

Shades of Lady Superstardom in South Indian Movies: A Study of Selected Movies of Manju Warriar and Nayanthara

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2026.27.1.48>

Abstract

Films are a mode expression implicated in discourses on gender, class and caste. The Indian film industry is generally classified as North Indian and South Indian film industries, in which Mollywood and Tollywood have a prominent place. Apart from the typical love story based on hero worship, these industries have experimented with the representation of heroines who are atypical, as they are not the normal feminine types, but those who display boldness, resulting in the label 'lady super star'. Manju Warriar and Nayanthara are female heroines labelled as 'lady superstar' due to their heterogeneous and atypical roles. The current study analyses a few movies of Manju Warriar such as Ennum Eppozhum, Vettah, Udaharanam Sujatha, Ami, Lucifer, Prathi Poovankozhi, Chathur Mukham, and Ayisha; and of Nayanthara such as Naanum Rowdy Dhaan, Imaikkaa Nodigal, Viswasam, Mookuthi Amman, Annapoorani, Aramm, Kolamaavu Kokila, and Dora through the lens of gender roles and cultural representation.

Keywords: South Indian movies, lady superstars, atypical female characters, gender roles, Manju Warriar, Nayanthara.

Introduction

The concept of stardom in cinema dates back to the Hollywood film industry and was later reflected in the Indian film industry (J and Nivedhita). Eventually, the idea of 'stardom or star values' has relied on male actors. There was a dearth of female centric films in the Malayalam and Tamil film industry. However, a couple of years back, this trend witnessed a change due to cinematic culture, progressive content, experimental aesthetics, localised production, and critical interrogation of gendered inequality in the cinematic spaces (Ajikumar and Sircar 129). Thus, the term 'stardom' was not only associated with the male actors, but extended to the female actors as well. The idea of star or stardom is gauged by several factors such as the stature of the actor in the film industry, the sudden popularity of a film or the success of consecutive films. It is rated on the basis of the presence of the actor or actress in the movie and the number of box office hits. If the success rate is higher, then the star value is increased in the market, and they charge more to act in the films (Morin 32-40).

Article History: Full Article Received on 1st June, 2026. Peer Review completed on 19th August, 2026, Article accepted on 25th August, 2026. First published: Sep. 2026. **Copyright** vests with Author. **Licensing:** Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Stars can regulate the economic viability of the industry by using their star value (J and Nivedhitha 3-5). Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald in *Stars* say that the concept of the star phenomenon relies entirely upon collapsing the difference linking the star as an individual and as a performer. They point out 'charisma', as one of the key qualities in film stardom. The quality of 'charisma' highlights stars as being unique and sets them apart from their other audience members, investing them with obvious magical traits (1-47).

Rather than realistic stories, both Malayalam films and Tamil films depict heroes in vivacious shades and represent them as real heroes or survivors. However, the trend of associating stardom with the male actors in the Malayalam and Tamil film industry altered with the arrival of Nayanthara and Manju Warrior respectively. Manju Warrior reentered the industry after a long break in her career with the movie *How Old Are You?* Similarly, Nayanthara after a long hiatus resumed her acting career by playing impactful roles in the Tamil film industry. These two actors played a significant role in rewriting the existing framework of the film industry in which the plot revolves around the male actors alone. Gradually the scripts incorporated stories in which female characters were given more prominent and meaningful roles rather than placing them as mere love interest or an aid of the male protagonist in the movie, which redefined the film industry and led to the idea of female stardom/ lady superstar.

A Review of the Studies on Female Stardom in Malayalam and Tamil Film Industry

Ms. Seena J and Dr. D Nivedhitha in the article "Female Stardom: An Analysis of the Star Image Construction of Malayalam Actress Sheela", talk about stardom created by the actress Sheela through her numerous films (3-5). The paper talks about the varied roles performed by Sheela and their massive impact on the Malayalee audience. Malavika Ajikumar and Ajanta Sircar in the article "Female celebrities in digital age: the changing notions of stardom in Malayalam cinema", talk about the role of digital platforms, including social media. They observe that the recent Malayalam movies create female stardom through the movies of Aparna Murali and Paravathy Thiruvothu due to the intervention of digital media, which gives an opportunity to the female stars to deviate from the conventional notions of the female body (128-144). "Gender construct as a narrative and text: The Female protagonist in new-generation Malayalam Cinema" talks about the influence of new-gen Malayalam films and their withdrawal from conventional regional style. The deviation and disposition of dominant hegemonic patriarchy are analysed through the representation of women characters (Gopinath and Raj 65).

The women directors in the Tamil film industry have made a drastic change in the depiction of women in films (Balagobalan and Raguram 13). Using a sociological approach, the above study observes that the women represented in movies directed by women directors are energetic, innovative and they break the stereotypes (13). Virginia Woolf, in her *A Room of One's Own*, says that a woman should have a room of her own and have financial independence (qtd. in Kaur 283-287). Rupa Peter, in "A Study on the Portrayal of the Career Woman in Tamil Films", says that financial independence is one of the basic avenues of women empowerment. The Tamil film industry consistently portrayed women in varied roles, including sex objects, vamps, the mother, the wife and the daughter. Later, they experimented with career women roles, which gained a greater significance (106). In "*Shero* worship: Female stardom in Tamil cinema" Amrutha Kunapulli discusses how Nayanthara and Jyothika created the label of "lady super star" with a set of complex negotiations (125). "A Study on Women Empowerment in Tamil Cinema Through K Balachander Films" discusses how women empowerment is depicted in K Balachander's movies. The study finds that the portrayal of women in movies as educated and participative in decision making, makes women appear more substantial and empowered (82).

In “Resilience of Women in the Selected Films in Mollywood”, Jibin Francis and Dr. B. Beneson Thilagar Christadoss point out the drastic change in Mollywood films in the 21st century, with the film scripts becoming more women-centric and with the disappearance of the stereotypical representation of women (54). In “The Representation of Women in ‘New Generation’ Malayalam Films”, Ananthakrishnan U and Dr. V. Santhi Siri talk about how the new generation Malayalam movies depict the social issues in a realistic way and how the representation of women have changed in terms of visual culture (11).

Considering the literature mentioned above, the current study focuses on how female stardom is created in both the Mollywood and Tollywood film industries by two actresses, namely, Manju Warriar and Nayanthara, through their characters and the sociopolitical aspects of dissemination of gender perspective in society.

Method

The current study focuses on a qualitative thematic analysis, specifically finding out the major themes associated the character depiction of Manju Warriar and Nayanthara and thereby creating female stardom. The study also looks at the cultural and patriarchal aspects associated with the creation of female stardom through the lens of gender aspects.

A Glimpse Through the Movies of Manju Warriar

Manju Warriar’s return to the Malayalam film industry after a long break was with the film *How Old Are You?* (2014) Her movie *Ennum Eppozhum* (2015) depicts Manju as a lawyer named Deepa, a single mother who firmly stands for truth and justice. In *Vettah* (2016), she acted as a police officer. The movie talks about the investigation of a missing actress. Her movie *Udahanam Sujatha* (2017) depicted the real struggle of a widowed single mother, who struggles to take care of an aggressive adolescent daughter. *Aami* (2018) is a biopic in which Manju Warriar acted as Kamala Das/ Madhavikutty, a renowned Malayalam writer. The story talks about the early marriage of Madhavikutty, her devotion and love towards lord Krishna, her relationship struggles and her identity issue. *Lucifer* (2019) another blockbuster movie, talks about the sudden death of a political Godfather and the rivalry and battle of others to get the position. *Prathi Poovankozhi* (2019) is another film which talks about the story of an ordinary saleswoman, who goes through a bad experience while travelling on the bus and sets out in search of a sexual predator, which leads to unexpected consequences.

Chatur Mukham (2021), another movie, talks about the story of a young woman who is troubled by a malevolent supernatural force that enters her life through a substandard phone that she bought once she lost her phone in an accident. *Ayisha* (2023) is a biopic that tells the story of Nilamboor Ayisha, who is very bold and strong.

A Tabular Representation of the Characteristics of Manju Warriar’s Characters

Name of the movie	Economic condition	Language proficiency	Education	Qualities
<i>Ennum Eppozhum</i>	Middle class	Good	Educated	Strong, bold, confident, independent, fearless
<i>Vettah</i>	Rich	Good	Educated	Strong, bold, confident, independent, fearless

<i>Udaharanam Sujatha</i>	Poor	Good	10 th fail	Independent
<i>Aami(biopic)</i>	-	-	-	-
<i>Lucifer</i>	Rich	Good	Educated	Bold, strong-fearless
<i>Prathi Poovan kozhi</i>	Middle class	Good	Educated	Strong, bold, confident, independent-fearless
<i>Chatur Mukham</i>	Middle Class	Good	Educated	Confident, independent
<i>Ayisha(biopic)</i>	-	-	-	-
(Table-1)				

Name of the movie	Economic condition	Language proficiency	Education	Qualities
<i>Ennum Eppozhum</i>	Middle class	Good	Educated	Strong, bold, confident, independent, fearless
<i>Vettah</i>	Rich	Good	Educated	Strong, bold, confident, independent, fearless
<i>Udaharanam Sujatha</i>	Poor	Good	10 th fail	Independent
<i>Aami(biopic)</i>	-	-	-	-
<i>Lucifer</i>	Rich	Good	Educated	Bold, strong fearless
<i>Prathi Poovan kozhi</i>	Middle class	Good	Educated	Strong, bold, confident, independent fearless
<i>Chatur Mukham</i>	Middle Class	Good	Educated	Confident, independent
<i>Ayisha(biopic)</i>	-	-	-	-

(Table 2)

Shades of Female Stardom in Manju Warriar's Movies

The shades of stardom in Manju Warriar's films started with her movie "*How Old Are You?*" The movie was widely acclaimed since it was her first movie after a long break in her career. The impression that she left in the minds of Malayalee audiences through her characters in the earlier films, the tribulations in her personal life and her acting skills together contributed to the expectations of the audience towards her reentry. The unique conceptualization, visualization and female-oriented characters make her movies acceptable to the audience (Gopinath and SJ Raj 68).

Two of the selected movies are biopics (*Aami* and *Ayisha*), which also depict two strong personalities. In *Ennum Eppozhum*, she is described as an advocate. She is financially independent and a single mother who manages her personal and professional life with ease. More than that, she is described as a person who keeps her passion alive, for instance she makes time out of her busy schedule to practice classical dance in the early morning. Thus, most of the Malayalee audience, especially women, relate to the protagonist in the movie who strives to accomplish her day-to-day responsibilities while also creating a space for recreation. *Prathi Poovankozhi*, *Ennum Eppozhum*, *Vettah* and *Lucifer* portrayed female characters as confident, independent and fearless. *Udahanam Sujatha* also explored these qualities. All her characters are educated (*Udahanam Sujatha* is an exception, but it shows her effort to clear the 10th level exam to motivate her daughter to study and achieve great heights in her career), economically independent, proficient in the language and use either saree or salwar as the costume. Moving away from the usual way of representing the female protagonist as a self-sacrificing, morally pure, chaste woman or the lover of the hero, Manju Warriar's movie stipulates women with independence and confidence. Her characters in *Ennum Eppozhum*, *Prathi Poovankozhi* and *Lucifer* stand as a testimony to the same. The characters she played in the aforementioned movies are empowered, irrespective of their marital status. For instance in the movie *Ennum Eppozhum*, she is a divorcee, whose life does not stop with the divorce, but she continues to excel in her profession, voice out her opinion and lives her best life. Similarly in the movie *Prathi Poovankozhi*, she is unmarried and molested by a passenger in the bus, she does not turn to men for help, but sets out all by herself to find the offender. Also in the movie *Lucifer* she does not try to save the marriage or her reputation when she discovers the abusive side of her husband and fights him against all odds.

The characters played by Manju Warriar in the selected movies were shown wearing outfits with subtle colours suitable to her roles and in most of these films, she hardly put any makeup on. These elements including the dialogues delivered by Warriar in these movies received considerable approval and admiration from the audience, which established her as a person, performer and an asset, thus surpassing the mere status of stardom (McDonald 1). Her portrayal of the character Sujatha in the movie *Udahanam Sujatha* was devoid of any makeup and fancy sarees, thus aptly depicting her as a domestic worker. Similarly, the common sarees worn by her with no makeup on, in the movies *Prathi Poovankozhi* and *Lucifer*, where she played the role of a salesgirl and a mother of an 18-year-old respectively, were reflective of social reality. Thus, as described by Sangeetha Padmanabhan in her article, 'Her Again: Becoming Manju Warriar,' "Manju in her comeback was not only an actor, but also a brand embodied that embodied a combination of facets- of a model, dancer, actor and a social being." Though it was not an easy job to regain her status as an actor and establish herself in the industry, Warriar has been largely successful in her endeavours. Her current stardom and appreciation amongst the audience calls for a review of the probable reasons that underscore her 'second coming.' (MP 86-87). Apart from costumes and characters, her dialogues also seem to have played a significant role in representing her as a woman who has had her share of freedom and financial

independence. For instance, in the movie *Ennum Epozhum*, Advocate Deepa (played by Manju Warriar) refuses to give an interview to a magazine reporter by stating a pretextual reason such as the reporter's *kuri* (sandal paste) on his forehead. Thus, through her roles in the selected movies, Warriar represents a woman that breaks all patriarchal embedded gender stereotypes and influences the Malayalee audience particularly women. Manju Warriar portrays her female characters as a woman who has access to public spaces, activities, and assumes managerial positions. Pooja Pillai in her article, "There's something about Manju Warriar" states that Manju Warriar has received a special love from spectators when compared to other actresses in the industry. She attributes this fondness to the instantaneous and immense success that Warriar attained through her memorable characters, which owing to her inherent talent was enacted by her with grace (Qtd in MP 87). All these elements contributed to Warriar's stardom.

A Glance through the movies of Nayanthara

Like Manju Warriar, Nayanthara also returns to the industry after a short break in her career. Her *Nanum Rowdy Dhaan* (2015) talks about the love story of a policeman's son and a girl with hearing impairment. *Imaikkaa Nodigal* (2018) is an action thriller movie that talks about a CBI officer chasing a serial killer and the twisting climax at the end. *Viswasam* (2019) is the story of a chieftain who separated from his wife and daughter. Years later, he came as a hero to save his daughter without revealing his identity. Her *Mookkuthi Amman* (2020) is another movie that depicts Nayanthara as a goddess. The plot of the story deals with the visits of an everyday commoner who visits his traditional ancestral temple and meets the goddess who fulfills his wishes and blesses him. *Annapoorani* (2023) tells the story of Annapoorani, who aspires to become a chef but faces several obstacles to fulfilling her dream. *Aramm* (2017) depicts the

story of a district collector who faces numerous bureaucratic hurdles while trying to save a girl child who is trapped in a borewell, explicitly focusing on the water issue. *Kolamaavu Kokila* (2018) depicts the story of Kokila, who was forced to enter the world of drug smuggling to raise her money for her mother's critical medical treatment and the chaos involved in it. *Dora* (2017) another movie, tells the story of a father and a daughter who bought a car possessed by a dangerous spirit.

A Tabular Representation of the Characteristics of Nayanthara's Character

Name of the Movie	Depiction	Role /Character	Marital status
<i>Naanum Rowdy Dhaan</i>	Female protagonist lover, daughter	A girl with hearing impairment	Single
<i>Imaikkaa Nodigal</i>	Female, protagonist, mother, wife, daughter	CBI Officer	Married/Widow
<i>Viswasam</i>	Female protagonist, wife, mother	Business woman	Married
<i>Mookkuthi Amman</i>	Female protagonist	Goddess	-
<i>Aramm</i>	Female protagonist	Collector	Single

<i>Kolamaavu Kokila</i>	Female protagonist, daughter	-	Single
<i>Dora</i>	Female protagonist, Daughter	Business woman	Single
<i>Annapoorani</i>	Female protagonist, daughter	Student with a passion for culinary practices	Single

(Table 3)

Name of the Movie	Cos-tume	Economic condition	Language proficiency	Education	Qualities
<i>Naanum Row-dy Dhaan</i>	Skirt, top with	Middle	Good	Not mentioned	Strong, bold, confident
<i>Imaikkaa Nodigal</i>	Formals	Rich	Good	Educated	Strong, bold, confident, independent, fearless
<i>Viswasam</i>	Saree and salwar	Rich	Good	Educated	Strong, bold, confident, independent, fearless
<i>Mookuthi Amman</i>	Saree	Rich	Good	-	Bold, strong, fearless, Destruction, epitome of all virtues
<i>Aramm</i>	Saree	-	Good	Educated	Confident, independent, fearless, democratic
<i>Kolamaavu Kokila</i>	Skirt and top	Poor	Average		Strong, bold, confident, Independent, fearless
<i>Dora</i>	Salwar	Middle class	Good		Strong, bold, confident, Independent, fearless
<i>Annapoorani</i>	Salwar	Middle class	Good	Educated	Strong, bold, confident, Independent, fearless, decision maker

(Table 4)

The shades of female stardom in Nayanthara's Movies

Conventionally, women in the Tamil industry had roles limited to that of the hero's lover, wife, mother or daughter (P 81). It was the norm to portray women who were obedient as a desirable

quality of women and a necessary trait of that gender. In the article, “A Good Woman, a Very Good Woman: Tamil Cinema’s Women,” C S Lakshmi describes as follows-

Good and evil women, in clear black-and-white divides, have been the obsession of Tamil cinema in a way. Not only are their physical features different, but their language, dress, and body structures are also different. The good woman embodies all that Tamil culture stands for regarding women. She is chaste, intelligent, motherly and divine. The evil woman is a coquette, a temptress and a loudmouth who finally gets her dues. Built into these oppositional black-and-white portraits are complicated symbols like the thali, turmeric, kumkum and widow-white. That is how the basic ground plan is drawn (16).

The idea of a good woman is constructed by the patriarchy, which lists out a number of criteria, including submissiveness, obedience to mother-in-law and men (Kunapulli 125). They become the conveyors of essential tradition and culture. The glorification of motherhood stresses women’s role as ideal mothers who bear sons of the nation/ state (Sabala and Meena Gopal 45). In the selected movies, Nayanthara is mainly represented as an educated woman with a capacity for decision-making. She is depicted as bold, strong, confident, and fearless, with good command over language. Among the movies *Viswasam* and *Nanum Rowdy Dhaan*, the male and female protagonists share the screen equally. The progress of the plot is equally distributed between the actions of the hero and the heroines. Apart from these two movies, other movies like *Imaikkaa Nodigal*, *Aramm*, *Mookuthi Amman*, *Dora*, *Kolamaavu Kokila*, and *Annappoorani*, has Nayantara in the lead role and the plot is centered around the ups and downs of her character. The CBI officer in *Imaikkaa Nodigal* breaks the stereotypical version of a woman, and heroism is disseminated through her attitude and actions. Another distinctive feature in her movies are the outfits she wears in them. The dressing, education, independence, decision-making capacity, financial independence, commanding power, and proficiency in both English and Tamil redefine the definition of stardom in Tamil films.

The absence of tears (except for the scenes that demand it) and varied definitions of independence, confidence, and gallantry make her a lady superstar. Her characters are more inclined to the tradition and culture of Tamil Nadu and have more appreciation for women’s empowerment. The dresses that she preferred to wear in the movies and the roles of mother, wife, and daughter are rendered with liberty. The patriarchal definition of gendered roles, which become a cause for subordination, is reconceived with multiple possibilities. For example, in *Imaikkaa Nodigal*, she is a widow and a CBI officer. She ensured that her personal life did not interfere with her professional responsibility. Similarly, in *Vishwasam*, she is an educated woman who loves her husband, child and takes care of her family with so much happiness. All these choices affix her as a lady superstar in the Tamil film Industry.

Along with the aforementioned points, the actors such as the colour theme of the costume, hairstyle, makeup, dialogues and facial expressions induce the creation of stardom. For instance, in the movie *Imaikka Nodigal*, there is a famous scene where the antagonist traps Anjali (played by Nayantara) in a metro station and confronts her. Her countenance displays no signs of fear, and she looks straight into the eyes of the antagonist. Her overall appearance inclusive of her hairstyle and costume contributed to the intensity of her boldness and courage needed for her character. These nuances in the roles played by Nayanthara promoted her character as a liberated, independent, fearless woman who owns her life and is happy in her space. Thus, it breaks the typical portrayal of Tamilian women in supporting roles who patiently accepts all situations without any complaints. Thus such depiction of Nayantara’s characters, may also be one of the reasons for the birth of the title ‘lady superstar’ in the Tamil film industry.

Conclusion: Lady Super Stars and Gender Perspective

Both Manju Warriar and Nayanthara created a space in the movie industry through consecutive successful films. The characters that they portray in films are not stereotypical and break gendered notions. S Gopinath and SJ Raj, in “Gender Construct as Narrative and Text: The Female Protagonist in New Generation Malayalam Cinema”, quoted the gendered aspects put forward by Judith Butler. They said;

Butler’s concept of performativity elucidates the identity as it is conceptualised, created and perpetuated by society. What is understood as gender traits are merely constructs naturalised over time. The social status quo is defined by women’s place within the structures of family, and community and is maintained and challenged when change is sought in the direction of gender egalitarianism, autonomy or freedom (68).

The role played by Manju Warriar and Nayanthara in the movies discussed above, is one of a mother, daughter and wife. However, their characters are scripted in a manner far from the habitual gendered responsibility of women in the roles. These roles were performed by them with agency of their own characterized by confidence and independence. Depiction of an empowered woman who breaks all the barriers, like the male as the breadwinners of the family, and repression of being single or divorced or a widow, builds a mighty woman. This may be the reason why these two actresses become the lady superstars of the concerned industry.

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