



CHALLENGING GENDER NORMS: THE REPRESENTATION OF MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN IN *MAGALIR MATTUM* (2017)

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Abstract:

Magalir Mattum (2017), directed by Saravanan, is a progressive Tamil film that offers a fresh perspective on the portrayal of middle-aged women in contemporary Indian cinema. The film revolves around three women in their 40s—played by Jyothika, Urvashi, and Bhanupriya—who set out on a road trip that serves as both a literal and metaphorical journey toward self-discovery. By focusing on these women, the film challenges traditional gender norms that typically marginalize older women, particularly in the context of South Indian cinema. This paper explores how *Magalir Mattum* subverts stereotypes surrounding middle-aged women, delving into their desires, emotional complexities, and the pursuit of autonomy outside conventional roles of wife and mother. Through a feminist lens, the paper examines how the film critiques the societal expectations placed on women as they age, while celebrating their agency, independence, and friendship. Ultimately, *Magalir Mattum* offers a nuanced and empowering portrayal of middle-aged women, inviting viewers to rethink societal views on aging, gender, and femininity.

Keywords:

Gender norms, middle-aged women, empowerment, autonomy, feminist film theory, *Magalir Mattum*, aging, South Indian cinema, friendship, societal expectations.

Introduction

The representation of women in Indian cinema, particularly in Tamil films, has long been influenced by patriarchal norms that emphasize beauty, youth, and motherhood as central to a woman's identity. Middle-aged women, often considered "invisible" or relegated to stereotypical roles as mothers or caregivers, rarely find themselves at the forefront of narratives that explore their emotional complexity, desires, or agency. In this context, *Magalir Mattum* (2017) stands out as a rare film that focuses on the lives of three middle-aged women, offering a critique of the societal norms that confine women to predefined roles as they age. Through its narrative, the film challenges these gender norms, presenting its protagonists as complex, multi-dimensional individuals who seek personal fulfillment beyond the traditional boundaries of wifehood and motherhood.

This paper examines how *Magalir Mattum* challenges gendered expectations surrounding aging women in Tamil cinema. By focusing on the journeys of its female characters—Vimala (played by Jyothika), Manjula (Urvashi), and Padmini (Bhanupriya)—the film offers an opportunity to explore how the portrayal of middle-aged women can subvert traditional gender norms, empower women, and provide a new narrative for women at the intersection of aging and autonomy.

Gender Norms and Aging: A Societal Overview

In many societies, including Indian culture, youth and beauty are seen as central to a woman's value. As women age, they often experience a devaluation of their worth, particularly when it comes to their roles in family, marriage, and the broader social context. Aging women are frequently depicted as either invisible or as the antithesis of youthful vitality, often relegated to the roles of mother, grandmother, or caretaker. These representations are so deeply ingrained that they influence the way older women perceive themselves and the expectations others have for them.

Indian cinema, especially mainstream Tamil films, has traditionally reinforced these stereotypes, often portraying women in secondary roles or confining them to the domestic sphere. In such films, older women are either the “mothers” who exist to serve their children and families or the “villains” who uphold patriarchal norms. *Magalir Mattum*, however, offers a subversion of these tropes by centering on the lives of women who are beyond the conventional stage of youth and motherhood but are not defined solely by their roles as caregivers.

The film challenges the notion that women's value diminishes with age and instead presents middle-aged women as individuals with desires, ambitions, and a right to emotional and sexual autonomy. By exploring these themes, *Magalir Mattum* provides a feminist critique of the social and cultural limitations imposed on women as they age.

Feminist Interpretation of *Magalir Mattum*: Subverting the Traditional Narrative

1. The Empowerment of Middle-Aged Women Through Friendship

A significant feminist element in *Magalir Mattum* is its portrayal of female friendship, which becomes a vital space for self-expression and empowerment. The three women—Vimala, Manjula, and Padmini—reconnect with each other after many years and embark on a journey that transcends physical boundaries. Through their friendship, they share their fears, regrets, desires, and dreams. This camaraderie allows them to break free from the societal roles they have long been expected to play as wives and mothers.

The road trip becomes more than just a narrative device; it functions as a metaphor for freedom, self-discovery, and reclaiming agency. The characters, who have been constrained by familial responsibilities, come to recognize that their lives are not defined solely by their roles as caregivers. Their collective journey is symbolic of women's ability to find strength and empowerment in solidarity, a core tenet of feminist discourse. In *Magalir Mattum*, friendship between women becomes an act of resistance against patriarchal structures that confine them to subservient roles.

2. Aging, Sexuality, and Desire

Another crucial feminist theme in the film is the exploration of middle-aged women's sexuality and desires. The film does not shy away from discussing the physical and emotional needs of women who are often presumed to lose their sexual agency as they age. Vimala, the film's primary protagonist, is shown to be grappling with the emotional void in her marriage, feeling neglected by her husband, who has taken her for granted. Her emotional and sexual needs, previously ignored, are central to her personal journey. The film portrays her yearning for connection, intimacy, and a rediscovery of her desires.

The narrative does not demonize Vimala's longing for emotional fulfillment outside the traditional roles of wife and mother. Instead, it gives her space to articulate her dissatisfaction, thereby reclaiming

her right to sexual autonomy and self-expression. This portrayal is a significant departure from traditional representations of aging women in cinema, who are often shown as sexually irrelevant or completely disinterested in intimacy. By addressing the emotional and sexual complexities of middle-aged women, *Magalir Mattum* challenges the stigma that surrounds the desires of older women.

3. The Rejection of Patriarchal Domesticity

Another important feminist reading of *Magalir Mattum* is its critique of domesticity and patriarchal family structures. The film critiques the traditional expectation that women should prioritize their families and children over their own needs and desires. Vimala, in particular, confronts her husband's neglect of her, which leads her to question her role in the family. As she travels with her friends, she experiences a sense of liberation that she has not felt in years.

This rejection of patriarchal domesticity is a critical feminist element in the film, as it challenges the notion that a woman's fulfillment should come from self-sacrifice within the family unit. Instead, the film advocates for women's autonomy and the right to make decisions based on their own needs, desires, and happiness. Vimala's decision to leave her home for a while is an act of defiance against the traditional expectations of women's roles in the family.

The Significance of Representation in Tamil Cinema

Magalir Mattum is significant not only for its feminist themes but also for the impact it has on the representation of middle-aged women in Tamil cinema. Historically, women in Tamil films—especially older women—have been marginalized, with few opportunities to represent their own desires, autonomy, and emotional journeys. This film provides a much-needed shift in perspective, showing women who are not defined by age, marital status, or motherhood but by their individual experiences, friendships, and aspirations.

The film's positive representation of middle-aged women challenges the conventional wisdom that older women have no place in mainstream cinema. By centering on the lives of middle-aged women, *Magalir Mattum* offers a counter-narrative to the patriarchal tendency to erase or marginalize older women's voices in Indian cinema.

Conclusion

Magalir Mattum is a powerful example of how Tamil cinema is evolving to offer more diverse and complex representations of women. Through the portrayal of three middle-aged women, the film challenges the traditional gender norms and societal expectations placed on women as they age. It provides a feminist critique of the patriarchal structures that define women's worth through their roles as wives and mothers, offering instead a narrative where women are empowered by friendship, autonomy, and the freedom to express their desires.

By focusing on the emotional complexities and sexual agency of its middle-aged female protagonists, *Magalir Mattum* not only subverts the stereotypical portrayal of aging women in Tamil cinema but also invites a broader discussion on aging, gender, and femininity. The film ultimately redefines what it means to be a woman in middle age, offering a powerful message of empowerment and self-fulfillment.

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