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A Pluralistic Analysis of Women's Plight in Vasanth's 'Sivaranjiniyum Innum Sila Pengalum (2021)'

Selvaraja A K

Research Scholar, School of English & Foreign Languages

The Gandhigram Rural Institute (Deemed to be University), Dindigul, Tamil Nadu, India

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1666-398X>

Abstract

"You know her as a mother, daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law. But seldom as a woman ... And maybe never as a human." (Goyal)

These above lines are true. Men do not understand woman and they blame it on women saying, women are difficult to understand. Down the ages, the plight of woman in our country remains the same, while the scenario is differently presented in the media. The truth is woman are still victimised at the hands of this patriarchal society. Director Vasanth's Sivaranjiniyum Innum Sila Pengalum (2021) is one of the exceptional cases. The movie portrays the plight of woman, true to the core. The movie takes its origin from literature. Amidst the commercial masala films, this anthology movie is a laurel on the head of Tamil Cinema. The movie touches upon various aspects of women's issues and how are they dealt with. It also presents how they end up as victims and most significantly, it shows how the fake scenario is constructed brilliantly to cloud people's vision from seeing what is truly happening in reality. This paper is an attempt to touch upon the pluralistic aspects that is present throughout the movie and to ponder over those issues.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender Inequality and Discrimination, Domestic Violence, Woman Empowerment & Patriarchy etc

Sivaranjiniyum Innum Sila Pengalum (2021) is a recent tamil anthology movie made based on three short stories that deals with woman's issues. The stories are chosen from different timeline and authors, in order to project a gradual development over years. The movie is directed by director Vasanth, who is known for his famous tamil movie, Rhythm. The movie has won many awards and honours. There is a compelling need to make movies like this, even in the 21st century of the digital natives, even after many waves of feminism, awareness about gender equality etc. Amidst movies that justify being an alpha male and an egoist, this movie is a consolation. The movie has ignited conversations regarding whether women's condition over the years have improved or not?

The first movie is about a how a wife overcomes her domineering husband. The protagonists name itself carries significance and it is ironical. The wife's name is saraswathi. It is the name of the Hindu goddess of education, knowledge and wisdom, but here the character is illiterate. But there is a uniqueness associated with goddess Saraswathi. She is more of an independent woman, when compared with goddesses Durga and Lakshmi. Without the need and necessity of the husband, a male counterpart, she can establish herself independently.

The usual image of Parvathi is the one where she sits with lord Shiva in the Kailash mountains and similarly we remember Lakshmi, serving lord Vishnu, resting in the snakebed. Whereas, the usual image of Saraswathi is that, saraswathi with her swan.

There is no place for her husband brahma in her portraits. She is the goddess of knowledge and wisdom, she can convey/ establish her-self and identity without her husband. Sharing similar characteristics with the goddess, the character saraswathi also realizes her ability, capability, strengths and weaknesses, identity, self etc after the abandonment, in the absence of her husband. To mock at the masculinity and in an attempt to belittle the constructed masculine character, the husband character was not given a name. He is a man, that's all that needs to be conveyed. It's his identity and its sufficient enough to make the viewers understand.

When today's advertising world is insisting men to 'share the load' of laundry (Ariel India), the bitter truth is the husbands like that of saraswathy's, are not even ready to share the load that their wives carry. It is asked why laundry is always the women's job. It is always the wife who carries everything, who cleans everything, who cooks everything and do all things that people in the house ask her. It has been pointed out much earlier in the 1994 film *Magalir Mattum*, the TV advertisements for bikes and cars cast men, while the advertisements for pressure cooker and washing machine cast women, as if men do not eat or wear clothes. They reinforce the ideology that women are meant for cooking and washing and they say women belong to the kitchen and push her into it. (*Magalir Mattum* 1994). Today's advertisements are subtly doing the same and there are a few exceptions to the same gender stereotyping, discriminating and conservative ideas in them. Even the recently praised advertisement for Taj Mahal Tea, that asks women to have me time with a cup of tea. That too is again confirming the notion that a woman has to steal some time for a cup of tea. (Taj Mahal Tea)

In the first segment, while holding the baby in one hand and carrying all other things in her hand, Saraswathi cannot run fast enough with her husband to catch the bus. The husband scolds her and when they reach home, he is also not ready to carry the baby even for a few seconds, while saraswathy is searching for the key. If he shares the load, it will make her job easy, but he is not ready to do it yet and the wife continues searching for the key. Though they both are just now returning to home, she owes her husband an excuse and an explanation for why

she has not cooked fresh and reheated things cooked in the morning.

She prepares his bedding and then sits down to eat. The movie shows how the husband has no sense regarding what will his wife eat, if he empties everything. Eventually, it will also be blamed on the woman, for not making the food in enough quantity. When the baby's feeding bottle shatters, he shouts at her for disturbing his sleep. He has no concern for it and his priority is getting a sound sleep. Later, when the baby cries, he could not tolerate the mumblings of the baby troubling his sleep, so he scolds her "You can't even hush a baby from crying even for a moment and you call yourself a mother?" (*SISP* 14:17-18) Saraswathi tolerated everything till now, but like any other woman, she cannot remain calm, when someone questions her motherhood, she retaliates by saying it's the nature of the baby to cry. Bharathi Baskar reiterates the same thing in her book that women can tolerate anything, but when a guilt comes about 'am I not being a good mother', it is a great loss. A loss that cannot be corrected forever, filled with pain. (Bhaskar 63)

But the husband cannot tolerate a woman talking back to him. He beats her black and blue, because he believes a woman speaking against a husband is a big crime. When he tries to bash her head against the door for the fourth time, saraswathy's breaking point ruptured. She stops him with a 'Hmm' and silence him by telling 'Don't beat me'. It shatters the husband's male ego, which has been carefully built for thousands of years in/by the society. When he beat her, she couldn't resist. When she resisted, her resistance could not be not tolerated by her husband. For the next few days, he is not talking to her and not drinking coffee prepared by her. He punishes her with silence, because the mistake is she talked. Finally there comes a tough situation, when she cannot continue to run the household anymore without the kitchen supplies and vegetables.

She literally begs him to answer "What I have done wrong? Are you not everything to me? Will you not speak to me? Tell me why? Why torture me with your silence?" (*SISP* 28:23-43) He leaves the house, without touching the breakfast made by her. That night he did not return home, then never he returned. One finds it easy to walk away from the problems,

rather than facing them. She waits and waits and waits.. Isn't it the ideal thing for a woman to do? Shashi Deshpande puts it like, "But for women the waiting game starts early in childhood. Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws' home. Wait until you have kids. Yes, ever since I got married, I had done nothing but wait." (Deshpande30)

It is shown that after some years, saraswathi is leading a contemplated life with her daughter happily. They go to temple and park and spend time. She is now, very much liberated without anyone to constantly control her. She smiles on seeing herself in the mirror and then she makes coffee, sit on the chair comfortably and drinks her coffee, enjoying it sip by sip, which she would have never dared to even imagine, if her husband was there. This segment is based on Asokamithran's short story *Vimosanam*. The story is rightly titled *Vimosanam*, which means liberation. It indicates Saraswathi is liberated from her husband's control.

The second story's protagonist name is Devaki. Devaki is the biological mother of lord Krishna, yet was not recognised or praised for it. All the glory and the fame of being krishna's mother went to yasodha. Devaki lost the chance to enjoy all those privileges and witnessing the mischeifs of little Krishna. The character devaki in the movie, has similar traits. She doesn't have any kids. But she treats her sister-in-law's children as her own. One of the reasons for devaki's sufferings may be because she is childless. The story is told in the point of view of the little boy, devaki's nephew who is responsible for all devaki's sufferings. In this segment, devaki the protagonist, rides the scooter while her husband and nephew sits behind her, which is unusual. Usually, the male ego will not allow to sit in the back while a woman takes charge of riding the vehicle, so he seems a very understanding and modern husband.

Subtly, a stereotype was mentioned. In all the family photographs, generations after generations, the same pose was maintained. Husband sitting in a chair and the wife standing behind, this pose reimposes the hierarchy and powerplay that exists in the house. She questions this and questions whether they think women are immune to leg pain. The house is painted black on the outside and the inside is white

and this contradiction is seen throughout the story. Symbolically it tells us the people who are showing themselves as pure in the outside is deep dark inside. Throughout the movie, there are subtle dialogues and frames that slash patriarchy on the go just like that. For instance, when ramu and his friends are speaking, one of them says, "What's so great about that? I won't accept it. hey, he won against girls. I may have accepted if he had run against boys." (SISP 42:45-53) It creates an impact that women are not worthy enough even for defeating, for putting up a fight with, for competing with.

The segment also talks about sensitive issues like identity and possession. Only because she possess a diary, she is branded as secretive. Devaki writes a diary, because she could find it therapeutic and cathartic. Also, in the end, there is a diplomatic debate left over to be pondered. Whether the boy is guilty or not?. The elder daughter in law is jealous over devaki. She mocks her as the queen elizabeth, who earns and so buys whatever she wishes. Devaki works and gets salary, she earns considerable amount of money and this irks the others. The boy reveals that devaki writes a diary and this becomes a huge talk in the house. Everybody in the house discuss this. When the people in the house have no other way to bring her down, they make a mountain out of a molehill; they make a fuss using this diary issue.

The question that is aimed at her repeatedly is, 'If there is nothing wrong in it, why you are so secretive?' (SISP 56:08-10) Devaki uses the diary as a tool to pour out her thoughts and suppressed emotions and desires etc. They are not secrets, but instances of triviality that she holds upto significance, such as her conceptualisation of beauty as confidence and her admiration for women wearing modern dress. She uses the pooja lamp used in prayers and worship to burn the papers of her diary. Fire has always been a symbol of purity and cleansing. Whenever a woman's character is questioned, a reference to how Sita jumped into the fire in order to prove her chastity is made. Here Devaki burning her diary is one such instance. Eventually, she moves out of her in-law's home to a hostel. Devaki moving out of the house is a sigh of relief, because the entire family and household was caging her, her thoughts, her thinking and her sense of self. The movie ends with

a glimpse of devaki having tea in a teashop standing independent with her scooty, unlike the women in the family photographs. The moment is very defining and proud for her.

There is no place for a question like whether devaki's act of writing a diary is right or wrong? The subject that is put into debate here is People interfering in her diary writing, even if they are her relatives, is acceptable or not. Devaki could have shown the diary or could have not. It is her prerogative. One cannot and should not compel her to show what is written in her diary, even though if it is her husband. But at the same time, putting her character into question, calling her characterless on account of her writing diary is unacceptable. The husband is shown very modern, rationale in the beginning. He is kind of an understanding husband, who listens to the words of his wife. Clearly Mani, the husband is influenced by his family to question devaki's actions and his judgment is clouded by devaki's adamancy in not allowing anyone to read her diary. If devaki was given enough time to explain herself (though there is no need for her to do that), mani could have completely understood her side of the situation. But, it is strikingly said that, when there is an issue that pokes his ego or power, he will no longer remain the same. He is caught by the conservative patriarchal thinking that women should not do anything without asking the husband. He will lose his modernistic and rationale thinking and becomes a typical patriarchal man in the society. His character is the most significant in the story, equal to that of protagonist devaki. Because, he trusts and understands his wife very much and if he stood in his stand firmly, then there is no chance for the problem to arise. Here the blame on mani is pitying, because if not forced by the family, he is a good and caring husband. Devaki's character carries weightage with added uniqueness. She is bold, brave, sensitive, sensible and a woman who demands the respect that she deserves. In this age, when laws about data protection and privacy as a fundamental right are discussed, this story was written in 1999, the time when the ideas like privacy and personal space were not popular and jeyamohan was a true pioneer in voicing it. This segment is based on Jeyamohan's short story *Devaki Siththiyin Diary*. The story is aptly titled, as the entire story revolves around the diary.

The third and final segment of the movie is based on a short story 'Ottam' written by Aadhavan. The protagonist's name is Sivaranjani. It can be interpreted as either a woman who adores lord Shiva or a woman who is adored by lord shiva. In both the senses, the name denotes parvathi, wife of shiva. The name presents that, mutual adoration and admiration is one of the essential factors in a relationship. That a special bonding is between the husband and wife, which makes the marriage work and prevents it from falling apart. But ironically, the husband and wife in the movie, doesn't have the adoration nor a bonding. It presents the story of Sivaranjani, a potential athlete, who was denied her dreams in the name of marriage and now passes her time as a housewife. Immediately after the marriage of sivaranjani, the movie shows the plates of a physical balance. It is implied that, like the two plates of a balance, husband and wife in a marriage has to balance each other for an equal and effective relationship. This movie holds a lot of references. For instance, Smt. Pratibha Patil swearing in ceremony is broadcasted on TV. In her presidential speech, she says "Empowerment of women is particularly important to me as I believe this lead to the empowerment of the nation... We must ensure that every section of the society, particularly the weak and the disadvantaged are equal partners in, and beneficiaries of the development process." (Patil) Exactly when it is broadcasted on TV, a woman was denied her chance to empowerment and thereby the nation's development.

To satisfy the good old community custom of becoming a father right after the marriage, sivaranjani's dream of becoming an athlete or her chances of winning in the national games are shattered. She produces a NOC (No Objection Certificate) from her husband, we do not know why but she loses her chance to participate in the National games. Proving the Masculinity and establishing the Machismo factor of the husband in the community is more important than a woman losing her chance to attain her dream. The loss of her chance to prove herself hurt her deeply and she buried it deep inside her. She continues to long for the recognition that she never got, the praise that left unsaid, the appreciation and validation that she missed. Inherently she still needs those things. She toils hard in household

works, so that she may get a word of appreciation from her husband or mother in law. When no such thing happens, she got used to the monotonous routine of her domestic life.

She gives birth to a girl and as years move the girl grows and now is studying 4th grade in school. She listens to her daughter talking and she is always weary and exhausted. The kitchen work and household chores eat away all her mornings and she toils in the kitchen daily. "For women who spend all their hours doing unpaid work, the chores of the day kill the dreams of a lifetime... On average, women around the world spend more than twice as many hours as men on unpaid work, but the range of disparity is wide. In India, women spend 6 hours a day doing unpaid work, while men spend less than 1". (Gates 117)

Always associating a woman, especially a married woman with the kitchen is a still followed stereotype in Indian cinema. Whenever the mother character is introduced, she will be in the kitchen or serving food. Tamil movies has this interesting thing of introducing a kitchen, always with a woman pouring dosa. This was mocked in the trailer of the 2017 film *Magalir Mattum*, in which women discuss, how many dosas they have poured over years? They count and the results are around 2.5 lakhs, 3 lakhs and 5 lakhs, while the million dollar question is how many dosas that they have got in return. Has anybody made dosas for them, out of love is still an unanswered question. (*Magalir Mattum* 2017) This was dealt fully in the recent feature film *The Great Indian Kitchen*. How lives of women are intertwined with the kitchen and men are not aware of the intricacies in it. The Protagonist's piled up anger and frustration at the patriarchal setup and men is revealed in one line, where she lashes at her brother "Why can't you get the water yourself?" (TGIK 1:32:19-20) Even a glass of water has to be brought by the woman to him, the man is not even ready to get the water by himself. Let alone the issue of women entering the premises of the Sabarimala temple, even today, the condition of our nation is such that there are still women among us, who are trapped inside the kitchens with no way to get out.

In her freetime, she likes to read books. Her mother in law condemns her habit of reading books

too. She calls what sivaranjani reads as 'trash'. She also wonders how her son is allowing his wife to read those things?. She remarks it like, as if sivaranjani needs the permission of her husband even to read books of her choice. Do husbands have a control or censor over what books the wives are allowed to read? The sight of the nearby playground and girls playing in it, while passing, brings nostalgia to her. Taking one day off is creating such a ruckus in the house. There are many questions, that she bound to answer and held responsible like, who will take care of the child in her absence? Sivaranjani makes the child answer her father that she can handle herself in the absence of her mother and she pleads her father to let her mother go for at least a day. Holding the household chores and parental responsibilities against the women in the house, to keep them locked in the house, to prevent them from going out, having a breath of fresh air is not new. It is a customary habit for men.

The husbands have to have the feel that they are always in control. Keeping the wife under one's control, by whatever means necessary can be best understood from the husband and wife duo in ambai's short story *Siragugal Muriyum*. After so many struggles and obstructions from her husband and his family, she makes an attempt to see the cup that she won during her college days, which turns futile, she returns dejected. Her longing to see the cup, which stands as a symbol of her victory and what she was capable of, explains how much she is deprived of appreciation and recognition in the long run. The thirukural that the daughter recites, is directly criticising people who learn, but do not act by it. The kural number 391 says, "Learn, what is to be learnt, with no flaws; once learnt, stand by what you learned" (Thiruvalluvar) When there are 163 women's studies centres in Indian universities and colleges, that teach gender equality in our country (policy studies), which stands 140th among the 156 nations in Global Gender Gap Index Ranking of World Economic Forum (Mishara and Joe). This is the irony that is brought into light by the movie.

One day, the daughter is having extra practice classes in school and she misses to give her the lunch box. She is not ready to give up and her daughter missing her lunch or skipping her practice is not

acceptable for her. She sees her daughter boarding the bus from afar and despite that, she runs and runs and finally catches up with the bus, taps the bus to a halt and she hands over the lunch to her daughter. Usually, when you do something remarkable, a return gift is welcome. But, when her daughter offered her waterbottle, she refuses as the claps of the children in the school bus itself provides her the much needed recognition and encouragement. She was longing for that and she got it from unexpected people. Her deed of running fast for a long distance, to give the child, her lunch is applauded by the children in the school bus, because they knew the depth of the deed and how to truly appreciate. She walks back home smiling, like a person who has achieved something and is content. What women like sivaranjani wants? Shashi from *English Vinglish* answers, what they need is respect, more than love. When laurent expresses his love, she declines and thanks him for making her feel good about herself, like a woman who is worthy enough for the love and respect that she truly deserves. (2:07:24-34)

In all the three segments, men accusing women is common and also women searching for something is common. The woman's search materializes in the end, they find themselves, identity, freedom, independence, recognition and self etc. The evolution of women's financial independence across the 3 movies is significant. Saraswathy finds a way to run the family, Devaki works in a government office while Sivaranjani is a housewife. The evolutions shows that men have understood that going for a job, being financially independent is making women more strong and determined, on the other hand, less able to control them, so in the third movie, it is shown that she is a housewife, who is dependent on her husband. Why sivaranjani didn't go for a job? Her husband needs all of his chores to be taken care of. Her priority must be doing whatever the husband asks her to do. A woman can chase after her dreams, even after getting married and giving birth to children. That is what movies like *How Old are You and Panga* portrayed. "Who decides the expiry date of a woman's dream?" (36 *Vayadhinile*) This question is remarkable and the answer should be no one. But sivaranjani lacks something which the woman in the other movies had, that is a supporting

partner, a true companion by her side. When one do not stand with her during her struggle or appreciate her success, then automatically he forfeits the right to comment or criticise her on failure.

The scene in which the guest to the house, explains the disparity between men and women after marriage, sums it up all. She clearly presents everything, logically. Her speech can be summarised as "Men are intelligent, they do things for a reason, works hard for the family and spends time wisely. While, women are dunce, they waste their time in trash things, they are unable to realise that they were exploited etc." (*SISP* 1:29:45 – 1:31:33)

The woman-woman relationship inside a household is also an important factor in the movie. The mother in law does not support her daughter in law and vice versa, this is the sorry state of affairs in most of the indian households. The sister-in-law's jealousy over devaki and her financial independence is the root cause of all the issues. The inability to buy sarees on her own likedevaki is the origin. She strikes right at the chord that the husband is not willing to ask about the diary, because, his wife earns a good money. A woman who earns is also the one who voices her opinions out and make the husbands understand them. Most of the modern men's worst nightmare is a woman with authority. The mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in the third segment is different. There, the mother want to exercise her right over her son, she doesn't like the daughter-in-law making decisions in the house. Her issue is who has the control over the man in the house. She carefully establishes her supremacy and authority over cooking and kitchen. Because, it is said that, "the way to a man's heart is through his belly". (Thappad 1:59:42)

There is another commonality in all the three shorts. A girl child, who observes and is growing by seeing her mother. Saraswathy's daughter in the first segment, Devaki's niece in the second and sivaranjani's daughter in the third. They all learn from their mothers. They watch their mothers cook, do the chores, wash dishes & clothes, make coffee for their fathers etc. A woman's mind is subtle and sensitive. One has to understand her inner feelings, including the subtleties and express it to her. That is what she expects the most.

Absence of songs in the film is significant. Though the songs could have helped the movie to be a bit more dramatic, one can understand the director's decision to not include songs, as they would be unnecessary and could be possible distractions. The ending shots of the three segments show the women as calm, composed, assertive and determined. Saraswathi comfortably relaxes herself by enjoying her coffee, sitting in the chair; Devaki leaning on her scooter and drinking tea in front of a teashop and sivaranjani smiles while she slowly walks back to her apartment. All those are the poetic and magical moments, for which we primarily consume art in the first place. While the first two segments provide us with a sense of completion, the third story is left open ended. Thus, one could not easily come out of the impact from the third segment. A girl who lost her dream and her cup, finds at last what her true sense of being is. While sivaranjani and saraswathi are victims of domestic violence that is directly laid on them, devaki is a victim of intimate privacy violation.

The ongoing debates about whether marital rape can be a crime or not? Extra marital affair is a crime or not? Live-in relationships are legal or not? These debates and recent judicial judgments over these things are modern and rationale in thinking, yet one cannot ignore the fact that they constitute as one of the primary factors that led to the increase in the insecure feeling of woman in this society. Whatever the crisis may be, most of the times, the one who ends up as the victim is a woman.

Conclusion

A woman is the epitome of sacrifice, the one who will lose her self for the sake of her her family, for her the husband and children are the world, she will do anything for them. Down the years, this kind of image has been constructed around women. The women here, walk away from the stereotype and they choose and become their own paths. They are no heroines, they are the representatives of our women. Though the time has changed, the condition of women is unchanged, they are still within the clutches of patriarchy. Women are as capable as men to make their own decisions and make their own living. They do not want to be restricted in the

name of protection. The utmost need of a woman in today's world has shrunk to the least recognition for her existence. They are oppressed as the second sex and they cross each and every day as any other ordinary woman of our country. Not only the lifestyle and condition of lives have become modernised, but also the violence and oppression against women got modernised too. Domestic violence against women has become now, epistemic and intellectual violence. The women in the film are not completely unaware of the brutal society. Yet, they willingly made the choice to accept the challenges and are ready to prepare themselves and face it. The movie has portrayed what is happening in our society, for a long period of time and it is the need of the hour to do something about it.

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Author Details

Selvaraja A K, Research Scholar (Ph.D), School of English & Foreign Languages, The Gandhigram Rural Institute (Deemed to be University), Dindigul, Tamil Nadu, India, **Email ID:** akselvarajatamilan@gmail.com