Portrayal of Women Entrepreneurs in Telugu Movies: An Innovator or an Iron Maid?

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Abstract

It has been observed that women entrepreneurs are growing at an unprecedented rate of growth from the last few years, yet the role models are far and fewer to make any lasting impact on entrepreneurship and women founders. Gender and Media, especially gender portrayal in movies, have been researched and discussed over the years leading to many changes in the way women are portrayed in movies. Despite regional movies portraying women business leaders, the characterization and portrayal continue to be entrenched in stereotypes with masculine characteristics. This study analyses select regional movies on the following parameters: Ambition, Self-confidence, Risk Taking, External factors: socio-economic and cultural, and Sexuality to validate the hypothesis. The evidence in these women characters reinforces the stereotypes of entrepreneurship being a male dominated space. It is time for all researchers to strive to address the differentiated, complex, and varied influence gender characterization has upon men and women in entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Gender Bias in Media, Gender Inequality, Gender Stereotypes in Movies, Gender and Entrepreneurship

The term entrepreneur can be referred to as a person who starts and runs a new business or an organisation. They are responsible for developing a business plan to thrive in the market, making a financial arrangement, and hiring employees who can run the business. While that is the generic definition of an entrepreneur, the industry has also defined a woman entrepreneur. According to the Schumpeterian concept of Innovative Entrepreneurs, women who innovate, initiate or adopt a business activity are known as “Women Entrepreneurs.” Kamala Singh, a women Entrepreneur from Rajasthan, has defined a woman entrepreneur as “a confident, innovative, and creative woman capable of achieving self-economic independence individually or in collaboration, generates employment opportunities for others through initiating, establishing and running the enterprise by keeping pace with her personal, family and social life.”

Women’s entrepreneurship is a growing global phenomenon, attracting considerable research attention during the last few decades (Henry, Foss, & Ahl, 2016). As mentioned by Afza and Amir Rashid (2009), women entrepreneurs are significantly affected by external factors such as political, financial, and social factors, almost in any sector. That said, Roomi et al. (2018) suggest that women’s entrepreneurial career choices both revolve around and are shaped by a complex interplay of socio-cultural factors.

Our current gender discourse characterises women as caring, loving, gentle and good which links them to domestic, caregiver and volunteer duties. Evidence suggests that business is generally seen as a ‘man’s world’ and thus is believed to require characteristics that are stereotypically masculine, rather than feminine (Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002). Because entrepreneurship is a male-dominated occupation, both men and women are exposed to a large number of male entrepreneurs, leading them to perceive a similarity between masculine and entrepreneurial characteristics.

Contemporary films aimed at women reflect the role of women in the workplace. Many of these films represent women entrepreneurs but the question is whether or not these accurately reflect the roles and
experience of working women. Going to the movies often means suspending our disbelief and entering into a world that looks nothing like our own, but does this mean that they are completely, “…irrelevant to lived experience or without significance?” (Gledhill, 340) The films are still steeped in the dominant cinema and created through the lens of the men. Leadership and success in the public sphere is seen as an intrinsic male trait and this stereotype is seen in many films.

Drawing on literature on entrepreneurship, women entrepreneurship, organisational behaviour, my study aims to study the women entrepreneurs in 5 films in the Telugu film industry against 5 primary parameters: Ambition, Self confidence, Risk Taking, External factors: socio-economic and cultural, and Sexuality. The films chosen are all based in the dominant cinema and focused on Indian culture. I have looked at films in the last decade that have achieved both financial and critical success.

**Ambition and Vision:** Ambition drives you to excel at everything you do and Vision is the vital force that drives the entrepreneur. All successful business leaders become adept at pushing through the inevitable set back(s) and have enough belief in their vision and are propelled by the need to achieve.

In the movies *Pelli Choopulu, Miss India*, Chitra (Ritu Verma) and Manasa Samyukta (Keerthy Suresh) are driven by their vision; to succeed in business, innovate with the concept of Food Truck, and to spread the goodness of varieties of Indian Tea. The leads are educated MBA grads, extremely career focused and driven. In *VIP2*, Vasundhara (Kajol) is driven by ambition to be the number one company in construction. At the same time in movies like *A Aa*, and *Attarintiki Daaredi*, the entrepreneur’s vision or ambition that drives them is not detailed out.

While ambition is portrayed, in these films, it is also shown that ambition in women is looked down upon. No matter how intelligent, resourceful or talented, a woman, in our patriarchal society, is expected to ‘settle down’, with a husband and kids. Even if she is a career woman, she is expected to put home before work like shown in *Miss India* and *Pelli Choopulu*. Or like in the other 3 movies, the women are shown as being ambitious at the cost of others, including family or being ruthless.

**Risk Taking and Motivation:** Nurwahida (2007) claimed that most successful women entrepreneurs have the characteristics of motivation and risk-taking. Previous literature also postulated that the risk-taking tendency among entrepreneurs is unfailing (MacCrimmon & Wehrung, 1990). A successful business leader needs to be prepared to take calculated risks to achieve success. In none of the select 5 movies, the leaders discuss business plans in detail, their risks and mitigations are not shown or discussed, while in all of them these women built their empires from scratch. The business plan is brought up in passing in the movie *Miss India* when Manasa looks for investors. In *A Aa*, Mahalakshmi (Nadhiya) is extremely confident of the returns and ROI basis hunch/gut versus actual risk mitigation. In *Pelli Choopulu*, Chitra is prepared to handle setbacks and pursues her dream even after the first order is a disaster.

**Self esteem and confidence:** Previous research indicates that all males, including those that exhibit masculine and feminine characteristics, are attributed to possess the psychological characteristics (i.e., the self-concept and self-esteem) suitable for being a leader (Kent and Moss, 1994; McCabe et al., 2006). Drydakis et al. (2018) found that women who exhibit masculine personality traits are more competitive than those displaying feminine personality traits. Self-confidence plays a critical role in entrepreneurship literature and it is believed that it helps entrepreneurs in their entrepreneurial activities (Oney & Oksuzoglu-Guven, 2015). However, in almost all the select movies, this confidence is portrayed as overconfidence and masculinity in the form of aggressiveness is portrayed.

In *VIP2*, the founder of one of India’s largest construction firms, Vasundhara is abrasive, arrogant and in the habit of snapping her fingers when she wants to make a point or summon her terrorised minions. She talks about how she struggled to make her way in a male dominated industry. It is her ego and the need to have the number 1 people working for her number 1 company that leads her to make fatal mistakes.
Confidence is seen as being in control and not showing emotions. What Sachs and Blackmore found was, “…in daily life rationality is seen to be a virtue and revered while emotionality is seen to be an encumbrance and reviled. It is seen to be an inappropriate dimension of life in schools, as in other organisations.” (268) Extreme emotions are not seen as professional because, “…being professional was a code word for being in control…” (271) Except anger, most of these women entrepreneurs in movies do not show emotion and even that anger is shown as causing harm to themselves or their business. For example, Vasundhara loses her cool when Raghuvaran (Dhanush) does not accept her job offer. Mahalakshmi loses her cool in A Aa due to which she loses relationship with her brother.

Sexuality: Since masculine attributes are predominant in entrepreneurs, even in these movies femininity and sexuality are underplayed. These films do not portray the women entrepreneurs as glam dolls who use their sexuality to succeed. In VIP 2, Raghuvaran blows Vasundhara a kiss and calls her Amul baby. In Miss India, many male counterparts propose to the heroine and fall in love with her. When Manasa goes to meet the coffee baron KSK to seek investment, he tells Manasa he agreed to meet her, even though she didn’t have an appointment, because she is beautiful and later uses the word ‘hot’. Manasa dresses demurely in kurtas, until she is told by her boyfriend that she should dress differently as she is in the US, at which point, she completely changes her wardrobe.

The dress and clothing of these characters including middle aged women entrepreneurs command attention and respect. Vasundhara has an impeccable sense of style, incredibly high expectations and demands of her staff, dresses in corporate suits portraying her need to be taken seriously as a contributor to the workplace. Manasa struggles to raise her economic status as she dresses plainly and in an androgynous fashion. For example she wears jeans, t-shirts, and black boots. There are no close-up shots of their cleavage or navel. In Pelli Choopulu, Chitra is also seen in comfortable salwar kameez and clothes representing Indian women. As middle aged entrepreneurs, Mahalakshmi and Sunanda both dress very elegantly and gracefully in Indian attire that gains admiration and respect.

External Factors

Socio economic: Scholars argued that socially constructed and learned ideas about gender and entrepreneurship limit women’s ability to accrue social, cultural, human, and financial capital and place limitations … (Carter & Rosa, 1998; Gatewood et al., 2003; Marlow & Patton, 2005) Economic factors refer to the arrangement of necessary data identified with internal company financing and external financial situation, which influences business success (Wube, 2010). In 4 movies out of the 5, women struggle to raise capital and look to their family and friends for investment or their own savings.

Family Support: It is difficult to obtain family support for women who wish to become entrepreneurs and this reality is portrayed in 4 out of the 5 films. In Pelli Choopulu, the dad saves, but for the woman’s wedding, and in Miss India, the family believes that entrepreneurship is not for middle class women. They reiterate the belief that a woman should be educated but only so she becomes desirable enough to be a suitable wife for a man looking for an educated addition to his family. Manasa is constantly asked by her family to get married. On the other hand, it is portrayed in these movies that they struggle for some semblance of a work/life balance by pouring their everything into their careers. In VIP 2, no mention is made of Vasundhara’s spouse; in Miss India, Manasa rejects all offers and proposals to grow her fledgling company, and in A Aa and Attarintiki Daredi, Mahalakshmi and Sunanda are already married and are seen to be making all decisions in the household and business.

While these films offer resistance to current gender discourse by showcasing women in high powered and/or leadership roles, the films also reflect current gender discourse by minimising the role of women to reproduce stereotypes as well as sexualizing the various female characters for the viewing and pleasure of a male audience. The films are still steeped in the dominant cinema and created through the lens of the men.
As Barnett states, “As long as these myths continue to thrive and be reinvented, women will be penalized in the workplace...” She states that the only way that there will be change in the workplace is to disregard antiquated notions of gender difference and recognize that both women and men have “nurturing and achieving capabilities”. (672) The present study found that men and women’s entry into entrepreneurship may be enhanced or limited by their perceived similarity to masculine characteristics. What needs explicit study and examples are research into the feminine intuitive factors that play an important role in opportunity identification, and building relationships.

It has been observed that women entrepreneurs are growing at an unprecedented rate of growth from the last few years. Instead of lockdown inside the walls of their homes, they are bold and confident to take the world by storm with the help of efforts and potential that they possess. Now, they are becoming independent and beat the men in the business sphere. They are contributing to the business along with catering to the needs of their family. It is strikingly interesting that they are moving from the traditional business of handicrafts and handlooms to the fashion industry, IT, construction, and so on. That said, the still relatively small number of women entrepreneurs in high-growth businesses may not be enough to change their views on the relationship between entrepreneurial and feminine characteristics.

It is now important for entrepreneurship researchers to pursue a broader research agenda that uses a ‘lens of gender’ (Bem, 1993) to study how the way gender and entrepreneurship are constructed in society can influence the rate and type of entrepreneurial activity. It is also important for all researchers to acknowledge the invisible masculinity of entrepreneurship that so profoundly influences their assumptions, variables, theoretical and measurement models, and methodologies (Ahl, 2006), and strive to address the differentiated, complex, and varied influence gender characterization has upon men and women in entrepreneurship.

References


