

REPRESENTATION OF TOXIC CHARACTERIZATION AND GENDER DYNAMICS IN SOUTH INDIAN CINEMA

Dr. Alice Rufina F,

Assistant Professor, Department of Viscom and Animation, Dr. M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute, Maduravoyal, Chennai.

Abstract

The representation of intimate relationships in contemporary South Indian cinema has undergone a remarkable transformation, shifting from idealized notions of romance to psychologically complex narratives that foreground emotional vulnerability, possessiveness, manipulation and power imbalance. While romantic relationships have traditionally been portrayed through culturally accepted patriarchal frameworks, recent films increasingly explore the darker dimensions of love, exposing behaviours associated with toxic masculinity, emotional abuse, coercive control and gender inequality. This study comparatively examines the representation of toxic characterization and gender dynamics in the Tamil film *Lover* (2024) and the Telugu film *Girlfriend* (2025). Drawing upon Feminist Film Theory, Gender Performativity Theory, Male Gaze Theory and Hegemonic Masculinity Theory, the research investigates how cinematic narratives construct gender identities, negotiate emotional power and normalize or challenge toxic behavioural patterns within romantic relationships.

The study adopts a qualitative research design using Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Narrative Discourse Analysis to examine dialogues, characterization, mise-en-scène. Comparative textual analysis reveals that both films depict toxic behavioural traits through emotional dependency, possessiveness, surveillance, jealousy, manipulation, and psychological abuse; however, they differ in the ways female agency is represented. The Tamil narrative critiques patriarchal possessiveness through psychological realism, whereas the Telugu narrative negotiates toxicity within broader cultural expectations of romance and gender performance. The study argues that contemporary South Indian cinema is gradually shifting from romanticizing toxic relationships toward encouraging critical reflection on gender equality, emotional accountability and healthy interpersonal communication. By comparing two linguistically and culturally distinct industries, this research contributes to feminist film studies, gender communication and South Indian cinema scholarship while expanding academic discourse on toxic characterization in contemporary visual culture.

Keywords: Toxic Characterization, Toxic Masculinity, Gender Dynamics, South Indian Cinema, Comparative Film Studies.

1. Introduction

Cinema functions as one of the most influential cultural institutions in contemporary society. Beyond its role as entertainment, films construct social realities, negotiate cultural identities, reproduce ideological beliefs, and influence audiences' perceptions regarding relationships, family structures, gender roles, and emotional behaviour. In India, where cinema occupies a central place in everyday cultural life, the representation of romance significantly shapes societal understandings of intimacy and interpersonal relationships. Romantic narratives have historically reinforced patriarchal ideologies by portraying men as dominant protectors and women as emotionally dependent caregivers. However, the emergence of contemporary relationship dramas has introduced more nuanced explorations of psychological conflict, emotional trauma, and gender negotiations. South Indian cinema, particularly Tamil and Telugu film industries, has recently witnessed an increasing number of films that question conventional romantic ideals by portraying emotionally

complex relationships characterized by manipulation, possessiveness, insecurity, and psychological violence. Unlike earlier romantic narratives that often glorified male persistence and female submission as expressions of love, recent films have begun exposing the harmful consequences of such behaviours. This transformation reflects broader social changes influenced by feminist discourse, digital communication, mental health awareness, and changing expectations regarding equality in intimate relationships.

Among these emerging films, *Lover* (2024) represents a significant departure from traditional romantic storytelling in Tamil cinema. Rather than celebrating obsessive love as devotion, the film critically examines emotional dependence, insecurity, possessiveness, and psychological manipulation within a deteriorating romantic relationship. The protagonist's inability to regulate emotions, respect personal boundaries, and trust his partner becomes the central source of interpersonal conflict. Instead of positioning toxic behaviour as masculine heroism, the narrative exposes its destructive consequences for both partners, encouraging audiences to critically evaluate normalized patterns of emotional abuse.

Similarly, the Telugu film *Girlfriend* explores contemporary romantic relationships through the lens of emotional complexity, interpersonal conflict, and evolving gender expectations. The narrative reflects changing cultural attitudes towards relationships by examining issues of autonomy, trust, identity, emotional negotiation, and gendered communication. Rather than depicting romance as an idealized emotional destination, the film presents relationships as dynamic spaces where power, vulnerability, and identity continuously intersect. Through its portrayal of emotional misunderstandings and behavioural conflicts, the film provides an opportunity to examine how gender norms continue to influence intimate relationships within contemporary Telugu society.

The concept of toxic characterization has gained increasing scholarly attention across psychology, sociology, communication studies, and media research. Toxic characterization refers to the systematic representation of behavioural traits that cause emotional, psychological, or interpersonal harm. Such behaviours include possessiveness, manipulation, coercive control, emotional dependency, verbal aggression, jealousy, surveillance, gaslighting, intimidation, and emotional isolation. Unlike physical violence, these forms of psychological abuse often remain socially normalized because they are frequently represented as signs of affection, commitment, or passionate love within popular media narratives.

The persistence of toxic characterization in cinema cannot be understood independently from broader systems of gender ideology. Patriarchal societies often construct masculinity through ideals of dominance, emotional suppression, competitiveness, and authority while simultaneously encouraging femininity through obedience, emotional labour, sacrifice, and relational dependence. Cinema functions as a cultural apparatus that either reinforces or challenges these normative constructions. Consequently, analysing toxic characterization requires a gender-sensitive framework capable of examining how cinematic narratives negotiate power relations between men and women.

Gender dynamics within romantic narratives extend beyond individual character behaviour to encompass broader questions concerning identity formation, emotional agency, social expectations, and institutionalized inequalities. The interaction between masculinity and femininity within film narratives reflects wider cultural beliefs regarding authority, vulnerability, independence, sexuality, and emotional expression. Therefore, examining gender dynamics enables researchers to understand how films construct acceptable models of love, conflict, reconciliation, and emotional responsibility.

The present study adopts Feminist Film Theory as its primary interpretative framework while integrating Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, and R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity. Together, these theoretical perspectives facilitate a multidimensional examination of visual representation, narrative construction, ideological discourse, and gender performance within contemporary South Indian cinema.

Unlike previous studies that have predominantly focused on audience reception or isolated representations of toxic masculinity, this research conducts a comparative textual analysis of two recent South Indian films from different linguistic industries. Such comparison enables a deeper understanding of regional variations in cinematic storytelling while identifying common ideological patterns that transcend linguistic boundaries. Through Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Narrative Discourse Analysis, the study investigates how dialogues, cinematography, editing, mise-en-scène, costume, sound design, colour symbolism, and narrative structure collectively construct meanings surrounding toxic relationships and gendered identities.

The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary contribution to film studies, gender studies, communication research, and cultural studies. By comparatively analysing Tamil and Telugu cinema, the research broadens scholarly understanding of how regional cinemas participate in shaping contemporary discourses surrounding love, masculinity, femininity, emotional health, and gender equality. Furthermore, the study contributes to ongoing debates regarding the social responsibility of cinema in representing healthy relationships while challenging the normalization of psychological abuse within popular romantic narratives.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Gender Representation in Indian Cinema

Indian cinema has traditionally portrayed men as dominant and women as submissive, reinforcing patriarchal gender roles (Hall, 1997; Wood, 2020). Berger (1972) and Mulvey (1975) argue that women are often represented as objects of visual pleasure. However, feminist scholars such as hooks (1992) and Ahmed (2017) advocate women's agency and equality. Contemporary films like *Lover* (2024) and *Girlfriend* (2025) increasingly depict women as independent individuals challenging traditional gender norms.

2.2 Toxic Masculinity in Cinema

Toxic masculinity refers to behaviours such as dominance, emotional suppression, and possessiveness that reinforce unequal gender relations (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). While earlier films often romanticized such behaviour, recent studies (Bahl, 2022; Pramudiya et al., 2023) argue that contemporary cinema critiques emotional abuse.

2.3 Toxic Femininity and Emotional Labour

Toxic femininity reflects restrictive gender expectations that encourage self-sacrifice, emotional suppression, and dependence (Anderson, 2023; Vermani, 2024). Butler (1990) views these behaviours as socially constructed, while Wood (2020) highlights women's emotional labour in maintaining relationships. Contemporary South Indian films increasingly portray women setting boundaries and prioritizing self-respect over unequal relationships.

2.4 Gender Dynamics in South Indian Romantic Cinema

South Indian romantic cinema has evolved from glorifying male dominance to emphasizing consent, equality, and emotional well-being (Hall, 1997; Fiske, 2011). Recent films such as *Love Today* (2022), *Lover* (2024), and *Girlfriend* (2025) question patriarchal relationship norms and promote healthy communication, reflecting changing societal attitudes toward gender and intimacy.

2.5 Feminist Film Theory

Feminist Film Theory examines how cinema constructs gender through patriarchal ideologies (Mulvey, 1975; Stam, 2000). Mulvey's concept of the male gaze explains women's objectification, while hooks (1992) and Ahmed (2017) advocate inclusive and empowered female representation.

2.6 Gender Performativity

Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of Gender Performativity argues that gender is socially performed rather than biologically determined. Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity explains how dominance becomes normalized. *Lover* (2024) and *Girlfriend* (2025) challenge these socially constructed gender performances by questioning toxic relationship behaviours.

2.7 Male Gaze and Visual Representation

Mulvey (1975) argues that cinema often represents women as objects of the male gaze, while Berger (1972) highlights unequal visual power relations. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) emphasize that visual elements communicate ideology. Contemporary South Indian films increasingly provide female characters with greater agency and narrative importance rather than reducing them to visual objects.

2.8 Comparative Studies on Toxic Relationships in Cinema

Recent research examines emotional abuse, coercive control, and unhealthy relationships in cinema (Asadi, 2023). Studies by Bahl (2022) and Pramudiya et al. (2023) show that contemporary films increasingly critique toxic masculinity. Although films such as *Kabir Singh* (2019) and *Animal* (2023) generated debate, *Lover* (2024) and *Girlfriend* (2025) promote healthier relationship dynamics. Comparative research on Tamil and Telugu cinema remains limited, justifying the present study.

3. Research Objectives

1. To examine the representation of toxic characterization in the Tamil film *Lover* and the Telugu film *Girlfriend*.
2. To analyse the construction of gender dynamics through characterization, dialogue, visual language and narrative structure.
3. To compare the portrayal of masculinity, femininity, emotional agency and interpersonal power across the two films.
4. To investigate how cinematic techniques normalize, critique, or challenge emotionally abusive behaviours within romantic relationships.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework comprising Feminist Film Theory, Gender Performativity Theory, Hegemonic Masculinity Theory and Multimodal Discourse Theory. These theories provide a comprehensive perspective for analysing how toxic characterization and gender dynamics are represented through narrative, characterization, dialogue, and cinematic techniques in the Tamil film *Lover* (2024) and the Telugu film *Girlfriend* (2025).

4.1 Feminist Film Theory

Feminist Film Theory examines how cinema constructs and reproduces gender inequalities (Mulvey, 1975; Stam, 2000). Mulvey's concept of the Male Gaze explains how women are often represented as objects of visual pleasure while men remain the central narrative figures. This framework enables the study to analyse female agency, emotional labour, power relations, and patriarchal ideologies in *Lover* and *Girlfriend*, assessing whether the films reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles.

4.2 Gender Performativity Theory

Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) Gender Performativity Theory argues that gender is socially constructed through repeated behaviours and cultural expectations rather than biological

differences. The study applies this theory to examine how masculinity and femininity are performed through behaviours such as possessiveness, emotional dependence, caregiving, and self-sacrifice.

4.3 Hegemonic Masculinity Theory

Connell's (1995) Hegemonic Masculinity Theory explains how dominant forms of masculinity normalize authority, emotional control, and power over women. In romantic relationships, these behaviours often appear as possessiveness, jealousy, surveillance, and control.

4.4 Multimodal Discourse Theory

Multimodal Discourse Theory explains that meaning in cinema is created through multiple modes, including dialogue, visuals, camera angles, lighting, music, editing, and performance. This study analyses how these cinematic elements collectively represent emotional abuse, gender inequality, and toxic relationships.

4.5 Conceptual Framework of the Study

The conceptual model guiding the research is illustrated below.

Independent Variables	Analytical Process	Dependent Variables
Characterization	Multimodal Discourse Analysis	Representation of Toxic Behaviour
Dialogue	Narrative Discourse Analysis	Gender Dynamics
Camera Language	Feminist Film Theory	Power Relations
Mise-en-scène	Gender Performativity	Emotional Agency
Sound & Music	Hegemonic Masculinity	Audience Meaning Construction
Narrative Structure	Comparative Analysis	Contemporary Gender Representation

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design to examine the representation of toxic characterization and gender dynamics in the Tamil film *Lover* (2024) and the Telugu film *Girlfriend* (2025). The films are analysed as cultural texts to understand how they construct meanings related to gender, power, and intimate relationships.

5.2 Research Approach

A comparative textual analysis is employed to identify similarities and differences in the portrayal of toxic relationships, gender roles, character development, emotional conflict, and narrative resolution across the two films.

5.3 Research Method

The study integrates Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) and Narrative Discourse Analysis (NDA). MDA examines cinematic elements such as dialogue, camera angles, lighting, editing, music, costume, and body language to understand how toxic behaviour is visually and verbally represented. NDA focuses on story structure, character development, conflict, and narrative progression to analyse how the films construct, negotiate, and resolve toxic relationships. Together, these methods provide a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics and toxic characterization in contemporary South Indian cinema.

6. Analysis and Discussions

6.1 Comparative Representation of Toxic Characterization

Contemporary South Indian cinema has increasingly moved away from romanticizing obsessive love and has begun critically examining unhealthy emotional relationships. Both *Lover* and *Girlfriend* portray romantic relationships that gradually evolve into emotionally abusive partnerships, exposing how possessiveness, manipulation, insecurity, and patriarchal expectations shape interpersonal dynamics. Although both films depict toxic characterization, they differ in narrative emphasis, character motivation, and the degree of female agency afforded to the protagonists.

In *Lover*, toxicity emerges gradually from emotional insecurity. Arun's possessiveness is rooted in fear of abandonment, low self-esteem, and emotional dependence. His controlling behaviour develops progressively through repeated misunderstandings, constant reassurance-seeking, suspicion, and inability to respect emotional boundaries. The film presents toxicity as psychologically internalized rather than socially orchestrated. Arun does not intentionally seek to dominate his partner; rather, his unresolved emotional immaturity transforms affection into control. Consequently, *Lover* frames toxic masculinity as a psychological condition that deteriorates relationships despite genuine emotional attachment.

Conversely, *Girlfriend* presents toxicity as an explicit manifestation of patriarchal ideology. Vikram's behaviour is not merely driven by insecurity but by deeply internalized beliefs regarding gender hierarchy, marital roles, and masculine authority. His expectation that Bhooma should abandon her education, prioritize domestic responsibilities, bear multiple children, and unquestioningly follow his career reflects structural patriarchy rather than individual emotional instability. The narrative therefore expands toxic characterization beyond interpersonal conflict by situating it within inherited cultural norms regarding marriage and gender. This distinction marks an important ideological difference between the films. While *Lover* critiques emotional immaturity, *Girlfriend* critiques patriarchal socialization.

6.2 Masculinity as Emotional Possession

Both protagonists perform masculinity through possessiveness; however, their motivations differ substantially. Arun demonstrates possessiveness through emotional dependency. His constant need for reassurance manifests as surveillance, suspicion, and jealousy. He interprets emotional independence as rejection, creating repeated cycles of conflict and reconciliation. His inability to regulate anxiety gradually transforms love into emotional suffocation.

Vikram's possessiveness, however, originates from entitlement rather than insecurity. From the early stages of the relationship, he publicly claims Bhooma as "his girlfriend" without her complete emotional consent, symbolically asserting ownership over her identity. Later, he attempts to regulate her friendships, monitors her interactions with male classmates, and isolates her from her support system. These actions reflect coercive control rather than emotional vulnerability.

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is particularly applicable to Vikram's characterization. His understanding of masculinity emphasizes authority, obedience, decision-making, and control over women's autonomy. The film explicitly illustrates how patriarchal values are transmitted across generations through Vikram's admiration of his father's domination over his silent mother. Consequently, the narrative suggests that toxic masculinity is socially learned rather than biologically inherent.

6.3 Representation of Female Agency

One of the most significant similarities between the two films is the gradual development of female agency. Both female protagonists initially tolerate emotionally unhealthy behaviour, interpreting possessiveness as love and emotional dependence as commitment. As the narratives progress,

however, they increasingly recognize the psychological consequences of remaining within controlling relationships.

In *Lover*, the female protagonist slowly withdraws from the relationship after repeated emotional exhaustion. Her decision to prioritize self-respect over romantic attachment symbolizes emotional maturity. The film emphasizes internal psychological realization rather than dramatic confrontation. In contrast, Bhooma's transformation in *Girlfriend* is more explicitly political. She challenges patriarchal expectations surrounding marriage, education, career, sexuality, and female respectability. Her rejection of Vikram extends beyond ending a romantic relationship; it constitutes resistance against a gender ideology that seeks to subordinate women's aspirations.

Particularly significant is Bhooma's farewell speech, where she publicly rejects the fear of slut-shaming and declares that she would rather remain unmarried than enter an unequal relationship. This moment reclaims narrative authority from the male protagonist and redefines female dignity independent of patriarchal validation.

6.4 Emotional Manipulation and Psychological Abuse

Both films foreground emotional abuse instead of physical violence, demonstrating that toxic relationships frequently operate through subtle psychological mechanisms.

In *Lover*, emotional manipulation appears through guilt induction, repeated accusations, excessive reassurance-seeking, silent emotional pressure, and dependency. Conflict emerges through emotionally exhausting conversations rather than overt aggression.

In *Girlfriend*, psychological abuse becomes increasingly systematic. Vikram employs several coercive strategies, including: emotional isolation, controlling friendships, silent treatment, gaslighting, dismissing Bhooma's educational aspirations, making unilateral decisions regarding marriage, public humiliation, slut-shaming, intimidation, threats concerning her future employment. The progression of these behaviours closely resembles internationally recognized patterns of coercive control identified within intimate partner violence literature.

Unlike *Lover*, where toxicity remains largely interpersonal, *Girlfriend* illustrates how emotional abuse expands into social violence by involving peer groups, public spaces, and institutional structures.

6.5 Family as a Source of Gender Ideology

Family functions differently in both narratives. In *Lover*, family remains largely peripheral, with the relationship existing primarily between the couple. In *Girlfriend*, family becomes central to understanding toxic masculinity. Vikram's perception of an ideal wife is directly shaped by observing his submissive mother and authoritarian father. His admiration for his mother's silence reflects intergenerational transmission of patriarchal values.

Simultaneously, Bhooma's abusive father represents another form of patriarchal control. Rather than protecting his daughter, he blames and shames her, reinforcing the social mechanisms that silence women experiencing emotional abuse. The narrative therefore demonstrates that toxic relationships are sustained not only by individuals but also by familial institutions that normalize gender inequality.

6.6 Narrative Construction of Female Empowerment

Both films ultimately reject the romantic ideal that love alone can transform emotionally abusive men. *Lover* concludes with emotional separation, emphasizing that affection cannot compensate for repeated psychological harm.

Girlfriend extends this argument further by depicting female empowerment beyond the relationship. Bhooma completes her postgraduate education, secures employment, pursues writing, travels independently, and rebuilds friendships. The epilogue redefines success not through marriage but

through personal fulfilment and self-determination. Consequently, *Girlfriend* presents empowerment as the recovery of identity following emotional abuse.

The comparative analysis of *Lover* (2024) and *Girlfriend* (2025) reveals a significant shift in contemporary South Indian cinema from romanticizing possessive love to critically examining toxic relationships. Both films portray emotional abuse, manipulation, and control as harmful rather than as signs of affection.

Table 6.1 Comparative Analysis of *Lover* and *Girlfriend*

Dimension	<i>Lover</i>	<i>Girlfriend</i>	Comparative Interpretation
Nature of Toxicity	Emotional insecurity	Patriarchal entitlement	Psychological vs. ideological toxicity
Masculinity	Possessive and emotionally dependent	Controlling, authoritarian, possessive	Different expressions of hegemonic masculinity
Female Agency	Gradually develops self-respect	Publicly resists patriarchal control	<i>Girlfriend</i> offers stronger feminist agency
Emotional Abuse	Guilt, jealousy, dependency	Gaslighting, coercive control, isolation, humiliation	<i>Girlfriend</i> depicts broader spectrum of abuse
Family Influence	Limited	Central to gender socialization	Patriarchy transmitted through family
Relationship Outcome	Separation	Female independence and career	Both reject toxic romance
Feminist Perspective	Critiques unhealthy attachment	Challenges patriarchal ideology	<i>Girlfriend</i> is more explicitly feminist
Narrative Message	Love requires emotional maturity	Love cannot exist without equality and autonomy	Both advocate healthy relationships

A key finding of the study is the evolving representation of masculinity and female agency in contemporary South Indian cinema. *Lover* portrays toxic masculinity as a product of emotional insecurity, jealousy, and immaturity, whereas *Girlfriend* links it to patriarchal norms that seek to control women's education, careers, and personal choices. Both films reject conventional romantic ideals by presenting female protagonists who prioritize self-respect and resist emotionally abusive relationships. Additionally, they shift the focus from physical violence to emotional abuse, depicting behaviours such as possessiveness, gaslighting, surveillance, isolation, and manipulation as equally harmful forms of intimate partner violence.

7. Findings

Based on the comparative analysis of *Lover* and *Girlfriend*, the study identifies the following key findings:

- **Representation of Toxic Characterization:** Both films portray toxic characterization as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing emotional manipulation, possessiveness,

jealousy, coercive control, gaslighting, psychological abuse, and emotional dependency. Unlike conventional romantic narratives, neither film romanticizes these behaviours as expressions of genuine love.

- **Transformation in Masculinity:** The representation of masculinity differs significantly across the two films. *Lover* presents toxic masculinity as a consequence of emotional insecurity and psychological immaturity, whereas *Girlfriend* depicts masculinity as a culturally institutionalized system of patriarchal authority that seeks to regulate women's autonomy.
- **Development of Female Agency:** The female protagonists gradually transition from emotional accommodation to self-assertion. Their decisions to terminate unhealthy relationships signify the rejection of patriarchal expectations and the affirmation of personal dignity, independence, and emotional well-being.
- **Emotional Abuse as Narrative Conflict:** Both films prioritize emotional and psychological abuse over physical violence. Behaviours such as surveillance, silent treatment, humiliation, intimidation, guilt induction, and emotional isolation function as central mechanisms through which toxic relationships are represented.
- **Influence of Patriarchal Socialization:** *Girlfriend* explicitly demonstrates how patriarchal ideologies are transmitted through family structures and cultural expectations, whereas *Lover* primarily focuses on individual emotional behaviour. This distinction illustrates the multiple dimensions through which toxic relationships are socially produced.
- **Cinematic Construction of Gender Dynamics:** Dialogue, characterization, narrative progression, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound design collectively contribute to constructing unequal power relations between male and female characters.

8. Conclusion

Cinema functions as a powerful cultural institution that not only reflects prevailing social realities but also actively shapes public perceptions of gender, intimacy, and interpersonal relationships. The comparative analysis of *Lover* (2024) and *Girlfriend* (2025) demonstrates a notable transformation in the representation of romance within contemporary South Indian cinema. Unlike earlier cinematic narratives that frequently normalized possessiveness, emotional dependency, and patriarchal control as expressions of love, both films critically interrogate toxic relationship dynamics by foregrounding their psychological, emotional, and social consequences.

The findings reveal that *Lover* conceptualizes toxicity primarily through emotional insecurity, ineffective communication, and unhealthy attachment, emphasizing the need for emotional maturity, self-awareness, and mutual understanding. Conversely, *Girlfriend* situates toxic masculinity within broader patriarchal structures, illustrating how deeply embedded gender norms continue to regulate women's autonomy, education, career aspirations, and personal choices. Collectively, the films demonstrate that toxic relationships are not merely the result of individual behaviour but are deeply influenced by cultural ideologies and gendered power structures.

The study further establishes that both films challenge conventional representations of women by portraying female protagonists as active agents capable of resisting manipulation, coercion, and emotional abuse. Through the application of feminist film theory and gender representation frameworks, the research highlights how cinematic narratives increasingly promote women's agency, consent, and self-determination. Additionally, the films expand the discourse on intimate

partner violence by recognizing emotional abuse—including gaslighting, possessiveness, surveillance, isolation, and coercive control—as equally significant forms of violence. Overall, this study concludes that contemporary South Indian cinema is gradually moving towards more realistic, gender-sensitive, and socially responsible portrayals of romantic relationships. These evolving representations contribute meaningfully to feminist film scholarship while encouraging audiences to critically question normalized patterns of toxic behaviour and embrace healthier, more equitable, and emotionally responsible relationship models.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.
- Anderson, K. V. (2023). Is it really helpful to talk about toxic femininity? *Psychology Today*.
- Asadi, S. (2023). The relationship between toxic masculinity and toxic femininity and their impact on social relationships and married life. *Journal of Neurology*, 4(1), 1–4.
- Bahl, B. L. (2022). *Princes, moms, and warriors: A feminist rhetorical analysis of toxic depictions in film* (Master's thesis, Grand Valley State University).
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. Penguin Books.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. University of California Press.
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859.
- Fiske, J. (2011). *Television culture* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. SAGE Publications.
- hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. South End Press.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Routledge.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18.
- Pramudiya, A., Oktoma, E., & Yuniarti. (2023). The representation of toxic masculinity in the *Do Revenge* movie. *Journal of English Language and Pedagogy*, 6(2), 85–99.
- Vermani, M. (2024). Toxic femininity and psychological well-being. *Healthline*.
- Wood, J. T. (2020). *Gendered lives: Communication, gender, and culture* (13th ed.). Cengage Learning.