

**Redefining Gender Roles: Configuring the “New Man” and the “New Woman” in the Tamil Film *Hey! Sinamika***

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**Abstract:**

This paper proposes to examine the representation of gender roles in the Tamil film *Hey! Sinamika* (2022). As the title itself suggests, it attempts to expand on the idea of ‘new man’ and ‘new woman’ and develop a concept of egalitarian society where the traditional masculine ideology gets questioned and challenged. Through a careful scrutiny of gender roles in the film and the relationship of the lead characters, Yaazhan and Mouna, it looks at the lessons the movie gives while also analysing the limitations in the way it deals with the concept of gender. The paper argues about the notion how gender equality in a man-woman relationship can be propounded by breaking the stereotypical gender norms and how the equal efforts from the partners are needed for the betterment of the relationship. The study contributes a new light to the existing field of works on Tamil cinema by discussing new ideas like ‘new man’, ‘new woman’, egalitarian gender relationships, gender equality and the recasting of gender roles in the film *Hey! Sinamika*.

**Keywords:** Gender, Househusband, Housewife, New Man, New Woman, Egalitarian

**Introduction:**

Gender roles in India have long been rooted in its historical, religious and cultural traditions that have emphasized on different roles and responsibilities for men and women. Traditionally, the patriarchal society sets certain gender norms. What roles are expected of men in the family? What are the traits that make someone masculine or feminine? Who is expected to do household chores? Can a man take responsibilities of household works? Can women be just as responsible as men? Can women ever be the breadwinners? The anxiety about what gender roles should be — manifests itself in myriad ways. In patriarchal and

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hierarchical society, such as the Indian community, the cultural identities of men and women are rigid (Coltrane). Entrenched gender norms have significantly influenced the professional and domestic spheres of men and women's lives (Seedat and Rondon). Traditionally, men were seen as the breadwinners and the heads of the household, while women were mostly associated with domestic chores and caregiving responsibilities (Desai & Andrist). The deeply rooted societal rules define acceptable behaviours, responsibilities and roles based on sex, commonly casting men as dominant decision makers and women as primary 'care-givers'. These stereotypes create systematic barriers to employment, limiting women's career opportunities, economic autonomy and health while enforcing strict often restrictive expectations for both genders.

The construction of gender roles in society is inseparable from how media represents them. Cinema is one such powerful media widely considered as a microcosm of social and cultural life of a nation. Social change that is transformative and radical can be incited by cinema, ultimately contributing to the questioning and rather dismantling of the gender stereotypes. Within the historical canon, several films have provoked major social revolutions especially the representations of gender roles and feminism. For many years Indian cinema became a medium depicting a traditional male chauvinistic society where women have generally been depicted as either taking care of the family and home or as subordinate to the male protagonist. Moreover, men have been depicted more consistently in the characterizations of traditional masculinity, which include control, authority, determination, and leadership (Kocheri & Ansari).

Tamil cinema, like other parts of Indian film industry, has relied on a repertoire of gendered tropes that have positioned women within narrow and often regressive roles. Whereas male protagonists have been presented as robust and stoic characters. While talking about the Tamil movies rooted in Tamilian cultural values, the audience sometimes finds a dichotomy between the chaste, traditional heroine and the modern, westernized woman. But these female characters are subjugated by the ideologies of the society reinforcing submissiveness to the heroes. The gender-specific role traditionally accepted is that — women are the 'angels of the house'. The politics of labelling the partners (the males and females) in a socio-cultural baggage implying certain gender roles and identities — is not an innocent affair. The labels of 'husband' and 'wife' extend itself by attributing traits to these two entities as 'the man of the house' and 'motherly figure, submissive caregiver'—only cooking, cleaning and looking after of the children, as Brady notes it out very clearly: I want a wife who will take care of my physical needs. I want a wife who cooks the meals, a wife who is a good cook... completely take care of a wife's duties ("I Want a Wife", Brady).

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However, with the influx of global or transnational culture, post-liberalization gave rise to the multiplex system: questioning of gender roles, breaking of certain gender stereotypes. Tamil cinema has started acting as a powerful catalyst for social change by challenging deeply held beliefs, by casting women as protagonists or in pivotal roles. The new arena of Tamil film industry casts new roles to the female protagonists breaking long run gendered roles. Films like *Aruvi* (2016), *Iraivi* (2016), *Aramm* (2017), present a shift from the male chauvinistic films presenting robustness and platonic heroism of the male protagonists to stories centred around women's lives. The notion of working women completely focused on their careers and upliftment of social, economic and cultural status, gets elaborated in these films. But, quite true to the demands of the society the working-women perspectives of the female protagonists undergo certain excruciations fostered from family and partners. Working women characters or a mere representative of an independent woman, the female character is made to feel bad or guilty for choosing a career over a family. In film like *36 Vayathinile*, Jyothika's success as a woman gets accomplished only after her husband's validation. Jessie from *Vinnaithaandi Varuvaayaa* (2010), is one of the important characters of Tamil cinema introduced as a working woman. But quite ironically the minutes she steps in, her career just vanishes into the background score. Famous Tamil dubbed film *The Great Indian Kitchen* can be elucidated as a remarkable critique against the normalization of domestic labour. It presents an outrageous outburst of the female protagonist against the systematic oppression towards women within marriage. But can it be able to resist the masculine 'gaze' which time and again tries to control the feminine urge to get emancipation? Is it possible for a female to go against the societal norms without getting support from the family and especially from the life partner? — these questions in a way lead towards the necessity of an egalitarian society heralding equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for all genders rejecting traditional and rigid roles.

*Hey! Sinamika* (2022), veteran choreographer Brinda's directorial debut, tends to strike a new pose in the ongoing resurgence of traditional hyper-masculine ideals of 'manosphere' that emphasizes male dominance, emotional stoicism and economic provider. The film offers a refreshing shift in modern Indian cinema, presenting a more egalitarian, non-traditional approach to relationships that counters ongoing gender stereotypes. Showcasing a departure from patriarchal narratives, the film fosters empathy towards presentations of gender roles, particularly by reconfiguring the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in modern partnerships. The egalitarian portrayal of *Hey! Sinamika* prognosticates an independent (both physically and financially) new woman Mouna (Aditi Rao Hydari), a career-focused working woman, a paleontologist, departing from traditional nurturing roles. Quite new to the existing Tamil filmography, *Yaazhan* represents an egalitarian new man shifting away from traditional, stoic hero, introducing a different gender role. The 'new

woman' and 'new man' in contemporary digital representations present an egalitarian shift, breaking from traditional patriarchy to showcase, financially independent women and supportive men who challenge stereotypical gender binaries.

*Hey! Sinamika*, the romantic comedy film, portrays a young married couple played by Aditi Rao Hydari and Dulquer Salman who make an effort to go beyond traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The film is a unique attempt to break the gender stereotypes and conventional gender roles, challenging the traditional gender roles that the society puts forward for men and women. The movie follows the story of an ambitious and successful woman, a palaeontologist (Aditi Rao Hydari) and a househusband Yaazhan (Dulquer Salman). The starting point of the film is quite unique and different to the long running presentations of the Tamil cinema. Unlike the traditional presentations of Indian or rather Tamil film industry, focusing on the chase or the wedding, the film begins with the characters already in a state of comfortable matrimony, only to immediately introduce conflict through a significant role reversal, marking departure from typical romantic comedy templates.

#### **The 'new woman' in *Hey! Sinamika*: Shattering Myths**

The changing roles of women in early 20<sup>th</sup> century India were influenced deeply by prominent images of 'New Women'. 'New woman'—the term was first used by Sarah Grand in 1894 in one of her influential articles to refer to independent women seeking radical change. The term 'new woman' emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, symbolizing a shift in women's roles and identities in society. Unlike the previous terrain of Indian cinema ranging from Bollywood to Kollywood (Tamil film industry) that positioned women as subordinate characters lacking any form of personal identity, the emergence of the 'new woman' is not confined in the four walls of the house. Rather she has a life outside the home leading the life of a corporate, being an architect or working woman in IT sectors. The term represented women who were breaking away from traditional roles, gaining education, entering the workforce, and demanding equal rights. Involvement in the modern economy both as a consumer and a worker has been recognized as one of the primary qualities of a new woman (Hussain & Hussein).

With the influx of globalization and liberalism, a huge change took place in Indian socio-cultural background heralding new perspectives in everywhere including culture, economy, society and films. A change took place in the representations of the Indian women in Indian cinema, leading to a shift towards modernisation of traditional Indian women (Arora). The new Indian woman is the archetype of the empowered woman that Indian cinema has formulated since liberalisation (Anwer & Arora). The new woman of modern world negates Mulvey's 'male gaze'. Laura Mulvey, in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" contends that the presentations of women in cinema fall under the gamut

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of the male gaze where the cinematic portrayals portray women from men's perspectives presenting women as a subordinate to men, are objects of male pleasure, and need constant help from them (Mulvey). John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* states: "Women are depicted in quite a different in quite a different way from men not because the feminine is different from the masculine, but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the women is designed to flatter him" (Bonner). But the 'new' approach marks a shift from these aged old traditional presentations of female characters in modern filmography, extending their roles from being a mere commodity of pleasure to an important consumer, a decision maker.

*Hey! Sinamika* successfully manages to present an idea of reversal of gender roles and works out the consequences of the same in the marital life of Yaazhan and Mouna. Mouna (Aditi Rao Hydari), as the movie portrays, is an ambitious career driven woman who is completely comfortable in her skin and who knows what she wants in life. She is clear about her dreams and not only does she have professional dreams, she also works hard for making them a reality. She exemplifies the 'New Woman' trying to negate and eradicate anything that hinders her peace and freedom in life. The continuous nagging of her househusband compelling her to do all the things according to his wish makes her suffocated in life. This, as a result, leads her to get irritated by her sanctimonious chatterbox of a husband whom she considers to be over doer of everything.

Tamil cinema, in the recent few years, has started presenting women centred movies where women protagonists are seen doing works outside the house and enjoying independence. But Mouna, in *Hey! Sinamika*, is different from the other female protagonists of Tamil cinema. She is a successful paleontologist, a working position quite new to the existing female world where a woman is either a software engineer, IT worker, T.V artist or working in male dominated work field. The gender-based demarcations still can be found in such places where a woman has to compete with a male competitor. Though women may be portrayed as being able to successfully combine traditional attributes with a career in IT, with IT work being a positive influence in women's lives (Pal), anxieties over her dealings in the workspace continue to exist. (Hebbar). In the field of male domination, Mouna gets the utmost success, as she has been chosen to go for a one-year work related vacation to Puducherry than Ram, the male co-worker.

An open-minded and independent woman, Mouna, does not even know how to cook, nor does she ever enter into the kitchen. Then film does not come across a scene where Mouna helps Yaazhan with domestic work. She gets the 'dream man' whom every woman dreams to have in their life. She also fell in love with the man who does not fall under the

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‘toxic masculinity’, who takes care of her. But the care, the love that once she loved, has now become a reason of her frustration. The sanctimonious chatterbox, her husband’s continuous nagging and micromanagement of every single thing leads her to take divorce from him. An embodiment of ‘new woman’, she takes the role of changing her life according to her own wish. But quite new to the persistent male narratives of the Tamil cinema, where a woman has to change the man’s character to live happily ever after, to get a peaceful life— Mouna’s peace would stem from plotting against her husband by making him fall in love with Malarvizi, a psychotherapist and counsellor of human relationships.

### **Subverting the Alpha Male: New Man in *Hey! Sinamika***

Indian cinema has consistently provided compelling narratives that delve into the intricacies of male vulnerability, emotional complexity, and resistance to traditional masculinity. It heralds a new masculinity — an alternative masculinity, making a remarkable shift from the conventional stereotypical roles. The emergence of the new masculinity can be attributed to the influence of globalisation and globalized media and the dissemination of liberal principles. This paradigmatic shift promotes the active engagement of men in questioning and challenging the limitations by gender norms, while advocating for adoption of a broader and more equitable conception of masculinity that encompasses a range of various expressions (Behera). The emerging concept of masculinity proliferating the idea of ‘new man’, entails a departure from conventional notions associated with traditional construct of masculinity. In accordance with the conventional norms, the societal expectation for masculinity entails embodying alpha characteristics, displaying independence, asserting dominance, and refraining from the expression of emotions (Kimmel). The alternative representations of new masculinity (the new man concept), seeks to address and challenge the detrimental aspects of the traditional, hegemonic ideologies of patriarchy that have adverse effects on both the male and female genders.

How does it feel when a man has to perform the role of a Man? How is it to be a Man? — these may sound odd questions when they are related to masculinity. As Jack Sawyer argued that men are prevented from becoming complete human beings by the masculine mystique. It maintains that our understanding of masculinity, or more accurately, what it means to be male, is, of late, experiencing a period of uncertainty (Solomon-Godeau 70). Consequently, the notion of masculinity has turned out to be ‘a problematic gender construct’ (Kimmel, 10) and has articulated a growing sense of unease with many of the traditional markers of masculinity. Evidence of a growing unease about the normative ideal of hegemonic masculinity can also be found in popular culture and its establishment of the ‘New Man’ characterisation (Chapman 1988). The ‘New Man’ is a distinct popular culture product and the creation of advertising strategies of the 1970s. With his ‘bony frame, an unassertive manner, a desire for nurturant activities and a wish to express emotion’ (Cornwall

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and Lindisfarne), the new man stands in contrast with the traditional masculinity. New manism refers to the media's portrayal of men as 'the anti-sexist, caring, sharing man' (Beynon), who seeks to avoid enacting traditional hegemonic masculinity. The New man image labels a range of changes indicating a departure from the traditional breadwinner masculinity. The emergence of the new Indian man represents a shift away from rigid masculinity towards more nurturing, emotionally expressive, and egalitarian behaviours. The New man rose to prominence in the 1980s like an exotic new species, happy to washing up or change a nappy (Castella). According to Oxford English Dictionary, the new man was someone "who rejects sexist attitudes and traditional male role, especially in the context of domestic responsibilities and childcare".

Quite contrary to the trends of presenting robust, machismo or stoic characters of South Indian cinema, Yaazhan is a flagbearer of 'new man'— a man with a zero male ego. A noble addition to the arena of existing and predominant m Tamil cinema, Yaazhan is a 'new man' archetype who breaks traditional gender norms. The first sight of Yaazhan by the 'female gaze' of Mouna has termed him 'Mr. Bean', a significant challenge to the definition of conventional masculinity. The reference to the Mr. Bean with the hero speculates shift from the preconceived notion of traditional masculinity. The representational arc of Mr. Bean intersects with, and unsettles the machismo of hegemonic masculinity manifesting a masculinity presented in the 'New Lad' (Neville, 231). The beginning of the film itself breaks the archetype of masculinity. Quite different from the mainstream Tamil cinematography presenting leading heroes rescuing and providing their female counterparts, Hey! Sinamika creates a fresh start. Unlike the traditional presentation of the male protagonist Yaazhan takes shelter under the table to save himself from the severe storm which is very much unexpected from a hero. The myth of masculine gender role gets shattered when Mouna lends her helping hand towards Yaazhan to lead him to a safe place. The fixed notion of gender identity also gets topsy turvied, when the audience, instead of having a machismo character finds Yaazhan as a house husband.

Yaazhan, acted by Dulquer Salmaan, plays a man secure in skin. Quite new to the predominant masculine man who considers that domestic works belong to only the female world, he doesn't have any qualms about taking care of household chores while his highly-paid wife Mouna (Aditi Rao Hydari) takes care of the bills. He is a software engineer who "just lost my fourth job". He happily left his job to follow his passion of learning cooking: "I came to study the cuisine of Mangalore". The four walls of the corporate world can not compel him to continue his job, rather makes him to quit it to pursue his heart's desire. Like Kabir in the Bollywood film *Ki and Ka*, Yaazhan normalizes the role of being a house husband. As a stay-at-home he never complains, nor does he show any grudge over his

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working wife Mouna whom he literally admired when first met with her. The flag bearer of a ‘new man’, Yaazhan became elated to learn her profession as a paleontologist.

Unsettling the gendered geography of domestic kitchen, the proponent of the ‘new masculinity’—Yaazhan takes responsibilities of cooking, a task that is only suitable for the females as prescribed by the hegemonic society. Being able to cook has traditionally stood for a mother’s love and woman’s competence to be a wife (Vester). For men, the reverse tends to happen: “To function effectively as men, they must maintain their expert role and negotiate their positions as nurturers” (Lindenfeld & Parasecoli 123). Kitchen, a spatial archetype has been designated as a gendered domain for women’s engagement in activities related to food preparation, serving and maintenance. The kitchen she is relegated to is an arena for unpaid labour that devalues her work and precludes her from social identity beyond the family (Kalia 2003). What if this arena of fixed gendered role has been taken over by a man? What if he takes the responsibilities of the household chores? Can a man mark a break from the ideology where a man’s participation in domestic cooking is seen as a recreational leisure activity, a kind of care-for-self project (Lupton 1996). This fixed entity of gender roles put in topsy turvy in *Hey! Sinamika*. Yaazan the house husband, loves cooking. As the film starts, the protagonist chooses cooking a more comfortable and ‘love to do’ job than the ‘boring job of a software engineer’: I’m a boring software engineer. It’s not quite the exotic profession as yours. I love cooking (*Hey Sinamika*). He left his job only to get admission in a cooking course in Mangalore. The marker of feminine identity and archetype of womanhood— ‘cooking’, turns out to be a heavenly affair, a medium of happiness for Yaazhan. Ramaiah idly, Ustad Biriyan, Kuchulaki, Amna, Bhutai Saru, Chicken Ghee Roast, Motai Masala, Pulmungi, Sweet Rice, Meena — the delicacies and cuisines, and their descriptions in his mouth highlight his love for cooking which is literally an unknown matter of affairs to his wife Mouna.

Quite different from the gender performativity that the agents of hegemonic or traditional masculinity in Tamil film industry may expect from the hero that he would lead a so called ‘manly’ life asking his wife to all the household affairs, he plays the role of a nagging husband. He takes or rather over cares for his wife making foods time to time. He subverted the role of a woman being talking all the time whereas the husband should be serious, measured and controlled about everything. He is a continuous chatterbox talking about each and every single topic especially related to cooking and marital relationship. The attributes of such talkativeness that is often attached to women and portrayed as a cute trait— is here ascribed to a man and is slightly problematised. In the continuous dichotomy between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’— he chooses ‘being’. He never feels ashamed of doing his job as a house husband nor does he consider about the preconceived notion of masculinity to be

performed. He lashes out at the agent of hegemonic masculinity who asked him to behave according to his gender role as he enters the birthday party his wife's boss, wearing his wife's floral dress. The man taunts him: "He is not even ashamed of going to...to the birthday party putting on a floral gown of his wife/ Are you, his husband? Or are both of you wives? (*Hey!Sinamika*). He asserts the gender equality by stating that if it is quite natural and accepted that a woman can put on a man's dress including shirts and pants, a man's dressing in a woman's clothes should be normalized. Transgression of the dressing codes highlights the possibilities of negating certain imposed gender roles and heralds the 'androgynous' identity formation. But, doing so it also highlights the predominant stereotypical notion of the conjugal gender roles of 'husband' and 'wife' and how they are connected with certain performance by the partners. This puts a question mark on the relationship that should be labelled on Yaazhan and Mouna according their roles in the house. Should Mouna be termed the 'husband' and Yaazhan, the 'wife'— as their roles in the household works put in topsyturvy? This would even raise another question whether we should even use the terms 'husband' and 'wife' while referring to the partners? May we not simply use words like 'companions', 'partners', 'spouse' other than gender labels while addressing the life partners in a society?

Yaazhan is a man of every woman's dream, a man who does not resort to violence, dominance, or stereotypical masculine tropes to prove his worth as a man. He is an embodiment of egalitarian new man who gives priority and admires about his wife's works so when Mouna goes for a working vacation, he doesn't want her to leave, not because he is jealous or insecure about his wife. He moves to Puducherry to look after Mouna. The film even presents another break from societal norms when Yaazhan leaves his place and moves to Mouna's working place only to lead a happy conjugal life. Is it not a threat to the societal norms where it is expected that a woman must leave her territory to live with her husband? A man of positive mindset he even takes the job of RJ and points out several things related to human relationships, societal flaws and the way how one can get rid out of that problem. Unlike the heroes of Tamil cinema, which portray extra marital affairs and how men can easily get involved with other women while his wife is still there in the house, he proves to Malarvizhi: "All Men are the same. But ALL MEN, are not the same" (*Hey! Sinamika*). It is very clearly presented through the film that even after the protagonist decides to give the rightful divorce, his wife wanted, he didn't go with the next best option: another girl who is in love with him. For him, that place cannot be replaced by another. Yaazhan is a 'dream man', a man of women's 'fantasy', a life partner whom every woman will happily want in their lives.

**(Im)possibility of (New) Gender Roles: A Journey towards Fantasy or Real World**

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Can a house husband always be happy? Can a working woman really get that much of freedom to take decision about her life? Does financial empowerment of women usher in a world of gender equality? If women earn and men stay at home, will the power dynamics between the genders dissolve? Or will it lead to the advent of another system of power? Can an egalitarian relationship ever be possible? Has the film *Hey! Sinamika*, become successful in heralding a world where a new form of gender identity can be celebrated? Does society make you lead a life of what you are? — the film leads towards a myriad of uncertainties where the audiences are left with so many questions in their minds. In the recent arena of Tamil cinema, the presentation of Yaazhan is more than real, too perfect, to be called as ‘fantasy’. Despite of starting as a fresh addition in the existing male-centric films, this film cannot present a linear storyline with the expectation of the audience. The concept of ‘new woman’ and ‘new man’ and their different ideologies regarding the upliftment of female identity and a yearning for an egalitarian society bereft of gender demarcation come across a clash. An egalitarian open mindset of Yaazhan creates his own world caring for his wife, making foods for her, maintaining the household and giving space to his wife in her works. But are these enough to make a marriage fruitful? In making a home free of gender specific roles where the husband never thinks it shame to be a house husband. But has he ever thought about the psychological and physical needs of a woman that are most important parts in a happy conjugal life?

In spite of being a supportive husband and a believer of gender equality, Yaazhan, has no respect for personal boundaries of his wife. He micromanages his wife’s daily routine and leaves no space for her desires or thoughts. What is the worth of being an egalitarian husband if he does not even give his wife freedom of expressing herself? This leads a wife frustrated and being suffocated to breath in a relationship and finding ways to divorce her husband. The film itself posits a question mark on its appeal to bring an egalitarian society bereft of gender demarcation, as the flagbearer of new masculinity, or ‘new man’ has to succumb to his wife’s trap by getting a ‘manly’ job outside his house. The person once satisfied with his role to be stay-at-home husband, now rules over the entire nation playing the role as RJ Yaazhan. The man of word not caring about what society thinks, has decided to divorce his wife based on people’s opinion by taking votes. While the world of ‘new woman’ again falls prey to the kindness of her male partner. Mouna, a self-confident and aspiring woman, who never thought of submitting to her husband, now begs of him to ‘accept’ in his life. Once a confident, well-organized woman, she shatters in her life, continuously urging for forgiveness even at the cost of sacrificing her own wishes. The ‘new Indian woman’ even becomes ready to ‘change’ herself according to the wish of her ‘egalitarian’ husband. The film comes to an end bringing reconciliation between the life partner beginning their life with a new hope. But this really leaves a myriad of questions into the minds of the spectators—

Does the end mark a new fresh journey of Yaazhan and Mouna? Or the film the unexpected and abrupt ending of *Hey! Sinamika*, has left so many aspects about gender identity untold, which could be elaborated with much care.

**Conclusion:**

In spite of certain flaws in the cinematic presentations of the film, *Hey! Sinamika*, under the directorship of Brinda, has done a splendid job in challenging the conventional gender roles expected to be played out in society. The film offers certain lessons on gender equality and puts forth the aspect that individual choices should be given importance than hegemonical rules and social norms, especially in case of human relationships. The film represents a transition from traditional presentations of women as submissive, suppressed and inferior to men, to ‘new women’ who are progressive, liberated and assertive. Furthermore, it puts forth and heralds a non-traditional, non-hegemonic and egalitarian world of a ‘new man’ demonstrating an enlightened attitude towards gender equality and togetherness.

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