

Abusing Women: The Pornographic Intent of Tamil Magazines

by
Snehid Group, Madras



THE run of the mill Tamil weekly struggles to express anti-women sentiments in various ways. Women are reduced to their bodies, their bodies to breasts and a womb. They exist, in these magazines, as objects of male desire and yet, the editors and publishers of these magazines would feel much wronged if we were to accuse them of being pornographic. But they do precisely what producers

of porn do. They fetishise sexual repression, cater to secret, often unacknowledged, male sexual fantasies and mutilate the female body at will! Pornography feeds on human guilt and fears about sex but is premised on the felt fact of male power. Its aim is to seek pleasure in her subservience and pain.

The editors and publishers of all these magazines are sanctimonious

men who cry shame at the very insinuation of porn. Editors, readers, writers and illustrators would never admit that they participate collectively and ritually, week after week, in what will be readily acknowledged as pornographic experiences by sensitive individuals everywhere. But there seems to prevail a general consensus among editors and readers that the vicious circle be

preserved. Some of these editors are affiliated to one or the other of the Dravidian parties while others belong to the non-official Brahmin opposition. The trash they produce is however homogeneous in its obscenity and vulgarity. The targeted readership of these magazines are the lower and upper middle classes but they are also being read by the semi-literate urban population living in slums and in small towns. One of this ilk also publishes a religious magazine—pro-Hindu and Brahminical — which carries interviews with religious heads, stories and tales of gods and goddesses and pictures of people, particularly women, expiating their sins by ritual dips in temple tanks. The male readership of this magazine is exhorted to refrain from overindulgence of any sort and particularly to avoid the lures of women. The women are advised to be pliable wives, good cooks when young, responsible mothers when middle-aged and sensible grandmothers who should undertake periodic pilgrimages. When asked how he could simultaneously publish a magazine that deals in smut and one that seeks to impart spirituality, the editor is believed to have retorted: “Why, do we not have pictures of Marilyn Munroe and of goddesses in the same house?”

The weeklies that we took up for scrutiny are *Ananda Vikatan*, *Kumudam*, *Kumkumam*, *Idhyam Pesugirathu* and *Saavi*. These magazines have set a trend in the field.

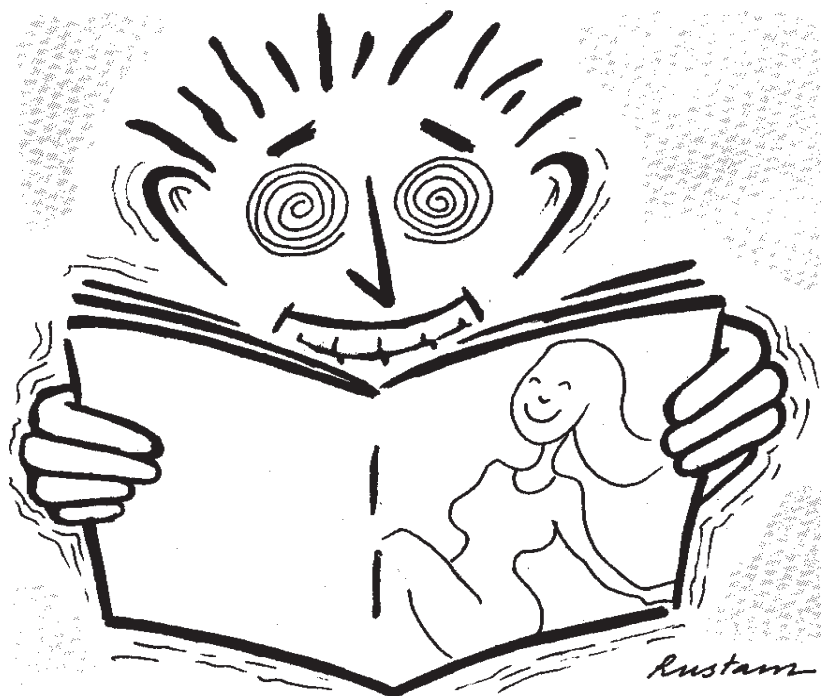
The general layout of these weeklies is the same, with the first page in almost all of them devoted to film news of one kind or another accompanied by photographs of semi-clad actresses and leering actors. These weeklies devote about 50 percent of their space to fiction, 20 percent to cinema and related news, 10 to 15 percent to politics, 10 percent to jokes and the remaining space to

trivia, quizzes, tidbits, pseudo-sociology or psychology. Whatever is written by way of social issues and problems are reproductions from English magazines and sundry other sources.

The stories that feature in these magazines are of two kinds, serial stories and short stories. Then there are one-page exercises in sheer titillation that usually begin on the tabooed theme of sex but end on a mundane note, with the sexual innuendos at the beginning of the story turning out to be the reader’s fancies. The author is supposed to have meant something else all along. The serial stories and short stories are woven around an individual’s emotional turmoil, his or her relationship with the family, with marriage, conjugal love, fears over sex and family honour. There are endless variations on these themes. Problems that an average, lower middle class man or woman of the upper and middle caste faces are touched upon but raised and resolved in such a manner that we are left in no doubt

that the authors do not mean to clarify but to confirm the status quo. The moral always is : if only we were as wise as the hero or as self sacrificing as the heroine of these tales, eternal bliss would be ours. Almost all issues that the author of the average Tamil story seems to raise are contained within the framework of the male-female relationship as if this exists in a vacuum; and, as if all problems could be reduced to love, sex and jealousy. Marriage is the answer to all ills and the family, the only refuge. The man of the stories knows best and the woman’s silence is shown as most necessary for life to go on.

The stories, on an average, portray the female character very negatively and great care is taken to ensure that male and female roles are segregated. Thus the women in these stories are always loving, caring, sacrificing, patient, forgiving, understanding and generally always willing to jump in with the male, either into life or simply into bed. Men are wise, worldly, know best and deserve a woman’s attentions. They are to be



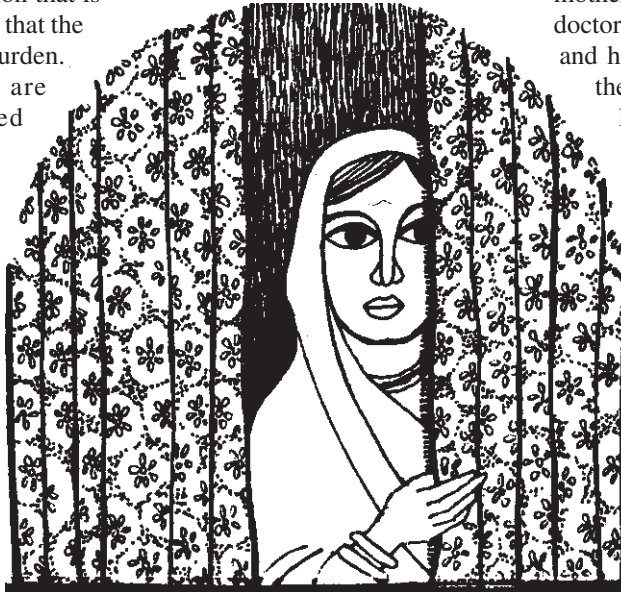
pampered, served and protected not only from diseases and bad weather but from the voracious sexual appetites of the “other woman” and sometimes even their own wives and girlfriends. Women are never referred to, even remotely, as possessing a mind. The most the male imagination concedes, where women’s intellects are concerned, is that women are cunning. They are shown forever as devising ways of spending money, fighting their in-laws, dreaming about the temporarily absent men in their lives or thinking out new menus and dress patterns.

Another disturbing notion that is endorsed by these stories is that the female child is always a burden. The men in these tales are benevolently disposed towards the girl only when she is safely married and not when she works at a job or wins prizes; of course, they are ecstatic when she cooks well, caters to the needs of the family, sings, dances, is deft with her fingers, is quiet as a mouse and willingly dependent on men. Any sign of independent thought or action in the girl child or the young woman is crushed.

The “other women” are shown as seductresses, possessing an insatiable sexual appetite which makes them seek extramarital partners. Such a woman is obsessed with finery of the most expensive kind and with jewellery. She is “modern” (a code word for promiscuity in Tamil magazines) and very ambitious for herself and her husband in order that her status in society improves. The “good” woman prays fervently and rescues her husband from the clutches of the scheming “other woman” so that the possessive male gaze is turned back on her.

While women as portrayed in the average weekly story are expendable

and easily replaceable commodities (where the loss of one can always be replaced by another), one of the their species is raised above the ordinary: the mother. Absolutely unique, she cannot be substituted with another, and if such a substitution does take place she is the wicked stepmother. The mother, as the supreme symbol of sacrifice and motherhood, alone vouchsafes the validity of a woman’s existence. All women are urged to achieve the exalted status of motherhood. As a mother, a woman is expected to be always patient, kind,



and forgiving and understanding. This myth of motherhood as an always desirable slate is so compulsively projected that women, who for one reason or another cannot become mothers, are shown as having a terrifying future to contemplate. In thus specifying their calling in life for them, these stories succeed in branding a woman’s aspirations for an independent future unworthy. One such story is that of a newly wed girl whose long cherished dream is to become a doctor and who plans to pursue her dream after marriage. Her husband approves initially; so does her mother-in-law. This approval

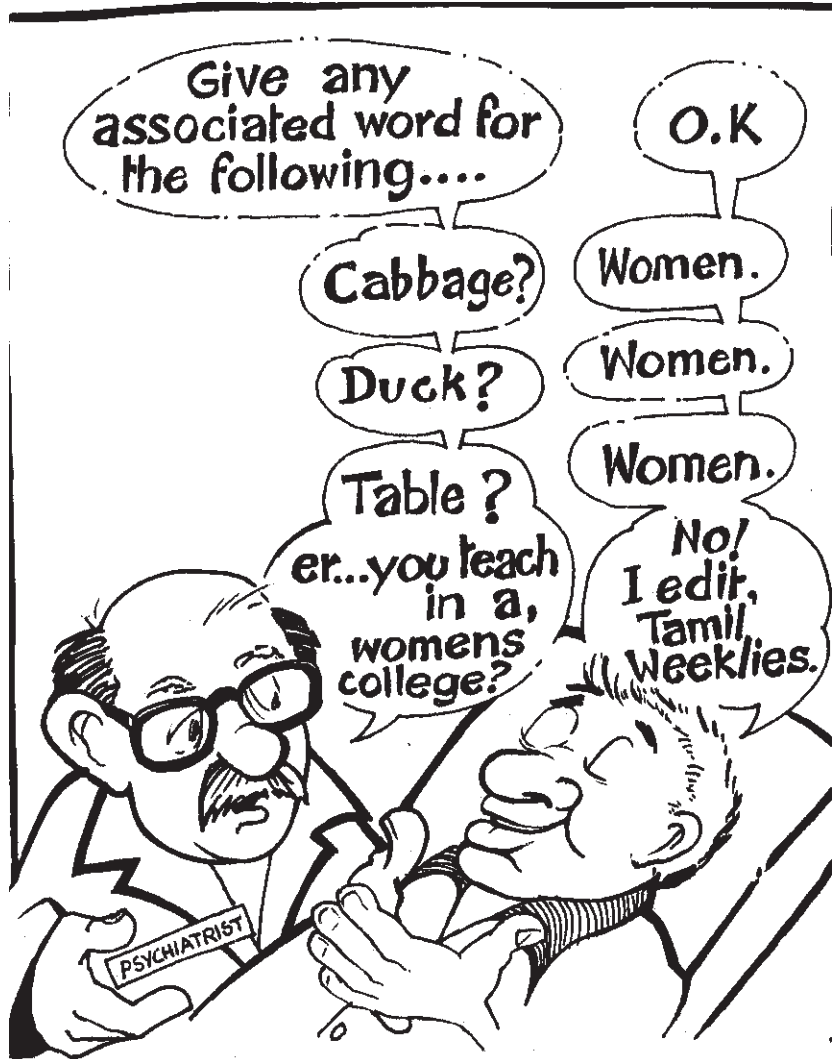
turns into hostility when she begets a girl child. Earlier, she had suggested that they postpone having a child so that she could study, but this had brought the family’s wrath on her. After her pregnancy, she persists in her efforts to study and leaves home to study abroad. She leaves her child behind with the mother-in-law and returns after having completed a brilliant few years in the USA. She discovers that in her absence her husband has become undernourished and her child is almost half dead. The child has become retarded during the time she was separated from her mother. When she takes her child to a doctor, he suggests that ‘they pray and hope that at least in the future the child will have her mother’s love and affection bestowed on her. What is conveniently elided in the narrative is the fact that the child had a loving grandmother and a doting father.

An instance of these weeklies’ spurious concern with real problems bears recounting. The story, actually an advice column written up as fiction, warns working women not to complain about their husbands to their colleagues, especially male ones. The husband flings his packed tiffin at his wife in the morning. But the wife is not to take such behavior amiss. Instead, she is to call him up and cajole him to eat lunch elsewhere.

The magazine’s verdict on divorce is that a woman or man who wants divorce is surely insane. Prostitution is considered detestable not because it reflects on the low status of women in our society but because a prostitute breaks up otherwise loving families. When, sometimes, issues of dowry are treated, the insinuation is that it is the woman’s fault. The man is shown stealing in order to pay for his sister’s dowry. If romance fails and the man walks away from a relationship to

marry a rich girl, it is because she will bring him enough dowry which he wants only to get his sister married.

Many stories bear titles that are clearly sexual *double entendres* and the narrative builds up, slowly and tortuously, always hinting at night, breasts and beds. As the tale ends we realise that all this build-up of sex is only towards a climax that has no relationship to the expectations induced. It is as if the reader is being slyly mocked and somehow made to feel guilty at whatever fantasies he might have entertained — fantasies that the magazine caters to anyway. This unabashed hypocrisy is present in the illustrations for these stories; in the short space available a picture of a big busted woman is squeezed in, either lying down or being gazed at. *Ananda Vikatan*, otherwise not particularly abusive, though full of pious injunctions to women, publishes “teenage stories.” These stories are ostensibly about of the susceptibilities of teenage bodies and minds. Hence, they deal with sex. But instead of an open and engaging treatment of real problems, we have the same old attitudes and ideas being reinforced. For instance, we have a story about a 14 year old who, while climbing a tree to retrieve a kite, chances to peep into the house next door where a half-clothed girl is preparing to bathe. Years later, the boy is now a man and he watches his son climbing a tree. Voyeurism down the ages, no less! Another story is about teenagers trying to experiment with effects of physical proximity. The word ‘sex’ is carefully avoided in the narrative. They run away for a single night and what happens is left to the reader’s imagination. Yet another story is of a girl who has just attained puberty. She reads of a dirty old man who molested a young girl and the story is of her growing fears about her loving grandfather — fears that are, ultimately, shown to be entirely misplaced.



Tamil weeklies abound in visual images of all kinds: illustrations for fiction, non-fiction, cartoons, photographs. About three-fourths of these images have to do with the female body. There is a pool of artists that all magazines use. These illustrators operate on the basis of a tacit code, one that has remained unchanging over several decades, that the female body, whatever the story, the situation and the character, be portrayed as nubile and with an hour-glass figure. Lines and curves might vary, the colour tones might be different, but all illustrators produce identical figures: full breasted women whose other features and parts of the body are sketched in only to

compound the effects produced by the bust. Reputed and intelligent authors, whose stories feature in these weeklies from time to time, do not seem to mind them being illustrated thus and many a picture has marred the effects produced by a good narrative.

The illustrations reveal other biases as well. The stories are all set in Tamil Nadu and the characters almost always Tamilian. Yet the illustrations show angular Caucasian faces and figures or else cherubic northern ones. Tamilian women, on an average, are dark, stocky and sturdy yet we are shown frail limbed, big breasted women who are often referred to as being fair complexioned.

The pornographic intent of Tamil

weeklies is perhaps most evident in the inventive use and abuse of the female body. Jokes, trivia, quizzes, fillers, all of these have to do with female sexuality. Mindless jokes on the woman's insatiable lust abound in *Kumkumam*. There are quizzes for male readers as they are asked to speculate on various parts of the female anatomy that are laid out for viewing. One such quiz was directed at various actors who were asked to name those parts of the female body they considered most desirable. Then, there are quiz photographs. We are asked to identify a photograph of a female back, semi-nude, or photographs of actresses in swimsuits, of actors and actresses in tight embraces with not much clothing on.

Jokes at the expense of women are the rule in these weeklies. Jokes, we have been told, are generally cathartic in their effects. People laugh away their fears and fantasies, hidden doubts and emotions through jokes. But considering the eternal sameness of jokes in Tamil weeklies on the domineering wife, the wife with expensive tastes, the mother-in-law obsessed with her son, or the promiscuous women who are forever planning a sexual encounter— one can only conclude that this sort of humour can hardly make for catharsis. These jokes betray an aggressive and often violent male attitudes. Illustrations for jokes and cartoons follow the general pattern of illustrations in Tamil weeklies. There is a plethora of big busted women here as well. It is as if the male pen automatically proceeds from the bustline whenever the portrait of a woman is intended.

It is possible that women read these magazines more than men. On the way home from work, waiting for a bus, trying to lessen the exhaustion of the long journey home, women read these magazines for distraction, for

they promise, in however stale a form, a dream world in which all things end well and everybody lives happily ever after. Besides, women recognise the dilemmas and problems they encounter in the world of the stories. Of course, the identification with the tale is never complete or consistent because, there are the "other women" whom readers learn to dislike and from whom they carefully distance themselves. Male readers would certainly find their "common sense" validated and ratified in these tales. But the question remains: how do women who suffer countless instances of oppression, exploitation and humiliation every day, accept without demur the ceaseless advocacy of patriarchal norms? How do women deal with the near-pornographic visuals? We are at a loss for answers. □

