

Article

Tamil Film Representation and Real Identity of North Chennai

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A B S T R A C T

The article explores the similarities and differences between the representation in Tamil films and the real life of North Chennai people and the impacts it created on the people both the inhabitants as well as the people outside North Chennai. The study also aimed to analyse how the film has impacted building Identity in the present generation. The researcher has taken 3 films that have been identified by the people who were interviewed. They are namely Puthupettai (2006) Directed by K. Selvaraghavan Vada Chennai (2018) Directed by Vetrimaaran and Madras Directed by Pa. Ranjith. These 3 directors' projections of North Chennai have impacted people and identified the people easily. Portraying North Chennai is not new to Tamil Cinema. There was a completely negative portrayal now it has gradually changed and apparently, a sense of positivity has begun to spread among the people. The study analysed the names and the philosophy behind them, economic conditions and migrations, the social system, cultural transformations and games and their values projected.

Keywords: Alternative Economy, Class Divide, Counter-Culture, Development, Identity, North Chennai, Representations, Tamil Films

Introduction

Cinema is popularly referred to as the medium of entertainment irrespective of all types of people. Cinema also has been used as a tool of propaganda in our Tamil Society. Cinema may be the creation of an artist's imagination. As art, it is pure in itself. It takes different dimensions when the cinema interacts with the important world. It gives meaning when it is created commercially. It also generates meaning when it is watched by the audience. The film projects the social, cultural and economic status of the people.

The impression we received from the media is different from actually what we see. Media select a specific set of images to convey a particular meaning. It also omits setting an image to limit our ideas about the problem. There's a

media that completely distorts the images around us and provides it completely different image.

This study evaluates the impact of the idea of identity status by Canadian psychologist James Marcia. Identity is sharing the sameness of a community also as having uniqueness. Ericsson says that a man's identity consists of the participation within the same continued life by constantly fleeting particles of matter in succession united to the same organised body. This identity refers to the standard of sameness in a particular person who associates himself or is associated by others with groups or categories based on some failing common features. Thus, it's essential to study the impact of cinema on the North Chennai people constructing their identity and their reality. (Construction of Identities, 2017, p. 83).

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Review of Literature

Karthikeyan Damodaran (Damodaran, 2021) in his article Filmic representations of North Chennai in contemporary Tamil cinema argues that the Tamil Cinema has systematically alienated its natives of Chennai to the peripheries. The natives according to historians are the fishermen community as well as the farming community. This is undoubtedly done by the various representations and victimising them to the territorial stigma. He points out that the territorial stigma imposed on people has many consequences. This stigma has been reflected in people's lives in the form of various embarrassments. It also influences their interpersonal relationship with others, their job opportunities, social life and education. He also points out the destigmatising of the territorial stigma in the films Attakathi (2012), Madras (2014) and some other films by Director Pa. Ranjith.

Ajay Srinivasan (Ajaychairman, 2017) in his article The Rise and Fall of North Madras Cinema notes that North Chennai was the heart of Tamil Cinema. Earlier film productions began in the area of North Chennai. The flavour has completely changed over the period. And The places from south Chennai occupied the cinema industry. At present, North Chennai is used as place of commercialization in Tamil Cinema. Stories based on North Chennai has hit to the box office. Whenever the filmmakers wanted to have a low budgeted film. They resorted to North Chennai. However, the growth of the industry and the film makers emergence from North Chennai has been monopolized by the film industry based on South Chennai.

The identity construction theories by James Marcia and Erik Erickson are suitable to analyse the impacts created by the films. Depends on the crisis and the commitment, four kinds of identities are formed. They are namely

1. **Identity Achieved:** When there is high amount of crisis and the commitment to come out of it, a person reaches to the state of identity achievement.
2. **Identity Foreclosure:** When people accepts traditional values and unable to determine own values, they reach foreclosure. It is characterized by high amount of commitment and low level of crisis.
3. **Identity Moratorium:** This status is also known as comfort zone. People do have crisis but due to lack of commitment, they fall prey to immediate comfortable solutions.
4. **Identity diffusion:** This is also known as rose confusion. When there is lack of commitment as well as crisis a person reaches to the level of identity diffusion.

Research Methodology

The study used the qualitative method of understanding to study the representation of North Chennai in Tamil films

as well as the real life of North Chennai people. Couple of researchers have already done research on North Chennai people and their representation in Tamil cinema. This research is a comparative study of real life in North Chennai as well as the life projected in Tamil cinema. The samples were selected through snowball non-probability sampling method. The researcher approached them and got the goodwill of the people through basic interaction. Then the samples were able to share freely with the researcher. The in-depth interview is considered to be a suitable approach to undertake the research because the opinion required the perceptions, experiences, interpretations and opinions of the North Chennai people to find the answers from them.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Naming and the Philosophy of Life

'Naming is an act of creation.' (Dunn, 2018). In Judaic tradition, God asked Adam to name the animals to have control over them. Thus, giving a place, an object, or a person a name is having control over the person. In our Indian system, by the name one can identify the person's caste and background. Names are also known as signs of dignity. Some used to say "He has spoiled my name". Surnames are also considered as an added value to the name. Caste names were surnames and people projected themselves as superior to others by being called by the caste name. There are also names of places added to be the surnames. Some names are gained by popularity while other names are generated to gain popularity. It is considered less dignified to be called by one's name, therefore people add a surname to add value to the person.

In the films, the name of the character has a meaning to it. The name of the Character is part of characterization. The names are skilfully crafted in the film. It acts subconsciously in the viewer's mind. Teja from Gemini (2002), Kokki Kumar from Puthupettai (2006), Kaali, Maari from Madras (2014), Anbu, Rajan, Guna are common in many such films. These names are considered weird names. Names projects rebellion nature in people. In Indian system, the high class people call their subordinates by the names of low dignity. Hence, the people, name their children with the name having high dignity. The names are usually of god's and goddess'. Kumar is taken from Kumaran, Senthil, Velu are the name of Lord Murugan. Kaali is a name of a ferocious goddess who fights against evil. Thus, naming indicates self-respect. The character names in the films are also has meaning associated to the film. The names are systematically branded as territorial and a sign of embarrassment. The common name by North Chennai people are Raja, Rajan, Rajathi. A respondent felt embarrassed to addressed by her name. Thus, the people notion of naming is shattered by the films. They Wanted to have an alternative identity so as to escape the

embarrassments. Most of the respondents of the research have English names. They are all the migrants from various districts of Tamil Nadu.

Economic Conditions and Migrations

Economic condition and migrations are correlated in North Chennai. The problem of migration has not projected in the films. It is shown merely as co-existence of different ethnic groups. To address this issue, the people of North Chennai are categorized into three economic classes based on their migration. 1) The natives of this Land from the pre colonial era: The fishermen (known as karaiyars) and the agrarian community (Mostly the Dalits). These people are economically backward in the society 2) The migrants who came during the colonial and post-colonial period for jobs. These people form the economical middle-class community. 3) The next level of migration happened in the post-colonial era when the places were largely occupied by the Muslim community as well as the North Indian community for trade. These people forms the upper class in the society as they hold the trade in their hands.

North Chennai is 20 km from Chennai airport. It is very close to the railway station and port. Hence this place has high commercial interest. Secondly, the transportation is easy and things are easy for business. Though in films it is projected that North Chennai is not comfortable for living it has high migration rate in Chennai last 20 years. The trade made in North Chennai is as equal to the IT sectors in South Chennai. According to Times of India report ("Migration to Chennai Follows Industrial Growth, but Quality of Life?," 2010) "it is estimated that in the next ten years, the population of Chennai is expected to reach 10 million. With an area of 176 sq km, the city Corporation has 590,000 inhabitants and the rest of the metropolitan area 1,013 sq km will have 66 Laks people by 2026. Planners began reclassifying agricultural land around cities as residential areas to spread out the population." This news report is evident to the historical event of how the natives were pushed to the corners by taking away their land and made it into apartments and buildings. When there is more migration, the agricultural lands were taken from the natives leaving their economical status unstable.

To counter this economic instability, people resort to violence. This violence, later organized and used by upper class people to their own interest. As the harbour is nearby, it is easy to indulge in smuggling and some illegal business. The people of this land is used for such activities. However, the beneficiaries are ultimately the bigshots of the society leaving the lives of this economically poor people lives at peril. The films partially projects these conditions leaving the rest of the world to judge them as uncivilized.

Social System is Outclassed by Class System

Social system is the following of the sameness of a group.

The social system is characterized mainly by people's life style, Appearance, Gender equality, Caste division. The notion of normal and natural is differing according to the economic conditions. As perceived in the films, the skin tone of the people is not dark in many cases. Thus, skin tone is an enforced identity of North Chennai. Naturally, the daily labourers will have dark skin as they are exposed to the sun often and the genetics are modifying accordingly. Young boys give more importance to appearance. Some of them go to gyms and build their body, while others have the habit of using cosmetics. The people especially the fishermen community have pride to have daughters. They do not see a female child as a burden to their family. Most of the films project women as strong in nature. Another major traits of the social system is Caste. As there are many migrants from various parts of Tamilnadu and elsewhere, it is not easy to identify the caste of the people. The respondents said that they do not know what caste they and their friends belonged to. Love marriages are common in the area and caste is never been an obstacle to it. Thus the social system apparently seen as an egalitarian society. However, When the respondents answered, they used the word 'they' pointing out to a particular side to denote other class of people. The word 'they' has clearly indicated the class division. One respondent said, " we do not go to their functions as they do not invite us neither they come to our festivals". Here the 'they' denotes the upper class people who mingle with their own group of dignified people. while another respondent said, " Crimes are not common in North Chennai nowadays. Only they will do it". Here the word 'they' denotes the economically backward community. The film projects only the social system of one particular class which makes other class people unaffected by the projection.

Cultural Transformations

The major cultural traits identified by the research are Slang, Gana songs, Pullingo and the celebrations.

Slang

Slang is Projected as Chennai Tamil in Films but spoken by a few people. Chennai slang is completely attributed to all North Chennai people. the researcher observed that none of the respondents spoke Chennai Tamil. They were talking normally. The researcher asked about the slang. The respondents said that among friends, they use certain words and use Chennai Tamil. They feel more friendly with the slang. With outsiders, they communicate with normal slang which is considered normal.

Outsiders perceive slang as something horrible. To some extent, the slang is considered threatening as well. The people of north Chennai uses the slang in the form of affinity and closeness as they use such words to their closed

ones. Some words seems to be not respectful. The words such as 'nee', 'unakku' 'vaa', 'po', are not accetpeted as respectful words by other people. people outside consider being called plural as respectful. They like to be called as 'neengal, ungalukku, vaarungal, pongal'. The slang also is straightforward as the people are. There is no hidden meaning to the slang.

Gaana Songs

It is true that the gana songs were popularized by people of North Chennai. But generalizing that North Chennai people like and are capable of singing gana songs is inappropriate. Only one respondent out of 60 expressed his interest in the gana song. This shows that all Chennai inhabitants are not lovers of Gana songs. It was alarming to the researcher that a new art form which is famous is considered as low by its own people. It is made to believe that gana is low art, an art of have-nots. Gana is normally sung by the 'Pullingo' in common places. There is a crowd who likes the song. People are entertained by gana songs in common places. This art also used in funerals as well.

Scholars like V. Ramakrishnan of the Government Arts College, Ponneri, map twenty styles of gaana songs. The songs were earlier introduced in a sophisticated format by Music Director Deva with instruments. The recent film makers uses this songs with a limited amount of instruments and preserve its originality.

Pullingo - A Counter Cultural Transformation

The pullingo is a new wave culture among youth, especially with north Chennai youth. There are some characteristics as well as appearance traits of pullingo that are collected from the respondents. They are dressed up in a peculiar way with a hat, faded coloured shirts and low hip pants. Their hair style is unusual. They usually ride in bikes most of them are of a particular brand. They are also considered as mischievous and attention seeking people. the films also projects a similar image stigmatizing the people and their culture.

The researcher admired some qualities of "Pullingo". There are the people of helping nature. They will help people if necessary even the person is not familiar to them, they come voluntarily. Toeing bikes and small riksaws are common nature among them.

The question is 'what makes them to be considered as bad or socially unacceptable'. Many respondents asked similar questions. If similar dress or appearance is found in economically rich persons, it is considered as style and innovation. Racing of vehicle is not only found in the Pullingo, it is common to all people. Thus Pullingo is not merely about appearance. the problem is an economic problem. This dimension of the society was leading the researcher to have a complete outlook of the research. The culture of

pullingo is a vivid example of socio cultural and economic divide in the society. To add value to the statement, the Pullingo do not have cosmetics to appear fair. It is to say that "I am like this and I consider this as best". This notion of rebel is natural to all north Chennai people.

Celebration

Celebration is part of North Chennai. Dance is an expression of celebration. People dance when they are happy as well as sad. Dancing has been associated with reality. One's inner feeling is expressed through dance. Dancing in the funereal is not explicit to the North Chennai or any particular caste. It is universal. Except for Europe and North America, all other countries have dances as worship. Dancing at death has profound spiritual meaning. It is traditionally followed. The people of North Chennai have kept the tradition in their hands.

Death dance popularly known as 'Saavu kuthu' is highly projected in all films. In Saavu kuthu ,people dance before the dead body to the rhythm of the musical instrument 'Parai' . It is projected as the sign of love for the person or expression of emotions. The dance has highly philosophical connotations. Life and death have to be celebrated in Indian philosophy. Differences of opinions among youth spread about this great culture. Some perceive it as merely as an expression of emotional outburst while other consider it as traditions. A few respondents suggested that it has meaning as to inform others that some death has happened. Respondents who are of Christian faith said that it is not their culture to dance at death. There is also a sense that this is the culture of a particular caste community namely the Dalits. However, this celebration of life and death is not only associated with Hinduism or any particular caste , It is a culture of people it is a philosophy of life.

Entertainment and Commercialization

The sportive activities are projected in films. In films, Carrom, Football, Cricket,Dove race and Cock fight are projected. All these games are commercially valued and has taken places in films. There are also some games that have not got any significances in films. they are played by the people namely Raja Guja, Benda, 10,20, Kuthadi, Pathanguthu Parangallu, Orrvalam, Kuthirai, Aaviyam Maniaaviyam, 7 Stones, Barbi, Kalla manna and Kathadi. There are also betting sports like the fightsight and Goat fight. The youth especially from Kasimedu has preserved such indigenous games. Most of the indigenous games are played as teams.

Most of the Indigenous games are teaching a lesson of "the survival of the strongest". The strongest player wins. It is universal. The second lesson is the value of unity. If someone comes and occupies your space, you have to be united and overthrow the person. This is the moral

lesson given in the games. The people of North Chennai have been facing this particular problem of invasion from the past. As Chennai is the border of Tamil and Telugu speaking people, people constantly faced the invasions in the history. Later it was occupied by Dutch, Portuguese and finally British settlements. These games reflect society and the rebellious nature is revamped by the game. Hence it is liked by the locals widely.

Findings

North Chennai is not exactly what is perceived through films. It is the merger of many cultures from all over Tamilnadu as well as some north Indian states. The portrayals made in the films are aimed at a particular community. They are the initial inhabitants of this land. As in the state of economic conditions, the victims of the biased representations are mainly fishermen and the Dalits. The literacy growth rate is proportionally less comparing to other two economic groups. As a whole, the major problem, that is hidden to the outside world is economic conditions.

Conclusion

All three directors perspectives of North Chennai is different from each other. They seems to be similar but they are different. Pa.Ranjith projects North Chennai based on the social system. He points out that the development of a society is found in its self-realization. He also projects many counter representations in film in terms of names, appearances and economic status, His other films also has the similar notions. Director Vetrimaran perceived the problem as more of class division. The problem of haves and have nots. His tone of film making points out that the crimes and illegal activities are the outcome of repeated suppression of economic status. Both the film makers' projection of women are similar. Director Selvaragavan has used the place as merely a pitch to his story. The notion of Unity is not much projected. The film is highly projected individualistic and of barbaric nature. A high amount of negativity is portrayed in his films.

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