

## Angel or Monster: Representation of women in Sri Lankan period films

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### Abstract

*The idea of femininity and womanhood is one that has constantly been shaped according to ideals of different cultures, traditions, or communities. Despite the general perception that such compartmentalised constructs and expectations of the woman is a thing of the past, it can be observed that they are still recycled and reintroduced implicitly or explicitly through various mediums in different societies. A similar trend can be observed in Sri Lankan period films as a motif of the dichotomous female representation is recurrent in those that were produced in the recent past. This is evident in the way feminine images are juxtaposed with the monster-woman type characters to elevate the 'ideal' within these films. Moreover, research on the concept of the angel/monster dichotomy originally introduced in Gilbert and Gubar's (1979) *The Madwoman in the Attic* uses mostly Eurocentric examples as it is scarcely explored in relation to Asian contexts. This study aims to explore how the dichotomous motif is construed on screen in relation to Sri Lankan standards of gender through the selected films, *Vijaya-Kuweni* (2012) and *Paththini* (2016) in order to present a novel conceptualisation of the dichotomy for the local context. Thus, I argue that Sri Lankan period films contain a dichotomous motif of female identity through the construction of related images that may differ from the dominant Eurocentric discourse on the angel/monster concept.*

**Keywords:** female identity, angel/monster, dichotomous motif, gender standards, Sri Lankan Period films

**Date Received:** 05<sup>th</sup> November 2018

**Date Accepted:** 13<sup>th</sup> February 2020

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## Introduction

Manipulation of the female identity through patriarchal ideologies to assert control and authority over the female body is a long tradition that has emerged and survived during different ages in history. Different aspects of the woman's identity such as how she should behave, dress or what roles she must assume are dictated through cultures in which patriarchal ideologies are at work. Any alternative identity that a woman attempts to assume transcending the normative is considered unacceptable or alien to that culture thereby designating it the image of a monster. These compartmentalised ideals of the woman's image and its source were first introduced in *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Gilbert and Gubar (1979). It reveals how the male literary tradition particularly in Western society inscribes these dichotomous androcentric "eternal types" upon the female identity. The primary factor supporting these ideologies is biological essentialism. It has given rise to the notion of femininity and also the idea of the woman as a weaker or inferior sex that is dependant for self-definition through man (Beauvoir, 2010). Hence, the "eternal feminine" image of the angel-woman can be considered an attempt to suppress female autonomy and desire represented through the monster-woman in paternal literary traditions (1979). It is undeniable that the angel-monster identity can be constructed differently according to the culture of a region, country or even community. Furthermore, this dichotomous image of the woman is not one that is restricted to literary traditions as the same motif can be observed in other artistic mediums in different societies.

Among them, Sri Lankan artistic representations or creations of the female body has a long history of propagating ideals of femininity thereby contributing to the gender norms prevalent in Sri Lankan culture. It is evident that images of femininity or non-femininity conveyed through different traditional Sri Lankan artistic modes reflect a confluence of different cultural ideologies due to the influence of Hindu mythic narratives (Perera, n.d.) and even European art and norms especially in the construction of the "ideal Sinhala woman" during the postcolonial era (Jayawardana, 2002). These cultural constructs emanating from traditional literary movements and sources can be observed even among modern artistic mediums such as the cinema. Nevertheless, this angle related to the

representation of women has been undermined especially in the discussions central to the period film genre in Sri Lanka. Discussions related to this genre are more focused on the socio-political implications in the films. Although certain research studies have focused on the construction of standards of femininity in Sri Lanka as portrayed through different mediums, the artistic or creative configurations of dichotomous female identities have not been explored. Furthermore, studies on the angel/monster concept are mostly in relation to Western contexts. Hence, this study aims to unveil how the angel/monster motif can be observed in Sri Lankan period films that focus on female characters as female identity is portrayed as dualistic on screen.

Among the many cinematic genres, the period film genre which focuses on storylines set in the past, is one in particular that reintroduces canonised images to appeal to the collective consciousness of the public (Hesling, 2001). The films selected for this study, *Vijaya-Kuveni* (2012) and *Paththini* (2016) which garnered immense commercial success in Sri Lanka are based on narratives that take a prominent place in Sri Lankan history and mythology. Thus, they can also be considered historicals which form the period film genre. It is argued that no historical film can be purely based on facts as it can be selective in terms of authorship and the facts or figures represented on screen (Stubbs, 2013). Moreover, the filmmaker himself transforms into a historian and his choice of visual representation can have a powerful impact on the 'historical consciousness' of society (Stubbs, 2013). Thus, the representation of the female figures in the selected films reflects the choices made by the filmmakers in relation to how femininity and non-femininity should be delineated on screen.

This study contains a textual analysis and a close reading of the characterization of two selected films of the Sri Lankan period film genre. The first film examined in the study is *Vijaya-Kuveni* (2012). The legend of Vijaya and Kuveni as stated in the *Mahavamsa*, narrates prince Vijaya's (first king of Sri Lanka) accession to the throne with the help of the Yaksha tribeswoman Kuveni whom he wed and eventually banished along with her children. Kuveni (also referred to as Kuvanna in the *Mahavamsa*) is portrayed as a supernatural being belonging to the *Yaksha* tribe in Sri Lanka. Moreover, she is depicted as a monster-woman with demon-

like attributes. Although the *Yaksha* tribe itself is portrayed negatively in history as a “special class of non-human beings- sometimes kindly, sometimes murderous and cruel” the female (*Yakkini*) is considered “more treacherous than the male” (Cited in Bachmann, 2004). This reflects a form of “double invisibility” (Spivak, 1995) for Kuveni’s character in historical representation as she is marginalised at two levels: her ethnic identity and gender. However, since the *Mahavamsa* only contains this basic outline of Kuveni’s character she is considered “an iridescent outline: due to a lack of historically-provable evidence” and can be “reconstructed according to the needs and spirit of the time, or of the individual artist of drama, dance, music, or all together” (Bachmann, 2004). The artistic reconstruction of this legend in the film *Vijaya-Kuveni* (2012) is considered a version that challenges the original narrative contained in the *Mahavamsa*. The main intention behind this alternative version as revealed by the director and screen play writer is to provide a different representation of Kuveni beyond the distorted image provided in the original legend (Jayasekera, 2012). However, it can be observed that the films’s portrayal of Kuveni in order to evoke sympathy and pity towards her plight is through framing her identity into the angel/monster binary thereby reflecting an unnatural duality in her character.

The second film considered for the study is *Paththini* (2016) which is based on the story of Kannagi, the human incarnation of the goddess Paththini as described in the Tamil epic *Silappatikaram* by Ilankovatikal. Although the origin of the myth is in South India, it has relevance to the Sri Lankan context due to the influence of the Paththini cult in Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere, 1986). This deity is usually linked with chastity, fertility and deemed a protector from disease and starvation in Sri Lankan culture (Hiatt, 1973). Similar to the character of Kuveni, the literary figure of Kannagi is also one that is creatively constructed in different ways through the influence of different “versions of the Pattini myth” (Obeyesekere, 1986). For example, it is noted that although the original “narrative skeleton” of the Tamil classic survives in the Sinhalese Paththini texts, there is additional material pertaining to the literary figure (Shulman, 1986). It is mentioned that the film *Paththini* contains a fantasy element due to the mythical events portrayed on screen. The director and screen play writer further

state that the film is a reinterpretation based on different sources which indicates once again that the choice made in the construction of the two female figures (Kannagi and Madhavi) to represent the polarities of the angel/monster dichotomy reflects certain gender norms (Perera, 2016). It can be observed that the choices made by the filmmakers in the way they reconstruct these legendary female figures on screen mirror how traditional images and ideologies have been employed. Thus, I argue that Sri Lankan period films contain a dichotomous motif of female identity through the construction of related images that may differ from the dominant Eurocentric discourse on the angel/monster concept. For this purpose, Gilbert and Gubar's theory is used only as the base or a basic outline for the research study. I have also attempted to detach Eurocentric approaches related to the angel/monster concept in the discussions of certain intrinsic configurations of the characters in order to reflect the cultural ideologies at work relevant to the local context.

## **Literature review**

Labelling and compartmentalizing women according to accepted standards of different societies is a common pattern that exists both implicitly and explicitly even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The source of such reductive fixed female identities can be traced to patriarchy. It is one of the oldest ideological institutions that seeks to yield authority over its Other – the woman, by operating systematically at different levels in diverse societies. One way through which this dominance has survived for centuries is by defining and re-defining the Other's identity by the male literary tradition.

The earliest allusion to a dichotomic female identity can be traced back to the Greek mythology of Pandora and the box of horrors which has influenced Greek literature and considered the pioneering literary tradition of this identity (Carillo-Rush, 2012). Henceforth, when looking at the literary canon it can be seen that the angel-monster dichotomy or related female identities have been moulded in different ways with the angel connoting the conventional and the monster connoting the unconventional.

The different ways in which the dichotomy is configured through diverse literary traditions is evident when comparing Asian and European literature. In the

European gothic genre, the madwoman has become an emblem to induce its horror element. Mental illnesses bound to the concept of the ‘sick woman’ is another aspect of the madwoman construction, according to European medical history, as it is linked with female madness. The popular female mental illnesses of green sickness, uterine fury and hysteria were believed to be interconnected with female madness (Dawson, 2008). In the traditional understanding, this madness closely associated with violence, is a label attached to those who defy gender roles. However, it is also perceived as a female strategy at two levels in the gothic genre. Phyllis Chesler opines that it is a response to the limited alternatives offered to women and is merely a stage of acting out the “devalued female role” (Cited in Stein, 1983). It is also seen as an inner journey of self-knowledge and psychic integration of the split self (with reference to the “double”) especially by certain writers in the “Female Gothic” (Stein, 1983). According to Barnhill, two types of women face a form of “double invisibility” (Spivak, 1985) in Victorian literature: the foreign woman and the lower class woman (Barnhill, 2003). At one level they face invisibility due to their sex. In addition, authors have made it a point to connect criminal acts only with women of lower classes in society so as not to upset the social order and create fear in the middle classes. Similarly, any minor criminal act of a foreign woman is blamed on the lack of “Englishness” as she is by default an outsider (Barnhill, 2003). Spacing apart from adult literature, the most popular mode of introducing these paradigms at an earlier stage of human development is through fairy tales which occupy a pivotal space in children’s literature (Moss, 1988). All these literary constructions automatically create a palimpsestic text within its literature as the female voice is made absent within the narrative with only androcentric polarized images to depict her presence.

Studies on separate cultural constructs display an array of conventional female identities although research on this subject with regard to Asian Literature is comparatively low. When considering Indian literature, the model of the ideal womanhood emanates from the historically revered figure, Sita. The divine power known as ‘Shakti’ in Hinduism represents the “divine feminine power” acquired through the designated role as wife and mother (Mehta, 2009). Interestingly, education which is generally perceived as a form of emancipation

carries a different connotation in the Indian context. The rationale behind receiving education is to utilize the social standing it provides to find “desirable husbands” in the marriage market (Mehta, 2009). However, it is also stated that the notion of the Indian ‘woman’ and representation varies depending on religion, class, caste and ethnic group (Mehta, 2009). Even in Chinese literature the world of the woman revolves around the concepts of family and home. Furthermore, she is portrayed as a psychologically inferior being (Li, 2009). In Sri Lankan literature, the female terrorist or suicide bomber is a novel monster-woman image that has evolved with time as it disturbs the non-violent femininity and abuses “societal sensibilities” (Agara, 2015). However, it requires to be examined further whether this negative image projected in Sri Lankan literature has a prejudicial ethnic element attached to it.

On the other hand, the cinema can instil conventional images through representations and absorb an audience into its cinematic reality instantly, which is why it is considered equally or perhaps more powerful than literature. The increasing trend of period films among the different cinematic genres has dominated the film industries of many countries and gained universal appeal due to its generic features. Period films have been described as artistic compilations of stories set in the past which can be based on historical facts, literary adaptations, fiction or a melange (Perisic, 2010). Much of the existing discourse on this genre focuses on its historical and political implications. Comparatively, there is less discussion on the representations or portrayal of female identities on screen which is further narrowed down as most of those studies are confined to British heritage films.

The Sri Lankan period film industry which was recognized as a trend only in the recent past through the film *Aba* (2008) is currently a male monopoly. Hence, an androcentric view of history is reflected through the traditional constructions and cinematic strategies which are employed. However, female representations recurrent in these films have been undermined since much of the current discourse pertaining to this subject is socio-political in nature. These female images are irrefutably pivotal as the country has a long tradition of representing the nation’s narrative through the female body especially in theatre where

performatives of the traditional Arya Sinhala woman was encouraged (De Mel, 2001). The fact that Sri Lanka is a multifarious confluence of different local and foreign cultures can lead to the production of hybrid but unique configurations of women in its period films. Despite the general conception of living in a progressive and modern era, reenactments of these stereotypes via cinema imply that they carry meaning for society even in the present (Stubbs, 2012). Thus, female binaries portrayed on screen indicate the undercurrent gender norms in society. Since the angel-monster dichotomic concept in most studies have taken a Eurocentric approach even in relation to this genre of films, this study aims to examine in depth the unique female constructs in Sri Lankan period films through Asian standards and how they may vary or be similar to the dominant approach in certain aspects. It will also be a reflection of the Sri Lankan standards of gendered identity in relation to women that are employed in the creation of identities on screen.

## **Method and Design**

In this study I will be taking into account only two films: *Vijaya-Kuveni* (2012) and *Paththini* (2016). These high budget films have been selected due to the prominence given to its female characters and popularity garnered among the Sri Lankan audience. Furthermore, only two selected characters of each film will be examined. My research methods consist of a textual analysis including a close reading of characterization.

The close reading of the films will examine the way in which the angel/monster dichotomy is constructed with the help of the theory based primary texts which will be used only as a foundation for the study. This will further be complemented with other related secondary sources on historical or cultural connections to the areas of discussion on female identity.

This research study will use a combination of feminist and psychoanalytic theories. In relation to feminist theories, Gilbert and Gubar's (1979) *The Madwoman in the Attic* will be taken as the primary basis for exploring female identities. This will be further complemented by John Berger's theory on the male gaze in his text *Ways of Seeing* (2008). The psychoanalytical theory selected for



the study is Carl Jung's collection of work on dreams in *Civilization in Transition* (1964).

## Research Question

In what ways is the body of the angel and the monster woman represented on screen and how are those identities differentiated according to related gender norms?

## Discussion

### *A Pandoric Construction of Kuveni*

One of the ancient sources of the angel/monster dichotomy can be traced to Greek culture which inscribed the dual nature of female identity through the popular myth of the goddess Pandora. Pandora is represented as both a benevolent earth goddess and a source of all evil as depicted through the popular mythical stories of Pandora's Box. The Greek paternal literary tradition has propagated the notion that womankind "is the source of all evil and misery in the world" which is her natural state and that her nature should be controlled through the social institution of marriage (Carillo-Rush, 2012). Hence, the woman was painted as a figure that contained the innate identity of a monster that needed to be tamed or reformed through the patriarchal constraints of marriage in order to produce an angel like identity which was submissive and inferior (Carillo-Rush, 2012). A similar ideology survives in South Asian culture through Hindu mythology. The woman is considered a representative of nature with an abundance of unharnessed power. Hence, her true nature is considered dangerous as "women= power + nature = danger" (Wadley, 1977). Man on the other hand, symbolises culture which controls nature. Similar to the Greek representation, this form of control is once again through marriage in which the woman transfers "control of her sexuality" and thereby her inherent powers to her husband as depicted through the benevolent deities in the Hindu pantheon (Wadley, 1977). A similar construction related to the nature/culture dichotomy can be observed in the representation of Kuveni's identity as the *masculinized woman* (monster) and *feminine woman* (angel) within the film. This representation has been used as a technique to direct the sympathy towards Kuveni's plight by drawing attention to her sharp

transformation into the ideal mould of a wife in order to negate her natural identity.

### ***The Masculinized Woman***

Kuveni from the onset is represented as the only woman who matches the energies, desires and autonomy of a man. She is thus, presented as the only female who is able to challenge the authority and order of the patriarchal order of the Yaksha clan and the Aryans. Although many historical studies indicate the presence of a matriarchal structure within the Yaksha clan, in the film, there is a clear depiction of Kuveni being suppressed by a patriarchal structure within the clan. All the leaders of the clan are depicted as male and there is a clear confession by Kuveni herself that she is prevented from ascending the position of a ruler although she is of a royal lineage due to a prophecy made at birth that she was a bad omen to the clan. Her non-feminine attributes and refusal to be confined to a life of passivity are the very features that construe her character as a monster on screen. It is perceived that “assertiveness, aggressiveness- all characteristics of a male life of significant action- are monstrous in women precisely because” it is “unfeminine” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979). This quality is seen in Kuveni as she takes a conscious and ambitious decision to take control of her life and fate by choosing to marry Vijaya as a means of escaping the prophecy and seeking liberation. This is perceived as monstrous by the structure as it is an instance of exercising her autonomy and an expression of sexuality since the female will is always perceived as “monstrous” (1979). Moreover, within her domain, Kuveni exercises considerable power over her subjects. The sartorial markers and gestures also symbolize her link with nature which connotes unharnessed female sexuality and power. The tribal jewellery and earthly coloured garments that are only of knee length emphasise this link as these markers change drastically following her marriage to Vijaya. Also, her behaviour and manner of speech are rough and at times violent which is similar to that of the men in the clan thereby indicating features that are associated with masculinity.

Another aspect of her identity is the warrior within her. As seen through the fight that ensues initially between her and Vijaya, it is possible to observe her military nature. The use of phallic symbols such as the sword and bayonet connote her transition into the male dominated realms. Even in this instance she quite easily matches the aggressiveness, violence and skill of a male seen in the battlefield. The martial art she follows is also clearly similar to that of the men seen in the film.

Hence, Kuveni's true identity as depicted at the beginning of the film is one of power, a level of autonomy and features of masculinity thereby being a source of male anxiety at different levels in the film. Since she is depicted as an ill omen from the onset due to the prophecy made by the astrologer at her birth, she is deprived of all privileges related to power, is placed under house arrest, and even prevented from attending their social functions by the leaders of the clan at the beginning of the film. Thus, there is a level of marginalisation of the character within the film as she is portrayed as a woman to be feared and a symbol of danger. Moreover, the association of her fate and life with predictable prophecies undermines the plurality of female identity and reduces it to a space which can be easily deciphered and constructed by the patriarchal order. Gilbert and Gubar state that the monster woman is perceived as,

Emblems of filthy materiality, committed only to their own private ends, these women are accidents of nature, deformities meant to repel, but in their freakishness they possess unhealthy energies, powerful and dangerous arts. (1979)

This perception of the monster woman resonates with Kuveni's character as it is her innate nature that men fear throughout the film. She is predicted to be the source of destruction upon the clan and is thus contained by restricting all her powers through imprisonment. This motif of imprisonment is important in the film as it acts as a means of subduing male anxiety by controlling this female figure that emanates power and autonomy. This natural self is considered a threat which she cannot contain herself. The leaders of the clan reveal that imprisonment was necessary for the protection of their kind thus indicating that

a woman's nature needs to be controlled through the patriarchal culture to prevent her from being a threat to herself and others.

This notion is carried throughout the film in the friction between the Yaksha clan and the Aryans. Kuveni's hesitance to aid in the plot against Vijaya by the remaining leader of the Yaksha clan and the sudden change in Vijaya's behaviour towards her are attributed to her inability to use her powers independently. Moreover, she is used as a symbol of sensibility which is portrayed as a negative and blinding force contributing to the male anxiety. In contrast, the patriarchal order of the clan is used as a symbol of wisdom and rationality. It is shown that Kuveni's actions and decisions are guided by her sensibility due to her blinding love for Vijaya. Hence, Kuveni's passion coupled with her power and autonomy as a woman is equalled to danger. Kuveni is deemed as a character that makes all the wrong decisions and brings about destruction due to the non-reliance of the patriarchal structure. This resonates the ideology of how nature represented through the woman needs to be controlled by culture represented by the man.

Kuveni's character also rouses the male anxiety within Vijaya's followers (Aryans) about female power. She is perceived as an exquisite woman but with "peculiar features" which are not defined clearly within the film. Nevertheless, she is associated with supernatural powers from the beginning. Here, the association of supernatural powers with a woman becomes a powerful factor for the construction of the monstrous identity of the female protagonist. It can be seen that this element is manipulated within the film to create male anxiety. Although the *Mahavamsa* paints Kuveni as a supernatural being, there are no traces in the film to prove that she possesses such a quality. Hence this element which contributes to the fear in the male consciousness is in actuality merely a creation to disguise the actual source of their fear which is female autonomy and power. This contributes to their anxiety and it is projected upon the character of Vijaya which is symbolised through his dreams.

The two main dreams that Vijaya has can be analysed through a Jungian psychoanalytical perspective to explore the male anxiety embedded within the unconscious mind. Carl Jung (1964) emphasises that "the dream is a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the soul". He also explains that

gender difference in an individual springs from a dichotomy that is internalised and deeply embedded in the human unconscious. This is represented through the *anima* and *animus*. The *anima* represents the “feminine essence” and the *animus* the “masculine essence” both carried within “the human psyche”. A certain friction within the individual regarding these normative images can create a “dissonance” and that results in the formation of a “psychological shadow” which can be the source of nightmares in an individual. A psychological shadow according to Franz (1996) is defined as,

identity created out of the deficiencies an individual perceives in him or herself, but which is often seen as a figure external to that of the self. The deficiency represented by the shadow can either spring from negative characteristics that one wishes to suppress, or positive characteristics that one wishes to attain (Cited in Lopez, 2010).

Furthermore, Jung points out that nightmares are “symbolic manifestations of the shadow” (Cited in Woolfe, 2014). Hence, the nightmare that Vijaya has following the arousal of his anxieties regarding Kuveni’s true nature by his ministers, shows a symbolic fear for the loss of his patriarchal power. The nightmare he has first shows a monstrous dishevelled image of Kuveni as a cannibal who threatens Vijaya’s lineage. It also shows Kuveni’s non-feminine form that contradicts with the feminine essence of the *anima*. So, it is the compromise of his masculinity or the *animus* that is represented through this powerful image of the woman. Hence, it is an instance of the formation of a psychological shadow in the form of a powerful Kuveni which evokes fear as it represents a certain deficiency within the male character which is the loss of patriarchal power. This notion is repeated in his second dream which is also a nightmare that contains the image of Vijaya’s father Sinhabahu, warning him of Kuveni’s true nature as a woman and pressurising him to assert his fleeting control. This shows how even the men are victimised through the pressures of the hierarchy in the patriarchal system (Morris, 1993). However, both dreams project the unconscious anxiety within the male subject created due to the threat against his masculinity through the autonomy symbolised by the masculinized woman.

### ***The Feminine Woman***

Another aspect of Kuveni's identity constructed in the film is the abandonment of her true identity for a more passive subdued self as an obedient and loyal wife to Vijaya. The film draws the spectators to this transformation as it is a sudden and unnatural shift made to undermine her monstrous features and focus on her sacrificial angel like image to evoke sympathy towards the character. It is almost offered as a compensation for her true nature. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) state that the woman is,

killed into a perfect image of herself.....she would see at first only those eternal lineaments fixed on her like a mask to conceal her dreadful body and bloody link to nature.

Kuveni's character is framed in a similar manner as her initial identity is "killed" to make her feminine in order to make her appealing to the audience and the other male characters in the play.

On the other hand, the film focuses on the social institution of marriage and how it plays a pivotal role in the female protagonist's life in this respect. At first, it is conveyed that the prophecy related to Kuveni can be prevented only through marriage to a man of high rank and noble birth. This indicates the importance placed on marriage as a form of control and a solution for the negative energies projected by a woman. Furthermore, it is possible to observe how a feminised version of Kuveni is projected as a result of the 'male gaze' that operates within a patriarchal society especially within the confines of marriage. John Berger (2008) points out that "every image embodies a way of seeing". Hence, the feminised version of Kuveni which symbolizes the expectations of a female identity by the male "surveyor" as "how she appears to men, is of crucial importance (2008). The male gaze is thus the way of seeing the female body by patriarchy and thereby a means of controlling the image of the female subject. The result is that the woman "turns herself into an object, –and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (2008). Similarly in the film, Kuveni's image is cropped into one that suits a marital life and the expectations of her husband. The first indicator of this is when she starts to follow the practise of worshipping Vijaya before their consummation and considers him a god like figure in her life.

Thereafter, she is always positioned of a lower height in the presence of her husband highlighting her submissive and inferior position next to him. Although she assumes her position as the queen of the nation, it is clearly depicted that she has no power in decision making and is of a lower position than that of the ministers of the court. Her passivity regarding the decisions Vijaya makes for her and the physical abuse she endures due to the change in his character marks a sharp contrast to her identity presented at the beginning as a powerful masculinized woman. The woman who was portrayed as a figure who takes charge of her own fate is presented in this version as one who has placed her life and fate in the hands of her husband.

In addition, sartorial markers and gestures are subjected to changes which act as indicators of a more cultured image as opposed to the natural image she possessed previously that is almost portrayed as primitive. She becomes more soft spoken, graceful in her manners and more elegant in her dress. Her garments shift from knee length to ankle length connoting a more cultured image of her appearance and behaviour. There is also no instance of her raising her voice to her husband even when she is treated unjustly. Even the manner in which she challenges the injustices towards her is subjected to change. Initially in the film, she challenges the leaders of her clan aggressively with rough speech when they are captured by Vijaya's army. However, it is replaced by hysterical pleas when she is unjustly banished by Vijaya due to the political propaganda of his ministers. These changes resonate the interplay within the nature/culture dichotomy. It can be perceived that these changes are a result of the notion that male authority harnesses the uncontained power and sexuality of the woman thereby releasing her from the primitive state through the social institution of marriage.

This image is deconstructed immediately when she exits her marital role. The symbolic removal of all sartorial markers including the royal garments and ornaments signifies a shift in her identity and the re-emergence of her true nature. Hence, this compartmentalised construction of Kuveni's identity as a woman reflects the embodiment of an imposed duality similar to the mythical construction of Pandora and the Hindu mythical ideology of women.

### ***Juxtaposition of Virtue and Lust***

The film *Paththini* (2016) represents the angel/monster dichotomy by attributing qualities relevant to the two polarities in two different female characters in the film: Kannagi and Madhavi. These two characters are juxtaposed in two ways: characterization and contrasting responses received to the respective images within the film. This technique used within the film clearly elevates the ideal female identity represented through the chaste Kannagi and at the same time degrades the initial identity of Madhavi portrayed as a lustful seductress.

### ***Madhavi: The Degenerate Woman<sup>2</sup>***

According to the Tamil classic, Madhavi is a courtesan for whom Kovalan abandons his wife Kannagi. While Kannagi is clearly the emblem of purity within the film as perpetuated through the *Paththini* myths, Madhavi becomes the emblem of lust and immorality within the film. This construction of Madhavi's character bears a certain resemblance to the concept of the "fallen woman" in Victorian literature where a seductress or a woman who lacks sexual purity is considered a deviant thereby labelling her as a monster (Barnhill, 2003). This type of woman is usually ostracized in Victorian society. Although this type of ostracization is not present in the film, the negativity towards her identity is built up in other ways. Madhavi is actually portrayed as a character who bears a high rank in society due to her title as the royal courtesan. She becomes the object of desire among the men and her profession as a courtesan is to entertain any man in the country who is ready to pay her price.

One powerful way in which the negativity towards her identity is built within the film is through the eyes of the male protagonist Kovalan. Although he enjoys "unabashed sexuality" after his marriage to Madhavi, he is portrayed as a victim of her charms and seduction (Obeyesekere, 1986). Her refusal to give up her profession to fit into the ideal role of a wife, in which she belongs solely to her husband, becomes the point of disillusionment in Kovalan and the sole reason for him to abandon her. Later on, he confesses how her identity disgusts him due to her refusal to meet the demands of a marital role. This is an instance of the male

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert and Gubar (1979) "The Madwoman in the Attic"



gaze operating in society to label women who transgress from the roles assigned to them as,

men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated” (Berger, 2008).

Madhavi’s refusal to sacrifice her profession for the sake of her marriage can be seen as an instance of exercising female autonomy. It shows that she does not conform to a conventional life of domesticity but prefers to maintain her professional identity. These aspects in her character disturb the male gaze thereby looking upon her identity as unacceptable and unsuitable for marriage life.

The focus in the film of the negative effect of a “degenerate woman” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979) on the man is another way in which Madhavi’s identity is ostracized through Kovalan. The relationship between Madhavi and Kovalan depicts how the degenerate woman has the capability of making man stray from the correct path. Kovalan states that she is the source of moral blindness to the man as her nature compels man to abandon all sense of reason. She is also accused of charming and entrapping him through materialistic lustre. Her exquisite beauty and appearance is thus perceived merely as a façade to hide the inner repulsiveness within her. This notion of appearance vs. reality and moral blindness is further complemented by recurring images of Kovalan being intoxicated. This intoxication during his stay with Madhavi further signifies the loss of reason within the man which compels him to take rash decisions. Furthermore, it shows that his link to Madhavi is temporary as it is merely based on intoxication in lust. This relegates her character to an object that is merely used for sexual pleasure. She is thus considered a moral danger to man as her nature is depicted as one that has the power to mislead man.

This identity is further promoted as improper for a woman when Madhavi herself internalises the expectations of a woman that is of virtue and purity. Her conversion to a more religious self and the renunciation of her profession by carrying Kovalan’s child later on in the film are indicators of the success of the male gaze. It can be seen as an instance of a conscious conversion from the

constructed monster-woman to the angel thereby highlighting the importance of norms attached to femininity.

### ***Kannagi: The Memento of Feminine Virtue***

Kannagi's character portrayal on screen parallels with beliefs of the goddess Paththini in Sri Lankan culture. Her virtuousness is emphasised from the beginning to act as a clear contrast to the monstrous nature of the degenerate woman. From the onset of the film there is much respect drawn to her character as there is no association of sensuousness as with Madhavi's character. Her sartorial markers which cover her body in full length are most often shades of white or soft tones which connote the purity and decency within her as opposed to her juxtaposed character. The space she occupies within the film is mostly the confines of her home or her place of worship. This paints the picture of a domesticated and spiritual woman who values simplicity.

The relationship with her husband also acts as a means of conveying the image of a dutiful wife. Her refusal to remarry when Kovalan abandons her and the sacrifices she makes to reunite with him tallies to a certain extent with Gilbert and Gubar's discussion of "contemplative purity" in relation to the angel-woman (1979). It explains the submissive nature and the silencing of the female voice but Kannagi is not portrayed as a figure that is silenced. On the contrary, she is seen as a figure that brings justice and makes her voice heard on behalf of her husband. However, her submissive nature in relation to her marital role is emphasised. This is seen when she unquestioningly allows Kovalan to squander their wealth on Madhavi, forgives her husband and gives priority to his happiness by giving him the freedom to choose his partner. These self-sacrificial acts are the very qualities that are portrayed as lacking in Madhavi's character – a level of submission to patriarchy.

Moreover, the warrior depicted within Kannagi is a feminised version in contrast to the very physical masculinized rendition of Kuveni's military competence. Kannagi's ability to endure harsh conditions during Kovalan's absence, the impediments faced in her journeys to find her husband and the punishment given to the King of Pandi for unjustly executing her husband can be seen as instances of the character's inner warrior. The power linked to this aspect of her identity is

garnered through spirituality. On the other hand, the purpose of invoking this inner warrior is seen as a selfless cause – to protect her husband. She is portrayed as the protector of man and the source of positive energies in a man as opposed to the negative effects the degenerate woman has on man.

## Conclusion

It can be observed that the representation of women in the selected films of the period film genre contains constructed- female identities that act as contrasts complementing an angel/monster dichotomy. These constructions reflect the choices made by the filmmakers to attribute oppositional features in the selected female identities. As discussed in the study, the films use two different techniques to convey this duality with the interplay of different gender norms in this construction. One is the representation of the duality within Kuveni in *Vijaya-Kuveni* (2012). Kuveni's character is reconstructed in this manner to draw attention towards her inscribed feminine identity that is offered as compensation for her original masculinized identity. Kuveni's feminine attributes are what makes her character appealing and acceptable according to the film as it is this identity that is elevated to evoke sympathy towards the injustice directed at her. It also shows the necessity to construct a female character as embodying social ideals of femininity to make it worthy of being seen in a positive light. The second is the use of two different female characters in *Paththini* (2016): Kannagi and Madhavi as polar opposites. Through them, socially accepted and unaccepted qualities in a woman are portrayed on screen. In both films, through both techniques, it is the ideal version of the woman or the angel identity that is highlighted. Hence, it can be observed that this motif of the duality, indicates an implicit ideology related to gender norms which advocates a certain type of female identity.

Although the concept of the angel/monster dichotomy prevalent in these films does bear a resemblance to the general outlines discussed in Eurocentric discussions, the intricate details in the construction of the differences between the characters can be considered as reflecting the gender standards in Sri Lankan culture. The details embedded within each female construction reflect underlying stereotypes that are attached to women in Sri Lankan society. The ideal of what

a woman ought to be are generally attached to domesticated roles as seen in the enactments of both films. There are also clear demarcations of masculinity and femininity especially in *Vijaya-Kuveni*. Femininity is linked essentially with the patriarchal figure of the husband as her identity is defined through this male figure by showing that the woman needs to appeal to the eyes of patriarchy at all times. Hence she is portrayed as a supporter in a man's life rather than an equal partner. Through this, the importance of marriage in a woman's life is also emphasised by painting the marital role as a sacrilegious space in which a woman can acquire status and respect in society. The woman who considers marriage secondary to other responsibilities in life or fails to please the male gaze is thereby labelled as a transgressor and seen as an identity that requires reformation. The films also convey a clear depiction of how the woman embodying the accepted standards of femininity will always be held superior to those who do not. Through these male-centric constructions, female identity is ultimately reduced to a mere duality that is to be looked upon and judged. Although these may not reflect the general conception in Sri Lanka towards women, the development of this dichotomic motif within these contemporary films shows traditional ideologies related to women that still survive in local culture. These ideologies indicate that the identity of women is something that is still judged based on their conformation or non-conformation to ideals related to women.

### **Limitations**

Although there can be multiple areas that could be examined under the selected topic, for the purpose of the study, the scope has been narrowed down. Thus, only selected areas have been considered through only two female characters of each film. There can be many other aspects of female identity in relation to the dichotomy that can be explored such as cultural markers or technical angles related to film theory that have not been included in the study. I have also selected only two films from the period film cannon which were produced during the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Since this study is by no means an attempt to homogenise the experience of women or gender norms in the country only one side of the picture on female

identity is discussed which is the angel/monster dichotomy as delineated in the selected films. Furthermore, the angel/monster images may also differ depending on the type of community, race or ethnicity. The dichotomy itself could be a confluence of the intersections of these social elements. The study does not contain exact cultural or historical sources for each and every stereotype related to women contained in the discussion since Sri Lankan culture itself is influenced by diverse cultural ideologies. Although I would attempt to look at some of these intersections, there may be those that could be missed or omitted due to the scope of the study. However, those that are not included could be incorporated in future research.

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