From Mythology to the Modern Age: Exploring the Role of Mythology and Literature in Mani Ratnam's Cinematic Adaptations

Ms. Veena SP
PhD Research Scholar

Dr. P. Nagaraj
Professor and Head

Dr. M. Ashitha Varghese
Assistant Professor
Department of English and Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore

Abstract: Mani Ratnam has evolved as one of the significant faces of Indian cinema. His scripts usually carry an ideology that would have multiple parallel sub themes and they would equally emanate the motives contributing to the main plot. One such element specially, is the literary references that are often infused in his movies in the form of songs, dialogues and characterization, or even as the main plot with certain changes to be presented as a screenplay. His other movies like *Raavanan (2010), Thalapathy* (1991), also had the shades of Indian epics into their plots and characters. The effect of these movies, especially when it reaches various sections of the society, creates an inquisitive fervour over the original literary text based on which the script is curated. The trend of reiterating the literary works that are already globally acclaimed stays as a trend for a particular time period to conceive the movie, the adaptations and to travel along with the popular trend that the movie sets in the society at the time of release and the critical discussions followed by the movie release. Apart from the literary acclimations as the whole plot, the literary references from vernacular languages exhibited through songs and dialogues gained attention and popularised the particular literary section that is revisited, reinterpreted by viewers as readers for precision of thoughts and comprehension over the acclimated literary content represented in the visual art form. The paper intends to examine the literary acclimations and references in the movies of Mani Ratnam, in detail, that have created positive and critical perceptions and trends in all aspects for a particular time period.

Keywords: Acclimation, Adaptations, Literary works, Mani Ratnam, Movies, Trend.

Literary Adaptations

Literary texts have long served as a rich source of inspiration for the creation of compelling and thought-provoking cinematic experiences. When it comes to choosing literary works suitable for adaptation into cinema, several factors come into play. A literary text that has a captivating and well-developed narrative structure lends itself well to the visual medium of cinema. Stories with strong

plotlines, well-defined characters, and richly imagined settings have the potential to translate into visually stunning and emotionally engaging films. The texts that explore universal themes and evoke deep emotional responses have a higher chance of resonating with a wider audience when adapted into cinema. Themes such as love, loss, redemption, identity, and personal growth have enduring appeal and can translate into powerful cinematic storytelling. Additionally, literary works that possess vivid and descriptive language can provide filmmakers with a strong foundation for visually immersive storytelling. The evocative imagery and sensory details found in such texts can inspire filmmakers to create visually stunning and thematically rich cinematic experiences. Moreover, literary works that offer complex and multi-layered narratives, filled with subplots, symbolism, and thematic depth, can provide filmmakers with rich source material for adaptation. These texts often offer opportunities for nuanced character development and exploration of intricate relationships, adding depth and complexity to the cinematic adaptation.

The cultural and historical significance of a literary work can make it an attractive choice for adaptation. Texts that shed light on important social issues, historical events, or cultural contexts can be compelling for filmmakers aiming to bring such stories to a wider audience and promote understanding and empathy. Literary texts suitable for adaptation into cinema, the interplay between captivating narratives, universal themes, evocative language, complexity, and cultural significance serves as a guide for filmmakers seeking to create impactful and visually captivating cinematic experiences from the wealth of literary material available to them. Adapting literary works into movies is a captivating process that involves translating the written word into a visual and auditory medium. Filmmakers face the challenge of staying true to the essence of the original work while making necessary adjustments for the cinematic medium. This often requires condensing the story to fit within the typical runtime of a film. Visual and cinematic considerations play a crucial role, as filmmakers strive to find visually compelling ways to depict the story, utilizing cinematography, production design, costumes, and special effects. Literary devices, such as internal monologues or extensive descriptions, must be transformed into cinematic equivalents. Casting is vital in bringing characters to life on the screen, and adaptations may require modifications to suit the film medium. Narrative structure may need adjustments to ensure clarity and coherence. Additionally, audience' expectations for well-known literary adaptations must be balanced with the need to provide a fresh perspective. Successful adaptations strike a balance between faithfulness to the source material and utilizing the unique qualities of cinema to create an engaging experience for the audience.

Indian Perspective

Indian cinema has a rich history of adapting literary works as a source for the scripts, and also from novels, short stories, plays, and poems. Classic literature, both in Hindi and regional languages, has been a popular choice for adaptations, showcasing iconic stories. Filmmakers bring their own interpretations and artistic vision to the adaptations, infusing their unique cinematic style. The integration of music and dance, a hallmark of Indian cinema, adds an extra layer of entertainment to these adaptations. Many Indian literary adaptations have achieved both popular and critical success, bridging the gap between literature and cinema while captivating audiences with their storytelling. They serve as a testament to the talent and creativity of Indian filmmakers and have become an integral part of the cultural and artistic landscape of Indian cinema.

The evolution of Indian cinema based on literary representations has been a fascinating journey. Initially, adaptations were often straightforward and aimed at bringing popular literary works to the screen for mass entertainment. However, as Indian cinema matured, filmmakers began to explore a more nuanced approach to literary adaptations. They sought to capture the essence of the original works while infusing their own artistic vision. This led to creative reinterpretations that went beyond mere replication, resulting in innovative storytelling techniques, unique visual styles, and experimental narrative structures. With advancements in technology and a greater emphasis on visual effects, filmmakers have been able to create visually captivating worlds that do justice to the imagination and grandeur of the literary source material. Whether it's the mythical landscapes of epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* or the vivid descriptions of regional folklore, Indian cinema has pushed boundaries to bring these literary worlds to life on the big screen. Furthermore, Indian filmmakers have expanded the scope of literary adaptations to include works that address contemporary social issues and reflect the diverse cultural fabric of the country. They have utilized literature as a powerful tool for social commentary, using storytelling to shed light on topics such as gender inequality, caste discrimination, political unrest, and human rights. These adaptations have not only entertained but also served as catalysts for social change, sparking conversations and raising awareness among the audience. The evolution of Indian cinema based on literary representations has also witnessed a growing emphasis on artistic integrity and a deeper engagement with the source material. Filmmakers have collaborated closely with authors and literary experts to ensure a faithful adaptation that captures the essence of the original work. This collaboration has led to a more nuanced understanding of the literary texts, resulting in adaptations that resonate with both fans of the original works and newcomers to the stories.

Moreover, the success of Indian literary adaptations has had a significant impact on the global stage. Many Indian films have garnered international acclaim, showcasing the rich storytelling traditions of Indian literature to a global audience. This has opened doors for cross-cultural exchange and appreciation, fostering a deeper understanding of Indian literature and culture. The evolution of Indian cinema based on literary representations has seen a shift from straightforward adaptations to more artistic and socially relevant interpretations. Filmmakers have pushed the boundaries of storytelling and visual aesthetics, capturing the essence of the source material while embracing their own creative vision. These adaptations have not only entertained but also reflected the social fabric of India and introduced its rich literary heritage to a wider audience, both within the country and on the global stage.

Mythology as Source

Indian mythology has been a significant source of inspiration for movies in India, with filmmakers delving into the rich and diverse mythological tales from Hindu epics, such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, as well as several regional folklore based myths. These adaptations bring larger-than-life characters, Gods, Goddesses, and mythical creatures to the big screen, showcasing their extraordinary powers, struggles, and moral dilemmas. The stories are often presented in a grandiose and visually stunning manner, incorporating elaborate sets, costumes, and special effects to transport audiences into the mystical realms of Indian mythology. These movies not only entertain but also serve as a means of cultural preservation, passing down ancient legends and

teachings to newer generations. They explore profound philosophical and moral concepts while captivating audiences with their epic narratives. Indian mythology represented in movies allows viewers to immerse themselves in the fascinating world of gods, heroes, and mythical adventures, celebrating the rich heritage and spiritual traditions of the Indian subcontinent.

Methodology

Film adaptation theory is the transfer of a work or story, in whole or in part, to a feature film. While the most common form of film adaptation is the use of a novel as the basis, other works adapted into films include non-fiction (including journalism), autobiographical works, comic books, scriptures, plays, historical sources and even other films. Adaptation from such diverse resources has been a ubiquitous practice of filmmaking since the earliest days of cinema in nineteenth-century Europe. In contrast to when making a remake, movie directors usually take more creative liberties when creating a film adaptation. A derivative of the film adaptation theory is the literary adaptation is the adaptation of a literary source (e.g. a novel, short story, poem) to another genre or medium, such as a film, stage play, or video game. It can also involve adapting the same literary work in the same genre or medium just for different purposes. The literary text adapted in the case of Mani Ratnam movies has had a double way interaction with the viewers. In certain cases the movie has gained familiarity due to the adaptation and certain literary works have gained a sudden momentum of popularity due to its representation in the movies. Movies - a form of visual art compresses long narratives, text and literary pieces to present itself to the audience in a concise form. Movies hold the power of influencing our conversations, thinking patterns, expressions, relationships and perceptions. Mani Ratnam's movies have taken into account for its literary acclimation, its blend of literariness and screenplay without losing the essence of the original work. These movies keep infusing into our daily lives after watching it brings literature and life much closer day by day.

Drawing from the vast reservoir of ancient texts such as the *Mahabharata, Ramayana*, and other regional folklore, Mani Ratnam masterfully weaves together elements of these epics into his narratives. His movies embody the timeless themes, moral quandaries, and philosophical depth found within these literary treasures. Mani Ratnam's adaptations go beyond mere retellings of the epics. He ingeniously reimagines the characters and situations, adapting them to contemporary settings while preserving their essence. By doing so, he bridges the gap between the ancient and the modern, presenting audiences with stories that resonate across time.

In these adaptations, Mani Ratnam deftly explores the complex and multifaceted nature of human relationships. He captures the moral dilemmas, internal conflicts, and shades of grey that exist within characters, blurring the boundaries between heroes and villains. By utilizing Indian epics as a source, Mani Ratnam's adaptations offer more than just entertainment; they provide a means to explore profound human experiences, societal dilemmas, and timeless wisdom. Mani Ratnam's films reflect his deep understanding of the epics' moral and philosophical underpinnings, while also presenting them through a contemporary lens. His adaptations serve as a reminder of the enduring relevance of these ancient texts, making them accessible to a wider audience and allowing the richness of Indian mythology to resonate with viewers worldwide.
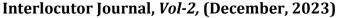
Mani Ratnam's utilization of Indian epics as a source in his movies showcases his ability to translate the essence of these timeless texts into compelling cinematic experiences. Through his adaptations, he brings forth the complex characters, universal themes, and moral quandaries of the epics, making them relevant and relatable to contemporary audiences. Ratnam's films stand as a testament to the enduring power of Indian mythology and its ability to captivate and enlighten across generations.
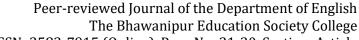
Mani Ratnam's Movie Making

Mani Ratnam, a renowned Indian filmmaker, is known for his distinctive style and his remarkable contributions to Indian cinema. His movies are celebrated for their unique blend of compelling storytelling, complex characters, and visually stunning cinematography. Mani Ratnam often weaves intricate narratives that explore a wide range of themes, including love, relationships, social issues, and political unrest. His films often delve into the human psyche, portraying characters who grapple with moral dilemmas and internal conflicts. One of Mani Ratnam's notable strengths lies in his ability to create layered and relatable characters. He portrays them with depth and complexity, allowing the audience to empathize with their struggles and aspirations. His films often revolve around strong female characters who challenge societal norms and expectations. Mani Ratnam's exploration of human relationships, whether romantic, familial, or friendships, is marked by authenticity and emotional depth, capturing the complexities of human connections.

Visually, Mani Ratnam's movies are a treat for the senses. He collaborates with talented cinematographers to create breathtaking visuals that enhance the storytelling. Whether capturing the vibrant landscapes of rural India or the bustling cityscapes, his films exude a visual richness that adds another layer of depth to the narrative. Mani Ratnam's meticulous attention to detail is evident in his production design, costumes, and use of colors, contributing to the overall aesthetic appeal of his movies. Music plays a pivotal role in Mani Ratnam's films, and he has collaborated with renowned composers to create iconic soundtracks. The integration of music and choreography seamlessly blends with the narrative, enhancing the emotional impact of the storytelling. Mani Ratnam's movies are known for their memorable songs, which have become chart-toppers and timeless classics in Indian cinema.

Throughout his career, Mani Ratnam has not shied away from addressing social and political issues in his films. He often weaves these themes into the fabric of the narrative, offering thought-provoking commentary on topics such as communalism, corruption, and societal inequalities. Mani Ratnam's approach is nuanced, encouraging viewers to reflect on these issues and sparking conversations about the pressing concerns of Indian society. His scripts carry an ideology which has parallel themes. The sub plots add vigour and multiple perspectives towards the perception of the main theme. Gopala Mani Ratnam Subramaniam, professionally known as Mani Ratnam, left his consulting job and became a filmmaker. He started off his career with *Pallavi Anu Pallavi* that earned him Karnataka state government's best screenplay award in 1983. His script etches out the liveliness of his characters in spite of criticism regarding his casting, portrayal of a particular community and their norms. His Tamil debut was in the year 1985, with the movie *Pagal Nilavu.* This was followed by the release of *Idhaya Kovil,* a remodelled script based on *Charlie Chaplin's* novella, Footlights. Mani

Ratnam's scripts right from his initial days as a filmmaker tend to carry literary references and inspiration. The familiarity that he easily ceases is majorly due to the literary acclimations that he uses as the base of his scripts. The literary pieces that are already well known, when presented with modifications according to the plot, Mani Ratnam hits the target right, capturing the attention of the viewers. Following *Mouna Ragam* in 1986 that earned him the first national award, his most celebrated work, Nayakan was released in 1987. The movie was based on *Mario Puzo's* novel *Godfather.* The character Vito was presented to the Tamil audience as Velu Naicker with familiar elements and characterization. The plot of the novel was adapted and several Indian elements were added with certain modifications in the actual plot of the novel. The modifications made it appealing to the viewers .The movie was a box office hit due to its eminence among urban sections and as an entirely new genre among the rural audience. The movie fetched a spot in the Time magazine's 'All time 100 greatest movies' along with other two Indian films in the entire list. The accolades also include three national awards and India's official entry for Oscars. The movie also had real life references and characters based on which the plot was developed.

Epics as Source

Mani Ratnam, has shown a penchant for drawing inspiration from Indian epics in his movie adaptations. He weaves elements from these timeless literary works into contemporary narratives, creating a bridge between the ancient and the modern. Mani Ratnam's exploration of Indian epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana showcases his deep understanding of their rich mythology, philosophy, and ethical dilemmas. In his adaptations, Mani Ratnam delves into the complexities of human nature, often using characters and situations reminiscent of those found in the epics. He reinterprets the moral conflicts, the battle between good and evil, and the larger-than-life heroes and heroines, breathing new life into these mythical stories. Mani Ratnam's movies embody the epic's core themes of love, duty, honor, sacrifice, and the consequences of human actions. One of the remarkable aspects of Mani Ratnam's adaptations is his ability to relate these ancient tales to contemporary social and political contexts. He seamlessly connects the universal themes of the epics to present-day issues, making them relevant and relatable to modern audiences. By blending elements from the epics with current realities, Mani Ratnam creates thought-provoking narratives that reflect on the complexities of human relationships, societal structures, and the struggle between righteousness and moral ambiguity. Mani Ratnam's artistic vision and attention to detail are evident in the visual and auditory aspects of his adaptations. He employs striking visuals, grand sets, and meticulous costume designs to transport viewers into the mythical worlds of the epics. The integration of music and dance, a hallmark of Indian cinema, adds depth and emotional resonance to his adaptations. Mani Ratnam collaborates with renowned composers to create soul-stirring soundtracks that complement the narrative and evoke the emotional essence of the epics. Through his adaptations, Mani Ratnam encourages audiences to explore and appreciate the profound wisdom embedded in Indian epics. He presents these timeless stories in a manner that appeals to a contemporary audience, bridging the gap between ancient mythology and the modern world. Mani Ratnam's adaptations serve as a reminder of the enduring relevance and universal appeal of these epic tales, highlighting their timeless messages and moral lessons.

When literary acclimations earned Mani Ratnam, commercial success and appreciation, he used *Mahabharata* as a partial source for characterization in his movie *Thalapathy* in 1991. In *Thalapathy*, Mani Ratnam's adept characterisation shines through, drawing inspiration from the complex characters of the *Mahabharata*. The film features a diverse ensemble cast, with each character embodying distinct traits and motivations. Ratnam skillfully adapts the epic's archetypal characters into relatable and multifaceted individuals, navigating their personal journeys within the modern context. The central character, portrayed by Rajinikanth, mirrors the charisma and enigmatic qualities of the legendary character Karna from the Mahabharata. Ratnam imbues him with a compelling blend of righteousness, strength, and vulnerability, capturing the essence of a conflicted hero torn between his loyalties and personal convictions.

Mammootty's character, inspired by the character of Duryodhana, showcases shades of both power and vulnerability. Ratnam explores the depths of his character's complexity, highlighting the internal struggles and conflicts he faces, as well as his unwavering loyalty to his friends. The film also delves into the contrasting dynamics between the female characters. Shobana's portrayal of a resilient and courageous woman reflects the spirit of Draupadi, while Bhanupriya's character draws inspiration from the virtuous and self-sacrificing character of Kunti. Ratnam crafts their character arcs to reflect their strength, resilience, and unwavering loyalty to their loved ones. Additionally, Ratnam excels in developing supporting characters that add layers of depth to the narrative. The film explores themes of friendship, camaraderie, and the complexities of human relationships through the interactions between the characters, capturing the essence of the Mahabharata's intricate interpersonal dynamics. Ratnam's mastery of characterisation lies in his ability to present flawed and complex individuals who are relatable and evoke empathy from the audience. Through the characters' interactions, moral dilemmas, and personal journeys, he brings forth the timeless themes and moral lessons of the Mahabharata, reimagining them within the context of contemporary society. In the movie *Thalapathy*, Mani Ratnam demonstrates his skill in bringing the layered and morally ambiguous characters of the *Mahabharata* to life, providing a fresh and captivating interpretation of these iconic personalities. The film's characterisation adds depth, emotional resonance, and relatability, elevating the narrative and contributing to its enduring impact on audiences. It explored the portrayal of the same theme with modern modifications which had both critical acclaim and commercial success upon its release. People received the movie well due to the familiarity of the base story and characters played by the favourite stars of the time. Certain scenes and elements are used to bring the shades of Karna portrayed as Surya in the movie. The usage of sun's ray as the backdrop of the scene, Surya's constant battle to establish his identity associates him to the characteristics of Karna from the *Mahabharata*, where Surya is also found in a basket from the river as Karna in the epic. These elements increase the resemblance of the epic in the plot of the movie that lead to the reception of the adaptation used.

Similarly *Raavan* (2010) was based on the epic the *Ramayana* to which Mani Ratnam added his own twist which was subjected to various versions of perception. He crafted a contemporary narrative that intertwines elements of the ancient myth with modern storytelling. Ratnam reimagined the characters and the core conflicts of the Ramayana, creating a gripping tale of love, vengeance, and redemption. The movie explores the complex relationship between the righteous protagonist, Dev, and the enigmatic antagonist, Veera, who embodies both the hero and the villain. The embodiment

is personified based on the mythological characters with symbols and detailing. Ratnam's interpretation of the *Ramayana* goes beyond the simplistic notions of good and evil, delving into the shades within human nature. The movie's visual grandeur, breathtaking cinematography, and powerful performances bring the epic landscape to life, while the haunting soundtrack adds depth and emotional resonance. *Raavan* stands as a testament to Ratnam's ability to merge the timeless wisdom of the Ramayana with contemporary narratives, offering a thought-provoking exploration of the human condition and the choices that define our destinies. The later part of the movie was modified to suit the screenplay which differed from the original plot of the epic. This created critical and religious condemnations towards the movie for the different portrayal. The effect of literary acclimation used in the movie led the audience to oppose the movie when it slightly differed from the already known story. This ultimately led the audience to conceive the movie as a wrong portrayal of the existing epic *Ramayana* though the movie intended to carry only the shades of the epic in its characterizations. This caused revisits to the original literary text by a large number of audiences to know the genuineness of the adaptation represented. The literary discussions based on the movie led to the popularity certain associative literary works of the epic *Ramayana* like Raavana Kaviyam and Periyar's Ramayana Kurippugal that had a similar shade of plot when compared to the plot of Mani Mani Ratnam's *Raavan*. His movies that have literary acclimations has always led the mob to revisit the literature to verify the modifications and representations made by him in his scripts.

Textual Adaptation

All the above mentioned films had a part of epic as their source but Mani Ratnam's *Ponniyin Selvan* released in 2022 was a direct textual adaptation of Kalki's Tamil masterpiece fiction *Ponniyin Selvan.* The fervour that the movie created among the audience of the entire nation was visible through social media and the response to the promotional campaigns of the movie. Exceptionally the movie created an inquisitiveness to the people who read the original novel of Kalki to know and develop a familiarity with the plot of the movie. Though the visual representation of the epic had slight variations due to the text to movie conversion, the effect that the movie created over the original text was undeniable. In the case of Mani Ratnam's *Ponniyin Selvan*, along with reading of the original text, various conceptions and clarifications from the novel were discussed. Similar to other movies that had epic as a source *Ponniyin Selvan* also created a sudden inquisitiveness among the audience towards the other associative less familiar texts like *Nandhipurathu Nayagi* and *Malar Solai Mangai.* The novels based on *Ponniyin Selvan's* sequels and prequels became sought after due to the increased popularity. This was done by the viewers to perceive the plot with more precision about each character of the main plot. *Nandhipurathu Nayagi* deals with the love affair of Kundavai and Vandhiyadevan while *Malar Solai Mangai* deals with more details about the character Nandhini. The movie also caused a sudden demand and hike in the sales of the bestseller novel *Ponniyin Selvan* which has never gone out of trend. The characterization, the screenplay and the dialogues faced certain critical observations from literary enthusiasts due to certain variations. At the outset Mani Ratnam's Ponniyin Selvan created a literary inquisitiveness among the Indian over the original text like no other literary adaptations ever done.

In Mani Ratnam's adaptation of *Ponniyin Selvan,* his meticulous attention to historical accuracy shines through, immersing the audience in the rich tapestry of the Chola dynasty. The grandeur of

the era is depicted through opulent sets, intricate costumes, and stunning cinematography, transporting viewers to a bygone era. Mani Ratnam's directorial finesse allows him to balance the epic scale of the narrative with intimate character moments, bringing depth and emotional resonance to the story.

One of the standout aspects of Mani Ratnam's adaptation is his ability to breathe life into the complex characters from the novel. Each actor brings their A-game, delivering powerful performances that stay true to the essence of their respective characters. From the charismatic Vandiyadevan to the enigmatic and strong-willed Kundavai, the characters are multifaceted and relatable, eliciting empathy and fascination from the audience. Mani Ratnam's screenplay weaves together multiple plotlines and subplots, creating a web of intrigue and suspense. The narrative unfolds organically, gradually revealing the political machinations, romantic entanglements, and personal conflicts that shape the fate of the Chola dynasty. The pacing of the film keeps the audience engaged throughout, with well-timed twists and turns that heighten the tension.

Visually, Mani Ratnam's film is a treat for the eyes. From sweeping vistas of ancient Tamil Nadu to intricately designed palaces and battle sequences, every frame is crafted with an eye for detail. The use of vibrant colors, stunning compositions, and evocative lighting adds to the visual splendor of the film, enhancing the overall cinematic experience. Mani Ratnam's adaptation delves into the timeless themes explored in the novel, such as loyalty, honour, love, and sacrifice. He navigates the complexities of human relationships and power dynamics, offering profound insights into the human condition. The emotional depth of the characters and their journeys resonates with the audience, leaving a lasting impact. Mani Ratnam's direct adaptation of *Ponniyin Selvan* is a masterful cinematic achievement. Through his meticulous attention to detail, compelling storytelling, and stunning visuals, Mani Ratnam successfully brings Kalki Krishnamurthy's epic novel to life on the silver screen. The film stands as a testament to Mani Ratnam's artistry and serves as an immersive and unforgettable experience for audiences, both fans of the novel and those new to the story.

The representations of indigenous and native arts, portrayal of love, phrases, in Mani Ratnam's movies highly influences the trend of the people socially and culturally. Representation of Mahakavi Bharathiar's songs in his movie *Kaatru Veliyidai* in 2016 created an interest towards the less familiar works of the renowned poet. Though the works of the poet were internationally acclaimed in the literary world, its common usage among people accelerated. The familiarity to common audiences over a poem of Bharathiar increased by the adaptation of the song *Nallai allai* in the movie. Several usage of phrases, lines from Bharathiar's poems like *Nin mugam theriya kanden* in the iconic scene of the film has entered the frequently used phrases of people than before. This is due to the impact that the movies create, representing literature in a more connected way to our daily life.

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Authors' Bio:

Ms. Veena SP is a Doctoral Research Scholar in the Department of English and Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University currently working in the area of Cultural Studies.

Dr. P. Nagaraj is a Professor and the Head of the Department of English and Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University. His area of expertise include English Language Teaching and Cognitive Language Studies.

Dr. M. Ashitha Varghese is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore. Her areas of expertise include Tribal Studies and Health Humanities.