

Article

Young Generation Perception on Sri Lankan Refugees and Their Representation in Tamil Films

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A B S T R A C T

This article investigates the role of representation in Tamil films as to how the Sri Lankan refugees are portrayed in films and further it studies to understand the life of Sri Lankan refugees in Indian Refugee camps and the reality that are represented in films. It further helps us understand the impact of representation theory in films and the role and art of how it is used to convey various types of stories in Cinema. The researcher particularly taken three movies that were top ranked in the pilot study, 'Nandha' (2001) by director 'Bala, Kannathil Muthamital' (2002) by director Mani Ratnam and 'Jagame Thanthiram' (2021) by director Karthik Subbaraj to understand the Sri Lankans portrayals. This investigation is essential to understand as to what kind of re-presentations the film makers in Tamil Cinema are trying to send across. Tamil filmmakers in India frequently depict Sri Lankan refugees in their films. They represent the Sri Lankan refugees in a variety of ways, including via characters, scenery, attire, education, livelihood, trading, employability. They portray them in a variety of roles too. The results of this study will help the researcher to understand how this marginalized community has been used in the film.

Keywords: Illegal Traders, Portrayal, Refugees, Representation, Terrorist

Introduction

Media portrays reality in accordance with the imagination and vision of the artist. Human minds are strongly influenced by visual pictures. Films often convey ideas and prejudices via the portrayal of specific characters. The impact of movies on society as a whole is enormous. New practices, concepts, trends, etc. are introduced. Films have the power to not only establish opinions but also alter them. The stories of the Sri Lankan refugee have been featured in a number of films.

People flee their homes when one or more of their fundamental human rights are infringed or in danger. The number of refugees globally has grown over the past century for a variety of causes. Local and International conflicts have caused an increase in the number of refugees in several nations and more closely from our neighboring countries like Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Refugees typically left their homes for protection, but in certain instances, they had additional requirements that varied according to their family needs. Most often people become refugees not at the

fault of their own. When the basic needs of the humanity are put to risk, the humanity searches for survival in the neighboring countries. In the last few years and decades, we have been hearing and witnessing horrifying stories of people fleeing for safety security and survival. Thousands of refugees lost their loved ones in the course of their survival journey. Very often these stories are presented in films and media according to the writer's perspective and sometimes they tend to be very subjective. Some films portray the refugees as helpless humanity while some other films portray them as a threat.

Most of the research that has been conducted on the subject of refugee problem has been carried out by various scholars across the globe. Foreign investigations have discovered that the media frequently portrays refugees and the availability of refuge as a problem or as a threat to the host nation. Due to various projections and options, many host countries tend to borrow perceptions that refugees are terrorist, unwelcomed guests, uneducated people, poor and vulnerable people. India has been receiving refugees from Sri Lanka past 30 years due to the local ethnic wars in their country. The families of Sri Lankan refugees, who fled the country's ethnic conflict in the 1980s, make up the biggest community of refugees in refugee camps and the second-largest refugee population in India. The Sri Lankan refugee problem has been a major topic in modern and older Tamil films. However, no studies have been conducted on how these refugees are portrayed in Tamil movies or how these movies have affected people, particularly today's youth. The researcher chose this subject in order to examine how refugees are portrayed in Tamil movies.

Review of Related Literature

Deepanjanli Mishra (2015) in portrayal of women in Media argues that recent studies on news reports reveal that the primary motivation behind the reporting is sex and sensation. Women's concerns made up fewer than 2% of the total articles in one of the four major English daily in India, much less in the other three, according to the research. (Bahuguna). In addition to the protracted and contentious discussion around the proportion of women in legislative bodies, it is disturbing to contemplate the state of women in Indian society as a whole.

In one of the early researches Andrea Peycheva (2016) in Representation of refugees in popular culture explains that the examination of media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers, as well as how these groups use the media, are two possible research subjects that might be explored. Media coverage of refugees has always been difficult, marred by commercial considerations, sensationalism, exaggeration. 'Media Portrayals of Refugees and their Effects on Social Conflict and Social Cohesion' by Muzeyyen Pandir (2020) says that the way the media portrays refugees may lead

to prejudice against them as well as understanding and acceptance. In this way, conflict and cohesiveness between host and refugee communities are challenges that the media may either contribute to or solve. Directly and indirectly, purposely or accidentally, media depictions influence public opinion, attitudes, sentiments regarding migrants. A close look into these scholarly writings enables the researcher to understand the representation of the refugees in films and its relation to the chosen variable.

Research Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to discuss and understand the art of creating perceptions and forming opinions through the representation of people/ community in films. Film makers play a vital role in creating diverse images of people. This research will help us understand whether the filmmakers are representing a positive image of the refugees or negative or neutral or reality as it is. Representation theory by Stuart Hall is used in this paper. The representation theory helps to understand how people, places, objects, events and cultural identities are presented in the films. Often the representations are according to the film makers and they are constructed. It is important for media students to understand the impact of this theory. The South Indian Tamil cinema industry has shown Sri Lanka, its people, the ethnic strife since the beginning of the war.

In this paper the researcher has taken three movies, 'Nandha' (2001), 'Kanathil Muthamittal' (2002) and 'Jagame Thanthiram' (2021) and 10 screenshots from each movie that refer to the variables to understand the representation of refugees portrayed in the movies as well as a pilot study was carried out with 150 respondents to understand their perception and understand of Sri Lankan refugees and their current situation. This data of pilot study and the various scenes analysis from the three movies will help the research to understand what kind of representation these films have created upon the people.

Research Questions

1. How are the Sri Lankan refugees portrayed in Tamil films?
2. What message is communicated through the way in which the Sri Lankan refugees are projected in films?
3. What kind of Socio-Economic-Cultural conditions of the Sri Lankan Refugees are presented in the films?

Data Analysis and Interpretation

From Table 1, it is understood that out of 150 respondents, 50 (33.3%) respondents stated 'strongly agree' to the statement that Sri Lankan refugees are represented in films as 'illegal traders.' Similarly, out of 150 respondents who responded to the pilot study survey, 65 (43.3%) respondents stated 'strongly agree' to the statement that movies represent Sri Lankan refugees as 'uneducated.'

Within the age groups of those 'agreed' to the statement the highest percentage of respondents is found in the age group of 16-21 (26.4%). As the age group of respondents increases less percentage of respondents 'agreed' to the statement. With the age groups of those 'strongly agreed' to the statement, the highest percentage was found in the age group of 22-25 (15.9%). Among those respondents who stated as 'neutral', the lowest percentage is among the age group of 16-21 (26.4%). This means that the majority of young respondents prefer to take a position one way or the other. Another of 150 respondents, 47 (31.3%) respondents stated 'strongly disagree' to the statement that Sri Lankan refugees are represented in films as 'unemployed people.' This perception is stronger among the younger age group. This is noticed in the response of 83 (55.3%) respondents, of 150 respondents, who stated that they 'strongly disagree' to the statement that right to free movements in the country. 36 (24.0%) respondents stated that they 'disagree' with the statement. Out of 83 respondents 35 respondents are from the age group of 22-25. They are under the perception that the refugees are a threat to this country therefore they should not be allowed to move freely in the country. The negative images of the refugees created by the films are so strong that the respondents do not agree with the statement that citizenship should be given to the refugees. Out of 150 respondents, 101 (67.3%) respondents 'strongly disagree' with the statement that citizenship should be granted to Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who have been living in Tamil Nadu for more than 20 years. Totally 101 respondents stated 'strongly disagree' to recommend citizenship to the refugees who have been living in the country.

Table I. Respondents Who Described their Opinion on Sri Lankan Refugees Being Represented as 'Illegal Traders' in Films

S.No	Represented in films as illegal traders	N	%
1	Agree	21	14.0
2	Strongly Agree	50	33.3
3	Neutral	18	12.0
4	Disagree	31	20.7
5	Strongly Disagree	30	20.0
	Total	150	100.0

The above Table 2, states that among the male respondents, 31 (38.8%) male respondents stated 'strongly agree' that Sri Lankan refugees are represented in films as illegal traders. 16 (20.0%) male respondents stated 'disagree' to the statement and 14 (17.5%) male respondents stated 'strongly disagree' that Sri Lankan refugees are represented in films as illegal traders. 13 (16.3%) male respondents

stated 'neutral' and 6 (7.5%) male respondents stated 'agree' to the statement. Among the female respondents, 19 (27.1%) female respondents stated 'strongly agree' to the statement that Sri Lankan refugees are represented in films as illegal traders. 16 (22.9%) female respondents stated 'strongly disagree' and 15 (21.4%) female respondents stated 'disagree' to the statement that Sri Lankan refugees are represented in films as illegal traders.

The above Table 3, states that 30 respondents stated 'strongly disagree' and another 50 respondents stated 'strongly agree' to the statement that films represent the refugees as illegal traders. Out of 50 respondents who stated strongly agree, 24 respondents are from the age group 22-25 and another 18 respondents are from the age group 16-21. This perception is derived from the films they watch. According to IGI Global Publisher of Timely Knowledge, media representation refers to how individuals, institutions, events, or facts are portrayed in the media; It is accepted as a notion related to how issues or problems are conveyed to the public and how a causal relationship is formed. It includes all representational, symbolic, rhetorical factors of media products and all direct and indirect informative aspects.

Sri Lankan Refugees are Represented as 'Illegal Traders and Gangsters' in Films

The researcher aimed to examine the way in which the Sri Lankan refugees are represented in Tamil films. The non-Sri Lankan refugees are portrayed as well-wishers or helpers who want to aid Sri Lankans refugees and bring peace to the country's warring factions. Indian personalities are chilly, stable, friendly, but Sri Lankan refugee characters are warm, unsteady, aggressive emotionally.

- The film's stereotypical depictions of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees as 'illegal traders,' as 'terrorists' make it simpler for powerful individuals to treat them unfairly and to foster hostility toward Sri Lanka's minority Tamil population. It also communicates a poor image of the refugees among the younger people who have not heard much about the Sri Lanka civil war and its historical context
- Out of 150 respondents 50 (33.3%) respondents stated that they 'strongly agree' that films represent the Sri Lankan refugees as 'illegal traders.' Among the 50 respondents who strongly agreed, 24 respondents are from the age group 22-25 and 18 respondents are from the age group of 16-21. This explains Objective 1 that Sri Lankan refugees are represented in films as 'illegal traders.' Majority of the respondents feel that films represent Sri Lankan refugees as illegal traders in Jagame Thanthiram

Table 2. Gender based Respondents Who Described their Opinion on Sri Lankan Refugees Being Represented as ‘Illegal Traders’ in Films

Gender	Sri Lankan refugees are represented in films as illegal traders					Total
	Agree	Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Male	6	31	13	16	14	80
	7.5%	38.8%	16.3%	20.0%	17.5%	100.0%
Female	15	19	5	15	16	70
	21.4%	27.1%	7.1%	21.4%	22.9%	100.0%
Total	21	50	18	31	30	150
	14.0%	33.3%	12.0%	20.7%	20.0%	100.0%

Table 3. Age based Respondents Who Described their Opinion on Sri Lankan Refugees Being Represented as ‘Illegal Traders’ in Films

Age	Sri Lankan refugees are represented in films as illegal traders					Total
	Agree	Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
16-21	12	18	7	11	5	53
	22.6%	34.0%	13.2%	20.8%	9.4%	100.0%
22-25	6	24	10	11	18	69
	8.7%	34.8%	14.5%	15.9%	26.1%	100.0%
26 and above	3	8	1	9	7	28
	10.7%	28.6%	3.6%	32.1%	25.0%	100.0%
Total	21	50	18	31	30	150
	14.0%	33.3%	12.0%	20.7%	20.0%	100.0%



1:41:34

Representment	Three people are captured in an image. Tired, cold and waiting for something.
Interpretant	They are travelling in France and are too tired of their journey. Fear is noticed on their faces.
Object	Location name text, park garden area, Attilia along with her brother and nephew waiting.
Context of Situation	Through the help of a local agent, Attilia along with her brother and nephew, illegally migrate to Rameshwram and to France and from France they try to travel to London where Sivadoss stays. London is their hope because they are confident that Sivadoss will help them settle and will also help them fight in the court to get a refugee identity.
Construction	War destroys humanity. Like Attila's family, many families in Sri Lanka are destroyed due to war. They want to live and for their livelihood they end up becoming illegal immigrants, illegal traders.

Figure 4

Refugees are represented as 'poor, vulnerable and uneducated people'

Even though director Maniratnam depicted the ethnic struggle in Sri Lanka in Kannathil Muthamittal, the movie focuses more on current events like adoption and associated disputes. This movie does a better job of capturing the child's sense of betrayal and intense agony than the conflict. The core plot of the movie is around an adopted kid, with the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict serving as a prominent supporting character.

- There are scenes that depict guerrilla attacks, shootings, explosions, blasts, casualties, the agony suffered by people. Brightly coloured searchlights and bomb-related flashes serve to depict and distinguish the real combat. All these projections explain Objective 3 that Sri Lankan refugees are represented in Kanathil Muthamittal 2002 film as terrorist
- Sri Lankans arriving scene at the seashore of Rameshwaram and the 'Kalli Adi Kalli' song in Nandha movie too portrays the Sri Lankans refugees as very poor, vulnerable, dependable. This explains Objective 2 that Sri Lankan refugees are portrayed in Nandha (2001) film as poor and vulnerable

When it was asked if the Sri Lankan refugees are represented in films as unemployed people, 48 respondents stated that they 'strongly agree' that film represents them as unemployed people. 58 respondents out of 150 stated 'strongly disagree' that the films do not represent the Sri Lankan refugees as vulnerable people in films. Among 58 respondents, those 'strongly disagree' to the statement the highest number of respondents is found in the age group of 22-25. 30 respondents are in this age group. As the age group of respondents' increases less percentage of respondents 'strongly disagreed' to the statement. As analysed by the researcher there is a clear film representation perception formation among the age group 22-25. This age group has been influenced by the film representation of the Sri Lankan refugees. Their responses were very much in line with the filmmaker's representation.

Conclusion

All three filmmakers of Kanathil Muthamittal, Nandha and Jagame Thanthiram have tried to present to the world about the pain of this oppressed community which has gone through years of ethnic civil war. They tried to give their best, however, the means should not justify the ends. One should keep in mind that while representing a community in films, one must take into consideration that there should not be more damage to the hurt. Probably, the filmmakers can make a proper study of the context before representing any community or individual because it can be perceived differently by different people.

All three movies did create a strong perception among the respondents, particularly among the age group 22- 25. These age groups' responses were mostly film centric and contrary to the reality of Sri Lankan refugees' life in the camp. The age group of 22 to 25 seems unaware of the persecuted community's 30 years as stateless citizens and their hardship abroad. One of the main goals in this research is to comprehend how Sri Lankan refugees are portrayed in Tamil movies. The researcher now learns that the film creators had the noble goal of highlighting Sri Lanka's burning ethnic news and its effects on the vulnerable but it has also created an unexpected negative image of this struggling community.

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