

Women Behind the Camera: Reconfiguring Female Subjectivity in the Films of Anjali Menon and Sudha Kongara

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Abstract:

Indian cinema has historically participated in the construction of gendered visual regimes in which women are frequently positioned as objects of visual pleasure, narrative desire, domestic sacrifice, or patriarchal surveillance. Laura Mulvey's influential formulation of the male gaze established an important framework for understanding the relationship between cinematic spectatorship, visual pleasure, and patriarchal power. However, contemporary Indian cinema has witnessed the emergence of women filmmakers whose works complicate conventional structures of looking by placing female subjectivity, interiority, agency, vulnerability, and desire at the center of cinematic narration. This paper comparatively examines the films of Malayalam filmmaker Anjali Menon and Tamil filmmaker Sudha Kongara through *Bangalore Days* (2014), *Koode* (2018), *Wonder Women* (2022), *Irudhi Suttru* (2016), *Soorarai Pottru* (2020), and Kongara's segment "*Ilamai Idho Idho*" from *Putham Pudhu Kaalai* (2020). Rather than if films directed by women automatically produce a female gaze, the study investigates how these directors reconfigure female subjectivity through narrative perspective, camera positioning, embodiment, dialogue, costume, spatial organisation, relationships, and spectatorship. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, E. Ann Kaplan's feminist film theory, Bell Hooks's concept of the oppositional gaze, Teresa de Lauretis's theory of gender technologies, and Judith Butler's account of gender performativity, the paper argues that Menon and Kongara challenge objectifying cinematic conventions by presenting women as desiring, thinking, working, vulnerable, resistant, and self-defining subjects. Their approaches, however, are not identical. Menon's cinema frequently constructs female subjectivity through intimacy, emotional relationships, friendship, healing, and collective spaces, while Kongara's films more often position women within competitive, professional, and structurally masculine environments. The comparison demonstrates that the female gaze should not be understood simply as the reversal of the male gaze but as a heterogeneous mode of cinematic looking

that redistributes narrative authority and transforms women from objects of representation into subjects of experience.

Keywords: Female gaze, Male gaze, Female subjectivity, Anjali Menon, Sudha Kongara, Indian cinema, Feminist film theory, Spectatorship, Women directors.

1. Introduction:

Cinema is not merely a medium of entertainment; it is also a powerful cultural mechanism through which identities, social relations, desires, and gender roles are made visible. The representation of women on screen has historically been shaped by patriarchal systems of looking in which the female body is frequently organized as an object to be viewed, desired, controlled, or evaluated. Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*" transformed feminist film criticism by arguing that classical narrative cinema structures visual pleasure through a gendered division between an active male look and a passive female image (6–18). Her argument established the gaze as a political and ideological structure rather than merely a question of cameras technique.

Mulvey's intervention remains fundamental, but contemporary cinema requires further interrogation of the categories of looking and spectatorship. The emergence of women filmmakers, alternative forms of spectatorship, digital platforms, regional cinemas, and new representations of female desire has complicated the binary relationship between male spectator and female object. E. Ann Kaplan's "*Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*" expanded feminist film analysis by examining women both as representations within cinema and as participants in cinematic production (Kaplan). Teresa de Lauretis subsequently shifted attention toward the processes through which cinema participates in producing gendered subjectivities rather than merely representing pre-existing gender identities. Bell Hooks, meanwhile, complicated dominant feminist film theory by introducing the oppositional gaze and emphasizing the relationship between looking, race, power, and resistance (Hooks 115–31).

Within Indian cinema, these theoretical questions acquire particular significance because gender representation is shaped by regional cultures, linguistic traditions, family structures, caste and class relations, religious practices, popular- star cultures, and changing social expectations. Malayalam and Tamil cinema offer particularly productive contexts for examining these transformations. Both industries possess strong traditions of realism, social commentary, melodrama, stardom, and family- centered narratives, while contemporary filmmakers have increasingly questioned conventional representations of gender.

This paper focuses on two contemporary women directors: Anjali Menon from Malayalam cinema and Sudha Kongara from Tamil cinema. The study examines Menon's *Bangalore Days*, *Koode*, and *Wonder Women*, alongside Kongara's *Irudhi Suttru*, *Soorarai Pottru*, and the segment “*Ilamai Idho Idho*” from *Putham Pudhu Kaalai*. Menon's official filmography identifies *Bangalore Days*, *Koode*, and *Wonder Women* among her directorial works. Kongara directed the “*Ilamai Idho Idho*” segment of *Putham Pudhu Kaalai*, alongside the other directors who contributed to the anthology.

The purpose of selecting these six films is not to establish that all women directors create an inherently feminist cinema. Such an assumption would itself reduce cinematic form to biological identity. Instead, the paper asks how female subjectivity is constructed through cinematic choices. The central concern is therefore not who holds the camera, but what the camera permits the spectator to see, feel, understand, and identify with.

The paper proposes that Menon and Kongara challenge the conventional objectification of women through two related but distinguishable strategies. Menon's films tend to construct female subjectivity through interpersonal relationships, emotional interiority, friendship, family, healing, and intimate spaces. Kongara's films frequently construct female agency through work, competition, ambition, physical strength, economic independence, and women's negotiation of male-dominated institutional spaces. Their films therefore demonstrate that the female gaze is neither singular nor uniform.

2. Research Gap:

Existing scholarship on feminist film theory has extensively investigated the male gaze, female spectatorship, women's representation, and the politics of cinematic looking. Mulvey's theory remains the foundational point of departure, while Kaplan's work has expanded the discussion of women both before and behind the camera. Bell Hooks further challenged universalizing accounts of female spectatorship by demonstrating how race and social location influence acts of looking. De Lauretis's concept of gender as a technology also encourages an understanding of cinema as an active participant in the construction of gendered subjectivity.

However, three significant gaps remain.

First, much discussion of the female gaze risks treating it as a simple opposite of the male gaze. Such an approach suggests that replacing a male director or male protagonist with a female director or female protagonist automatically produces feminist representation. This paper challenges that assumption.

Second, scholarship on contemporary Indian cinema frequently concentrates on individual films, individual characters, or the representation of women as a social category. Comparatively less attention has been given to directorial approaches to female subjectivity

across regional industries. A director-centered comparative method makes it possible to identify recurring cinematic strategies rather than isolated examples.

Third, although Anjali Menon's *Bangalore Days* and *Koode* have already been examined through the framework of the female gaze, including a 2022 study specifically devoted to these two films, there remains scope to move beyond identifying female-gaze elements and investigate how Menon's approach changes when placed alongside another contemporary woman filmmaker from a different linguistic industry.

Similarly, Sudha Kongara has received considerable critical attention for constructing women characters who challenge conventional supporting roles. Her own comments on representing women realistically rather than as fantasy figures make her cinema particularly valuable for a study of gaze and subjectivity. Yet a systematic comparison of Kongara's gaze with Anjali Menon's across multiple films offers a productive new direction.

The research gap can therefore be formulated as follows:

Existing studies have examined female representation and the female gaze in individual Indian films, but comparatively little attention has been given to how two women directors working in different South Indian linguistic and cinematic traditions construct female subjectivity through recurring visual, narrative, spatial, and affective strategies.

This paper addresses that gap through a comparative study of Anjali Menon and Sudha Kongara.

3. Research Questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

- 1.How do Anjali Menon and Sudha Kongara construct female subjectivity in their films?
- 2.In what ways do their cinematic techniques challenge the objectifying conventions associated with the male gaze?
- 3.How are female bodies, desires, vulnerabilities, professions, relationships, and choices visually and narratively represented?
- 4.How do the two directors differ in their construction of female agency?
- 5.Can the female gaze be understood as a reversal of the male gaze, or does it constitute a more complex mode of spectatorship?
- 6.How do Malayalam and Tamil cultural contexts influence the cinematic construction of female subjectivity

4. Objectives of the Study:

The major objectives are:

- To examine the construction of female subjectivity in selected films of Anjali Menon and Sudha Kongara.
- To analyze the visual and narrative strategies through which women become subjects rather than objects.
- To compare the directors' approaches to body, desire, agency, vulnerability, work, relationships, and space.

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- To reinterpret the concept of the female gaze through contemporary South Indian cinema.
 - To demonstrate the importance of regional and culturally specific approaches to feminist film analysis.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Laura Mulvey and the Male Gaze:

Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" remains indispensable to any study of gender and cinematic spectatorship. Drawing upon Freud's concept of scopophilia and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Mulvey argues that classical cinema organizes looking through a patriarchal structure in which the male character functions as the bearer of the look and the woman becomes its image.

The importance of Mulvey's theory lies not simply in identifying sexual objectification but in demonstrating that cinematic form itself can produce gendered relations of power. Camera movement, editing, framing, narrative structure, and identification work together to determine who looks and who is looked at.

However, applying Mulvey mechanically to contemporary Indian cinema can produce limitations. A film may contain women who are visually attractive without necessarily constructing them solely as objects. Likewise, a male character can be objectified, while a female character can occupy the position of narrative observer. Therefore, this study uses Mulvey as a starting point rather than a final explanatory model.

5.2 E. Ann Kaplan and Women Behind the Camera:

Kaplan's *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* is particularly relevant to this study because it examines both the representation of women and women's participation in filmmaking. The title itself establishes the importance of examining what occurs on both sides of the cinematic apparatus.

For the present study, Kaplan enables a movement from the question "How are women represented?" toward "What happens when women participate in determining representation?"

This distinction is crucial for analyzing Menon and Kongara. Their gender cannot be treated as proof of a female gaze, but their positions as women film makers make it possible to examine how their creative decisions challenge established representational conventions.

5.3 Bell Hooks and the Oppositional Gaze:

Bell Hooks's concept of the oppositional gaze expands feminist spectatorship beyond a universal category of "woman." In *Black Looks*, hooks demonstrates how race and gender shape the experience of looking and how marginalized spectators can resist dominant cinematic identification.

Although Hooks' original discussion emerges from Black women's spectatorship in the United States, her emphasis on looking as a site of resistance is valuable for Indian cinema. Female spectators do not constitute a homogeneous audience. Class, caste, language, region, sexuality, age, marital status, and cultural location influence the ways women may identify with or resist images on screen.

Thus, the present paper employs the concept of the oppositional gaze to investigate whether Menon and Kongara create spaces in which female spectators can identify with women as complex subjects rather than merely as desirable bodies.

5.4 Teresa de Lauretis and Gender as a Technology:

Teresa de Lauretis's Technologies of Gender is useful because it conceptualizes gender as something produced through representational and cultural technologies rather than as a simple biological fact.

Cinema can therefore participate in either reproducing or challenging gender norms. When *Irudhi Suttru* places a young woman inside a boxing arena, or when *Wonder Women* places pregnant women at the center of narrative authority, the films do more than introduce female characters. They reorganize the spaces and activities through which femininity is made visible.

5.5 Judith Butler and Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's Gender Trouble provides another important theoretical foundation. Butler argues that gender is produced through repeated acts, performances, and social expectations rather than existing as a stable essence.

This framework is particularly useful in *Bangalore Days*, *Irudhi Suttru*, and *Soorarai Pottru*, where women negotiate expectations surrounding femininity, marriage, work, physical appearance, sexuality, ambition, and domestic responsibility.

The female subject in these films are therefore not simply "empowered." She repeatedly performs, negotiates, refuses, and reconstructs gender expectations.

6. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, comparative film analysis methodology.

The primary corpus consists of six films:

Anjali Menon

1. Bangalore Days (2014)
2. Kooda (2018)
3. Wonder Women (2022)

Sudha Kongara

4. Irudhi Suttru (2016)
5. Soorarai Pottru (2020)
6. "Ilamai Idho Idho" from Putham Pudhu Kaalai (2020)

The selection is purposive rather than statistical. The films were selected because they provide substantial representations of women's interiority, agency, relationships, work, desire, vulnerability, and social negotiation.

The analysis focuses on:

- Framing
- camera position
- camera movement
- close-up and long shot

- point-of-view structures
- editing
- mise-en-scène
- costume
- body language
- dialogue
- sound
- spatial organization
- narrative perspective
- character agency
- spectatorship
- relationships between male and female characters

The study also uses comparative textual analysis. Each director is first analyzed individually, after which the two cinematic approaches are compared.

7. Theoretical Framework:

The study combines five theoretical perspectives:

Mulvey: To identify and interrogate objectifying visual structures.

Kaplan: To investigate women's position both as represented subjects and as filmmakers.

Hooks: To understand looking as resistance and to avoid assuming a universal female spectator.

De Lauretis: To examine cinema's role in producing gendered subjectivity.

Butler: To examine the performance and negotiation of gender.

Together, these theories permit the paper to move from a simple male-gaze/ female gaze binary toward a model of reconfigured female subjectivity.

8. Analysis:

8.1 Anjali Menon's Cinematic World: From Female Presence to Female Subjectivity

Anjali Menon's cinema is particularly valuable for gaze studies because women in her films are rarely defined exclusively through their relationship with men. Her films frequently construct ensembles in which multiple characters possess distinct emotional histories and desires.

Menon herself has resisted being categorized simply as a "female filmmaker," arguing that filmmaking should be judged through the work rather than through the gender of its creator. This apparent contradiction is productive for feminist film analysis. It prevents the study from if every directorial choice made by a woman automatically constitutes feminist aesthetics. Instead, Menon's films must be examined through the specific ways they create subjectivity.

8.2 Bangalore Days: Female Agency within the Urban Space:

Bangalore Days presents a group of cousins whose lives intersect in an urban environment. The film's female characters, particularly Sarah and Natasha, disrupt conventional expectations surrounding women's mobility, romance, sexuality, and marriage.

Sarah's character is particularly important because her physical disability does not become the entire definition of her identity. Her desire to become a professional racer challenges assumptions concerning female bodies and disability.

The racing space is conventionally associated with masculinity: speed, machines, competition, risk, and physical control. Menon places Sarah within this environment not as a symbolic exception but as a person with ambition. The camera consequently becomes important. Sarah's body is not primarily fragmented into sexualized parts. Her physical presence is connected to movement, work, skill, and emotional experience. The spectator is invited to understand her relationship with speed and freedom rather than merely to consume her appearance.

This represents a crucial movement away from Mulvey's model of woman-as-image. Sarah becomes a woman who looks, acts, chooses, competes, desires, and moves. The film also challenges the idea that romantic fulfilment must complete female identity. Sarah's relationship with Kuttan does not erase her professional ambitions. Similarly, Natasha's relationship with Arjun does not completely determine her narrative value. Thus, *Bangalore Days* establishes an important feature of Menon's cinematic approach: female identity remains plural. Women can be lovers and professionals, vulnerable and independent, romantic and ambitious.

8.3 Koode: Trauma, Memory and the Interior Female Subject:

Koode provides an even more intimate model of female subjectivity. The film centers on Joshua and his deceased sister Jenny, whose presence structures his emotional recovery. Jenny is not constructed through conventional sexualized imagery. Instead, she occupies a space of memory, affection, playfulness, and emotional intimacy. This is significant because the female character is not introduced primarily through her desirability. Her function is connected to emotional memory and psychological transformation.

A particularly important feature of *Koode* is the film's willingness to slow down. Contemporary criticism has identified this deliberate slowness as part of the film's distinctive aesthetic and connected it to an "indulgent" female gaze. Menon herself has explained that she allows actors' performances to influence camera movement rather than imposing a rigid camera structure upon them. This approach is significant for a theory of female subjectivity because it suggests that the camera is responsive to performance rather than simply controlling the performer.

Jenny's body therefore becomes expressive rather than merely decorative. Her laughter, gestures, movement, and interaction with Joshua generate meaning. The film's gaze is consequently relational. It looks with the character rather than simply at her.

8.4 Wonder Women: Women Looking at Women:

Wonder Women is arguably the most explicit example of Menon's reconfiguration of female subjectivity. The film places six pregnant women at the center of the narrative. Menon herself described the film as being located in a feminine space and explained that pregnancy becomes a lens through which feminine perspectives and experiences, empathy, and sisterhood can be explored.

This is important because pregnancy has historically been represented in cinema through romanticized motherhood, domestic sacrifice, or reproductive symbolism. Menon instead foregrounds women's conversations about pregnancy. The film therefore changes the direction of the gaze.

Rather than asking:

"How does the pregnant woman appear?"

the narrative asks:

"How does the pregnant woman feels?"

That distinction is fundamental.

The women discuss anxiety, miscarriage, divorce, motherhood, bodily change, relationships, work, and social judgement. The body becomes a site of lived experience rather than visual spectacle. The prenatal center becomes a counter-space to patriarchal domesticity. Within this space, women exchange information, listen to each other, disagree, and develop solidarity.

The film's emphasis on sisterhood has also been highlighted by contemporary criticism. The result is a form of collective female subjectivity. Instead of one exceptional heroine defeating patriarchy, Menon creates a community of women whose different experiences become mutually intelligible.

8.5 Sudha Kongara: Female Agency through Resistance and Achievement

While Anjali Menon's cinema frequently constructs female subjectivity through emotional intimacy and relational spaces, Sudha Kongara often places women within environments structured by competition, economic pressure, professional ambition, and masculine authority.

Kongara has explicitly stated that she prefers to portray women as they are rather than as "mannequins or fantasy dolls," criticizing the tendency of Indian cinema to reduce women to idealized or stereotypical figures.

Her cinematic approach therefore provides an important counterpoint to Menon.

If Menon's women often ask:

"Who am I in relation to others?"

Kongara's women frequently ask:

"What, can I become despite the structures around me?"

8.6 Irudhi Suttru: The Female Body as Resistance:

Irudhi Suttru provides one of the clearest examples of Kongara's transformation of the female body. The protagonist Madhi is a young woman from a disadvantaged background who enters the male oriented world of boxing. Traditional representations of the female body often construct femininity through softness, beauty, passivity, or erotic availability.

Madhi's body is instead constructed through:

- movement
- physical strength
- exhaustion
- sweat
- injury
- training
- competition
- aggression
- determination

The boxing ring therefore becomes a counter-space to the conventional cinematic treatment of women's bodies. The camera does not need to make Madhi beautiful in order to make her significant. Her body possesses functional agency. She runs because she wants to win. She punches because she is competing. She trains because she has ambition. This changes the spectator's relationship with the female body. The female body is not simply something to be looked at. It is something that acts.

This distinction can be understood as a movement from the body-as-image to the body-as-agent. The film also complicates the traditional relationship between male mentor and female student. Prabhu's authority is continually challenged by Madhi's refusal to remain obedient. Her resistance becomes part of her subject formation. Thus, *Irudhi Suttru* does not construct female empowerment merely through dialogue. It constructs it physically.

8.7 Soorai Potru: Female Partnership and the Rejection of the Sacrificial Wife

Soorai Potru is particularly significant because it is structured around a male protagonist, Maara, while still giving considerable narrative importance to Bommi. This makes the film a useful test case for the argument that a female gaze does not require women to occupy every narrative position.

Bommi is not simply the supportive wife whose function is to help the hero succeed.

She possesses:

- professional ambition
- financial independence
- entrepreneurial knowledge
- emotional authority
- sexual agency
- opinions

- anger
- humor
- economic competence

Her identity as a woman does not disappear when she becomes a wife. This is one of the film's strongest challenges to conventional gender representation. The film's romantic relationship is therefore structured around partnership rather than rescue. The wife is not simply the reward at the end of the male hero's journey. She is a participant in the journey. Recent critical discussion of the film has similarly identified its female character as a rejection of the familiar self-sacrificing wife archetype, emphasizing her position as an equal participant in the protagonist's journey.

This is central to the film's reconfiguration of the gaze. Bommi is not valuable because Maara desires her. She is valuable because she possesses her own subjectivity.

8.8 “Ilamai Idho Idho”: Age, Desire and Female Emotional Life

Kongara's “*Ilamai Idho Idho*” segment from *Putham Pudhu Kaalai* offers another important dimension of female subjectivity. The segment explores an older couple whose relationship is shaped by memory, ageing, affection, and the possibility of renewed intimacy. Its significance lies in the fact that Indian cinema has often privileged youthful bodies as the primary objects of romantic desire.

By placing older characters within the space of romantic and emotional intimacy, Kongara expands the boundaries of who is allowed to desire and be desired. The segment is especially useful for gaze theory because it disrupts the assumption that cinematic romance must depend upon youthful physical attractiveness.

Desire becomes connected to:

- memory
- Companionship
- emotional recognition
- history
- ageing
- vulnerability

The body is therefore not eliminated from desire but recontextualized. This represents another form of resistance to the commercial cinematic gaze.

9. Comparative Analysis: Menon and Kongara

The comparison reveals both similarities and differences.

9.1 Female Body:

Menon tends to construct the female body through emotional and relational experience. Kongara more frequently constructs it through physical activity, labor, competition, and professional capability.

Dimension	Anjali Menon	Sudha Kongara
Female Body	Relational and emotional	Physical and functional

Dimension	Anjali Menon	Sudha Kongara
Agency	Interpersonal	Professional and competitive
Space	Home, friendship, and intimate communities	Workplace, sports, and institutions
Desire	Emotional and relational	Romantic and autonomous
Patriarchy	Negotiated through relationships	Confronted through resistance
Female Solidarity	Strongly emphasized	Present but often individualized
Gaze	Intimate and affective	Assertive and embodied
Subjectivity	Interior and relational	Active and achievement-oriented

9.2 Female Subjectivity versus Female Objectification:

The most important similarity between the two directors is their refusal to reduce women to visual objects. Menon's women are allowed to speak, remember, heal, laugh, argue, desire, and experience vulnerability. Kongara's women are allowed to compete, work, fight, earn, negotiate, desire, and refuse.

Both therefore replace the question:

“What does the woman look like?”

with:

“What does the woman experience?”

This is the fundamental movement from object to subject.

10. The Female Gaze Is Not Simply the Opposite of the Male Gaze:

The findings suggest that the concept of the female gaze requires greater theoretical precision.

If the male gaze is defined simply as:

man looks → woman is looked at

then the female gaze might appear to be:

woman looks → man is looked at.

However, this reversal is inadequate.

A woman director can reproduce patriarchal objectification, just as a male director can create complex female subjectivity. Contemporary discussions of women filmmakers similarly caution against equating the female gaze simply with the gender of the filmmaker.

The present study therefore proposes three characteristics of the reconfigured female gaze.

10.1 Subjective Interiorization

The spectator gains access to the woman's feelings, memories, anxieties, desires, and conflicts.

10.2 Embodied Agency

The female body becomes an acting body rather than merely an observed body.

10.3 Relational Spectatorship

Women are represented through relationships with other women, men, families, institutions, and communities without being reduced to any one relationship.

These three dimensions are visible across the selected films.

11. Regional Context and the Female Gaze

A comparative Malayalam–Tamil framework is particularly important because the female gaze cannot be separated from regional cultural contexts. Menon's Malayalam films frequently construct subjectivity through domestic spaces, friendship, family, migration, emotional communication, and collective experience.

Kongara's Tamil films more frequently position women within public and professional spaces boxing arenas, entrepreneurial environments, aviation- related institutions, and other spaces where women confront established masculine authority. This does not mean that Malayalam cinema is “more feminine” or Tamil cinema “more masculine.”

Instead, the difference demonstrates that female subjectivity is culturally mediated. The female gaze therefore needs to be understood as situated looking. The woman is not simply a universal woman.

She is located within:

- language
- region
- class
- profession
- family
- age
- sexuality
- cultural expectations

This insight also connects the study with Hooks' insistence that spectatorship is shaped by social position rather than gender alone.

12. Discussion:

The comparative analysis demonstrates that both Menon and Kongara challenge conventional patriarchal structures of representation, but they do so through different aesthetic strategies.

Menon's cinema is characterized by affective intimacy. Her films frequently ask the spectator to inhabit emotional spaces.

- *Bangalore Days* constructs women through mobility and relationships.
- *Koode* constructs female presence through memory, trauma, affection, and healing.
- *Wonder Women* constructs female subjectivity collectively through pregnancy, conversation, and sisterhood.

Kongara's cinema, by contrast, is characterized by embodied resistance.

- *Irudhi Sutru* transforms the female body into a site of physical power.
- *Soorai Potru* transforms the wife into an economic and emotional partner.

➤ “*Ilamai Idho Idho*” challenges the invisibility of ageing desire.
 The two directors therefore offer complementary models of female subjectivity:
 Menon emphasizes the woman's right to feel, relate, remember, and define herself. Kongara emphasizes the woman's right to act, compete, desire, work, and resist.
 This distinction is one of the principal contributions of the study.

13. Major Findings:

The study produces five major findings.

Finding 1: Female subjectivity is constructed rather than automatically produced by female authorship. The gender of the filmmaker alone cannot establish the presence of a female gaze.

Finding 2: Menon's cinema foregrounds relational subjectivity. Women become subjects through friendship, family, intimacy, emotional communication, and collective experience.

Finding 3: Kongara foregrounds embodied and professional agency. Women become subjects through work, physical strength, economic independence, competition, and resistance.

Finding 4: Both directors challenge the objectification of women's bodies. Their films frequently shift attention from visual attractiveness to lived experience and action.

Finding 5: The female gaze is heterogeneous. There is no single female gaze. Instead, there are multiple feminist modes of looking shaped by region, culture, genre, class, age, profession, and individual directorial aesthetics.

Director	Film	Scene	Gaze Mechanism	Female Subjectivity
Menon	Bangalore Days	Sarah's racing sequences	Embodied camera	Professional agency
Menon	Koode	Jenny–Joshua interactions	Relational framing	Emotional subjectivity
Menon	Wonder Women	Prenatal-class conversations	Collective female perspective	Sisterhood
Kongara	Irudhi Suttru	Madhi's boxing/training	Functional body	Physical agency
Kongara	Soorarai Pottru	Bommi–Maara conflicts	Reciprocal gaze	Economic/emotional agency
Kongara	Ilamai Idho	Couple's reunion/intimacy	Ageing desire	Romantic subjectivity

14. Conclusion:

The present study has examined the cinematic construction of female subjectivity in selected films of Anjali Menon and Sudha Kongara. Through a comparative analysis of *Bangalore Days*, *Koode*, *Wonder Women*, *Irudhi Suttru*, *Soorai Potru*, and “*Ilamai Idho Idho*,” the study has demonstrated that contemporary women filmmakers in Malayalam and Tamil cinema are participating in a significant transformation of cinematic representation.

The central argument of this paper is that the female gaze should not be understood as a simple reversal of the male gaze. It is not sufficient to replace a male protagonist with a female protagonist or a male director with a female director. The more significant transformation occurs when cinematic form permits women to become subjects of experience.

Anjali Menon's cinema achieves this transformation through intimacy, emotionality, relationality, memory, friendship, and collective female spaces. *Bangalore Days* presents women who negotiate mobility, romance, disability, and professional ambition. *Koode* constructs female presence through emotional memory and healing. *Wonder Women* most explicitly shifts narrative authority toward women's collective experiences of pregnancy, vulnerability, reproductive concerns, and sisterhood. Menon's own explanation that *Wonder Women* uses pregnancy as a lens through which female experiences, empathy, and sisterhood can be explored reinforces this interpretation.

Sudha Kongara approaches female subjectivity through a different cinematic vocabulary. In *Irudhi Suttru*, the female body becomes physically powerful and professionally ambitious. In *Soorai Potru*, Bommi challenges the conventional image of the sacrificial wife by becoming an economic and emotional partner. In “*Ilamai Idho Idho*,” Kongara expands the representation of desire by allowing ageing characters to retain emotional and romantic subjectivity.

The comparison therefore suggests that female subjectivity has multiple cinematic forms. It may appear as vulnerability, resistance, friendship, labor, desire, physical strength, professional ambition, emotional intelligence, or collective solidarity. The paper consequently proposes the concept of reconfigured female subjectivity as a useful way of moving beyond the binary of male gaze and female gaze. Reconfigured subjectivity occurs when women cease to function primarily as images organized for an assumed spectator and instead become agents of narrative, emotion, action, and meaning.

This approach also prevents the study from romanticizing women filmmakers. Menon's and Kongara's films are not automatically feminist simply because women directed them. Rather, their significance emerges through specific cinematic decisions concerning

framing, narrative authority, characterization, spatial organisation, embodiment, and spectatorship.

Ultimately, the comparison of Anjali Menon and Sudha Kongara demonstrates that contemporary South Indian cinema is not merely producing “strong women characters.” It is increasingly asking a more fundamental question:

What happens when women are permitted to occupy the position of the subject who sees, feels, desires, acts, remembers, chooses, and speaks? The answer offered by these films is that the cinematic woman becomes more than an object within another person's story. She becomes a complex subject whose body, voice, relationships, desires, labor, vulnerabilities, and choices constitute the story itself. The significance of the female gaze, therefore, lies not in making women look like men or making men into objects, but in redistributing cinematic subjectivity.

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