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## **"Have Beauty Ideals Evolved? Reading of Beauty Ideals in Tamil Movies by Malaysian Indian Youths**

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### **Biodata**

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### **Abstract**

Studies have shown that beauty ideals are often exemplified, transmitted and maintained through cultural products such as art, literature and movies. This paper analyses the perception of beauty ideals in Tamil movies by Malaysian Indian youths and beauty ideals in Tamil movies from the 1960s to 2009. There were two stages of data collection. The first stage consisted of in-depth interviews with 20 female and 20 male students at a public university in Malaysia. They were selected using a purposive sampling method. The next stage involved a content analysis of 25 Tamil movies produced from the 1960s to 2009, selected by means of a stratified sampling technique. The analysis showed that some elements of beauty ideals have evolved in Tamil movies, and these trends were also

identified by the participants. The preference for thinness, fairness/whiteness and youthfulness is prevalent for actresses but not for male actors. This may be a reflection of socio-cultural expectations of contemporary Indian society and the mass consumption of global media. The emphasis on traditional feminine ideals remains obvious in these movies, even though the prominence given to them has decreased over the years. Understanding of these changes is important in media literacy and in the design of intervention programs for these youth.

Keywords: gaze, objectification, beauty ideals, Malaysian Indians, cultural products

## **Introduction**

Studies have shown that beauty ideals are often maintained through cultural products (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003). Some examples of cultural products in the form of entertainment are movies, music, books, and sports (Lawrence and Philips 2002).

Traditionally, beauty ideals are often passed on through art, literature and music (Thomson and Heinberg 1999). The mass media have been identified as very powerful means of communicating beauty ideals in modern society (Sarwer, Grossbart and Didie 2003; Heinberg 1996 as cited by Thomson and Heinberg 1999; Mazur 1986). At a very young age, beauty ideals are passed on to children through fairy tales (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003) and video and books (Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose and Thompson 2004). Many studies have shown the effect of media exposure on the body image of women (Thomson and Heinberg 1999; Grabe, Ward and Hyde 2008; Yamamiya et al. 2005). Park (2005), for example, showed that exposure to beauty and fashion magazines increased the desire to be thin among female college students. Spurgas (2006) using the grounded theory methodology, identified that media, cultural background and ethnicity influence the origin of beauty standards and women's perception of their body. The participants in this study, while acknowledging that the effects of media can be either positive or negative, felt that the media show very narrowly defined beauty standards for women (Spurgas 2006). However, most studies on the effect of the media have focused on Western media, and none on South Indian popular media specifically among the diasporic community.

Visual media have been identified as the most common means of perpetuating the sexual objectification of women (Frederickson and Roberts 1997). According to Kant (1963 as cited in Papadaki 2007) sexual objectification involves treating a person as a sexual tool. Similarly, feminists such as Dworkin and MacKinnon (who worked on men's consumption of pornography) see objectification as a process where a person is seen or treated as an object

merely for sexual pleasure and this, therefore, harms one's humanity. Another feminist, Nussbaum, while acknowledging the potential negative effects of objectification, still believes that objectification can be harmless. MacKinnon and Dworkin have argued that inequality in society is closely tied to objectification. According to Dworkin, in a patriarchal society, where gender roles are clearly defined, women are always objectified by men. Kant, while acknowledging women are mostly the victim of objectification, does not deny that men can be objectified in some relationships if the woman is in a position of power (Papadaki 2007).

In the media, sexual objectification is identified with regard to the importance given to the overall appearance or body-shape of females (Vandenbosch and Eggermont 2012).

According to Mulvey (1975), in traditional Hollywood cinema, women are used as passive objects of the active male gaze. The male character plays an active role while the female character is often passive, powerless and the object of desire of other characters. Their presence is meant to satisfy the desire for the visual pleasure of heterosexual males on or off the screen. Therefore, their looks are coded or designed to "connote to be *looked-at-ness*" [emphasis in original] (Mulvey 1975:11). This way of seeing emphasizes the hierarchical nature of the gaze and of gender identity. According to Mulvey,

... classic Hollywood movies give us back a woman-object through a male gaze that projects his own fantasy on the female figure in two ways - voyeuristic (which sees the rebel woman as temptress and prostitute) or fetishist (the docile and redeeming woman represented as the Virgin Mary) (Sassatelli 2011:124)

Mulvey's essay, while being an important contribution to film studies, has been criticized for not accounting adequately for female spectators and focusing only on the heterosexual male gaze. It is also criticised for not explaining the gaze towards male images and the binary

position used to describe gaze, i.e. the active male gaze and passive female who is being looked at (see Neale 1983; Chaudhuri 2006; Manlove 2007; Sassatelli 2011).

In the context of Indian movies, Vasudevan (2000 cited in Chatterjee 2005) has suggested the concept of *darshan* as an alternative way of analysing gaze in movies. *Darshan*, which is an important notion in Hinduism, refers to the visual interaction between the deity and the devotee in worship (Babb 1981). It is a visual activity that is reciprocal (Gell 1998 as cited by Taylor 2002). *Darshan* is hierarchical in nature, but it is not gendered because the one giving and the one taking *darshan* can be of either gender. A second notion of vision employed in popular Indian cinema is known as *nazar* (Taylor 2002). *Nazar* is a concept associated with the Persianate love poetry tradition, which began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century in South Asia (Taylor 2002). In Hindi cinema, *nazar*, which is used to express sexual desire, is further intensified when it is performed in the context of *darshan* viewing (Taylor 2002). The expression of sexual desire is intensified by the yearning of *darshan* from the giver to the receiver. *Darshan* has been used to analyse gaze in Hindi movies (see Taylor 2002; Chatterjee 2005). However, it has hardly ever been used to analyse Tamil movies.

Chinniah (2008), in her analysis of the status of Tamil film heroines, concludes that the 1970s marked a transformation in Tamil cinema. This is when the heroine changed from being a passive character to a pleasurable object of male gaze (Chinniah 2008). Prior to this, the heroines are either portrayed as, or transformed into, traditional female archetypes. Tamil cinema also made a clear distinction between the 'pure' and 'impure' women. The heroines are the image of purity while the dancing women in 'item<sup>1</sup>' songs are the image of impurity (Lakshmi 2008). In contemporary movies, the heroines are portrayed with some elements of being a 'impure' while maintaining their purity (Lakshmi 2008). Therefore, after the 1970s, heroines are used as sexual objects in the movies, but at the same time are shown to be women who hold on to the traditional feminine ideals (Chinniah 2008).

*Nazar* and *darshan* may be applicable to some forms of viewing in Tamil cinema. Gazes in a romantic relationship can be reciprocal. There is an expression of desire and a yearning for the view to be reciprocated between the two people involved in the gaze. In this reciprocal gaze, however, after a while, the woman would lower her gaze, and at this point, she becomes the object of the male gaze. This lowering of the female gaze is used in Tamil movie to emphasise the traditional feminine ideals. In addition to this, in most other contexts (which includes the period prior to the start of romantic relationships, views from the villain, views from strangers, in 'item' songs), women are portrayed as the object of the male gaze. The focus and movement of the camera on specific female body parts constitutes the objectification of women in Tamil movies and signifies a heterosexual male gaze, as suggested by Mulvey (1975).

This paper analyses the perception of beauty ideals in Tamil movies by Malaysian Indian youths at a public university in Malaysia and compares it to beauty ideals in Tamil movies produced from 1960s to 2009. It tries to determine if beauty ideals in Tamil movies have evolved over these five decades, and how far youths are able to identify these trends. Tamil movies were chosen for this study because of their cultural significance, and the level of consumption among Malaysian Indians.

### **Malaysian Indians**

'Malaysian Indians' refer to people of Indian origin who are Malaysian nationals. They are a minority ethnic group in Malaysia, constituting around 7.3 per cent of the total population. Based on the 2010 census, 362,910 Malaysian Indians are between the ages 20 to 29. In this age group, approximately 51 per cent are male, while 49 per cent are female (Department of Statistics 2010). Most are Hindus, but there are also some Malaysian Indians who are Christians or Muslims.

Most Malaysian Indians are descendants of migrants from South India, particularly from Tamil Nadu. There have been a few waves of migration to Malaysia from India. Most migrations happened during the British colonial times, when Indians were brought to Malaysia (then Malaya) to work in rubber plantations. Even though a small number of professional and managerial Indians migrated during that time, most migrants were illiterate and poor (Sandhu 1993).

### **Tamil Movies**

In this paper, 'Tamil movies' refer to movies in the Tamil language, produced in India. The centre of Tamil movie production is Chennai, Tamil Nadu. India produces more than 1000 movies a year, which may be much higher than the number of movies produced in Hollywood in a year. Among these, it is estimated that an average of 90 Tamil movies is produced annually (Krishnan and Sakkthivel 2010). Based on the number of movies reported in the popular media and in various blogs by movie enthusiasts, the researcher estimates that in 2010 and 2011 approximately 120 Tamil movies were produced each year in India. It is important to note, however, that some of these movies may be dubbed movies from other Indian languages, which makes it very difficult to determine the actual number of Tamil movies produced in a year.

Outside India, Tamil movies have a big influence in Malaysia and Singapore (Ravindran 2006). In Malaysia, the movie *Endhiran* – which was released in 2010 – grossed more than USD 1 million in its first week (IMDb 2010). Other activities related to the Tamil movie industry are often held in Malaysia: for example, *Endhiran*'s soundtrack was released in Malaysia (Majid 2010). Tamil movies such as *Billa* (2007), *Kumaran s/o Mahalakshmi* (2004), *Thillalangadi* (2010), *Kannamoochi Enada* (2007) are partly shot in Malaysia. These movies are culturally significant, not merely because of the high consumption in Malaysia,

but as “a cultural resource for articulating their sense of hybridised identity” (Velayutham 2008:184).

There is a very small production of Tamil movies in Malaysia, but these movies are not as popular as Tamil movies from India among Malaysian Indians. Government television channels in Malaysia only have limited hours of Tamil programming. These channels show one Tamil movie per week, and about three hours of other local Tamil programs (such as documentaries and serials) every day. Most of these programs are shown in the afternoon<sup>2</sup>. ASTRO, the sole satellite television provider in Malaysia, broadcasts six variety channels which have been dedicated to Tamil programs since April 2013. These channels are broadcast from India. Some are broadcast simultaneously in India and Malaysia, while others are delayed broadcasts. Even though these channels broadcast mega serials (television serial which often have close to or more than 1000 episodes), comedies, Tamil songs reality show and talk shows, a major portion of their content are Tamil movies and programs related to Tamil movies (such as songs from Tamil movies, comedy from Tamil movies, movie reviews, and so on). Other than that, there are other Tamil channels from India such as a kids’ channel (*Chutti TV*), a comedy channel (*Adithya*) and a music channel (Sun Music). *Adithya* and Sun Music consist of comedies and songs from Tamil movies, respectively. ASTRO has a Tamil movie channel (*Vellithirai*) and two pay-per-view Tamil movie channels (*Muthalthirai* and *Thangathirai*). Most of the movies on these channels are produced in India. Another channel called *Vanavil* shows mostly local Tamil movies, talk shows, serials, Tamil movies related programs, and Malayalam and Telegu (two other South Indian languages) movies and programs from India<sup>3</sup>. The availability of these channels, gives viewers in the diaspora an access to the development and changes in Tamil Nadu and India, hence India now, becomes part of the lived culture and no longer only an inherited legacy (Sankaran and Pillai 2011). On top of this, cinemas in Malaysia regularly show Tamil movies. Even though



there is not an exact number to indicate the level of consumption of Tamil movies in Malaysia, the nature of television programs and regularity of Tamil movies in Malaysian cinema does give an indication that Tamil movies are very popular in Malaysia.

### **Traditional Beauty Ideals**

In Indian folklore and stories, beauty is never explained as being mainly based on physical appearance. It is often connected to the character of a woman and the values which she upholds (Ghosh 1973). Beauty ideals are expressed as only a part of feminine ideals.

Similarly for a man, their physical appearance may be discussed, but emphasis will be given to the virtues he holds exhibits. For example, in *Chilappatikaram*, a great Tamil epic written by Ilanko Atikal in 5th century C.E., even though Kannagi is described as a very beautiful woman, the emphasis is always given to her character (Parthasarathy 1993). Kannagi is seen as the ideal Tamil woman, and the epitome of *karpu* or chastity (Ramaswamy 2010; Zvelebil 1973).

Four ideals which are highlighted in Tamil culture regarding women are *accam*, *madam*, *naanam* and *payirpu* (Lakshmi 1997). *Tolkappiyam*<sup>4</sup>, which prescribes the norms for Tamil literature, discusses *accam*, *madam* and *naanam* as ideals which are expected from women (Sivakami 2004). It is not easy to identify English words that are equivalent to these terms. *Accam* can be translated to timidity (Lakshmi 1997). The word timidity however, does not encompass the actual and cultural meaning of this term. Similarly, *naanam* can be translated as bashfulness (Lakshmi 1997). Even though *accam* and *naanam* are often used when describing a woman in Tamil literature, it does not imply that women have to be timid or bashful all the time. There are instances where a woman is shown to be brave and courageous. These values are meant for particular situations, and when the need arises other values are highlighted. Kannagi, for example, is described as a very beautiful woman, both in terms of her looks and character, but at the same time she is also described as an extremely

courageous woman who challenges the judgement of the King in order to clear her husband's name. Her husband was falsely accused and sentenced to death for stealing the anklet of the Queen. Kannagi comes to court to prove that the anklet which Kovalan had was her's and not the Queen's<sup>5</sup>, hence proving that her husband is innocent and that the King has given the wrong judgement. Other than that, there is a Tamil folklore which describes the bravery of a woman. For example, there is a story about a woman named Veerayi who chased a tiger by using a *muram* (an instrument used to winnow chaff from grains, made of bamboo). In these instances, the bravery of a woman is highlighted, but generally the emphasis is on *accam* and *naanam*.

*Madam* is sometimes interpreted as innocence, but has also been explained as the ability to withhold one's knowledge (Lakshmi 1997). Kannagi is described in *Cilappatikaram* to possess such innocence (Zvelebil 1973). *Payirpu* (physical sensibility) is related to chastity, and may be understood as the exclusive devotion to one's husband and a feeling of disgust towards any other men (Lakshmi 1997:2962). It has also been translated to feminine awe and is seen as a quality which follows when *accam*, *naanam* and *madam* are practised (Sivakami 2004). Two values for women that can safely be said to be highlighted in Tamil culture are chastity and devotion to their husbands (Ramaswamy 2010; Sivakami 2004). Women have gone to great lengths – and even performed miracles – to show their devotion to their husbands e.g. Kannagi in *Chilappatikaram*. Similarly, *Thirukural* which is often seen as the greatest book on Tamil ethics, composed in approximately 500 C.E. (Blackburn 2000), emphasises the importance of chastity and devotion to one's husband (Pandian 1993).

In Tamil culture and literature, Lord Muruga (Murugan) is often seen as the ideal for a man. *Murugan endral azhagan* (Murugan is beauty) is a commonly used phrase among Tamils. Murugan is seen as the epitome of youthfulness and beauty (Clothey 1978). It is important to note that beauty here does not merely refer to physical beauty, but it is

something more spiritual than that (Clothey 1978). Murugan is also admired for his courage, intellect and compassion (Collins 1997). Similar trends can be seen in other Indian literature or mythology, such as the *Ramayana*, which describes Rama and Sita as the ideal man and woman (Desai 1970). Even though Rama is described as a good looking man, his character as a devoted son, a loyal husband, and a caring brother is often highlighted in great detail. His loyalty to his wife, Sita, and his belief in monogamy is often applauded (Desai 1970) even though he may not be seen as an ideal husband by contemporary feminists (Rajalakshmi 2005).

Another art form which is very common in Tamil Nadu is sculpture. The temples in Tamil Nadu display thousands of statues (Raman and Padmaja 1996). Many of these sculptures depict men and women. A close look at the female sculptures in Tamil Nadu will show that most of the women depicted in these sculptures are curvaceous (see Ghosh 1973).

## **Methods**

Data for this paper comes from two different sources. The first stage of data collection was the conducting of in-depth interviews with 20 female and 20 male Malaysian Indian students at a public university in Malaysia. This study focuses on Malaysian Indians, because many Malaysian Indians watch Tamil movies regardless of their mother tongue. In this study, 80 per cent of the youths in the sample identified Tamil as their mother tongue. All the participants admitted that they watch Tamil movies regularly on the television and in cinemas. Most participants were able to speak Tamil, but unable to read or write Tamil. The students were selected using purposive sampling methods. They were between the ages of 20 to 23, and pursuing undergraduate degrees. More than half came from either a middle class family or better and had at least one parent who is a professional. Other participants came from low income families. Some of the questions asked to the participants were: Can you describe some physical characteristics of actors and actresses who are commonly seen in old

and new movies? How do you feel about the looks which are often shown in movies? Do you think that the physical characteristics of actors and actresses have changed over the years? Do you think that different looks are given importance in different eras? They were also asked about their movie watching behaviour: Do you watch Tamil movies on a television or in a cinema or both? How often do you watch Tamil movies? What type of movies do you watch? Are you familiar with stars from various eras? Are you a fan of a particular hero or heroine and why? Other than movies, they were also asked about other consumption related to Tamil movies: What kinds of music do you listen to? Do you watch or listen to Tamil movie songs? Do you watch Tamil comedies?

All interviews were transcribed and translated to English. In translating these interviews the researcher tried to maintain the style used by the youths – hence some of the interviews quoted in this paper may not be grammatically correct. After transcription, the researcher went through the transcripts for familiarization, before coding to identify important themes from the data was carried out. The names used in this text are fictitious.

The next stage involved a content analysis of 25 Tamil movies produced from the 1960s until 2009, which were selected using stratified random sampling. The sampling frame for Tamil movies was created based on searches using five different Internet search engines: Google, Bing, Yahoo, Dogpile and Altavista. From these search engines, the researcher concluded that a good list of movies was available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Tamil-language\\_films](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Tamil-language_films)<sup>6</sup>. These movies were listed according to their decade, and for each decade five movies were selected randomly. The movies analysed are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 here

Movies were analysed from the 1960s onwards for two reasons. First, movies since the 1960s are still available for research. It is rather difficult to find movies which were

produced prior to this era. Secondly, movies from the 1960s are still popular among the Tamil movie fans and are regularly shown on the local satellite television which specializes in Tamil and Indian language programs. In addition to this, stars from the 1960s are very popular among Malaysian Indians.

During the content analysis, various variables were identified and measured. Some variables were constructed based on the views expressed by the respondents. First of all, the hero and heroine<sup>7</sup> were identified and their physical characteristics were documented. Some of the characteristics documented were: whether the hero/heroine is fair (white), wheatish<sup>8</sup> or dark; if they are thin<sup>9</sup> or plus-sized; and if they portray a young, middle-aged or an older person in the movie. Other than that, the physical characteristics of supporting actors, villains and comedy actors were analysed. Further analysis was carried out to identify if a preference for a particular beauty ideal is emphasized in these movies. Finally, the female characters were analysed to see if there were portrayals of traditional ideals. In the content analysis, coding was conducted by the researcher and a research assistant. The data produced by both coders were checked to ensure reliability in the coding.

## **Findings**

Four major themes have been identified from the data analysis and are discussed in the following sections.

### ***Thinness***

Respondents explained that in recent movies all the actresses were very thin, and thinner than an average woman's body type. Movies before the late 1990s had actresses who looked like the 'girl next door'. Actresses before the late 1990s were more curvaceous than actresses in recent movies. Anitha, for example felt that heroines in old movies look normal.

In old movies, heroines look normal, like you and me. Now, they are so thin. Guys go crazy about Shreya because of her figure. If you look at

Kushboo, she was not thin. Or in the 60s, KR Vijaya was also not thin.

Now they are all super slim, like models.

Like Anitha, other participants expressed similar views. When asked about male actors, participants highlighted that similar trends are not seen for them. They felt that actors of all sizes (from thin to overweight) play main roles in Tamil movies of all eras. Meena explained,

For the heroes it does not really matter. You can have fat heroes, thin heroes. Many heroes are overweight. Prabhu and Vijaya Kanth had many movies, even when they were fat.

Another participant Bala explained how Dhanush – who is rather thin and does not look strong – is portrayed as being very strong in movies.

Dhanush is so thin, but he still acts like a gangster and can beat up 20 people. I think he is a gangster in *Sullan* [2004].

In contrast, they felt that plus-sized actresses are used only for supporting or comedy roles. Malliga was unhappy that size is used as comedy in some Tamil movies and how actresses who gain weight are not able to play main roles in movies.

Sometimes they ridicule fat people in movies, especially fat women. Once the actress puts on weight she usually acts as [a] sister or mother [supporting roles].

Another participant Raj explained that it is common to hear gossip about actresses trying to reduce or maintain weight through diets and other medical procedures.

We hear actress like Nayanthara going for liposuction to reduce weight so that she can still play main roles, but you don't see Vijaya Kanth or TR [T. Rajendar] talking about diet to be heroes.

The content analysis also showed that before the late 1990s not all the actresses were very thin, unlike the trend in more recent movies. For example, in *Naanum Oru Penn* (1963) and

*Dheerga Sumanggali* (1974), the heroines are curvaceous and not thin. Most heroines after the late 1990s are thinner than actresses from the 1960s to early 1990s. Even though these actresses may not be as thin as Western super models, there is clearly a thinning trend in Tamil movies in recent years.

The content analysis confirms that, in all decades, male actors who are of different sizes take the main role in Tamil cinema. For example, Dhanush, who is considered very thin, acted in the main role in *Thiruvilayadal Arambam* (2006). This fact is highlighted by the antagonist in the movie – Prakash Raj – in the song *Ennama Kannu*. On the other hand, there are also overweight actors such as Vijaya Kanth and Prabhu, who play the main role in Tamil movies such as *Arasangam* (2008) and *Kushti* (2005). Therefore, it is clear that thinness is becoming the ideal in recent Tamil movies for actresses while the same ideal does not apply to male actors.

### ***Fair<sup>10</sup> or white***

The participants explained that most actresses playing the main role in recent movies (since late 1990s) are very fair or white. Maria, a female participant explained

All the heroines today are fair. I don't remember seeing anyone who is dark. Asin, Jothika and Shreya are all fair. Most of them are from North India. There is hardly a Tamil actress. Even if they are from South India, they are fair, like Asin and Sneha.

They explained that not many actresses in Tamil movies are of South Indian origin. Many Tamil movies use actresses who are of North Indian origin (e.g. Shreya, Jothika and Simran<sup>11</sup>). According to them, North Indian actresses are relatively fairer than South Indian actresses. In addition to this, they also highlight that even when actresses of South Indian origin play the main roles, they are also fair-skinned (e.g. Asin and Sneha). They felt that no dark-skinned actress plays the main role in recent movies. They believed that the scenario

was rather different in the 1970s and 1980s, where there were some actresses who are dark-skinned, or wheatish (e.g. Saritha and Banupriya) playing the main roles. Rani explained,

Like Banupriya, she is not that fair. She had so many movies in the 80s.

But now I can't think of anyone who is dark in movies.

Skin colour is not important in the choice of male actors for the heroic parts. In all eras, they see actors who are fair-skinned and dark-skinned playing the main role. Mani explained,

It is very different for heroes. Of course Surya, Ajith, Kamal [Hasan] are fair, but there are like Superstar [Rajini Kanth], Vijaya Kanth and Partiban who are dark. All of them act as heroes. Rajini has been acting since my mom was young as a hero.

Another participant Mega, expressed similar views.

When I watch 80s movies, heroines, Radha and Ambika were fair, but like Saritha, she is dark. I think there were others too... It is hard to say about 60s movies, all were in black and white. I don't know if they were fair or dark.

Most were unsure about the skin colour of actresses in the 1960s, because most movies in the 1960s were in black and white.

The content analysis of movies confirms that there is a preference for fair (white) actresses in Tamil movies, especially in movies which were produced in the late 1990s to 2009. All of the movies analysed (in the late 1990s to 2009) had a fair-skinned actress playing the main role. Before the 1990s, there were at least a few actresses who were wheatish in Tamil movies.

Actors of various skin colours are seen in the movies throughout the five decades. In all of the movies analysed (except *Agni Satchi* (1982) and *Naanum Oru Penn* (1974)) the heroines are always as fair as, or fairer than, the hero. *Naanum Oru Penn* (1963) is an



interesting movie in the context of this study. It is about Kalyani (actress Vijayakumari) who has difficulty getting married because she is dark. When she gets married, she is initially disliked by her father-in-law, who later accepts her and treats her well. Her husband, who was tricked into marrying her, was initially very disappointed with the marriage because he dreamed of marrying someone very beautiful. When her husband's aunt humiliated her, she sings a song – *Kanna Karumainira Kanna* – to express how she feels to Kanna (another name for Lord Krishna). In this song, she says that even though Kanna is dark, He is worshipped and adored by everyone, unlike her who is being judged for her colour. Later in the song she questions Kanna for creating her and says that, even though she has a kind heart, it cannot be appreciated by others because it is covered by her looks. In the end, this movie emphasises the importance of a woman's character as compared to her beauty. This movie is a fiction, but it highlights the problem of colourism among Indian women.

### ***Youthfulness***

According to most participants, Tamil movies idolize youth for actresses, and most actresses in the main roles are rather young. Very few are able to be a lead actress when they are in their thirties. Yasodha, explained,

Heroines usually act when they are young. Once they are older, they can't be heroines anymore. They usually act as [a] sister, sister-in-law or mother. For heroes it is different. Rajini Kanth acts with heroines who are very much younger than him. I think he is like 60 plus but he is still the hero. Kamal also the same. It is funny how in one movie Meena acts as a child with Rajini then in *Ejaman* she acts as the heroine with him. Now she does not act as heroine anymore, but Rajini Kanth still acts as a hero.

Another participant, Justine, expressed similar views and added that when heroines became older, they move on to act in main roles in Tamil soaps.

Actress[es] like Radhika, Ramya Krishnan even Devayani started acting in serials when they were older. They were not acting as heroines in movies, but in the drama [serial] they have the main roles. Most of the time, they are like 'heroes'. All the guy characters are supporting their character.

Data from popular media and the Internet shows that actors like Rajini Kanth and Kamal Hasan have acted as protagonists for more than 30 years, while the actors Vijaya Kanth, Parthiban and Sathyaraj have acted in main roles for more than 20 years. It is common for actors in their fifties or sixties to act as protagonists (taking on the roles of young adults) because most Tamil movies focus on stories related to young adults. They are often paired with actresses who are in their twenties. Rajini Kanth, for example, was paired with Shreya in the movie *Shivaji, The Boss* (2007) and Kamal Hasan was paired with Asin in the movie *Dasavatham* (2008). Actresses' careers in main roles end sooner. There are of course exceptions to this: some actresses such as Aishwarya Rai (Miss World 1994) still act in main roles even in their late thirties.

### ***Feminine Ideals***

The content analysis shows that there is a slight change in feminine ideals in movies from the 1960s to 2009. Movies in the 1960s and 1970s gave great emphasis to the traditional feminine ideal. Emphasis on the four feminine qualities of a Tamil woman is obvious. In this era, many female main characters portray the docile and sacrificing women: for example, in the movies *Pava Mannippu* (1961), *Pazhum Pazhamum* (1961), and *Naanum Oru Penn* (1963), *Dheerga Sumanggali* (1974). The heroine's role is focused on family or love relationships. Her sacrifice and devotion to family and husband is greatly emphasised in these movies. Other aspects of her life, such as the pursuit of other goals or an education or a career are shown minimally. In this study, only four movies show some aspects of the heroine's career. The movie *Suryagandhi* (1973) shows the family conflict due to the insecurities felt

by Muthuraman<sup>12</sup>, because his wife, Jayalalitha, earns more than him. Movies produced after the 1960s still show some of these elements, but the message may be conveyed in a more indirect or subtle manner. In *Mann Vaasanai* (1983) traditional feminine ideals are identified as values which make a nation special.

The seventies marked the advent of movies on *Puthumai Penn*<sup>13</sup> i.e. 'liberated' and empowered women. For example, *Nizhal Nijamagirathu* (1978) and *Agni Satchi* (1982) showed women who were bold, and challenged traditional social norms. These movies were directed by K. Balanchander who is known to make movies focusing on strong, bold and independent women who challenge traditional societal norms (Chinniah 2009), even though his movie also highlights the 'loss' that women suffer when they do not conform to these norms. This does not mean that movies after the 1970s do not emphasise traditional feminine ideals, but sporadically there are portrayals of women who are different and do not conform to these ideals.

Other movies such as *Anbe Vaa* (1966), *Pattikaada Pattanama*<sup>13</sup>(1972), *Nizhal Nijamagirathu* (1978), *Pudhu Kavithai* (1982) are about taming the urban, educated and mostly rich heroines who subscribe to Western ideals. In the end, she will understand the importance of traditional feminine ideals and accept the phallic authority. A similar theme is also present in *Padaiyappa* (1999). In this movie, the antagonist, Ramya Krishnan, is portrayed as someone who was educated in a foreign country and does not conform to any of the traditional feminine values. She falls in love with the hero, Rajini Kanth, who is in love with Soundarya. Soundarya works as a maid in Ramya Krishnan's house and is portrayed as someone who follows the traditional feminine ideals. In the end, Ramya Krishnan, who fails to destroy Rajini Kanth's life for rejecting her, kills herself. These movies emphasise that it is only natural for a woman to follow the traditional feminine ideals and the negative consequences of not following these ideals.

## **Discussion**

Content analyses of the interviews and movies show that there is a shift in some beauty ideals portrayed in movies for actresses. In terms of size, there is a thinning trend for heroines, and in terms of colour there is a preference for fairer actresses in contemporary movies.

Preference for thinner actresses is similar to the trends in Western movies (see Sarwer et al. 2003). Studies have shown that beauty ideals in the Western media have always been elusive and unattainable for most ordinary women (Forbes et al. 2007; Spurgas 2006). Participants felt that the actresses' bodies do not represent those of most Tamil women. The actresses from the 1960's to the 1980's are seen to have a body size and shape which is similar to ordinary women. This was termed as looking 'normal' by the participants in this study. This shows that some elements of beauty ideals in Tamil movies are becoming similar to Western ideals and away from traditional Indian beauty ideals. Traditional Indian culture does not emphasise thinness as a beauty ideal for women (Dasgupta 1998). Even though what thinness means in Tamil society may be rather different from Western society, beauty ideals in Tamil movies are moving towards a body type which may be unattainable by many women and this is clearly identified by participants. In a previous study using a multi-ethnic sample, many Malaysian youths thought that being thin is important to being beautiful, and that obesity is not seen as beautiful (Karupiah 2013).

The preference for fair skin is becoming more prominent, as there are hardly any heroines who have dark skin in the main roles in contemporary movies. The emphasis on fair skin may be a result of a long history of preference for whiteness in Indian society, a phenomenon that has been highlighted by many studies (Badrudjoja 2005; Li et al. 2008) even though the actual reason for this preference is still unclear (Glenn 2008). It has been reported that skin colour differences in India is often associated with status and caste and may have existed before colonialism (Badrudjoja 2005; Li et al. 2008). Additionally, white skin is

often considered as an asset or a social capital for a woman, especially in marriage (Badrudodoja 2005; Glenn 2008; Jha and Adelman 2009). It has been reported that Indian and the Indian diasporic community are the largest consumers of skin lightening products in the world (Glenn 2008). This is a clear indication of the preference for fair skin among these communities. Preference for whiteness is not unique to India, though. It has been documented that, there is an overwhelming preference for whiteness in Asia generally (see Saraswati 2012; Leong 2006), even though the kind of whiteness preferred may be different in each society (Saraswati 2012). Saraswati (2012), for example, argues that though being light-skinned is important to women in Indonesia, it does not mean that they would like to have the skin colour of someone who is of European descent. Therefore, the preference for fair actresses in Tamil movies is another manifestation of the preference for fair skin for women in Indian society, but it is becoming more prevalent due to globalisation and the mass consumption of media.

One aspect often not highlighted in the academic sphere, as compared to the popular media (e.g. see Rao 2011), when discussing Tamil movies, is the role of the dubbing artists who give voice to the many heroines, a trend that started in the 1980s. Among the heroines identified in this study, at least seven heroines since 1980s have used dubbed voices in their movies. Prior to that, all heroines used their own voices including those who are not native speakers. The participants highlighted that most heroines in recent years do not know Tamil (e.g. many actresses from North India) but there are also native speakers who use dubbed voices in movies.

There are two issues which can be identified here. The participants believed that this is mainly because the directors are only interested in fair actresses, hence they prefer to cast someone who is fair even they are not able to speak Tamil. They also felt that the use of dubbed voice makes the heroines sound similar to each other. They use mainly soft and child-

like voices for a heroine. In recent years, a select group of dubbing artists such as Deepa Venkat and Chinmayi are used to give voice to many heroines (see Rao 2011). This is not the case for heroes – who use their own voices – hence there are many different kinds of male voices being heard in Tamil movies. It is hard to explain why directors prefer to use dubbed voices for heroines, but it can be hypothesized that this may be due to the importance given to physical appearance for a heroine. Her physical appearance is seen as crucial to the success of their movie, as compared to maintaining the authenticity of her acting and the use of her original voice. The heroine is being packaged with a narrowly defined look and voice and used as an object for male gaze in most movies. Her voice, literally and symbolically, is not seen as important in Tamil movies. This is not the case for heroes; many non-native speakers use their own voices in movies. In the 1980s and 1990s, there were a few heroes who used dubbed voices, such as Mohan and Prabhu Deva, but in recent years, most heroes use their own voice, while most heroines use dubbed voices for dialogues. Using a dubbed voice is an exception for male actors (even for some who are non-native Tamil speakers) and a norm for actresses<sup>15</sup>.

While some aspects of beauty ideal evolved for actresses, in all eras there are more variations in terms of looks for the heroes compared to the heroines. Women are expected to fit into a very narrowly defined beauty standard (which to some extent also includes stereotyping of their voices). Tamil movies are mostly hero-centric. The storyline revolves around the life of a male character, hence the variation in terms of character and looks is seen as vital to the plot. The heroine on the other hand, who is often the love interest or wife of the main character, takes a supporting role which enhances the hero's status. Similar to Mulvey's analysis of classic Hollywood movies, women are showcased to be *seen* while the hero *acts*. Therefore, the showcasing of women is designed to convey a strong visual impact to the spectators. Similarly, in Tamil movies, heroines are packaged in a certain way in terms of

looks, voice and character to be seen both by the characters in the movies and the spectators of the movie.

The obsession with youthfulness for women is not unique to the Tamil movie industry. Studies have shown that a similar trend exists in Hollywood, even though in recent years some Hollywood movies featuring older women stars have been very successful (Jermyn 2012). Many older Hollywood stars also find that television gives them a space to showcase their talents (Smith 2012 as cited in Jermyn 2012). As pointed out by the participants, popular actresses such as Radhika, Simran, Kushboo, Ramya Krishnan and Devayani have acted as the protagonists in at least one of the Tamil mega serials. The Tamil serials often showcase a woman as its protagonist, and in many cases also the antagonist. This, therefore, may seem to be an attractive avenue for older actresses for various reasons. As a protagonist in a mega serial, they are able to take the main role in serials as compared to Tamil movies where the heroine's roles (except in very few movies) are always secondary to the hero's role.

Traditional feminine ideals are still evident in most Tamil movies analysed in this study. The message is strongest in movies from the 1960s and 1970s. Heroines were used to show the pure, docile women. Even though the message becomes more subtle in movies after that, it remains as an important and central theme to describing the heroines. She may be shown as being playful, outgoing, scantily dressed, but traditional ideals are her core values. Here, she resembles the pure woman with a 'tinge' of elements of a temptress. Traditional feminine ideals are deeply rooted in Tamil society and they have long been as accepted as the norm. In 2005, when actress Kushboo made some comments on pre-marital sex and virginity, it caused a major controversy in Tamil Nadu. Many cases were filed against her in the Indian courts. She was accused of making offensive remarks about Tamil culture. All the cases against her were later dismissed by the Indian Supreme Court in 2010 (BBC 2010). Similar

views were expressed by Periyar in his Self-Respect movement which was launched in 1926 (Anandhi 1991; Pandian 1993). He viewed chastity as a value which oppresses women and called for the denunciation of chastity as an ideal for women (Anandhi 2005). The 'Kushboo' incident shows how much traditional feminine ideals are still treasured in Tamil society. This has encouraged most movie makers to maintain major aspects of feminine ideals in most of the movies in this study. Even though recent movies have incorporated many changes in society (for example, in the methods of communication, language, fashion and how romantic relationships, dating and marriage are portrayed), the traditional ideals are still either overtly evident or subtly implied in these movies.

The ability of these youths to identify the evolution of beauty ideals in Tamil movies shows the clarity and strength of the message being sent out by these movies. The beauty ideals projected in these movies are easily read by these youths. This shows that Tamil movies play an important role in transmitting beauty ideals among Malaysian Indian youths and demonstrates the strength of the media in maintaining and changing beauty ideals in a society. It is an example of how beauty ideals are transmitted from the Indian society to the diasporic Indian society in Malaysia, even though the scope of this study does not allow the researcher to explore how much such ideals are transmitted into Indian society in Malaysia. Most female youths admitted that they have tried to follow the trends and fashions in Tamil movies in their own lives (e.g. hair style, sari blouse design, make up and accessories). Female youths in this study reported that they feel some pressure to conform to these ideals. Some female youths have tried to look like their favourite actresses by using whitening products and reducing weight through diet and exercise. Some male youths also said that they follow the hair style and dressing of actors. They sometimes also mimic the dialogue and actions performed on screen by their heroes.



They however, cannot be seen as passive consumers who absorb the beauty ideals shown in Tamil movies, but they actively criticize the motives and the trends in Tamil movies – particularly the preference for fair and young actresses. Their ability to criticize these beauty ideals cannot be equated with the ability to reject such ideals, since other studies have shown that women are often able to criticize unattainable media ideals but still pursue these ideals because it may bring positive changes in their lives (Engeln-Maddox 2006). From this study, it may also be hypothesized that similar influences could be found in other Tamil diasporic communities and need to be studied further.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study show that, some beauty ideals have evolved in Tamil movies. Based on the perception of the respondents and content analysis of Tamil movies from 1960s to 2009, youthfulness and fairness are the most common beauty ideals seen in Tamil movies for actresses. The emphasis on fairness is becoming more prominent in Tamil movies since the late 1990s compared to movies produced prior to that. Similarly, there is a strong emphasis on thinness since the late 1990s. Traditional feminine ideals are emphasized in Tamil movies of all eras. The degree of emphasis has moved from being very strong and direct in the 1960s to something more subtle and indirect in more recent movies. Male actors in Tamil movies are not expected to conform to very narrowly defined beauty ideals. Actors of all shapes, sizes, colour and age are able to play the main role in Tamil movies. Since most Tamil movies are hero-centric, the variations in the looks of the male actor are important for the plot of the movie. Women on the other hand, are cast in a stereotypical way to convey a strong visual impact on the spectators. The use of dubbed voice for native and non-native Tamil speakers again shows the importance given to the physical appearance of the actresses as compared to the authenticity of their acting. This can also be seen as a way of further

stereotyping women i.e. they are portrayed to look in a particular way but also have a similar kind of voice.

Youths are able to read and criticize the beauty ideals and the evolution of these ideals in Tamil movies. At the same time, they admitted that they follow some portrayal of beauty ideals, trends and fashions shown in Tamil movies in everyday life. This shows that, they do not totally resist the portrayal of beauty ideals in Tamil movies even though they are critical of these ideals. This shows that these ideals are being transmitted to the diasporic community in Malaysia. Understanding this process may be important in media literacy programs for youths.

### **Limitations**

The list of movies used as the sampling frame for this study may not be the most comprehensive and the researcher acknowledges that that is one of the limitations in this study. However, the list consisted of more than 4500 movies in total. Another limitation of this study is that only 25 movies were used in this analysis. Content analysis of these movies involved some form of judgement on the part of the researcher. The interpretation of who is dark, fair or wheatish used in this paper is based on what is normally accepted among South Indians communities. It may, however, be rather different in other communities. Two rounds of content analysis were conducted to ensure reliability in the way it was carried out.

### **Notes**

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1. 'Item' songs are songs with dance sequences that are not relevant to the plot of the movie, usually showcasing sexily dressed women performing dances with very suggestive

moves. 'Item' songs are not a new phenomenon in Tamil movies and were seen even in the 1960s. However, since the 1990s, many actresses who are usually cast as heroines in Tamil movie appear in 'item' songs. For example, Gautami appeared for an 'item' song in the movie *Gentleman*.

2. This was estimated based on the TV guide on [www.rtm.gov.my](http://www.rtm.gov.my) in May 2013.
3. This description is based on the information available on [www.astro.com.my](http://www.astro.com.my) in May 2013.
4. Zvelebil (1973) estimated that *Tolkappiyam* was composed between the 1st or 2nd century BCE and the 5th century CE.
5. Kannagi's move to defend the honour of her husband is sometimes criticized, because her husband (Kovalan) had betrayed her by having an extra marital affair with Madhavi (Lakshmi 1997). Her devotion to her husband is glorified in Tamil culture. Such loyalty is traditionally expected from a Tamil woman, but can be seen as something that is oppressing women. There have also been counter arguments to this criticism, which supports Kannagi for defending her husband, because she fought for truth and justice and this is seen as signs of a strong and empowered woman. However, I prefer to view her courage as a sign of her devotion towards her husband rather than empowerment, since she never questioned her husband's betrayal. Periyar, a social reformist, criticized Kannagi's action in his attempt to liberate women through his self-respect movement, and emphasised that chastity has been used as a way of oppressing women in Tamil culture (Pandian 1993). In the movie *Agni Satchi*, K. Balachander portrayed an alternative 'Kannagi' in a stage play. The alternative Kannagi condemned Kannagi's move to burn Madurai. She criticized Kannagi for causing harm to the whole city, and killing innocent people even after the King who killed her husband had died.

6. The researcher understands that Wikipedia is not accepted as a scholarly source.  
However, in this study it was only used to create a sampling frame of movies, because there is no official list of Tamil movies produced in India from 1960 to the present. Most lists are maintained by movie enthusiasts in their private blogs.
7. The word ‘heroine’ is commonly used among fans to refer to actresses who play the main role in a movie while the word ‘hero’ refers to the (male) actor who plays the main role.
8. ‘Wheatish’ is a term used in Indian English to describe someone who is not fair or dark (Ramasubramaniam and Jain 2009). Wheatish is not commonly used among Malaysians, but is employed here only as a term to describe skin colour.
9. In this study, a thin person is someone who does not look overweight but may have flabby arms, legs or slightly bulging tummy. A very thin person is someone who has a slightly toned body. The phrase ‘very thin’ in this study does not refer to someone who looks scrawny.
10. This is based on the perception of the interviewees. The researcher did not verify the ethnic origin of these actresses.
11. It is common to refer to someone who has a light skin colour as ‘fair’ among Malaysians.
12. This paper uses an actor’s real or screen name rather than the character name.
13. Two other movies considered revolutionary in the portrayal of women who challenged traditional norms in the 1970s are *Aval Appadithan* (1978) and *Aval Oru Thodarkathai*. (1974). For a detailed discussion on these movies see Lakshmi (2008).
14. For a detailed analysis on how the phallic authority is affirmed in the movie *Pattikaada Pattanama* see Kaali (2000).
15. It is puzzling why actresses who are able to speak Tamil agree to using a dubbed voice in movies, as it reduces the authenticity of their acting and makes them ineligible for the National Award which is considered the most prominent award ceremony for Indian

movies (see National Film Award Regulations 2011). Even though one of the reasons for using dubbed voices may be an inability to speak in various Tamil accents as demanded by each movie, the question remains why only actresses use dubbed voices. Actors face the same challenges, but choose, or are expected to deliver, their dialogues themselves.

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