

Gender, Technology and Representation: Analysis of Ban's *U Syiem* (2013)

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Abstract

The film is a medium that has the ability to bring change to society. Films, especially regional films, influence the audience since they connect more with the local content. The advancement in film production technology has not only improved the film-viewing experience but also provided an opportunity to filmmakers to offer a variety of content. This puts the filmmakers in a privileged position as they decide what the viewers will consume although films may or may not represent reality. This study analyses the first animation film of Meghalaya, U Syiem (2013) with representation theory as a framework to understand the portrayal of male and female characters in the film. The study also includes an interview with the film's director to understand the process of developing and creating characters in the film. The study aims to provide new perspectives to viewers and learners in understanding various aspects of men's and women's roles in a matrilineal society through the nuances of animation technology.

Keywords: gender; representation; Khasi film; technology; animation; U Syiem

Introduction

Technology has the ability to promote gender equality and empower women. It provides women with increased "access to education, employment, and entrepreneurship", while "challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes that often restrict their potential" (Mint, 2023). The use of technology to promote gender equality has made significant progress, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. "Remote work, flexible schedules, online education, and mentorship programs" have offered vital support and platforms for women to develop their "social and intellectual capabilities" (Mint, 2023). Despite these promising advancements, the tech industry remains predominantly male-dominated, with women underrepresented in various roles,

including engineering, leadership, and decision-making positions (Goldstaub, 2021). Women in technology face gender pay gaps and encounter biases and stereotypes that hinder their career advancement and recognition (Slotboom, 2022). To ensure an inclusive and thriving environment where gender is not a barrier, there is still work to be done. Technological advancements have revolutionized various sectors including healthcare and education. This article examines the film industry, focusing on an animation film, which heavily relies on the nuances of technology.

Technology plays an important role in today's film production process. It has changed how films are made, distributed, screened, and consumed. The inclusion of technology in cinema is "to trigger the audience's empathy and bring them

closer to the story” (Li, 2021). On-screen it has helped provide an enhanced film experience to the viewers, off-screen it engages the audience with sharp images and visuals (Sharma, 2022). The history of cinema started with silent black and white films, then colour and sound were introduced, followed by VFX, and animation. Animation films are a popular form of visual storytelling that use drawings, computer-generated imagery (CGI), or other forms of visual art to bring characters and stories to life. These films have been entertaining audiences of all ages for decades, and their popularity has grown over the years. Animation films come in many styles and genres, from light-hearted comedies to heart-wrenching dramas. Some of the most popular animation film genres include family films, action and adventure films, fantasy films, science fiction films, mythological epics, etc. One of the main benefits of animated films is that they allow filmmakers to tell stories that might be difficult or impossible to tell in live-action films. Because animation films are not bound by the laws of physics or the limitations of the real world, they can explore fantastical concepts and create characters and settings that are truly unique (Lascala, 2022). Animators can create any character or setting they can imagine, and they can use visual effects and computer-generated imagery (CGI) to create stunning and intricate visuals that would be difficult or impossible to achieve in live-action videos. Additionally, animation films can use “exaggeration and caricature to create characters that are larger-than-life” and more expressive than their live-action counterparts (Hilder, 2023). Another advantage of animated films is that they can appeal to a wide range of audiences. While some may think of animated films as primarily for children, many animated movies are designed to appeal to adults as well.

Animation films have been gaining popularity in India recently, both among children and adults. Indian animation films have come a long way since their inception in the early 1900s with the first animated film *Agkadyanchi Mouj* (Matchstick’s Fun) directed by Dada Saheb Phalke (Chakraborty, 2023). The *Pea Brothers*, directed by Gunamoy Banerjee became the first film released in theatres in 1934 (Ghose & Gupta, 2018). Today, Indian animation films cover various genres, styles, and themes. One of the most popular Indian animation films of all time is the *Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama* released in 1992. This animated retelling of the epic of Ramayana became a cult classic for its beautiful animation and engaging storytelling.

Other notable Indian animation films include the *Hanuman* series, *Chhota Bheem*, and *Mighty Raju*. These movies have gained popularity among children for their colourful characters and lively storylines.

In addition to films, Indian animators are also producing animated series for television and streaming platforms. Netflix’s *Mighty Little Bheem* is a popular animated series featuring the adventures of the popular character, *Chhota Bheem*, and has been well-received by audiences worldwide.

Indian animators are also increasingly venturing into the realm of adult-oriented animation. The web series *The Legend of Hanuman* has been praised for its stunning animation and engaging storytelling. Indian animation films also incorporate traditional Indian art and culture, helping to promote and preserve India’s rich heritage. One example of a successful Indian animated film is *Hanuman*, a 2005 movie based on the Hindu epic Ramayana.

In recent years, the Indian animation industry has grown significantly,

with studios producing high-quality animated films that are viewed by audiences worldwide.

Representation of characters in animation films

A number of studies have been conducted to understand the representation of characters in animation films. Jimenez's (2022, p. 2) analysis of Disney animated films found that women characters were given more "pervasive roles". It was also found that while 63.3 per cent of the characters were male, only 36.6 per cent were females (Jimenez, 2022). A similar study by Sims (n.d) on the analysis of Disney films found that there has been no change in the portrayal of characters. The characters are portrayed stereotypically with male characters possessing masculine traits.

Many early animated films perpetuated traditional gender stereotypes, portraying women as passive and men as dominant and aggressive. In more recent years, there has been an attempt toward more inclusive and diverse depictions of gender in animation films. Shehattah (n.d.) examined the depiction of male main characters in three animated films and found that characters exhibited various typical traits associated with masculinity. Despite this, the protagonists reveal a modest advancement in the representation of males within the chosen animated films.

Fischer's (2010) evaluation of how female and male characters are depicted in five animated films found that they do not fall into gender stereotypes. Female characters were portrayed in various roles and were depicted with less stereotypical imagery. Similarly, male characters were shown in diverse roles with characteristics that did not conform to typical stereotypes.

In 2008, Gillam and Wooden conducted

an analysis of how masculinity is portrayed in Pixar's films. The study discovered a transformation in how male characters were represented. Previously, they were portrayed as dominant and powerful. However, in recent years, male characters have been depicted with masculine and feminine traits.

Palupi's (2019) analysis of three animation films found that Disney portrays its princesses as strong and self-reliant. However, the princesses are not portrayed as capable of completing their goals without assistance from men. They tend to believe they are less proficient than men in achieving their goals. The results suggest that gender stereotypes persist in animated films. Nevertheless, a positive change is noticeable as female and male characters are often depicted in non-conventional ways.

The present study

The literature review indicates that the characters have been portrayed stereotypically in animation films. There are very few studies conducted on Indian animation films. Hence, this study will analyse the first animation film of Meghalaya, *U Syiem* to answer the following question: How the male and female characters have been represented in the film? What was the process of developing and creating characters in the film?

This study is significant because most films emerge from patriarchal societies that follow patrilineal social structures. Although Meghalaya has a matrilineal social structure unlike the other states in India, it is still a patriarchal society. However, it is one of the few regions where "women enjoy social mobility and there are no bars to achieve economic mobility." (Rathanayak, 2021).

Theoretical framework

This study draws on Stuart Hall's (1997) concept of representation to understand the representation of characters and character design in film. Representation theory seeks to explain how meaning is created and conveyed through cultural representations, such as "language, images, and symbols" (Hall, 1997, p. 15). According to Hall, these representations are not simply reflections of "reality", but are constructed through social processes that are shaped by power relations and historical contexts. At the heart of Hall's representation theory is the idea that cultural representations are always encoded with meanings that reflect the dominant ideologies of the society in which they are produced. These ideologies are not necessarily consciously held by individuals but are rather the product of the social and historical conditions that shape the cultural context. Hall argued that representations are never neutral or objective, but are always produced within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts. He also emphasized the importance of understanding the power relations that shape the production and reception of representations, and how they can reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies and social norms.

Representation theory as a theoretical framework has been used by many scholars to understand how different forms of media portray individuals, groups, and communities. Parvez (2022) employed representation theory to investigate how gender is depicted in films featuring female superheroes. According to the study's findings, two out of three films portrayed the female lead characters as deviating from traditional gender roles. Sharma and Pathak (2022) employed the representation theory to analyze the social issues that the director of *Parasite* portrayed in different "scenes, shots, and sequences" of the

film, which won an Oscar. Similarly, a study conducted by Fatimah et. al. (2022) applies representation theory to investigate the portrayal of Japanese individuals and their interactions with Koreans in the film, *Pacchigi* (2005). Stuart Hall's representation theory helps us understand how different media and popular culture portray individuals, groups, and communities.

Method

A scene-by-scene textual analysis was done to understand the representation of the male and female characters in the film. Textual analysis is a "methodology that involves understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences" (Hawkins, 2017). The study also includes an interview with the film director to understand the process of developing and creating characters in the film. As animation is not restricted by reality, it does not require real-life characters which gives the makers the freedom to decide on the appearance and traits of the characters. Hence, the interview with the filmmaker is important to understand the idea behind the character design.

Analysis of U Syiem (2013)

The film is based on the life of the freedom fighter, U Tirot Sing Syiem. At a very young age, Tirot Singh loses his father in a battle. Upon his mother's request, he leaves the Nongkhlaw region to receive training. This is also a custom in the Khasi tradition, where the chief should receive good training for the coming years to be a rightful king. He spends his childhood with his uncle receiving training in warfare, craftsmanship, and other arts. After a decade, Tirot Singh returns to the Nongkhlaw region and is bestowed with the responsibility of a king who is

well-versed in the art of military warfare and combat and well-educated in administrative studies. He takes up the responsibility and life is very peaceful in the village until the East India Company comes to him with a proposal to build a road for uninterrupted trade. The king signs the treaty in consultation with his *darbar* (local council) for the welfare of his people but little does he know about the intention of the East India Company. As soon as the treaty is signed, a battalion of soldiers arrives in the region creating havoc. Women and villagers are harassed, and the childhood friend of Tirof Singh is killed. Looking at the sufferings of his people the king feels betrayed by the East India Company and decides to fight against the British. The king fights the British army in the Khasi hills for four years and signs a peace treaty following his surrender to the British. He eventually dies in Bangladesh.

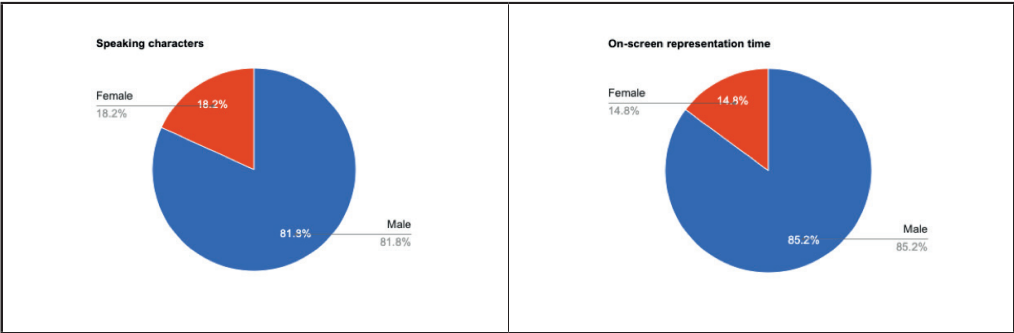
A scene-by-scene analysis was carried out to understand the representation of characters. The analysis has been categorised on the following themes: speaking characters and representation time; character roles and traits; appearance and costume.

Speaking characters and Representation time

The first thing that is noticeable while analysing the film is the number of male and female-speaking characters in the films. The male characters outnumber the female characters in the film. There are nine male-speaking characters in comparison to only two female characters. There are multiple scenes in the film when the king, Tirof Singh addresses the "people" of the village. In these scenes, there are only male characters in the village, not even a single woman is found in the frame. In the cremation scene of Tirof Singh's childhood friend, village people are seen standing alongside Tirof Singh. In this scene, except for Tirof's mother all the characters are male. This creates the impression that the village consists of only male residents.

Similarly, when it comes to on-screen representation time, male characters get more on-screen space than females. Male characters get an on-screen time of 46 minutes and 30 seconds, whereas female characters get only 8 minutes and 59 seconds. Figure 1 shows the representation of time and speaking characters in percentage.

Figure-1: Speaking characters and on-screen representation time



Character roles and traits

The two female characters not only get less on-screen representation time but also their roles are not central to the story. The two female characters in the film play the roles of a mother and Tirot Singh's childhood friend. The mother is portrayed stereotypically as caring, self-sacrificing and dependent. When Tirot Singh is young, his mother sends him away from her to learn, get trained, and acquire skills to become a king so he can protect the people of the village. Though the mother is very close to Tirot Singh, it is his uncle who makes decisions along with Tirot Singh. After the return of Tirot Singh, there are very few scenes with the mother and when she is present in the scene she is seen just as a spectator and not as a speaking character. She has no role in the film to drive the plot or the story forward. The other female character, Tirot's friend is also portrayed as dependent and submissive. The film has two major scenes with her and in both scenes, she is portrayed as dependent and submissive. In both scenes, she can be seen running away from danger in fear and getting help from the male character to rescue herself from the situation. The female characters are portrayed as dependent, submissive, caring, and self-sacrificing. On the other hand, the male characters are portrayed as strong, independent, responsible, and brave. For instance, when Tirot Singh leaves the village for training, the mother tells him, "You have to promise me to be strong, responsibility is in your hands now". And when Tirot Singh returns, the voice-over says "After a decade-long wait, he returned to his people, a man, his stature strong, muscular, and bold ready to bear the burden bestowed upon him. A brave leader to watch over the welfare of his kingdom and his people. Such stereotyped images of male and female characters can be seen throughout the film.

Appearance and Costume

The characters in the film can be seen wearing traditional and non-traditional dresses. The Khasi traditional dress for women is Jainsem and for men is a dhoti with a turban and a jacket. Keeping in mind it is a period drama, the decision to go with the traditional dress is suitable for the film. However, the difference is in their representation. The male lead character, his mother, and his uncle can be seen wearing the traditional dress which reflects the Khasi culture and tradition. The traditional dress worn by U Syiem signifies him as the leader of the village and a king who represents the Khasi tribe and stands for his people. But, the childhood friend of U Syiem, wears Jainkyrshah throughout the film. Jainkyrshah is also a traditional attire of the Khasi tribe. It is one side shoulder drape cloth, more like an apron, worn by Khasi women while doing chores at home or in public. Jainkyrshah symbolizes modesty and respect and Khasi women wear it to protect themselves from the stains of cooking or other chores. In the film, the childhood friend of U Syiem wears Jainkyrshah which signifies two things. First, it means she is involved only in domestic work at home which can be seen in the first scene where she is carrying a basket of fruits and heading to her home. Second, as Jainkyrshah is worn by women to protect themselves from stains, in the film it acts as a symbolic tool that she wears to protect herself from the people around her. In both scenes, she wears Jainkyrshah and runs away from danger to protect herself.

Character design

The main character in the film is U Syiem, his mother, uncle, childhood friend, and a British officer. As mentioned earlier in this paper, an interview was conducted with the film's director to understand the character design. The character

design of the films was all imaginative and no real-life references were taken. The looks and appearance of Tirot Singh have been described in many books as tall and having a well-composed body. However, the director decided to exaggerate and stylize the characters to appeal to a wider audience. The character design was influenced by Indian and foreign films. The director has taken the character's reference from Ramayana (1992) and The Prince of Egypt (1998). Hence, the characters were designed with stereotypical traits, which are a "tried and tested formula" and can be seen in commercial films. The makers went for the exaggerated and stylized characters since it was a fictional feature film, not a documentary or experimental film, and they wanted the characters to be accepted and liked by the audience. The makers followed the concept of shape language to communicate the personality of the characters. The male lead characters were developed on an inverted triangle shape to make the characters look strong, muscular, and dominant. The director wanted the mother to be a neutral character and hence decided to follow a rectangle shape to design the character. The childhood friend of U Syiem was designed on an hourglass shape so the shoulders and hips are of proportional width, and have a defined waist. All other characters were developed on either square or rectangular shapes.

Discussion

This study looks at the portrayal of male and female characters in the first animation film of Meghalaya. This study found that the male characters dominate the on-screen space, and the characters were portrayed stereotypically. The characters designed were also stylized and exaggerated to appeal to a larger audience. Hall (1997) states that cultural representations are never neutral or

objective, but are always constructed through social and historical processes that are shaped by power relations. The film begins with a disclaimer "While the story is inspired by actual events, certain characters, and characterization were fictionalized for the purpose of dramatization". It means that this film is not an accurate representation of reality and such representation can reinforce harmful stereotypes, which can lead to discrimination and prejudice. Meghalaya is a matrilineal society where women can be seen occupying spaces from offices to the marketplace. However, in the film, very less representation time is given to women characters and the roles given to them are not central to the story. This shows that women are less important in a society where only male members lead and make decisions. How can inaccurate representations in the film be harmful to society?

It cannot be denied that gender disparity is on the rise in Meghalaya but this region is known for its unique matrilineal social structure and this is not reflected in the film. The film follows the representation trend of other major film industries in stereotypically portraying the characters. In the film, women were portrayed as dependent and submissive whereas the male characters were portrayed as independent and strong. Such representation can form negative perceptions and reinforce stereotypes in society.

The stereotypes can also be seen in the film regarding physical appearance. The character design for the film is exaggerated. The male lead characters are given a well-composed muscular body, and the female characters are portrayed as thin and simple looking. This type of portrayal can reinforce harmful stereotypes by shaping the viewer's perception of beauty and perfection, based on the images they consume.

The director in his interview said that the film is not an accurate representation of reality and that the references for the film have been taken from Hollywood and Hindi films. As Hall (1997) stated that representations are always encoded with meanings that reflect the dominant ideologies of the society in which they are produced. The film, *U Syiem* has been dramatized and stylized to appeal to the audience. For instance, the director has taken the character's reference from *Ramayana* (1992) and *The Prince of Egypt* (1998). Further, the director talks about the representation of male characters and how a v-shaped body can make the character look dominant and powerful and be seen in films like *Hercules*, *300*, etc. The director went for a tried and tested formula for character design which can be accepted by the audience. Even an animated cartoon character like Jerry in *Tom and Jerry* will turn into a v-shape if it needs to be portrayed as powerful.

The male and female characters in the film, *U Syiem* are portrayed stereotypically and the character designs were also exaggerated. One of the reasons for the stereotypical portrayal can be related to Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. The film's creators such as the director, screenplay writer, animators, and VFX artists were predominantly male, as seen in other tech industries, which may have influenced their perspective regarding the portrayal of the characters. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir also wrote on the perspective of representation by a male, which states "representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth" (Beauvoir, 1952, p. 143).

As stated earlier in this article, animation films provide animators with the freedom to create diverse characters and settings limited only by their imagination. With the advancements in technology, the visual aspects of animation are becoming increasingly realistic. Consequently, it is crucial for animators to take on the responsibility of accurately representing society, particularly when it comes to the portrayal of issues related to gender. In the state of Meghalaya, animation is still in its early stages, and it should not simply follow the trends set by commercial live-action films. Instead, it should prioritize depicting society in a manner that benefits everyone.

Conclusion

This study looks at the representation of male and female characters in the first animation film of Meghalaya, *U Syiem*. The study found that the male and female characters are portrayed stereotypically and the character design is stylized. This type of portrayal can generate negative perceptions about gender and gender roles which get fixed in people's minds especially "children from a very young age and accordingly are forced to fit in with society's expectations of them" (Childrens Society, 2020). For a more comprehensive understanding of gender depictions in animation films from Meghalaya, it is recommended that further research be conducted when more films are produced in the future. This article specifically analysed one animation film, which currently stands as the first and only animation film from Meghalaya. Regional cinema, unlike Hindi cinema, influences the local audience as it is rooted in their culture and should portray the reality which can challenge gender roles and stereotypes, and help in building a more inclusive and dynamic society.

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