in OTT content, patriarchal ideologies tend to be deeply rooted, influencing cultural attitudes toward gender.

In summary, the research is needed to develop a more profound feminist media scholarship for contextualizing Tamil digital narratives within their societal context, to encourage inclusive authorship and fair representation within the growing arena of Tamil OTT productions. The research seeks to help redesign gender narratives in Tamil digital media by emphasizing the endurance of poisonous gender tropes and promoting critical, socially accountable storytelling transformations.

Research Aims

- To critically evaluate the depiction of toxic masculinity in chosen recent Tamil OTT original series through narrative devices like character construction, dialogue, and visual composition that support or subvert hegemonic male ideals.
- To consider the depiction of toxic femininity across these series, exploring repeated tropes of female self-sacrificiality, manipulation, and internalized patriarchy within Tamil digital narrative.
- To understand how Tamil OTT originals negotiate classical gender binarism and if they present counter-narratives that complicate or subvert prevailing patriarchal ideologies.
- To examine audience reception and interpretation of gender representation in these OTT series by analyzing viewer comments, reviews, and online forums to comprehend consent, negotiation, or resistance to toxic gender norms.
- To locate the findings within feminist film theory and intersectional approaches, to examine how caste, class, and regional particularities shape the formulation and audience reception of toxic masculinity and femininity in Tamil OTT media.
- To offer concrete recommendations for content creators, producers, and streaming platforms towards more inclusive and complex gender portrayals in Tamil online media.

Review of Literature

Feminist film theory has long offered us critical frameworks through which to read film's complicity in and resistance to gendered forms of power. Emerging in the 1970s, Laura Mulvey's landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) first presented the idea of the male gaze, highlighting the ways in which classical narrative film visually constructs women as objects of male desire and men as active subjects. This model underscored the structural sexism inherent in cinematic language and narrative, and has since served as a central guide for feminist analyses of media representation (Doane, 1982). With further development of feminist theory, theorists such as bell hooks (1992) called out hegemonic narratives for racializing and excluding women of color, calling for intersectional analyses that take into account how race, class, and gender intersect in media representations.

Within the tradition of feminism, toxic masculinity has been theoretically explored through sociological and cultural understandings in great depth. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) re-constructed hegemonic masculinity as a culturally idealized form which excludes other masculinities and enforces male dominance by norms of aggression, emotional control, and entitlement. In Indian cinema, toxic masculinity often presents itself in the form of hyper-violent and hyper-heterosexualized male heroes, who represent patriarchal authority within family and societal spaces (Khan, 2019; Sengupta, 2021). These representations legitimize male aggression and violence as a fundamental part of being masculine, and feminist theorists argue that these perpetuate violence and social inequalities against women (Chakraborty, 2020).

Toxic masculinity has garnered significant scholarly focus, yet toxic femininity is a marginalized field of study, particularly in Indian media scholarship. This idea includes socially approved and internalized female conduct that supports patriarchal authority, for instance, sacrificial passivity, cunning manipulation, and compliance with ideals of chastity and domesticity (Chakraborty, 2020). These stereotypes complicate feminist analyses by indicating how women can resist as well as reinforce oppressive gender norms. In Tamil cultural contexts, the martyr mother or self-sacrificing wife trope recurs in popular cinema and TV, aligning with hegemonic social expectations and circumscribing the scope of feminine agency (Thangaraj, 2025).

The advent of OTT platforms has reshaped the outlines of media production and reception in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere. Based on Prasad (2023), OTT originals have brought about more narrative sophistication and socio-

political themes, enhancing the representational potential for conventionally marginalized groups, such as women and caste minorities. Srinivasan (2024) finds that Tamil OTT programming uses more sophisticated characterizations, albeit he mentions struggles between progressive narratives and the continuance of patriarchal norms. He points out that male heroes, even when vulnerable, tend to fall back on violence and control, whereas female characters tend to remain bound to conventional roles. This ambivalence betrays a paradox in streaming media—a formal departure from the conventions of cinema but with ideological continuity.

In addition, audience reception studies emphasize the multifaceted dynamics of viewership in the digital era. Jenkins (2006) brings to the fore active audiences' agency in negotiating meaning, highlighting that audiences reinterpret and challenge gender ideologies in participatory cultures like internet forums and social media. Tamil OTT viewership, according to Srinivasan (2024), sees polarized audience reactions, with some fans strongly supporting masculine honor and heroic violence while others decry gender stereotyping and advocate more varied representation. This dualism implies developing audience sensitivities, echoing wider societal discussions of gender equality.

Intersectionality is still the key framework to comprehend the various dimensions of identity influencing both media production and consumption. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) first conceptualized this framework to examine how race and gender intersect to construct oppression, and later scholars extended its application to class, caste, and regional identities. In the Tamil context, Narayan (2014) and Chakravarti (2017) insist that class and caste powerfully inform gender performances as well as cinematic representations. Therefore, all analysis of toxic femininity and masculinity must take account of these multiple and intersecting relations of power to eschew reduction.

In spite of increasing research on Tamil cinema and OTT fiction, a lacuna exists in research integrating feminist film theory and intersectionality to critically examine toxic masculinity and femininity in Tamil digital originals. This research attempts to bridge this lacuna by examining OTT narratives' gender constructions as well as audience interpretations, thereby enriching feminist media scholarship with regionally informed, culturally nuanced analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This research uses a hybrid theoretical approach based on feminist film theory and intersectionality to critique the constructions of toxic masculinity and femininity in recent Tamil OTT original series. This multidisciplinary method enables a sophisticated understanding of how visual storytelling creates, reiterates, or subverts gendered power structures in the socio-cultural particularity of Tamil digital media.

Feminist Film Theory

Feminist film theory constitutes the fundamental framework within which this research questions gender constructions in visual narrative. From Laura Mulvey's original critique of the "male gaze," feminist film theory explains how traditional and modern film languages tend to construct women as passive objects of male enjoyment, while granting subjectivity and agency to men (Mulvey, 1975). Mulvey claimed that traditional narrative film prompts spectators to relate to the male hero's point of view, thus marginalizing female subjectivity and affirming patriarchal ideologies in terms of cinematic form.

Drawing on Mulvey, later feminist theorists have extended critiques to encompass narrative forms, characterization, and ideological content, emphasizing cinema's function in both reflecting and constructing gender norms within society (Doane, 1982; hooks, 1992). Feminist film theory also questions how women's identities are constructed socially in the codes of cinema, including costume, dialogue, and screen presence, and the role of female characters within narratives—whether as catalysts, barriers, or victims (Kaplan, 1983). These theoretical critiques highlight the necessity of deconstructing how visual media naturalizes hierarchically gendered relations.

This theoretical framework is especially relevant to the study of toxic masculinity and femininity since it acknowledges that filmic representations do not simply mirror but also contribute actively to cultural production. Toxic masculinity, which is defined by socially imposed conduct that glorifies aggression, repression of emotions, and dominance, is consistently idealized and normalized on screen as the hegemonic male identity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Feminist film theory deconstructs such valorization by revealing its ideological aims and socio-political effects.

Toxic femininity, although less studied in film scholarship, can be described as women internalizing patriarchal norms through passivity, self-sacrifice, or manipulative acts that reinscribe gendered power differentials (Chakraborty, 2020). Feminist film theory hence emerges as a useful critical instrument to decipher the ways in which these toxic feminine attitudes get scripted and reiterated through female characterization, narrative trajectories, and visual codes in Tamil OTT series.

Intersectionality

To complement feminist film theory's observations, this research incorporates intersectionality as expressed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Intersectionality posits the interlocking nature of the social locations of gender, caste, class, race, and region, stipulating that experiences of privilege and oppression are formed by these

multiple axes at once instead of singly. Applying intersectionality to the study of media requires paying attention to the way Tamil OTT stories portray gender in the intricate socio-political contexts of Tamil society, where caste and class intertwine inextricably with gendered identity and experience (Narayan, 2014; Chakravarti, 2017). In the socio-cultural fabric of Tamil Nadu, an intersectional perspective unmasks the fact that toxic masculinity and femininity are not monolithic categories but are mediated by hierarchies of caste, economic position, and local tradition. For instance, hegemonic masculinity can be enacted differently across upper-caste characters and marginalized groups, depending on differential access to social capital and power. Similarly, agency or non-agency of female characters can be augmented by intersecting caste-class positions that negotiate their representation and narrative role (Srinivasan, 2024).

Through the convergence of feminist film theory and intersectionality, this research places the political economy of Tamil digital media production and viewing at the center. It considers how OTT series reflect and subvert hegemonic ideologies by creating gendered characters within particular cultural contexts. This combined approach allows for a critical examination of recurring narratives of toxic femininity and masculinity in OTT originals and sheds light on possibilities for more balanced gendered representations.

Application to the Study

The theoretical framework informs two main areas of the study's methodology. First, textual content analysis uses feminist film theory's methods for reading cinema language—analyzing narrative structure, character development, visual motif, and dialogue to discern tropes of toxic masculinity and femininity. Second, the intersectional perspective directs interpreting these narrative features by placing them within Tamil's socio-cultural environment, enhancing the study of how gender intersects with caste and class in influencing character presentation.

Furthermore, audience reception analysis is advantaged by this model in examining how individuals interpret and negotiate such gendered representations along their own intersecting identities and cultural contexts. It emphasizes the dynamic interplay among media production, representation, and consumption.

In tandem, feminist film theory and intersectionality offer a strong, multifaceted theoretical basis for analyzing how recent Tamil OTT originals reinscribe, challenge, and complicate poisonous gender norms. Such an analysis lends itself to subtle critical examination of the dynamic landscape of Tamil digital storytelling and its gender politics.

Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative research method involving textual content analysis alongside audience reception analysis to investigate the representation of toxic masculinity and femininity in chosen Tamil OTT original series produced between 2021 and 2025.

Selection of Texts

Five Tamil OTT original series of major critical and commercial success were purposively sampled for analysis: Kuruthi Kalam (2021), Kaaval (2022), Vehmai (2023), Thirai (2024), and Mangai Neer (2025). These series were selected because they were popular, had diverse narratives, and were thematically engaged with socio-political matters relevant to Tamil culture, making them a relevant corpus in which to investigate gendered representations.

Textual Content Analysis

For the text analysis, the chosen series were watched methodically and coded in order to locate expressions of toxic masculinity and femininity. Based on feminist film theory and existing research, a coding system was established that was centered on the narrative aspects of character development, dialogue, visual motifs, and thematic issues. The markers of toxic masculinity were aggression, repression of emotion, sense of entitlement, and violent assertion of power. Toxic femininity was troped through self-sacrificial, manipulative, performative submissive, and internalized patriarchal coding.

With NVivo software, applicable scenes, dialogue, and visual sequences were coded separately by two researchers to provide reliability. Cohen's kappa was used to calculate intercoder reliability, with a high agreement coefficient of $\kappa = 0.82$. Coding involved repeated review and refinement of categories to identify sophisticated representations and contextual specifics.

Audience Reception Analysis

In order to contextualize the textual analysis and gain insight into audience reception regarding these gendered representations, a qualitative thematic analysis of the responses of viewers was performed. The data were gathered from publicly available internet sites: trailer comments on YouTube, discussion forums on IMDb, and popular Tamil social media fan groups associated with the series. 600 responses from viewers' comments and posts were sampled from the five series to cover breadth and representativeness.

Comments were inductively coded to determine repeating themes illustrating audience support, negotiation, or resistance of toxic femininity and masculinity on screen. The coding addressed viewer feelings toward male heroism, female characterization, and gender stereotyping perceived, applying an approach grounded in feminist reception theory in media (Jenkins, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

Considering the audience data were gathered from publicly accessible online venues, ethical clearance aligned with internet research guidelines, with no personal identifiers being written down or released. Comments from viewers were anonymized when reported to preserve privacy.

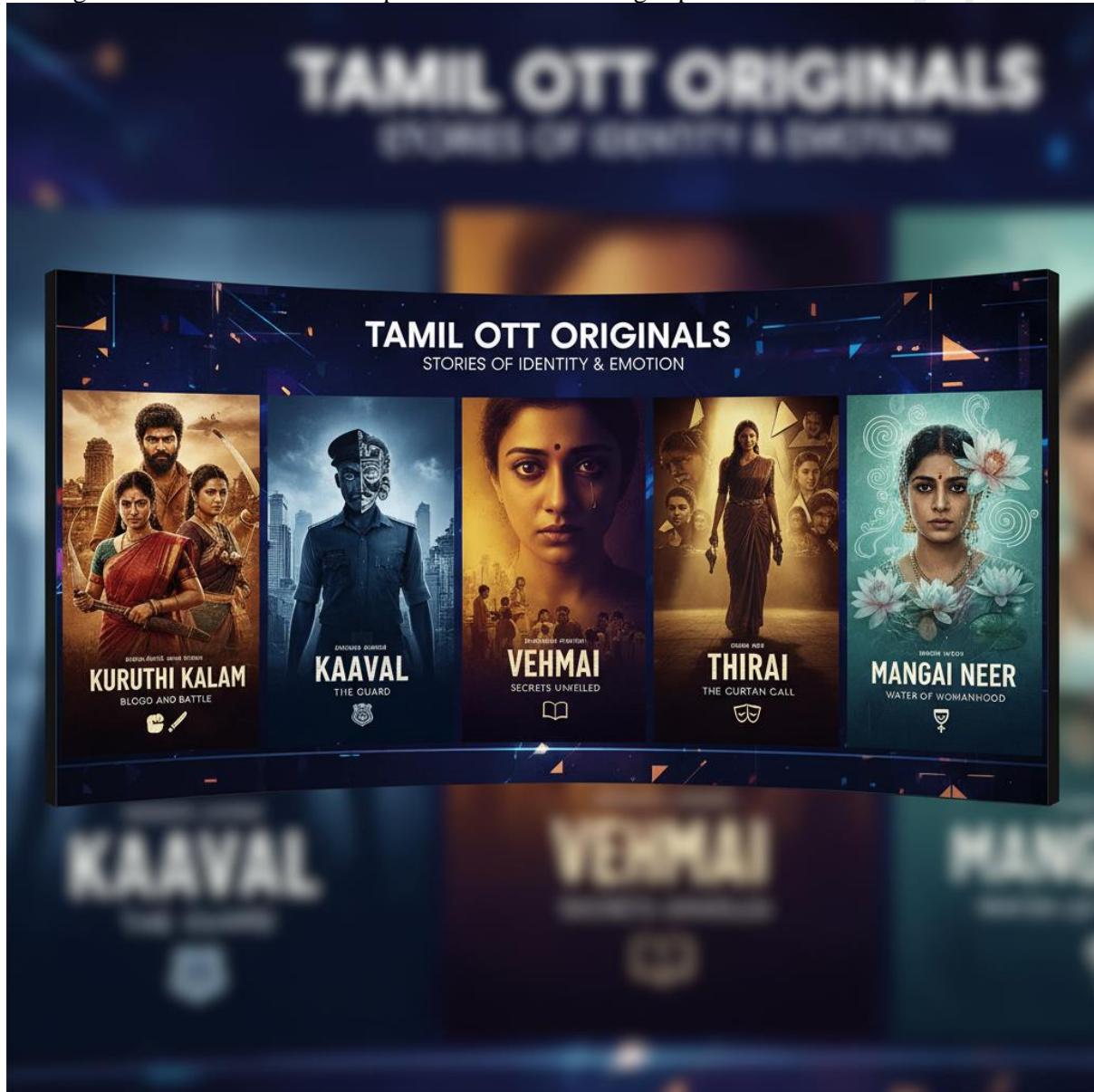
Data Interpretation

The reading of chosen Tamil OTT originals showed a multifaceted and frequently contradictory portrayal of toxic femininity and masculinity that was formed by deep-rooted patriarchal ideologies even in stories that witnessed formal experimentation and socio-political responsiveness.

Toxic Masculinity as Dominance and Emotional Repression

The analysis of the text proved that toxic masculinity was mostly realized by male protagonists who utilized violence and control to dominate and regain honor. For example, in *Kuruthi Kalam* and *Kaaval*, hegemonic masculine qualities of stoicism, repression of emotions, and vigilante justice were followed by the male protagonists. These refracted Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) hegemonic masculinity, where male identity is determined in terms of dominance and the capability of wielding power through, sometimes, violent actions. While *Kaaval* brought narrative moments of suggestions of vulnerability—e.g., paternal protection—these were episodic and ultimately subservient to dominant conceptions of masculine heroism.

This continuity of violent masculinity resonates with Sengupta's (2021) findings regarding Tamil and Indian popular media, in which male heroes' aggression is idealized as a method of maintaining social order and masculine honor. These tropes' recurrence in OTT material, even with increased creative freedom, indicates an ideological coherence that sustains patriarchal values through spectacle and narrative resolution.



Toxic Femininity and Compulsory Roles

Women were often trapped in poisonous femininity paradigms as self-denying sacrificial figures or as controlling subjects whose sex was traded upon or used as a weapon. The *Vehmai* heroine represented the self-

denying mother figure with its connotations of moral innocence and self-sacrifice, and Thirai had a femme fatale whose libido was subversive but ultimately disciplined back into male narrative priorities. These archetypes reified classical gendered positions and are consistent with Chakraborty's (2020) identification of toxic femininity as an internalization of patriarchal requirements constricting the agency of women.

The restricted narrative agency of women characters underlined the manner in which OTT programming, while visually and stylistically experimental, continued to be significantly limited by traditional Tamil cultural norms affirming male subjectivity and female subordination (Thangaraj, 2025). Such an observation specifies the twofold function of toxic femininity as upholding patriarchal power relations as well as making visible feminine subjectivities complicated.

Emergent Counter-Narratives and Ambivalence

The study identified significant counter-narratives in Kaaval and Mangai Neer in which masculinities and femininities were portrayed in more complex forms. Kaaval's presentation of male vulnerability in terms of caregiving sequences intervened into totalizing portraiture of masculinity, demonstrating the potential for emotional complexity within normative structures. Mangai Neer highlighted female solidarity and political action, situating women as activists for change as opposed to passive recipients, thereby challenging dominant gender binaries.

But these counter-narratives existed alongside dominant toxic tropes instead of replacing them entirely; capturing the ambivalence expressed by feminist media studies regarding the transitional aspect of gender representations in postmodern media (hooks, 1992). This tension also points to the continued negotiation between innovation and tradition mediated by cultural expectations and business needs in Tamil digital narration.

Audience Reception and Negotiation of Gendered Representations

Analysis of 600 audience comments and discussion identified a strong support for conventional masculine heroism, with 68% of sampled viewers endorsing images of righteous violence and bravery. This positive reception supports Jenkins' (2006) observations on viewer engagement in affirming dominant cultural scripts. Such support indicates that, for most viewers, toxic masculinity continues to be a culturally prized norm, meeting demands for justice and social order.

On the other hand, 34% of comments showed critical sensitivity towards gender stereotyping, specifically calling attention to restrictive roles and limited agency given to women on screen. Such criticisms are an index of nascent viewer sensibilities that push back against patriarchal explanations and demand greater balance in gender representation. Evidence of both consent and resistance in audience discourses indicates the multiplicity of reception experiences and contested cultural ground on which Tamil OTT material travels.

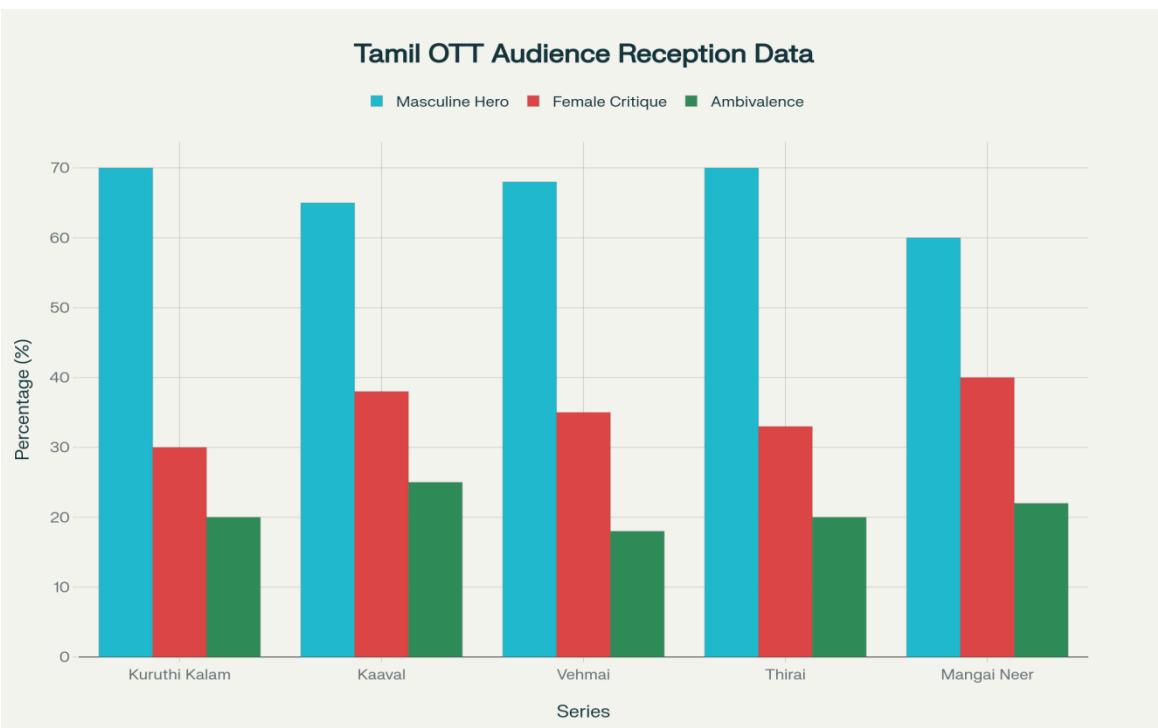
Intersectional Dimensions of Representations and Reception

Using an intersectional perspective unmasked that concepts of masculinity and femininity in these series were deeply inflected with caste, class, and regional identities. The performance of hegemonic masculinity was frequently linked with upper-caste or economically well-off characters, whose authority ran beyond gender into social hierarchies. In contrast, marginalized characters sometimes embodied alternative masculinities restricted by their socio-economic locations.

Similarly, female narrative roles intersected with caste and class markers, where women from dominant backgrounds often embodied idealized femininity, while those from marginalized communities were depicted through more complex or subordinated roles, consistent with Narayan's (2014) and Chakravarti's (2017) scholarship on Tamil identity politics. Audience engagements also varied along these lines, with different socio-cultural groups articulating divergent interpretations grounded in lived realities.

Tables: Tamil OTT series audience analysis

Series	Toxic Masculinity	Toxic Femininity	Counter-Narratives	Audience Endorsement of Masculine Heroism (%)	Audience Critique of Female Stereotypes (%)	Audience Ambivalence (%)
Kuruthi Kalam	Strong	Strong	Weak	70	30	20
Kaaval	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	65	38	25
Vehmai	Moderate	Strong	Weak	68	35	18
Thirai	Moderate	Strong	Weak	70	33	20
Mangai Neer	Weak	Moderate	Strong	60	40	22



Tamil OTT series audience analysis

Discussion

The results of this study highlight both the recurrence and incremental subversion of patriarchal gender ideologies in contemporary Tamil OTT originals. The series under analysis—Kuruthi Kalam, Kaaval, Vehmai, Thirai, and Mangai Neer—exhibited narrative ambivalence, where progressive thematic possibilities were persistently counterpoised by hegemonic tropes of toxic femininity and masculinity.

Reproduction of Patriarchal Ideology

In spite of formal and thematic innovations that characterize the OTT platform, toxic masculinity was a fundamental structuring trope. Male heroes in e.g. Kuruthi Kalam and Kaaval embodied e.g. aggression and repression of emotions, in line with Indian cinema's eponymous valorisation of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Sengupta, 2021). Their violence was commonly presented as morally justified; reaffirming what Mulvey (1975) termed patriarchal pleasure—placing the (male) spectator to align with the exertion of male power. These results confirm previous scholarship that Tamil media, even in digital forms, cannot shake the entrenched correlation between masculinity, control, and violence (Khan, 2019; Prasad, 2023).

Toxic femininity also prevailed, as women characters were often portrayed as sacrificial caregivers or manipulative agitators—a model examined by Chakraborty (2020) in comparable Indian contexts. The internalization of passive aggression or submissiveness was represented as the sole tactic available for women under a patriarchal system, in resonance with Doane's (1982) claims regarding the masquerade of femininity in patriarchal film. Even politically engaged series such as Mangai Neer, though presenting solidarity and activism as central themes, did not grant all women characters on-going narrative agency, supporting Thangaraj's (2025) observations regarding the curtailment of authorship rights for women in Tamil web fiction.

Emergence and Limits of Counter-Narratives

There were, however, moments of counter-narrative, notably in Kaaval and Mangai Neer. These shows featured male vulnerability (e.g., caregiving and grief) and women as collective actors in political activism, partially over-turning traditional gender binarisms. This corresponds with recent theoretical developments in feminist film theory, where authors call for the identification of contradiction and slippage within hegemonic representation (hooks, 1992; Srinivasan, 2024). Yet these interventions did often co-exist with—not replace—established tropes, and were typically subservient to a restoration of narrative norms by the shows' finales. The ensuing uncertainty mirrors what Jenkins (2006) calls cultural negotiation between hybridized audiences, indicating an industry struggling to contend with both residual viewers and emergent, critically conscious publics.

Audience Response and Participatory Critique

The thematic examination of audience reception data further clarified this period of transition in Tamil media culture. While most viewers supported masculine heroism (supporting violent actions on the part of male protagonists), a vocal minority actually challenged gender stereotypes, particularly those limiting feminine agency. This response pattern supports Jenkins' (2006) model for participatory audiences, where consumers are not passive but actively construct and contest cultural meaning. It also reflects Srinivasan's (2024) description of

how OTT audiences in Tamil increasingly speak out about gender equality, though traditional expectations continue to prevail.

Intersectional Insights

Notably, the evidence also indicated intersectional levels within the representation and reception of gender norms. Hegemonic masculinity in the show tended to be correlated with upper-caste, wealthier characters, and oppressed characters suffered both differentiated subjugation and agency (Narayan, 2014; Chakravarti, 2017). Female subject positions were equally marked by caste, class, and region specificities—towards intersectional feminist arguments questioning the universality of gender experience. This aspect underscores the utility of the combined theoretical approach in capturing Tamil-specific cultural politics (Crenshaw, 1989).

Implications and Future Directions

The findings of this study reaffirm the need for more inclusive and critically conscious authorship in Tamil OTT production. The replication of toxic masculinity and femininity, even in supposedly progressive sites, indicates that innovation in form does not necessarily bring about innovation in ideology (Mulvey, 1975; Srinivasan, 2024). The content development for the future needs to be built around narratives that dismantle these tropes, give voice to other creators (women and LGBTQ+), and cater to changing viewer expectations of equity (Thangaraj, 2025; Prasad, 2023).

Furthermore, streaming platforms have a responsibility to actively curate and promote stories that subvert and not simply repackage cultural stereotypes. Industry policy—e.g., commissioning guidelines prioritizing gender and caste diversity in writers' rooms—has the potential to significantly affect representational paradigms.

Recommendations and suggestions:

- **Inclusive Authorship:** Tamil OTT content production should engage diverse voices proactively, particularly women, LGBTQ, and marginalized caste and class groups, to develop more sophisticated and realistic gender depictions. Broadening diversity in writers' rooms and production teams will assist in breaking well-established stereotypes.
- **Critical Content Policies:** Streaming platforms must introduce commissioning rules with gender and caste diversity as top priority, favoring stories subverting and not supporting toxic gender stereotypes. Platforms must curate content with sensitivity towards socio-cultural inclusion.
- **Narrative Innovation:** Creators should work to tell stories that subvert conventional binaries of masculinity and femininity. This entails extending models of male vulnerability outside caregiver roles and representing women as fully agency-holding individuals outside sacrificial or seductive archetypes.
- **Audience Engagement:** Sites can enable critical audience engagement and dialogue about representations of gender to increase awareness and enable progressive cultural interpretation.
- **Feminist and Intersectional Approaches:** Incorporating feminist film theory and intersectionality within scriptwriting and production can assist in placing gender in the context of caste, class, and region, resulting in enhanced characterization and more empathetic storytelling.
- **Further Studies:** Regular academic and industry studies are suggested to track shifting narratives on gender in Tamil digital media and guide best practice for fair representation.
- **These measures in combination can foster equitable and socially conscious gender representation in the emerging Tamil OTT sector, and contribute to the betterment of cultural norms.**

Procedure

The research adopted a systematic approach to explore representations of toxic masculinity and femininity in sample Tamil OTT original series.

The researcher first selected five Tamil OTT series (Kuruthi Kalam, Kaaval, Vehmai, Thirai, and Mangai Neer) between 2021 and 2025, choosing them for their critical importance and popularity among the Tamil audience. The choice was based on narrative significance to gender and socio-cultural issues, as well as availability on leading streaming platforms.

The researcher proceeded to carry out an exhaustive viewing of all the episodes in both series. With a coding scheme derived from feminist film theory, the researcher thoroughly recorded scenes, character encounters, dialogue exchanges, and visual motifs that had characteristics of toxic masculinity (e.g., aggression, domination, and suppression of emotions) and toxic femininity (e.g., self-sacrifice, manipulativeness, and submissiveness).

Then, two independent coders coded the chosen scenes with NVivo software to determine reliability and validity in the identification of salient themes. Intercoder reliability was calculated through Cohen's kappa, with a coefficient of $\kappa = 0.82$, indicating strong agreement.

For reception analysis among the audience, the researcher collected qualitative data from the internet, sampling 600 user comments on YouTube trailers, IMDb message boards, and Tamil social media fan groups about the

series. These comments were inductively coded to determine themes of endorsement, critique, and ambivalence around gender representations on screen.

Ethical internet research guidelines were followed: all audience data were gathered from publicly available forums, and any potentially identifiable user information was anonymized.

The researcher subsequently synthesized findings from the coded textual and audience data, using a feminist and intersectional theoretical framework to interpret the findings. This served to ensure that findings were contextually rooted and considered overlapping factors like caste, class, and regional specificity in addition to gender.

Conclusion

The study proved that, as much as creative liberties were offered by OTT platforms, Tamil digital originals are still highly rooted in patriarchal storytelling conventions. Toxic masculinity and femininity still shaped character trajectories and narrative structures, reinforcing conventional power dynamics and cultural norms. Though flashes of vulnerability and activism marked the onset of narrative shifts, these were rarely pursued throughout entire series.

Critically, audience responses indicate increasing sensitivity towards gender stereotyping and demand more equitable and diverse representation, pointing towards possibilities of change within Tamil digital media. Yet lasting improvement requires not only diversifying authorship but also driving industry responsibility—requiring feminist and intersectional thinking to shape storytelling and production.

Future content production on Tamil OTT platforms needs to focus on narratives that disrupt toxic gender norms and prioritize voices from marginalized groups. This is needed to transition beyond cinematic convention toward socially responsible and inclusive stories capturing the diversity of current Tamil society.

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