



A study on Representation of Women's Issues in recent Kannada films

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Abstract

Cinema plays an important role in reflecting society and influencing people's attitudes toward women. In recent years, Kannada cinema has increasingly focused on women's lives, social problems, and empowerment. This study examines the representation of women's issues in recent Kannada films released between 2010 and 2025. The study uses a qualitative content analysis method to analyse selected women-oriented Kannada films. Five major themes were identified: gender discrimination, domestic violence, social inequality, identity struggles, and women's empowerment.

The findings show that women's empowerment is the most frequently represented issue (27%), followed by gender discrimination (23%), social inequality (20%), domestic violence (17%), and identity struggles (13%). Films such as *Hebbet Ramakka*, *Kiragoorina Gayyaligalu*, *Jeerjimbe*, *Nathicharami*, *Law, Act-1978*, *Shuddhi*, *Naanu Kusuma*, *Shivamma*, and *Aachar & Co.* portray women as strong individuals who face social challenges and strive for justice, equality, education, and self-respect. Although some films continue to portray traditional gender stereotypes, recent Kannada cinema increasingly presents realistic and empowering images of women. The study concludes that Kannada films are becoming an important medium for creating awareness about women's issues and promoting gender equality in society.

Keywords:

Kannada Cinema; Women's Issues; Women's Representation; Gender Discrimination; Women's Empowerment; Qualitative Content Analysis; Gender Equality; Feminist Film Studies.

Introduction

Cinema is an audio-visual medium that combines photography, sound, editing, acting, music, and narrative to create moving images for entertainment, education, artistic expression, and social communication.

In film studies, cinema is understood as a cultural and artistic form that represents and interprets social realities, identities, ideologies, and human experiences through visual storytelling.

Cinema is one of the most influential forms of visual communication through which societies construct, negotiate, and challenge ideas about gender, culture, and identity. As a cultural text, cinema not only reflects existing social values but also shapes audience perceptions regarding women's roles,

empowerment, and representation. Therefore, the study of cinema provides an important framework for understanding how women are portrayed in contemporary Kannada films.

Representation of Women's Issues in Cinema

The portrayal of women's issues in cinema has become an important area of research because films are not merely a source of entertainment but also a powerful medium of social representation. Cinema reflects the realities, aspirations, and struggles of women while simultaneously influencing public perceptions about gender roles and social expectations. The representation of women in films shapes audience attitudes toward equality, identity, family, work, and social justice. As society changes, cinema increasingly addresses women's lived experiences, making it a significant platform for discussing gender-related issues.

Traditionally, women in Indian cinema were portrayed primarily as mothers, wives, daughters, or romantic interests whose identities were closely tied to male protagonists. These portrayals often emphasized sacrifice, obedience, emotional dependence, and domestic responsibilities. Women were frequently represented through patriarchal ideals that valued modesty, family honour, and caregiving over personal aspirations. Such representations reinforced traditional gender stereotypes and limited women's agency within cinematic narratives.

In recent decades, however, the portrayal of women has undergone a gradual transformation. Contemporary films increasingly depict women as independent individuals capable of making their own decisions, pursuing education and careers, challenging social norms, and resisting oppression. Female characters are now more likely to occupy central narrative positions, demonstrating leadership, resilience, and personal growth. Cinema has begun to recognize women as active participants in society rather than passive supporters of male characters.

Modern cinema also highlights a wide range of women's issues that were previously ignored or marginalized. These include gender discrimination, domestic violence, sexual harassment, workplace inequality, child marriage, dowry, caste- and class-based discrimination, trafficking, reproductive rights, mental health, marital conflict, widowhood, single motherhood, cyber harassment, and unequal access to education and employment. By bringing these issues to the screen, filmmakers encourage public discussion and raise awareness about the structural inequalities women continue to face.

Another significant development is the representation of women's empowerment. Many contemporary films portray women overcoming personal and societal barriers through education, economic independence, legal awareness, political participation, entrepreneurship, and collective action. Such narratives challenge patriarchal norms and present women as agents of social change. Rather than depicting empowerment solely through individual success, recent cinema also emphasizes solidarity among women, community support, and resistance against injustice.

Cinema also explores women's psychological and emotional experiences. Contemporary films increasingly portray themes such as identity, self-discovery, trauma, grief, loneliness, resilience, and emotional healing. These narratives acknowledge women's inner lives and personal struggles, offering more realistic and multidimensional representations. Such portrayals move beyond stereotypical depictions and contribute to a deeper understanding of women's lived experiences.

Despite these positive developments, challenges remain. Many commercial films continue to objectify women through the male gaze, sexualized camera techniques, stereotypical beauty standards, and limited character development. Female characters are often underrepresented in leadership roles, and many narratives still revolve around male protagonists. In some films, women continue to be portrayed as victims or secondary characters rather than autonomous individuals with independent goals and perspectives.

Regional cinema, including Kannada cinema, has increasingly contributed to realistic portrayals of women's issues. Many recent Kannada films address themes such as rural women's struggles, domestic oppression, caste and gender discrimination, widowhood, education, employment, mental health, social exclusion, and women's resistance to patriarchal structures. These films often emphasize realism and

social responsibility while portraying women as complex individuals navigating contemporary social challenges. Such representations provide valuable insights into the changing status of women in society and the evolving role of cinema as a medium for social awareness.

Representation of Women's Issues in Recent Kannada Films

The representation of women's issues in recent Kannada films has undergone a significant transformation over the past decade. Earlier, female characters were largely confined to conventional roles such as mothers, wives, sisters, or romantic interests, with limited influence on the narrative. However, recent Kannada cinema has increasingly shifted toward portraying women as central characters whose lives, struggles, aspirations, and identities form the core of the story. This transition reflects broader social changes, increasing public awareness of gender equality, and the emergence of filmmakers committed to realistic and socially relevant storytelling.

One of the most prominent themes in recent Kannada films is patriarchy and gender discrimination. Many films depict the unequal treatment women experience within families, workplaces, and communities. Female characters are shown confronting traditional expectations, restrictions on education and employment, unequal decision-making power, and societal pressure to conform to prescribed gender roles. These narratives critically examine patriarchal structures and encourage audiences to question gender inequality rather than accept it as normal.

Another major issue represented is violence against women, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, emotional abuse, workplace exploitation, and psychological trauma. Instead of using violence merely as a dramatic device, many contemporary Kannada films portray its emotional, social, and legal consequences on women's lives. Such representations create awareness about women's safety, justice, and legal rights while emphasizing the resilience of survivors.

Recent Kannada films also place considerable emphasis on women's empowerment and agency. Unlike traditional narratives where women depended on male protagonists for protection or success, contemporary films increasingly portray women as independent decision-makers. Female characters pursue education, careers, entrepreneurship, and leadership while challenging patriarchal norms. They are presented as capable of making choices regarding their personal relationships, professional lives, and social responsibilities, thereby highlighting women's autonomy and self-determination.

The issue of identity and self-discovery has become another important aspect of women's representation. Many films explore women's search for individuality beyond socially assigned roles such as wife, mother, or daughter. These narratives examine personal aspirations, emotional well-being, mental health, and self-respect, presenting women as multidimensional individuals with their own ambitions, fears, and dreams rather than merely supporting male characters.

Recent Kannada cinema also addresses social issues affecting women, including child marriage, dowry, widowhood, caste discrimination, poverty, educational inequality, rural marginalization, workplace discrimination, and reproductive rights. By integrating these issues into compelling narratives, filmmakers connect individual women's experiences with larger social and structural problems. Such films encourage critical reflection on gender justice and social reform.

The portrayal of women has further evolved through the depiction of urbanization and changing lifestyles. Urban female characters are increasingly represented as educated professionals balancing careers, family responsibilities, and personal ambitions. Simultaneously, rural women are portrayed with greater realism, highlighting their resilience, leadership, and contributions to family and community life. This diversity reflects the changing socio-economic realities of Karnataka and broadens the understanding of women's experiences across different social contexts.

Despite these positive developments, several challenges remain. Commercial Kannada films continue to include stereotypical portrayals, objectification, and the influence of the male gaze, where women's bodies are emphasized more than their personalities or agency. In many mainstream narratives, female characters still receive less screen time, fewer opportunities for independent decision-making, and limited narrative

importance compared to male protagonists. Nevertheless, recent women-oriented films increasingly challenge these conventions by presenting realistic female experiences and emphasizing dignity, equality, and agency.

The representation of women's issues in recent Kannada films reflects a gradual but meaningful shift from stereotypical portrayals toward more authentic, socially conscious, and empowering narratives. Contemporary Kannada cinema increasingly portrays women as individuals capable of resistance, leadership, emotional resilience, and social transformation. While patriarchal stereotypes have not disappeared completely, the growing emphasis on women's perspectives demonstrates the industry's evolving commitment to gender-sensitive storytelling. These developments make recent Kannada cinema an important field for understanding changing gender relations and the role of visual media in promoting social awareness and women's empowerment.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the representation of women's issues in recent Kannada films. A total of 30 Kannada films released between 2010 and 2025 were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to women-centred narratives, portrayal of women's issues, critical recognition, and IMDb ratings.

Each film was viewed repeatedly and analysed using a structured coding sheet developed from feminist film studies and previous content analysis research. The coding focused on five major themes: gender discrimination, domestic violence, social inequality, identity struggles, and women's empowerment. During the analysis, scenes, dialogues, character development, and narrative events related to these themes were identified and coded. Since a single film could represent more than one issue, multiple themes were recorded wherever applicable.

The coded data were grouped into thematic categories, and descriptive statistics, including frequency and percentage, were used to summarize the occurrence of each women's issue across the selected films. The findings were further interpreted using qualitative thematic analysis to understand how recent Kannada cinema portrays women's experiences, challenges, and empowerment. This approach enabled the study to identify recurring patterns and provide a comprehensive understanding of women's representation in contemporary Kannada films.

1. Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination is one of the most significant themes portrayed in recent Kannada films. These films illustrate how women are treated unequally because of deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs and traditional gender roles. Female characters often face discrimination in education, employment, inheritance, marriage, leadership, and decision-making. Society expects them to prioritize family responsibilities over personal ambitions, while men are granted greater authority and freedom. Contemporary Kannada cinema critiques these unequal power structures by portraying women who challenge discrimination and assert their rights.

For example, *Hebbet Ramakka* (2018) portrays Ramakka, an elderly rural woman who contests local elections despite resistance from male political leaders and her own family. The film demonstrates how women face gender bias in political participation and leadership but also highlights their determination to overcome these barriers. *Kiragoorina Gayyaligalu* (2016) depicts rural women collectively resisting patriarchal oppression and challenging male dominance within their village. Similarly, *Jeerjimbe* (2017) portrays a young girl's struggle to continue her education despite financial hardship and gender-based restrictions, emphasizing that girls' education remains a crucial issue in society. These films reveal that gender discrimination continues to exist but can be challenged through courage, education, and collective resistance.

2. Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is another recurring issue in recent Kannada cinema. Rather than portraying violence merely as a dramatic element, contemporary films examine its physical, emotional, psychological, and social consequences on women's lives. They expose how abuse often remains hidden within families because of fear, social stigma, and economic dependence. These narratives encourage public awareness and emphasize women's legal rights and emotional resilience.

In Naanu Kusuma (2023), although the central issue is sexual violence and the struggle for justice, the film also reflects the emotional trauma, family pressure, and victim-blaming experienced by women after violence. Shuddhi (2017) examines violence against women and failures within the criminal justice system, emphasizing the need for accountability and legal reform. Law (2020) follows a young law graduate who fights her own legal battle after sexual assault, highlighting the importance of legal awareness, justice, and women's determination to confront violence. These films encourage viewers to recognize violence against women as a serious social issue rather than a private family matter.

3. Social Inequality

Recent Kannada films also portray the multiple forms of social inequality experienced by women due to caste, class, poverty, rural marginalization, and limited access to education and employment. Women's struggles are shown not only as gender issues but also as consequences of broader structural inequalities.

Shivamma (2022) portrays the daily struggles of a middle-aged rural woman attempting to support her family despite economic hardship and social neglect. The film realistically depicts how poverty and gender intersect to limit women's opportunities. Act-1978 (2020) explores institutional injustice, corruption, and bureaucratic inequality through the story of a pregnant woman forced to fight an indifferent system. Hope (2022) focuses on women's emotional and social struggles while emphasizing resilience in difficult circumstances. These films demonstrate that women often experience multiple layers of inequality and therefore require both social and institutional support.

4. Identity Struggles

Identity and self-discovery have become important themes in recent Kannada cinema. Contemporary female characters are portrayed as individuals seeking meaning, independence, emotional fulfillment, and self-respect beyond traditional roles such as wife, mother, or daughter. These narratives explore women's psychological experiences and personal growth.

Nathicharami (2018) portrays a widow struggling between personal desires and conservative social expectations after the death of her husband. The film questions traditional beliefs regarding widowhood and female sexuality while emphasizing a woman's right to emotional fulfillment and self-determination. Gantumote (2019) explores adolescence, first love, education, and identity from a young woman's perspective, portraying her emotional journey with realism and sensitivity. Aachar & Co. (2023) follows a young girl growing up in a conservative household as she negotiates family traditions, personal freedom, and modern aspirations. These films demonstrate that women's identity is shaped not only by social expectations but also by personal choices and lived experiences.

5. Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is one of the strongest emerging themes in recent Kannada films. Contemporary cinema increasingly portrays women as educated, economically independent, socially aware, and capable of making decisions about their own lives. Empowerment is represented through education, employment, leadership, resistance against injustice, legal awareness, and self-confidence rather than dependence on male characters.

Hebbet Ramakka (2018) portrays an elderly woman who becomes a political leader despite facing patriarchal resistance, symbolizing women's leadership and democratic participation. Jeerjimbe (2017) emphasizes education as a pathway to empowerment for young girls. Law (2020) presents a courageous

law graduate who uses her legal knowledge to fight for justice independently. Swathi Mutthina Male Haniye (2023) portrays a compassionate and emotionally strong woman who makes ethical decisions based on her own values rather than societal expectations. Kiragoorina Gayyaligalu (2016) demonstrates collective empowerment by showing rural women uniting against oppression. Together, these films suggest that empowerment involves not only individual success but also self-respect, autonomy, social participation, and the courage to challenge injustice.

Table: 1 Women's Issue and Example Kannada Films

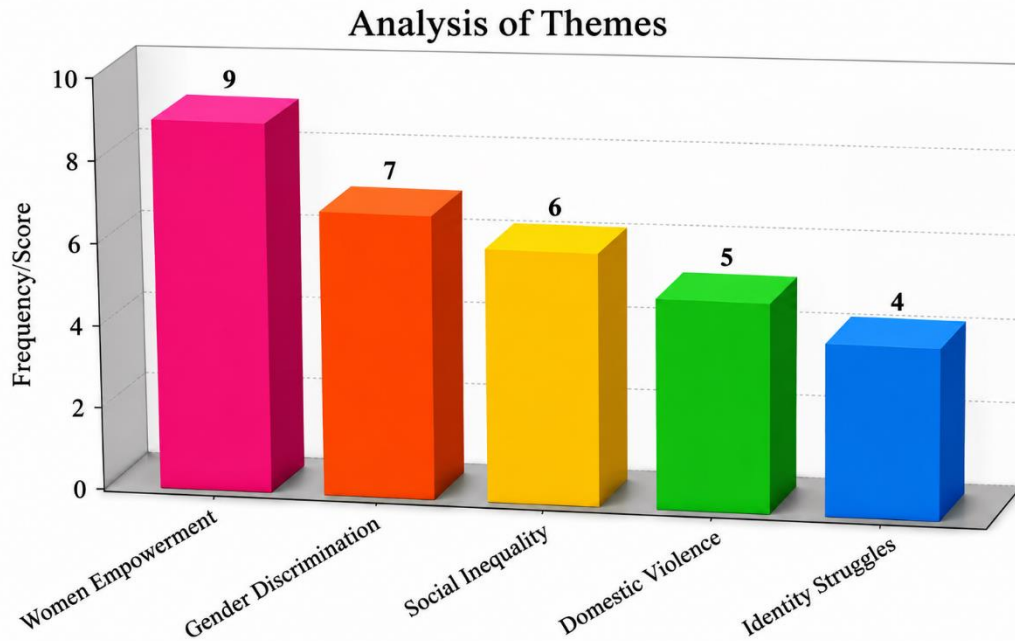
Women's Issue	Example Kannada Films
Gender Discrimination	Hebbet Ramakka, Jeerjimbe, Kiragoorina Gayyaligalu, Naanu Kusuma
Domestic Violence & Patriarchy	December-1, Pathibeku.com, Kiragoorina Gayyaligalu
Violence Against Women	Law, Shuddhi, Shoshithe, Naanu Kusuma
Social Inequality	Shivamma, Act-1978, Hope
Identity Struggles	Nathicharami, Gantumote, Aachar & Co., Life of Mrudula
Women's Empowerment	Hebbet Ramakka, Law, Jeerjimbe, Savitribai Phule, Kiragoorina Gayyaligalu

Representation of Women's Issues

The films were also analysed for the presence of major women-related social issues.

Table 2: Major Women's Issues Represented in Films

Women's Issue	Frequency	Percentage
Gender discrimination	7	23%
Domestic violence	5	17%
Social inequality	6	20%
Identity struggles	4	13%
Women empowerment	8	27%
Total	30	100%

Graph: 1 Women Issues Representation

The findings indicate that women's empowerment narratives appear most frequently (27%), followed by gender discrimination (23%). This suggests that contemporary Kannada cinema is increasingly engaging with social issues related to gender equality.

Conclusion

The representation of women's issues in recent Kannada films demonstrates a gradual but significant transition from stereotypical portrayals toward more realistic, diverse, and socially conscious narratives. The study found that contemporary Kannada cinema increasingly addresses important issues such as gender discrimination, domestic violence, social inequality, identity struggles, women's empowerment, education, legal justice, and emotional resilience. Rather than depicting women merely as supporting characters or symbols of sacrifice, many recent films position them as central protagonists with agency, independent decision-making, and the capacity to challenge patriarchal norms.

Films such as *Kiragoorina Gayyaligalu*, *Hebbet Ramakka*, *Jeerjimbe*, *Nathicharami*, *Law, Act-1978*, *Shuddhi*, *Naanu Kusuma*, *Shivamma*, and *Aachar & Co.* illustrate the changing representation of women by foregrounding their lived experiences and social realities. These films portray women as individuals negotiating structural inequalities while striving for dignity, justice, education, economic independence, and self-identity. At the same time, the study also observes that traces of patriarchal ideology, gender stereotypes, and the male gaze continue to exist in certain mainstream commercial films, indicating that gender representation remains uneven across the industry.

Overall, recent Kannada cinema reflects the broader socio-cultural transformation occurring in contemporary Karnataka by providing greater visibility to women's voices and experiences. The increasing emphasis on women-centred narratives suggests that cinema is evolving from merely reflecting society to actively participating in debates on gender equality and social justice. Therefore, Kannada cinema serves not only as a medium of entertainment but also as an influential cultural platform that promotes awareness, challenges traditional gender norms, and contributes to the ongoing discourse on women's rights and empowerment. These findings contribute to feminist film studies and media research by demonstrating the evolving nature of women's representation in regional Indian cinema and providing a foundation for future comparative and interdisciplinary studies.

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