



## Cinema, Politics, Women and the Shifting Contours of Disciplines

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### Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to understand how women engage with politics and cinema as against their male counterparts and whether the experience is at all different from the way men engage in the same. The study will also look at other smaller related issues and attempt to find answers to them and it questions the validity of the above issue, as a legitimate topic for discussion in the context of literary studies. The study reaches into a new hypothesis that film studies appears to stray into the arenas of cultural studies and identity politics. Context starts speaking for film and film starts to become inextricably intertwined in the reading of cultures, a vehicle of social reproduction.

**Keywords:** Contours, Discipline, Shift, Women, Cinema.

It is a common knowledge that some stars from the films try their luck with politics sooner or later. It can be seen as a pan Indian phenomenon. From Amitabh Bachchan and Shatrugan Sinha to Chiranjeevi and NT Rama Rao, stars have dotted the firmament of politics for years. Some of these stars get into it full time and others return to films, their home turf, after a brief stint. There seems to be an uncanny relationship that films and politics share in this regard. of course, a lot has been written about male stars and their engagement with public sphere activities like politics. While we have seen the various ways in which male stars negotiate with fans and the masses in order to gain a foothold in politics, we have

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hardly seen an analysis of how the same works for female stars in politics.

At this point it would be very much in order to mention that there is a distinction between an 'actor' and a 'star'. SV Srinivas, in his essay on 'Devotion and Defiance in Fan activity' makes a mention of Chiranjeevi's interview where Chiranjeevi says "Anyone can be a (good) actor if he tries hard enough. But there are very few stars...Only one or two in a generation." (Interview, Madras). In the same essay, Chiranjeevi is mentioned making a distinction between a 'star' and a hero: a star is not necessarily a hero but anyone who can draw audiences to theatres. The term 'star' itself is significant of someone who outshines the rest and stands out from the crowd. The above definition of a star by Chiranjeevi gives us a feeling that a star is a star because of the adulation that he enjoys. There is an unconditional affection and allegiance that the masses, especially fans give to the star. Having made this point clear, we now must move on to the question of whether the same kind of adulation is the lot of female stars as well. Vijayashanti, also a very popular cinestar, also entered politics and formed the Telengana Rashtriya Samiti. Vijayashanti has essayed various roles and has worked with a variety of directors. She has played the avenging woman as well as the docile wife. In an essay by Lalitha Gopalan "Avenging women in Indian Cinema" Vijayashanti herself says "I always have to kick and pound the villains to pulp. That's why I am called the Amitabh Bachchan of Andhra Pradesh." Does the audience then wish to see the female protagonist as displaying manly qualities or do they merely require assurance that the woman is every bit as good as the man? One also wonders whether the image of a strong woman necessarily constitutes a show of physical strength.

It would not be out of place to enquire at this point, whether the screen image of a female star, impacts in any way, the political image of the star. We read in the same essay that each of her films overturns the 'several conventional associations between femininity and aggression' In a movie titled 'Police Lockup' (1992), we see Vijayashanti playing a double role: that of a timid housewife as well as an aggressive police officer. Double roles in movies are used both to recognise as well as to bank on a star's popularity.

Bringing in a character like the inspector's wife creates a feminine domestic space that both cushions as well as counterpoises the public self of the aggressive woman. Does the movie going audience relate to both selves as portrayed in movies like these? Do these kind of films help inspire women among the masses?

If we were to look at the scenario in the Tamil film industry, we would see the way the male star politician scores over the female star politician. In an essay by Sara Dickey titled "The nurturing hero" we read that M G Ramachandran, also known as MGR, was seen as someone who enacted his personal and political values in the film roles he chose. Thus his fan clubs became official branches of the party. MGR, as he is popularly known, has fans enumerating the qualities that endeared him to his fans as late as 2005. The essay details the various shifts in the qualities that have immortalised MGR. In the 1980s MGR was praised for strength, potency and virility. In 2005 most people stressed his moral teachings and nurturing love for the people. It may be noted that MGR played two kinds of roles: firstly, the underdog who overcomes oppression and secondly, the ruler or warrior who fights for the downtrodden.

Jayalalitha had to desexualize her image. She did this by asking her party workers to call her 'Amma' so that her tainted image as a film actress would be shed, at least to some extent. This indicates a different experience from that of the male star, whose image has already been established as a man of the masses and someone who will care for and nurture the populace that has elected him to power. Once Jayalalitha came to power, she had to contend with a lot of criticism. What follows is a quote by an MGR fan and Tamil scholar, C Rajeswari:

"Our current chief minister (J Jayalalitha) is a good administrator, but we have officials to take care of administration. What we need in a leader is a nurturing mother."

It is strange that the masses should look for a nurturing mother like figure, when the position is one where administration is important. MGR, it may be recalled, was seen as a caring leader.

It is therefore, much more difficult for a female star to hold onto popularity and fan following as against the male star. This is

generally the rule. Hardgrave's quote on the actress in Tamil Nadu would shed some light on this issue.

"The actress in Tamil Nadu, however much she may attract a following, carries an aura of ill repute. Most actresses are believed to have 'loose morals'. . . . The actress; however is a source of ambivalence for most film fans. . . . she draws them to her-but she is never fully able to escape the ambiance of immorality. The actor has the benefit of the double standard."

In other words, a career in films does not command much respect. Studies conducted by Dickey show that film viewers are certain as to the distance that exists between film stars and themselves. Since film acting requires a woman to step out of the private sphere and present herself as a spectacle for the gaze of both men and women, a woman who has taken to films immediately detaches herself from other common women. If anything, the star provides a means of escape from the monotony of everyday life and the desperation of poverty. It must be kept in mind, though, that a section of the women in Tamil Nadu find Jayalalitha to be one among them. However, they are looking at her only as someone who has helped them in a political capacity.

Fan culture seems to adhere to the concept of a political society- a domain of mass politics removed from the structure of civil society. Thus the fan phenomenon can be looked at as an extension of the politics of the popular, an emerging political society that breaks through the dominance of the civil society. This idea comes up in Partha Chatterjee's work "Politics of the Governed", 2004.

The next set of questions that we need to address is the role that 'caste' plays in the engagement of cinema stars in politics. How does the 'caste label' affect a female star while engaging with the politics? Does iconography extend to all classes of society? If not, which stratum of society is affected by this?

It goes without saying that caste plays a very big role in politics. The fan associations in Andhra are populated by largely poor or lower middle class youth and these may in turn be, forward 'Sudra' castes (Kapu or Kamma) or Dalits. SV Srinivas, in his essay "Devotion and Defiance in Fan Activity' informs his readers that while party or caste affiliations do not fully explain the reasons for

the choice of a 'star', the very fact that they played and continue to play any role at all should be enough to take fans and their activities seriously. It is not true those fans are political cadres or that fan club activities prepare fans to enter politics. Not all fans involve themselves in political activities. It is, however, not out of place, to point out that fans at times, do seek a place for themselves in conventional politics. It is necessary to point out that fan associations and political parties attract people from similar socio-economic backgrounds. The common quest is social recognition and power. An example of this can be given. Vijayalakshmi is the president of the Vijayashanti Cultural Association. Besides a liking for the star, she says that the post would help her gain public exposure and that, in turn, would help her enter politics. Does fan activity also then enable potential political candidates to gain a foothold in politics? Is the experience of a fan following different for women stars as against male stars?

In an article by AS Paneerselvan called 'Fanning Voter Passions" in *outlookindia.com*, there is a reference to the fans of Rajnikanth taking up for him against Jayalalitha. In a film, Rajnikanth apparently says things that seem to point to Jayalalitha and that are where the trouble begins.

"For, his antipathy towards the chief minister began as a figment of Jayalalitha and her sycophants' imagination. In 1991, when Rajnikant played a taming-of-the-shrew role in *Mannan*, the paranoid AIADMK leadership read too much meaning into the dialogues. It was perceived that the shrew in the movie was Jayalalitha and there were veiled threats from members of the ruling party. Rajnikant's fans were for a time prevented from attending the morning darshans at his residence in Poes Garden, an upmarket area where Jayalalitha also lives."

Jayalalitha has her own fan following. Many women see her as one of them and speak glowingly about her achievements when she was in power. They say that she has done a great deal for the women of the state. They say that her opponents are trying to pull her down because she is woman. In the case of Jayalalitha, her fan following relates to her more as a politician rather than a film personality. The fan following is also a formidable force to reckon

with as can be seen in this case. The star politician definitely scored over the star, at least in this case. The star -politician in this case is capable of wreaking havoc on the star - the cinema star is definitely less powerful than the star politician. The equation here is less to do with the gender of the politician and more to do with the amount of power that politics brings with it. Southern star politicians are not just crowd pullers. They are torch bearers of people's power. In a sense, fan clubs also indicate the power of people's devotion to the star.

In a reversal of fortune of sorts, Jayalalitha's attempt to reclaim Chief Ministership in 1996, was marred by the entry of Rajnikanth who had been making crucial political statements in films like 'Muthu' and 'Arunachalam'. Therefore, besides the following, a political victory or defeat seems to be hinged on a lot of factors- the ability to impact the masses being one.

It is not possible to discount the role of the mass film in this context. In the introductory chapter of the book "Fingerprinting Popular Culture: The Mythic and the Iconic in Indian Cinema", Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy, indicate the role of popular cinema: "Popular cinema has increasingly tended to become a battleground of cultures, tastes, aesthetics and political ideologies". It argues that the Indian audience gets what it deserves because it does not know how to appreciate aesthetics in films. This kind of a high brow attitude seems to ignore the most obvious function that mass film serves. Popular cinema is not just a kaleidoscope of images but also a socio-cultural phenomenon which has its roots in the culture of the people. People empower this kind of film by allowing it to speak to them about their society, changing norms and the world in general.

Popular cinema has the ability to exert its impact on the masses when it appears as a key factor in national and state level politics. Censorship of a very stringent kind has ensured that not too many films are made, that have to do with endorsing a political ideology or criticize a political leader. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu has been credited with using the power of the mass appeal of film media, newspapers and the stage to impact the attitude and the ideology of the masses. The Tamil film Parasakthi (1952) has all that the party stood for: glorification of the

Dravidian heritage as well as the social evils of caste, superstition, class domination, the North-South divide among other things. The film came in for a lot of criticism from quite a few quarters. It supposedly hurt the sentiments of a section of society that believed and held religion as something to be venerated. The DMK, thereafter, made a lot of amends and asked for people not to condemn the party as one of non believers. Nevertheless, the film made waves and was remembered as one that gained a lot of popularity among majority of the mass film audience.

It must be noted that star power does not automatically guarantee political power. According to MSS Pandian, who has written extensively on this area, "The southern actors have never relied solely on their film star status to spur their political careers". He goes on to state that celebrities in north India have little interest in the 'larger canvas of politics'. Even if the spectator mistakes the screen image of the star for the political persona of the star politician, if he/she is not able to live up to the expectations of the populace, he/she is voted out of power. In this case, the gender of the star-politician does not really matter. Just like NTR lost power, Jayalalitha also was voted out of office. The difference is that, she has been in and out of chief ministership of Tamil Nadu. Therefore, star power does not necessarily ensure continuity in the stormy world of politics. This has been the case so far in the politics of south India.

Are women stars more accessible to their fans? Does language of films starred in matter as far as reach of the audience goes? For instance, is Jayaprada more popular because she has starred in Telugu as well as Hindi films? Is her fan base necessarily wider due to the fact that she has acted in films of more than one language? If that is the case, what kind of fan base will such a star have? Will the fan base have to do with the constituency that the star is contesting from? Stars have a pan Indian appeal. They serve an important purpose by erasing divisive electoral lines. Jayaprada's political career graph can be cited as a case in point. She is a Hindi film actress who hails from Andhra Pradesh in south India. She contested from Rampur in Uttar Pradesh and won. Rampur is predominantly feudal and Muslim. Though she is neither a Muslim nor from Uttar Pradesh, she won defeating Noor Bano, who is a

Congress candidate from the royal family of Rampur. This calls into question the experience of stars turned politicians in the North as being different from the experience in the south.

One also wonders whether stars campaigning for other stars or parties do so because of their reliable fan base. As Margaret Alva, the Congress General Secretary once said, "Stars are crowd pullers. But whether they can convert crowds into votes is another matter". A distinction has to be made between stars who lend their name to politics and those who have a political ideology.

It is common knowledge that Jayalalitha started off as a public relations officer and then minister in MGR's party and then rose slowly in the ranks. There have been quite a few instances in Tamil Nadu and other places where stars have tried to launch their own parties or have campaigned for other parties. This seems to have become more or less a pan Indian phenomenon. It now becomes important to ask the question: Do stars that campaign on behalf of a party, also bank heavily on their glamour and star quotient in order to garner support for the party that they are campaigning for? Going by what we have seen in the recent past, one can see that this is not necessarily true.

Having asked all these questions, it becomes essential at this point to see under what discipline these questions can be asked. The purview of literary studies does not, in a conventional sense, cover all this. The discipline of literary studies does not allow one to ask all these questions. The questions asked are to do with cultural history, sociology, film studies and to an extent popular culture as well as politics. The contour of a discipline, which was thought to be all encompassing until now is thus challenged.

However, English is the site of a clustering of ideas drawn from other fields- philosophy, social science and psychology (psychoanalysis) among them which makes for more radical sounding claims than one hears in other parts of the academy. The English (discipline) ideology is an expression of a broader phenomenon: the formation of a new social grouping. This class of people is the kind of workforce required by digitalized technologies and emergent in societies adapting to them. This class has been provisionally termed the "New Class". It must be noted at

this point, that the English ideology is one that provides a space for the articulation of notions and ideas which are only thought of or tacitly assumed elsewhere. It is the scene for the articulation of a new culture.

Avrom Fleishman, in his book titled "The Condition of English: literary studies in a changing culture" describes the changing contour of English studies thus: "This new thinking can be described as a fairly coherent ideology and can be associated with a more fluid set of mental attitudes prevalent among an emergent social class". The undulating terrain of English literary studies can be understood better as a larger socio-cultural transformation: "the rise to prominence of an intelligentsia linked to the New Class". The academic intelligentsia may come to recognize that the English ideology and the New Class mentality are perfectly compatible with one another and make for an unassailable foundation in the post industrial world.

At this juncture, one might also mention that in the recent years, cultural studies, gender studies and a whole lot of philosophy based courses have been included in the college and university syllabi. As Fleishman puts it: "Colleges and universities are no longer cloistered retreats but fully imbricate in the social mechanism". Yet universities are still repositories of tradition and works of artistic and literary value are led to resort to historical knowledge. The movement is openly scornful of the 'periodization' of history and literary texts. It is instead the notion of the episteme that is used. The extent of an episteme is never fixed. Hence, we have a new terminology within literary studies- "representations", "discursive practices", "mediations", "subversion", "ruptures".

Coming back to the series of questions posed in the first part of this paper, one can see that such questions could not have been asked of literary studies. If one were to look at the representation of women in literary studies, the traditional ways of doing it was to ask questions like, for instance, analysis of the role of women characters in "The Mayor of Casterbridge" by Thomas Hardy. Another instance would be a question like the portrayal of women characters in, say, the novels of the Bronte sisters. A question

involving the medium of film, sociological aspects of women stars and politics could hardly be considered the domain of literary studies. A question, if posed with this domain, would involve the dislodging of the basic tenets of the discipline and would be regarded as interdisciplinary.

DG Myers, in his essay, "The New Historicism in Literary Study" (originally published in *Academic Questions* 2, 1988-89) informs us of the crisis that the discipline went through. There was a sense, of the discipline having reached a dead end of sorts. For some time, feminism seemed to hold out some hope of transforming literary criticism into an agent of social change. But many within the discipline slowly realized that feminism had no distinctive method of its own; "the feminist critic knew what she wanted to say about a text, but she had to adopt other interpretive "strategies" as the saying went, to make her themes appear."

Hence, it is clear, that within the confines of the discipline it becomes very difficult to formulate and ask a series of questions like the ones that have been asked earlier in this essay. I would like to indicate here that literary studies can be seen as amoebic in structure- the outlines and contours of which are in a state of constant flux.

Moving on to film studies and its concerns, it is but natural to look at what kind of questions can be asked of this discipline. "An Introduction to Film Studies" by Jill Nelmes gives us an insight into the notion of genre as far as film is concerned. The term film 'genre' is a term imported to film theory from literary studies and meaning 'type' or 'class'. Attention to issues like taste, preference, identity and pleasure provide the film reviewer "with a tactical means of evaluating a film's relative merits in terms of the way, in which it can be said to be a classic of its genre, or, moreover, if it affords particular pleasures by extending, usurping, challenging or reworking particular generic elements."

Tom Ryall cautions against viewing genre criticism merely as a question of fitting films into their appropriate generic slot. The question of genre routinely emerges as a border dispute because it engages in defining the boundaries between one genre and another. Critics have tried to map the contours of genres in many

ways using a variety of methods. It is, therefore, no surprise that contours even within disciplines are being reworked and redefined. As can be seen from the above example, it is also becoming common to borrow terms and phrases from other disciplines.

“The Silent Cinema Reader” by Lee Grieveson and Peter Kramer details the shift in film production from short comedies to story films. The timing of this change had profound implications for a larger understanding of cinema practice- for instance, the reorganization of productive forces in areas of distribution and exhibition. The effect that comes from different chronological orderings affects the contours of film history.

The changing limits of film studies becomes clear, when post 1968, the study of film started getting incorporated into the paradigms of social sciences. Film gets decoded with the help of Marxism, psychoanalysis and so on. Film is a text within a political and intellectual context and the balance between the two is a source of conflict. Film studies appears to stray into the arenas of cultural studies and identity politics. Context starts speaking for film and film starts to become inextricably intertwined in the reading of cultures, a vehicle of social reproduction.

Janet Thumim’s book “Celluloid Sisters” sets out to examine two important issues in current film studies: the representation of women and the means by which audiences understand and utilise media texts. The question she poses is: how far can popular cinema be understood to have contributed to the continuing subjection of women in the post war period? Numerous other issues like the role of popular culture, the nature of women’s engagement with the female models offered to them and the way in which characters and understandings are established in popular films and forms are discussed. This study is carried out using movies from Hollywood and therefore has nothing to do with the Indian film industry or the Indian film audiences and fans.

It is worth noting that there have been studies done on audiences in India. They are to do with television audiences and the need for audience research. There have also been studies done on fan clubs and male star turned politicians. However, the women stars have been referred to only in passing.

The question that has been posed in the first part of the essay has not really been studied as part of a film studies project. This could be mainly due to the fact that the questions posed threaten to rupture the contours of conventional boundaries of disciplines that they stem from-politics, sociology and film studies.

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