



FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN MODERN CINEMA: A CASE STUDY OF *KANAA*

Tholkappiyan. k

Jain (Deemed-to-be) University, Bangalore.

Course: M.A. English

Abstract:

The representation of female protagonists in contemporary cinema, especially in the context of patriarchal societies, offers a rich terrain for feminist critique. *Kanaa* (2018), a Tamil-language film directed by Siddharth Sivakumar, follows the journey of Kousalya, a young woman from rural Tamil Nadu, as she strives to break through societal and familial boundaries to become a professional cricketer. By analyzing Kousalya's character through the lens of feminist film theory, this paper explores the ways in which *Kanaa* critiques gendered expectations, patriarchal structures, and the societal constraints imposed on women. The film's portrayal of a female protagonist who challenges traditional gender roles in a male-dominated sport, while navigating familial and societal pressures, offers a nuanced discussion of female agency, ambition, and empowerment. This paper examines key feminist themes such as breaking gender norms, family dynamics, the intersection of desire and societal expectations, and the symbolic significance of the cricket field as a space of resistance. By exploring these elements, the paper demonstrates how *Kanaa* contributes to ongoing feminist discussions in contemporary Indian cinema.

Keywords:

Feminist film theory, female protagonists, gender roles, Kousalya, *Kanaa*, cricket, patriarchy, empowerment, familial dynamics, gendered spaces, agency.

Introduction

Feminist readings of contemporary cinema have long interrogated how female characters are portrayed, particularly within patriarchal frameworks that limit women's autonomy and self-expression. In recent years, Indian cinema has witnessed a growing trend of films that challenge traditional representations of women, often focusing on female protagonists who defy societal expectations. One such film is *Kanaa* (2018), directed by Siddharth Sivakumar, which tells the story of Kousalya, a young woman from a rural village in Tamil Nadu who dreams of becoming a professional cricketer in a sport traditionally dominated by men.

This paper examines *Kanaa* through the lens of feminist film theory, analyzing how the character of Kousalya embodies a feminist challenge to the gendered norms and expectations placed upon women. In particular, the paper will focus on the themes of female ambition, resistance, family dynamics, and the role of gendered spaces in the pursuit of personal autonomy. The film's portrayal of Kousalya's journey to assert her desire to play cricket highlights the complexities of navigating societal constraints while striving for empowerment in a patriarchal society. By analyzing the intersections of gender, power, and agency, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation about feminism in contemporary Indian cinema.

Feminist Film Theory and Cinema

Feminist film theory emerged as a critical response to the male-dominated nature of mainstream cinema, which often portrayed women as passive objects to be gazed at, consumed, or saved. Grounded in the works of theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler, and bell hooks, feminist film theory seeks to examine how women are represented on screen and how these representations perpetuate or challenge societal gender norms.

Laura Mulvey's concept of the *male gaze* has been foundational in feminist film criticism. Mulvey argues that traditional cinema positions women as objects of male desire, with the camera often aligned with the male perspective. In contrast, feminist filmmakers and critics seek to reposition women as subjects with agency, exploring their narratives from their point of view and giving voice to their desires and aspirations.

Gender performativity, as articulated by Judith Butler, is another critical framework in feminist readings of film. According to Butler, gender is not an innate identity but rather a set of behaviors and

roles that individuals enact, often in response to societal expectations. *Kanaa* provides a compelling narrative for examining how Kousalya's performance of gender defies societal norms, as she pursues a non-traditional career in cricket, a space that is generally reserved for men.

By applying these feminist frameworks to *Kanaa*, this paper aims to analyze how the film's portrayal of Kousalya offers a critique of gender norms and patriarchy, and how the narrative works to subvert traditional portrayals of women in Indian cinema.

Breaking Gender Norms: Kousalya's Pursuit of Cricket

One of the central feminist themes in *Kanaa* is the challenge to gendered expectations in the domain of sports. Cricket, in India, is deeply embedded in the national psyche and is overwhelmingly male-dominated. Male cricketers are seen as symbols of strength, competitiveness, and national pride. Women's involvement in the sport, however, has often been marginalized and underrepresented. Kousalya's dream of becoming a professional cricketer is an act of defiance against these gendered conventions, as she seeks to carve out a space for herself in a sport traditionally reserved for men.

At the outset of the film, Kousalya's ambition is met with skepticism and resistance from her father, who believes that women should focus on more "appropriate" roles such as homemaking and marriage. Her father's objections are reflective of the societal pressures that women often face in rural, patriarchal contexts. Women's autonomy is frequently limited by rigid gender norms that dictate what is considered acceptable for them to pursue. In this regard, Kousalya's desire to play cricket serves as an act of feminist resistance, challenging the restrictive gender roles imposed by both her family and society at large.

However, the film does not present Kousalya's journey as an easy one. Her battle against societal expectations is fraught with obstacles, including her father's reluctance, the community's disapproval, and the inherent challenges of pursuing a male-dominated career. Through Kousalya's persistence, *Kanaa* highlights the difficulties women face when attempting to break free from traditional gender roles, while also celebrating the resilience and agency that women can assert in the face of adversity.

Family Dynamics: Patriarchal Control and Feminist Resistance

The family, particularly the father-daughter relationship, is central to the narrative of *Kanaa*. Patriarchal family structures often serve as one of the primary sites for the enforcement of gender roles, with fathers exercising control over their daughters' aspirations and choices. In *Kanaa*, Kousalya's father initially embodies the patriarchal authority that limits his daughter's freedom,

discouraging her from pursuing a career in cricket because it conflicts with his vision of her as a traditional, submissive daughter.

However, as the narrative progresses, Kousalya's father undergoes a transformation. His eventual support for Kousalya's dream reflects the potential for change within patriarchal structures. This shift in the father's character highlights a crucial feminist theme: the possibility for negotiation and reconciliation within patriarchal relationships. While the film does not suggest that patriarchy can be entirely eradicated, it suggests that change can come through understanding, compromise, and respect for the autonomy of women.

Kousalya's relationship with her mother also provides important insights into the complexities of familial feminism. Her mother, though more supportive of her ambitions, still harbors internalized patriarchal values. Despite this, she offers Kousalya emotional support, signaling that female empowerment within the family can be achieved not only through direct resistance but also through understanding and solidarity among women. *Kanaa* thus explores the dual role of the family: as both a space of patriarchal oppression and a potential site for feminist resistance and transformation.

Desire, Ambition, and Societal Expectations

Kousalya's ambition to play cricket is not just an individual desire but a feminist act of self-assertion. In a society where women are often expected to limit their desires to the domestic sphere, Kousalya's desire to succeed in a competitive, male-dominated sport challenges these deeply ingrained norms. Her struggle highlights the double bind faced by many women—on the one hand, they are expected to conform to traditional roles, and on the other, they are condemned for attempting to assert their own desires and aspirations.

Kousalya's journey illustrates the tension between individual ambition and the societal pressures to conform. The film critiques how women's desires are often viewed as transgressive or unnatural when they deviate from traditional roles, while simultaneously suggesting that women's pursuit of their own desires is a key aspect of feminist liberation.

The Cricket Field as a Symbol of Feminist Empowerment

The cricket field in *Kanaa* is more than just a place where Kousalya seeks to prove her skills; it is a symbolic space where gender boundaries are contested and ultimately redefined. Traditionally, cricket is a sport that symbolizes masculinity in India. For Kousalya to claim the cricket field as her own is a

powerful act of resistance against the cultural and social norms that designate such spaces as male-only.

The film uses cricket not just as a sport but as a metaphor for empowerment. Through her participation in cricket, Kousalya redefines what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society, showing that women can excel in areas that have historically excluded them. The cricket field becomes a space of self-expression, agency, and resistance, demonstrating that gendered spaces can be transformed through the participation of women.

Conclusion

Kanaa offers a compelling feminist reading of a young woman's struggle to assert her agency and independence in the face of patriarchal norms. Through the character of Kousalya, the film critiques the gendered barriers that women face in a male-dominated society, particularly in the realm of sports, which has long been considered a male preserve. The film also highlights the complex dynamics of familial relationships, where patriarchal control can give way to feminist resistance and transformation.

By portraying Kousalya's ambition as a feminist act, *Kanaa* challenges the limitations imposed on women and offers a hopeful narrative of empowerment and change. The film not only critiques gendered expectations but also celebrates the agency and resilience of women.

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Gledhill, Christine, editor. *Feminist Cinema*. Macmillan, 2007.

Hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press, 1984.

Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Mankekar, Purnima. *Gender and Modernity in the Cinemas of India*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Scruton, Sheila, and Anne Flintoff, editors. *Gender and Sport: A Reader*. Routledge, 2002.

Sivakumar, Siddharth, director. *Kanaa*. 2018.