

# **Vellaikaariya? Constructing Amy Jackson: Nativity and Whiteness in Tamil Cinema**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Research (MRes)

Department of Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies (MMCCS)

Faculty of Arts

Macquarie University

2017

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Politics, Nativism and Gender in Tamil Cinema .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Dravidian Ideology and Early Tamil Cinema.....	8
Sound Technology and The Debate Of ‘Tamil-Ness’ .....	11
The DK, The DMK and The Power Of Cinema.....	13
The Blurred Border Between Film and Politics .....	14
Lasting Effects of the DMK in Gendered Portrayals .....	16
Approaching Amy Jackson.....	18
<b>Chapter 2 White Is The New Brown: How We Got To Amy Jackson .....</b>	<b>21</b>
Postcolonialism and Whiteness .....	22
The Western Woman .....	26
Complications: Whiteness As An Aesthetic Of Beauty .....	32
Stigma and the Appeal of a Caucasian Female Actor .....	33
A Heroine With Glamour .....	36
<b>Chapter 3 Let’s Mix It Up: <i>Cinematic Excess, Masala</i> and</b>	
<b>Approaching Jackson as a Parallel Text .....</b>	<b>40</b>
Cinematic Excess .....	40
Masala and Excess.....	42
Inter-/Extra-textuality in Masala Hero Films .....	45
Inter-textual references to Jackson .....	47
Reading Jackson as a Parallel Text.....	48
<b>Chapter 4 Vellaikaariya?: <i>Thangamagan</i> and <i>Gethu</i>.....</b>	<b>53</b>
Golden Girl.....	54
Jackson As An Aesthetic Of Beauty .....	62
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>70</b>

## Abstract

Since Liverpool local Amy Jackson's debut in 2010, where she played a young British woman in the Tamil period-drama *Madrasapattinam*, Jackson has played exclusively Tamil/Indian characters in all of her films. Despite her Caucasian background, Jackson is nativised for these roles, her skin spray-tanned, her hair dyed, and her blue eyes hidden behind dark-brown contact lenses. More baffling are the recurrent in-film references to Jackson's Tamil characters as White. I will focus my analysis on a recurring reference to Jackson's characters as "the white chick" in two of Jackson's more recent Tamil films, *Thangamagan* (2015) and *Gethu* (2016). These films position two vastly different Amy Jacksons: the on-screen Indian and the off-screen westerner. This thesis attempts to understand how the fantasy of Jackson's femininity is produced through the clash of these two racially divergent figures. An intersectional feminist approach to *both* Jackson's gender and race is necessary in understanding her on-screen representation.

A closer look at the history of the involvement of Dravidian (nativist) politics within the Tamil film industry further indicates the need to discuss the incongruous figure of Jackson. The self-aware characteristics of Tamil cinema, referred to as *cinematic excess*, interfere with a conventional close-textual analysis; and as such, I will approach Jackson as a parallel text. References to Jackson's canonically Tamil characters as "the white chick," transgress the borders of the film text and create new meaning in the reception of both the character and the actor who plays her. Taking Jackson as its case study, this thesis is a sliver of a starting point towards a more enriched film theory for non-Western films.

This thesis is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Research at Macquarie University. I certify that this thesis is entirely my own work and that I have given fully documented references to the work of others. This thesis has not previously, in part or in whole, been submitted for a higher degree at any other university or institution.

Signed .....

(Meenaatchi Saverimuttu)



## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my gratitude to my wonderful supervisor Jane Simon, who has been so positive about my project from when I originally approached her. I cannot thank you enough for your support and encouragement. I would also like to extend my thanks to my family, especially my appa for the hours he spent assisting me with proofreading, and translation checks. Much of this thesis came about thanks to your patience over the years, listening to me (and sometimes arguing with me) as I voiced my grievances with Tamil Cinema.



## Introduction

In 2014, Amy Jackson, a British Caucasian model, was named as Chennai's Most Desirable Woman by *Chennai Times* (Dutt, 2015). Jackson has been a point of contention for myself since her entry into the South Indian Tamil film industry. The model made her acting debut in 2010, playing a British woman in the period-romance film *Madrasapattinam*. Since this role, Jackson has amassed significant popularity playing Indian/Tamil characters. Over the course of the following years, I have watched in horror as Jackson's skin was ever so slightly spray tanned, her hair was dyed black, and her light eyes hidden behind dark brown contact lenses. Through this cosmetic transformation Jackson is effectively nativised. What makes Jackson particularly fascinating is the inherent contradiction between her portrayal of archetypal Tamil women and her own identity as a Western Caucasian woman. The female characters Jackson plays are simultaneously Indian and non-Indian; conservative yet modern, she treads the line between the West and India. The image of Jackson is further complicated by the self-referential nature of the Tamil film industry, where it is common for a character to make a reference to Jackson as white, despite her characters being canonically Tamil. The Tamil film industry's self-awareness — or *cinematic excess* — requires an interdisciplinary approach. I therefore draw on film theory, stardom studies and critical gender and race theory to examine how meaning is made through in-film references to Jackson's whiteness. I argue that Jackson's femininity is simultaneously inferred through the construction of her characters as Tamil, and the deliberate shattering of this illusion through references to the reality of her ethnicity.

In this thesis I analyse how the off-screen white actor (*Outer-Jackson*) influences the reception of her on-screen Tamil character (*Inner-Jackson*). My analysis culminates in two case studies in which I look at the specific references to Jackson's Tamil characters as “the white chick.” The films I have chosen are two of Jackson's recent ventures, *Thangamagan* (2015) and *Gethu* (2016). Both of these films contain identical references to

Jackson's characters as the *vellaikkari* ("the white chick"). These *Outer-* and *Inner-* figures are intrinsically linked by these references; as it is in these instances, where the Jackson who exists outside of the filmic text collapses with the Jackson who lives within the film, where meaning is made. Given the frequency with which these extra-textual references are present within Tamil films, it is virtually impossible to disconnect the text from the social context in which it was produced and consumed. Therefore, when analysing the narrative function of the Tamil *Inner-Jackson* it is impossible to avoid looking at the implications of Caucasian *Outer-Jackson*.

It is necessary to state here that within the Tamil film industry it is incredibly uncommon to find a female actor of Tamil descent. The reasoning behind the use of non-Tamil female actors is discussed in Chapter Two. However, I posit that Jackson's presence in Tamil cinema is particularly peculiar; especially given her aggressive cosmetic nativisation and the overt and derogatory references to Jackson as a "white chick". These instances position Jackson as fundamentally different to the native characters within the films. A major instigator in establishing this native/foreign dichotomy is the inextricability of Tamil cinema and Dravidian politics. Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu evolved as a reaction against colonial oppression and caste-based inequality (Pandian, 1994). Tamil cinema is and has always been political; in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century, the dominant Dravidian party in Tamil Nadu, the *Dravidia Munetra Kazhagam* (DMK, Dravidian Progress Federation), produced numerous films which promoted Tamil language and culture as the epitome of virtue for the masses. The prioritisation of Tamil culture led to a disdain for non-Tamil cultures (Hardgrave, 1975, 2008; Lakshmi, 1990, 2008). These themes continue to pervade contemporary Tamil cinema and, as such, greatly impact audience reception of Jackson. However, contemporary Tamil cinema is anything but a relic of the past. Tamil cinema's extreme nativist politics are continually at arms with Tamil cinema's desire to portray an authentic picture of contemporary life in Tamil Nadu's

cities; modernity is thus unavoidable. Jackson is thus truly a byproduct of the tensions between postcolonialism and globalisation.<sup>1</sup>

My own relationship with Tamil cinema is constantly in flux. Tamil films have made up much of my childhood. However, as I grew older my fondness for these films would be routinely challenged by their problematic representations of gender and sexuality. As such, I find myself struggling within this thesis to find the balance between emotion and analysis. But as Rosi Braidotti states, “one’s intellectual vision, is not a disembodied mental activity, rather, it is closely connected to one’s place of enunciation” (1991: 160). So while I wish to avoid assigning Jackson value, based on whether or not she ‘belongs’ in Tamil cinema, I also endeavor to consider my own emotional involvement with Jackson’s on-screen presence.

My concerns about how to situate my own subjective response alongside a critical analysis of Jackson were reinforced when I came across a recent interview with Jackson on YouTube. The video, titled ‘BOLLYWOOD vs HOLLYWOOD,’ was uploaded by Hazel Hayes (ChewingSand), and has little to do with Indian cinema; in fact it is actually a sponsored advertisement for Amazon’s new Indian entertainment channel, Heera. The interview speaks volumes to how many Westerners, Jackson included, view Indian cinema as subpar to Western industries. Discussing her role in her first British film *Boogiemann* (2017), Jackson states that the film “has a link with India...which is obviously why they cast me [...] it [Indian cinema] was just the perfect stepping stone [to the British film industry] (Hayes, 2017).” This statement essentially positions Indian cinema as inferior to the British film industry/Hollywood.

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<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about this tension in relation to cinema. See, for example, Dovey, 2012; Kaplan, 1997; Hayward, 2000; Sarkar, 2008). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to unpack the complex relationship between globalization and postcolonialism in Tamil cinema, I consider Jackson as a manifestation of these tensions.

The irony of two white women sitting in a room in London and discussing Indian cinema is palpable. Over the course of the near ten-minute video there is no mention of the problematics of Jackson acting in roles where she is positioned as Indian. The two even go as far as to discuss how Jackson is a positive on-screen role model to Indian women. Despite Hayes' history of spouting pro-diversity representation in cinema there is a fundamental lack of understanding, or perhaps a deliberate avoidance of, how Jackson's portrayal of Indian women is inappropriate. It seems 'diversity' to Hayes, only applies to Western (and Caucasian) women in Western industries. Other responses given by Jackson in this interview indicate her problematic and superficial views on her portrayal of Indian women. Discussing her second film *Thaandavam* (2012) she states, "I played an Anglo-Indian girl [...] sarees, head-to-toe, and very *indianised*, which was great" (Hayes, 2017). While the meaning of the word 'indianised' remains a mystery to myself, the implication of this statement seems to be that Indian clothing and culture are nothing more than an accessory to Jackson.<sup>2</sup>

The interview highlights the necessity for an intersectional feminist approach when discussing Jackson. We cannot ignore the fact that Jackson's films hold cultural gravitas and influence in Tamil Nadu and Jackson's presence in Tamil cinema is symptomatic of the lack of representation in local cinema for Tamil/Indian women. Thus, we cannot frame Jackson simply in terms of her ethnicity but must frame her in terms of her position as a woman from the West, a privilege she exemplifies in the interview with Hayes.

Jackson repeatedly praises both Bollywood and Amazon's Indian channel as "internationally recognized" (Hayes, 2017). What these generalising statements heavily imply is that these two phenomena, by virtue of being well known in the West, carry a certain legitimacy over other regional cinemas. Further, Jackson states that her, "first film was actually a Tamil film, which is even more random than an *actual Bollywood film*

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<sup>2</sup> The term of Indianisation is commonly used to discuss the expansion of Indian culture across South and Southeast Asia (Cœdès, 1968, Vivekanandan, 2018, Wales, 1948). However, it is clear from the context of Jackson's comment that the actress is not intending to highlight this particular phenomenon.

[emphasis added]” (Hayes, 2017). This statement is again based on the fact that the Tamil film industry is not as well known in the West and thus has even less legitimacy than the already ‘subpar’ (in Jackson’s view) Bombay film industry. India’s fifteen fully functional film industries are often categorised as “Bollywood” by Western audiences. However, it seems rather presumptuous of Jackson, a woman who boasts about her seven years of experience in India to make such broad generalisations in labeling herself as a Bollywood star. These statements point toward a dismissal of India’s many regional film industries on Jackson’s part. Stephen Putnam Hughes (2010) is quick to critique the ethno-linguistic boundaries bolstered by Indian cinema academics, suggesting that these boundaries are ambiguous at best.<sup>3</sup> However, I would posit that it is vital at least to be aware of these linguistic boundaries, so as to not fall within the trap of generalising all Indian cinema as analogous to one another. As Vijay Devadas notes,

Cinema in India is not a singular machine of representation: it is a multiple and multifarious film industry that includes a variety of cinemas (Urdu, Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil and Assamese) marked by cultural, linguistic and regional differences (2013, 219).

These ethno-linguistic differences make each industry’s individual characteristics difficult to ignore. As I discuss in Chapter One, the Tamil film industry portrays very specific narratives, which are deeply entrenched in the Tamil language and culture. Bollywood’s supposed legitimacy, based on its international status, further reifies Bollywood as *the* Indian cinema, as an industry that projects, in my opinion, a non-existent, pan-Indian identity. This thesis is particularly concerned with the specificity of the Tamil film industry, and as such I will not be examining instances of *cinematic excess* in any other industry.

This thesis has four chapters. The first chapter focuses on the history of Tamil cinema, with a particular focus on Dravidian (nativist) politics in Tamil Nadu and the

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<sup>3</sup> Hughes focuses his argument on early silent cinema which without dialogue, could be spread throughout India without linguistic issues.

imbrication of politics and cinema throughout the course of the twentieth century. The purpose of tracing the history of Dravidianism and cinema is to highlight not only the intensity of Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu, but also the extent to which Jackson is foreign in an industry that boasts such native ideals. My second chapter follows on from this and engages with critical race theory and discussions of whiteness and race in cinema and popular media. In this chapter, I delve into the cosmetic nativisation of Jackson, and how this facilitates Jackson's racial mobility. Further, this chapter discusses the ever-prevalent stigma around female actors in the Tamil film industry and considers the idea that Jackson's Western background may paradoxically make her the perfect candidate for portraying a Tamil woman. My third chapter considers how Western film theory can be amended and expanded upon in order to better analyse Tamil films. Here, I place a focus on instances of *cinematic excess*: the self-referential and self-aware references in Tamil films. Finally, in Chapter Four I focus on in-film references to Jackson as "the white chick" in the films *Thangamagan* (2015) and *Gethu* (2016). References to the Caucasian *Outer-Jackson* in relation to the Tamil *Inner-Jackson* create jarring moments in which fiction and reality converge. It is through these moments of *cinematic excess* that the deeper implications of Jackson's presence come to light.



## Chapter 1

### Politics, Nativism and Gender in Tamil Cinema

My approach to Tamil cinema is concerned with identity politics, and more specifically with the type of ethno-linguistic identity constructed and voiced by contemporary Tamil cinema. Given India's postcolonial history, and particularly the dominance of Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu, Amy Jackson appears far from fitting the archetypal representations of femininity in Tamil cinema. It would appear that, somehow, Jackson has managed to fly under the radar, avoiding criticism despite the prevalence of anti-colonial Dravidian politics in Tamil cinema. However, tracing the history of Tamil cinema, with a particular focus on ideologies that seem to be intrinsically linked to Tamil-ness, clarifies Jackson's popularity within the industry; not as an enigmatic stranger, but as the culmination of the struggle between multiple, opposing ideologies.

In this chapter, I trace the formation of Dravidian politics alongside the emergence of silent and talkie cinema. While early cinema and Dravidian politics were not closely linked, these two entities ultimately converged in the late 1940s, with the emergence of the *Dravidia Munetra Kazhagam* (DMK) alongside the film industry. The DMK's influence in cinema led to multiple tropes used in Cinema, referred to as *cinematic excess*, which blurred the cinematic world and reality. In-film extra-textual references to the real party and its leaders, set in motion not only the dominant nativist narratives of the State's political rhetoric, which this chapter expands upon, but also many of the narrative devices that make contemporary Tamil cinema so rife with *excessive* moments. The era of contemporary cinema that we are experiencing seems far removed from the formative days of early cinema. However, as I explain later in this chapter, many of the unique characteristics boasted by Tamil cinema have their origins in the traditions of either early silent or DMK-era films. The purpose of tracing the history of Dravidianism and cinema is to highlight not only the intensity of Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu, but also the extent to which Jackson

is foreign in an industry that is entrenched in century-old nativism. Tamil cinema's political history is a vital foundation upon which I unpack Jackson's popularity and on-screen signification.

Early silent cinema in India evolved almost seamlessly out of the vastly popular theatre tradition. Travelling theatres toured across the nation, performing stage retellings of well known mythological and folk tales, and religious epics. These stories were particularly successful given the fact that audiences were acutely familiar with the narrative arcs of these tales. Subsequently, silent films were simply mythological theatre recorded on celluloid. It is not difficult to see how these mythological tales of justice, where the hero would triumph over evil and restore equilibrium, became thinly veiled vehicles for political and social messages. Tamil film historian, Theodore S. Baskaran states that southern Indian theatre was incredibly nationalistic and pushed various anti-colonial ideologies between the years of 1919 and 1945 (1981: 21; 2013: 128). The increasing popularity of theatre coincided well with the need for mass dissemination of anti-colonial ideology, and hence succeeded in mobilizing masses of people from all castes against colonial forces.<sup>4</sup>

### **Dravidian Ideology and Early Tamil Cinema**

Cinema, unsurprisingly, followed in the steps of nationalistic theatre and became vastly politicised over the course of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By the 1950s, cinema had become the primary vehicle for Dravidian propaganda. Dravidian politics continues to be the primary ideology in contemporary Tamil Nadu. Dravidianism is fundamentally based on the dichotomy in India, of Aryan (Northern) and Dravidian (Southern) cultures. As I will explain, much of Dravidianism stems from the dissatisfaction amongst those from the southern Dravidian states with the hegemonic social customs and political policies which

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<sup>4</sup> Theatre and cinema's subsequent popularity can be attributed to the fact that neither medium discriminated against those of lower classes/castes. Citizens of all castes could participate in and be mobilized by what Robert Hardgrave calls the "guerilla theater" of Tamil nationalism" (2008: 61).

bolstered Sanskrit (brahminical culture) and Hindi over other languages and cultures, particularly Tamil.

M.S.S. Pandian (1994) points out the problematic nature of accounts of the surfacing of Dravidian ideology in Tamil Nadu. Pandian states that generalised statements about the Dravidian movement's emergence from the Tamil Revival Movement only facilitate for a simplistic understanding of Dravidian politics. The clash between the elitist Tamil Revival Movement and the iconoclastic Self-Respect Movement contributed immensely to the formation of Dravidian cinema.

Pandian first establishes some context to the early versions of Dravidian ideology, identifying three important features within late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Tamil society, which facilitated the initial emergence of the Tamil revival:

...(1) the near monopoly over the public administration of Madras Presidency exercised by the English educated Brahmins; (2) their [the brahmins'] privileging of Sanskrit as their own distinct cultural marker and the simultaneous inferiorisation of Tamil culture/identity by them; and (3) the efflorescence of a kind of Orientalist scholarship which offered a picture of glorious Tamil/Dravidian past/identity as distinct from Sanskrit/Aryan past/identity (1994: 85).

Ethno-linguistic identity thus seems to have been a vital factor in establishing authority. Brahmins, who already possessed religion- and caste-based privilege, were further authorised in colonial structures by their bilingualism, and their prioritisation of English and Sanskrit over the 'everyman' language, Tamil.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1800s, Orientalist scholars in Chennai (then Madras) 'discovered' an unfamiliar body of Tamil literature (Hughes, 2010: 223; Pandian 1994: 88). The Vellala

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<sup>5</sup> This disdain for Tamil, and specifically the favouring of Sanskrit comes from the dominant perception of Sanskrit as the language of divine beings. Many Brahmins, most notably as far back as Subramania Diksitar in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, have passionately held the belief that the Tamil and resulting literature were undoubtedly derivatives of Sanskrit (Pandian, 1994).

Saiva elite<sup>6</sup>, non-Brahmin worshippers of Shiva, adopted this research as a means of promoting the 'true' Tamil form of worship. This gave way to the *Thani Tamil Iyyakam* (Pure Tamil Movement) started by Maraimalai Adigal in 1916; the movement was focused on ridding the Tamil language of Sanskrit-derived vocabulary and promoting the worship the Southern/Dravidian god Shiva, as opposed to the worship of more Northern gods, such as Vishnu, Indra and Varuna (Hughes, 2010: 226; Pandian, 1994: 91).<sup>7</sup> In pushing forward his own Dravidian and caste-based ideologies, Adigal, a Vellala Saivite, perhaps deliberately, simplified and labelled all Brahmins as Northerners, by virtue of their societal privilege as Aryan.

Adigal's writing problematised much of Hinduism as promoting Brahmin hegemony (Hughes, 2010; Pandian 1994). However, the crux of Adigal's argument seemed to stem from the notion that by virtue of their own religious practices, the Vellala elite perceived themselves to be far more civilised than others; in particular the Aryan Brahmins. While Adigal attempted to liberate non-Brahmins from the northern version of the caste system, his proposed counter-argument to the caste hierarchy was a system that placed his own kind, the Vellala elite, at the top (Pandian, 1994: 94).

The *Suya Mariyathai Iyakkam* (Self-Respect Movement) arose in the 1920s, alongside the *Thani Tamil Iyyakam*. For some time, these two movements were closely linked, as they had a similar belief in the collapse of the caste system. However, the *Suya Mariyathai Iyakkam*, led by E. V. Ramaswamy, placed little importance on religion, Saivite or not. Ramaswamy's approach to Dravidianism was a rationalist one. While he shared a similar enlightenment framework to Adigal, Ramaswamy had a far more sophisticated understanding of power and oppression. Pandian states that,

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<sup>6</sup> According to Pandian, "[v]ellalas were a dominant landowning caste in the Tamil countryside, known for their strict adherence to a 'Brahminical' form of Saivism with vegetarianism as one of its key tenets. However, given their intimate links with cultivation, they were treated as Sudras within the fourfold division of caste system. In pre- colonial Tamilnadu, they drew their power from land control, access to bureaucracy especially at the village level, and strong alliance with Brahmins" (Pandian 1994: 100).

<sup>7</sup> This claim was despite the fact that a vast group of southern Brahmins, the Iyers, also worshipped Shiva.

[the] far reaching critique developed by E.V. Ramaswamy established Hinduism as constituting multiple relations of power and not merely caste relations (as represented in the early 'Dravidian' ideology) (1994: 99).

From a contemporary feminist perspective, Ramaswamy's approach to Hinduism and oppression shares many characteristics with intersectionality; understood here as a stance that considers the intersections between gender, race and sexuality. Ramaswamy, himself, was a strong supporter of women's liberation, arguing that,

[w]hat Hindu religion tells about women is that god created women at birth itself as prostitutes; so they should not be allowed to be free at any time; they should be controlled by the father in the childhood [and] by their sons during old age [...] There is more such evidence in religious shastras. Their intention is nothing other than making women slaves of men (Ramaswamy, 1984: 8485, cited in Pandian, 1994: 98-99).

Ramaswamy's movement was one that advocated for mass inclusion. Lower caste citizens, women and the poor were mobilised through the *Suya Mariyathai Iyakkam*. Ramaswamy was clear that all levels of oppression must be addressed, so while a lower-class man may be subjugated in relation to the upper-class Brahmin, his position of power over his wife, mother or daughter must also be addressed and rectified.

### **Sound Technology and The Debate Of 'Tamil-Ness'**

Despite the growing popularity of the Self-Respect Movement throughout the 1920s, silent Tamil films were relatively unaffected by Dravidian politics and notions of pro-Tamil authenticity; however, this is not to say they were apolitical. Popular across the nation, Tamil-produced silent films, were played throughout India with intertitles translated into various languages to enable easy distribution (Hughes, 2010: 214). Stephen Hughes

discusses the debate surrounding Tamil authenticity in film. This debate arose during the 1930s, with the introduction of pre-recorded sound technologies.

Before the introduction of sound technologies, silent films from across India were circulated with little consideration for regional identity. However, in the 1930s sound became a major factor in restricting audience patronage, with linguistically delineated regions being less receptive to films in non-local languages. Despite lower audience engagement, films such as *Kalidas* (1931) continued to pander to a national audience, including songs and dialogue in multiple languages within a singular film. Despite being labeled as the first Tamil film, critics were quick to question the authenticity of *Kalidas*' Tamil-ness. Language was not the only consideration for categorising films as 'Tamil,' other factors, such as cast and crew, were also a cause for criticism, especially given the lack of local production facilities (Hughes, 2010: 215-216).<sup>8</sup>

By the mid-30s, the ever-rising popularity of Dravidian politics, made marketing of films as authentically 'Tamil' a necessity, and strides were made to facilitate local sound production in Tamil Nadu. By the 1940s, the majority of Tamil films made were being produced entirely in South India. However, this was still not enough to quell critics, who had problems with the continued overlap between regional industries. Crew members, arriving from all across British India and even some parts of Europe, continued to collaborate on South Indian productions. The Tamil and Telugu industries, in particular, had considerable overlap, sharing technicians, actors, studios and songs.<sup>9</sup> Hughes notes that by the 1930s the question of Tamil-ness in cinema became further complicated by the growing popularity of both the Tamil Revival and the successive Dravidian movement (Hughes, 2010).

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<sup>8</sup> Sound technology was only available in Bombay and Calcutta at the time, and as such Tamil casts and crew were sent to these cities to shoot, only to be directed and produced by non-Tamil production companies (Hughes, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> This continues to be the case with contemporary Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam films. The fourth southern industry, the Kannada industry, also shares its resources, although to a lesser extent as it is the smallest and least developed of the four industries.

## The DK, The DMK and The Power Of Cinema

In 1944, E. V. Ramaswamy's Self-Respect Movement had evolved into the *Dravidia Kazhagam* (Dravidian Federation, DK) (Hardgrave, 2008: 61). Ramaswamy's intention was to continue on from the Self-Respect Movement, and "demand [...] separate and independent state of Dravidasthan" (Hardgrave, 2008: 61). While the DK was successful in mobilising the public in favour of Dravidianism, it was not until 1949, when young screenwriters C. N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi founded the breakaway *Dravidia Munnetra Kazhagam* (Dravidian Progress Federation, DMK), that Dravidian politics, with the assistance of cinema, took hold as the dominant ideology of Tamil Nadu (Hardgrave, 2008); it continues to dominate the politics of the State to this day.

I delve into the mass appeal of DMK stars, and how reality and fiction converge, with a particular focus on the prominent politician and actor MGR later in this chapter.<sup>10</sup> Here, I will briefly discuss how the major ideologies employed by the DMK in popular films facilitated for the blurred border between on- and off-screen representations. As an offshoot of the DK, the DMK shared similar views on social justice with its precursor. However, considering the development of the DMK's policies throughout the decades, it is clear that garnering votes and securing electoral positions soon took precedence over Ramaswamy's more complex social justice ideologies (Hardgrave, 2008; Pandian, 1994). The DMK, in some ways more similar to the Tamil Revival Movement than the Self-Respect Movement, focused its efforts purely on caste-based inequalities and the North/South dichotomy. Films, particularly those written by Annadurai and Karunanidhi, most notably *Manohara* (1954), had an acute focus on a historical Tamil past. Hardgrave notes that, "[t]he Tamil past [and] its rich language and culture are glorified in story and song" (2008: 64). This focus on the past was a means of glorifying a 'pure' Tamil, something that was considered to be stifled by the ever-present North and corrupted by the

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<sup>10</sup> MGR stands for the actor's full name, Marudur Gopalan Ramachandran; MGR was his screen name and soon became his popular name.

vestiges of colonial modernity. In the idealistic historical space, screenwriters Annadurai and Karunanithi were able to explore contemporary inequalities through allegory. In films such as *Velaikaari* (1949) *Parasakhthi* (1952) caste inequalities become priests overstepping their bounds, monarchs tyrannising their subjects or landlords extorting money from tenants and workers. In all films, the same ideologies are pushed: the reinstatement of Tamil as the dominant culture and language, the return to traditional gender and familial roles, and the abolition of caste hierarchy. The most important message presented in these films was of course a reminder to the public to vote for the DMK in upcoming elections.

### **The Blurred Border Between Film and Politics**

The nature of DMK propaganda and the fact that cinema was so closely imbricated within the political climate of Tamil Nadu, facilitated a certain level of self-referentiality and self-awareness within Tamil Cinema, which I refer to as *cinematic excess*. DMK films featured party slogans and the iconic Party flag, and often a character called “Anna,”<sup>11</sup> a likeness of Annadurai, who appeared in DMK films to provide advice and spout the ideologies of the party (Hardgrave, 2008: 64). This is not to say, however, that the blurred distinction between the film world and the real world did not exist before the DMK. While the party certainly utilised these characteristics in a way that had not been done before, the nature of the transgressive fourth wall can be attributed largely to Hindu worship practices and the use of images in religious cinema. The nature of worship in Hinduism is particularly fitting for cinematic religious practices, as the ‘likeness’ of a deity is viewed as a direct representation of the deity itself. As such, seeing a likeness of a deity as a statue in the temple, or a small illustrated postcard, is no different from witnessing a likeness of the deity on screen; all images are equally worthy of worship.

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<sup>11</sup> Meaning ‘Older Brother’ but also a nickname for Annadurai



Kalpana Ram (2008) explores the blurred distinction between the diegetic and non-diegetic devotional space in the popular genre of *Amman* (mother goddess) films in Tamil Cinema. Ram states that contemporary "Amman cinema draws on the power of non-cinematic cultural practices" (2008: 56). This subgenre of religious film, centered around the goddess *Amman*, is vastly popular amongst rural women despite middle-class conceptions that contemporary mythological cinema is nothing more than "a conscious ploy...[which] preys on backwardness and illiteracy" (Ram, 2008: 49). Ram disagrees, arguing that *Amman* cinema is simply the use of modern technologies, which enhance traditional religious practices. Ram claims that *Darshan*, the gaze between the worshipper and deity, is immensely significant in Hindu religious practices, and similarly significant when audiences watch goddess films. As *Darshan* is performed with any image of the deity, the cinematic image is no different. Ram states that it is common for audience members to pray alongside on-screen devotees and in these instances the theatre itself is transformed into a devotional space.<sup>12</sup>

Early and contemporary mythological films include quasi-ethnographic footage of goddess festivals which, "establish a vivid sense of continuity between [...] the world outside and the world of the film," further enriching the religious experience of witnessing *Amman* on-screen and dissolving the border between reality and film (Ram, 2008: 56). While not mentioned explicitly by Ram, the blurring between fiction and reality in the religious space of the cinema is not exclusive to *Amman* films but is a common factor of many folk/mythological films both past and present. The increased ambiguity between on- and off-screen figures has continued to evolve from early mythological cinema, elevating the hero to mythic proportions both on- and off-screen, which aided actors, such as MGR, advancing their political careers (as mentioned by Srinivas, 2006; Dickey, 1993; 2001;

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between Tamil cinema and Hinduism see Devadas, V. & Velayutham S. (2010) Hinduism and Tamil Cinema. In A. Jacobsen & et al (eds) (Eds.), *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Volume 2: Texts, Rituals, Arts, Concepts* (pp. 651–658). Leiden: Brill.

2008). These actors, particularly MGR and Sivaji Ganesan, were able to utilise their on-screen superhuman characters in order to garner votes in the real world, by drawing comparisons between their on- and off-screen personalities. While not elevated to mythical status like her male costars, Jackson's off-screen presence similarly influences and interacts with her on-screen characters, as I discuss in Chapter Four.

### **Lasting Effects of the DMK in Gendered Portrayals**

In addition to the excessive archetypes established by the DMK, its steadfast nativism also created a set of gendered archetypes which continue to haunt contemporary Tamil films. In harking back to the past, the films of the DMK effectively undid the efforts of women's liberation activists in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; in the DMK's ideal world, the place for women was undoubtedly behind men. Tracing the construction of the DMK heroine reveals the foundation upon which the complicated portrayal of Jackson is built.

C.S. Lakshmi (2008)<sup>13</sup> traces the history of the portrayal of women in Tamil films. She starts at the dichotomous relationship between the mother and the whore, which started well before cinema, in mythological tales, and works her way up past the more 'liberated' woman of the 70s and 80s (discussed further in Chapter Two). Lakshmi concludes that although there has been a substantial change in the portrayal of women in Tamil cinema, the dichotomous relationship between pure and impure women remains very much the same as in pre-film narratives; something Lakshmi credits to the DMK. Lakshmi reiterates that Annadurai and Karunanithi's idealisation of the past established the notion of a Tamil woman's 'responsibility' to remain traditional. Lakshmi states,

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<sup>13</sup> I refer to authors using Indian/Tamil naming conventions by their given names, rather than attempting to fit these conventions into Western academic conventions.

[t]he good woman embodies all that Tamil culture stands for where women are concerned. She is chaste, intelligent, motherly and divine. The bad woman is a coquette, a temptress and a loudmouth who finally gets her dues (2008: 17).

In this simplistic formula there were only two types of women: the mothers and wives, who remain pure and traditional, and the impure whores, who stray from their virginal responsibilities. Lakshmi concludes by arguing that contemporary films are not better than their 1970s counterparts. “Contemporary Tamil cinema has ways of dealing with the contradictions of wanting to bare women and keeping them pure” she states (2008: 27). Hence, to maintain the heroine’s purity there is an alternative woman, often seen in the form of the ‘item dancer,’<sup>14</sup> who is impure for the express purpose of being semi-clothed on screen (2008: 27). These alternative women are the contemporary whores, sometimes quite literally, and continue to perpetrate the pure mother/impure whore dichotomy.

Sathiavathi Chinniah (2008) continues on a similar strain to Lakshmi, and traces the morphing of the sari-clad traditional passive female protagonist to the contemporary *katã-nāyaki* (heroine), a pleasurable object accepted and perpetuated by Tamil cinema because of her containment within the strict ideas of Tamil womanhood and *karpu* (chastity). Chinniah states that Tamil Cinema took as its reference two archetypical female characters from Tamil literary history, Kannaki and Vasuki.<sup>15</sup> These women pertain very clearly to the Mother side of Lakshmi’s dichotomy. Chinniah adds to this idea by stating that by the 1990s the modern *katã-nāyaki* combines both the whore and the virgin. According to Chinniah, the modern *katã-nāyaki* is chaste but, in an attempt to adapt to globalised culture, is contradictorily objectified by the film. As discussed in the following chapters, Jackson is very much an incarnation of Chinniah’s contemporary *katã-nāyaki*. Straddling the border of

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<sup>14</sup> Item dancers are women who appear within a short song sequence in films. These women have no importance to the plot, and, as the term ‘item’ may suggest, exist with the sole purpose of being objectified.

<sup>15</sup> Kannaki, from the Tamil epic *Silappathikaram*, is a wife who remains faithful to her philandering husband, even after he squanders their wealth on a *devadasi* (temple dancer). The king of Madurai eventually wrongly kills Kannaki’s husband and Kannaki burns the city to the ground in a fit of grief and rage. The second archetype, Vasuki, is a woman who in contrast to Kannaki is treated well by her husband, but akin to Kannaki remains chaste and faithful to her husband (Chinniah, 2008: 30).

the tease and the worthy virgin, Jackson's films utilise her Caucasian background and body to subtly infuse Jackson's traditional characters with a modernity that can easily be objectified.

### **Approaching Amy Jackson**

Jackson's on-screen femininity is thus equally inferred by pre-existing archetypes of Tamil femininity, and her Western background. She is in many ways the evolution of Chinniah's *katā-nāyaki*, a step further away from tradition. It is impossible to ignore Jackson's race, as overtly stated by all of her films, which seem unable to gloss over her cosmetic nativisation without at least partially referencing her difference. Consequently, I find it necessary to discuss Jackson as a parallel text to her films. Vijay Mishra, Peter Jeffrey and Brian Shoesmith (1989) discuss an alternative approach to Bombay cinema (referred to as Hindi cinema in this thesis) that considers the male actor as a parallel text, which theorists must take into consideration when reading films. The authors begin by problematising the use of stardom authors like John Ellis and Richard Dyer when approaching Hindi cinema. While stardom studies proves useful when approaching Hollywood films, it does not speak for non-Western industries. Accordingly, they propose that the reading of Hindi cinema can be successful with the use of these theories but only if the author is keeping the cultural paradigms of India in mind while doing so. In Hindi cinema, it seems stardom is deemed far more important than the star himself; fanzines that detail the life of the actor have an immense cultural impact and feed into the perception of the actor's screen presence and characters.

While Mishra, Jeffrey and Shoesmith make some excellent points about the workings of Hindi Cinema and the way audiences react to male stars, there are stark differences between Hindi cinema and Tamil cinema. They state that "[s]ince [the actor] is our parallel text, we do not make the distinction between character and actor" (1989: 59). The Tamil actor can also be read in a similar manner, as Tamil cinema consistently draws attention to

the fluidity of actor and character. Having said this, these authors argue that the actor in real life is more appealing than the characters themselves, something I disagree with in the context of contemporary Tamil cinema. When a contemporary Tamil film references the actor rather than the character, it tends to be in reference to the tradition of characters he or she has played, rather than to, for example, his or her marriage, children, or age. In other words, Tamil audiences care less for the real Amy Jackson and her life in London, and more for the *legend* of Amy Jackson, the dazzling Western model, who occasionally will star alongside their favourite actors. As such, I will be approaching Jackson using Christine Geraghty's (2007) idea of the *star-as-performer*. Rather than focusing on the celebrity lifestyle, I focus on the much more culturally poignant canon of Jackson's performative works.

Throughout this chapter, I have contextualised the Tamil film industry prior to Jackson's debut. Heavily influenced by the traditional values of the DMK, much of Tamil cinema is dictated by nativist ideologies that shape not only the narrative of the film, but the roles actors, including Jackson, must play. The fact that cinema was imbricated within the DMK's politics for so long facilitated for the *excessive* nature of Tamil cinema and the frequent disturbance of the fourth wall, as seen through extra-textual references to the party and the display of party memorabilia in DMK films. While this was already a characteristic of early mythological cinema, the DMK's social justice messages utilised this function in order to mobilise citizens against caste and northern hegemonies, as well as for electoral advantage. The focus on the caste system and the dichotomy between the northern and southern states of India, however, came at a cost; non-caste based inequalities, such as women's rights, were disregarded in favour of a holistic Dravidian identity. As discussed by Lakshmi and Chinniah, this had a major impact on female representation in films throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and forged archetypes of pure and impure women, which continue to pervade contemporary cinematic representations. There have been some profound changes in the portrayal of heroines between the 1940s and the present; however,

the key change I wish to focus on is the convergence of the mother and whore figure into one simultaneously pure yet objectifiable figure. References to Jackson's characters as "the white chick" in *Gethu* and *Thangamagan* call into question the portrayal of the increasingly exoticised, yet native, Tamil heroine, an incongruity I continue to examine in the rest of this thesis.

## Chapter 2

### White Is The New Brown: How We Got To Amy Jackson

Now that the groundwork has been laid out in terms of illustrating the development and growth of Tamil cinema in the intense nativist politics of mid-Twentieth century Tamil Nadu, I turn to consider how Amy Jackson, an ‘outsider’, has emerged as a prominent figure within Tamil Cinema. This chapter is primarily concerned with the construction of the contemporary heroine and positions Jackson as the latest figure in the sequence of varied Tamil heroines. Here, I consider how Jackson’s ethnicity and Western background may paradoxically make her the perfect candidate for portraying the contemporary Tamil woman, and by extension, her experiences. The distinction I make between Jackson’s ethnicity and her background will become clear as this chapter unfolds. However, this distinction has an important role in differentiating between ideas of whiteness as an aesthetic and social norms of acceptable behavior; two factors that equally contribute to Jackson’s appeal. When I refer to Jackson’s *whiteness*, I refer to her ethnicity, and in particular the colour of her skin, while references to Jackson’s *Western-ness* or *background*, refer to her upbringing and Western values.<sup>16</sup>

I begin my analysis by discussing key debates within postcolonialism, whiteness studies and representational discourses. The fervent nativism of Dravidian politics, and its prevalence within Tamil Cinema, as discussed in Chapter One, makes postcolonial discourse difficult to ignore, particularly considering the portrayal of men as native and women as Other in Tamil cinema. While debates within whiteness/representation studies vary considerably, I argue that the core understanding of whiteness as an invisible norm is not entirely suited to the example of Jackson. While Jackson benefits considerably from a transnational notion of whiteness as the ideal beauty, her whiteness is highly visible – and

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<sup>16</sup> I make this distinction between whiteness and Western-ness so as to avoid reducing my discussion of Jackson to the representation of skin colour. As I discuss later in the chapter, my discussion of whiteness is not simply about the politics of representation in terms of skin colour; instead, I position whiteness as connected to issues of power and hegemony.

often emphasised – within the context of Tamil cinema. I then move on to discuss the historical representation of Western/white women within Tamil cinema. As established in Chapter One, dominant narratives regarding ‘true’ Tamil culture, as introduced and advanced by the Dravidian movement and the DMK, significantly impact on representations of the West and Western culture. As such, I will discuss specifically female gendered manifestations of Western culture throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries.

The emergence of transnational beauty companies, who further perpetuate the class-/caste-based ideal of fair skin, complicate negative portrayals of the West in Tamil cinema. While a reverence for white skin can be considered foundational in establishing Jackson’s appeal, this reading does not account for Jackson’s non-Indianness, which is intrinsically contradictory to anti-colonial narratives in Tamil Cinema. Hence, Jackson’s appeal is not merely predicated on transnational notions of racial (Caucasian) beauty; her Western background and sensibilities are perhaps more fundamental in securing her popularity. Here, I build upon Constatine Nakassis’ (2015) notion of the non-Tamil female actor (in his case, the North Indian actors) functioning as a proxy for Tamil women. As I will discuss, Jackson’s racial mobility, aided by her cosmetic nativisation, ironically facilitates for idealised and fantastical portrayals of contemporary Tamil women. Both Jackson’s whiteness and Western-ness aid her in her popularity within the industry, allowing her to perform acts that are out of limits for the Tamil women she portrays.

### **Postcolonialism and Whiteness**

Before delving straight into the context of Jackson’s popularity, I provide an overview of some key debates within postcolonial and representation/whiteness studies. My approach to Jackson straddles these disciplines, as Jackson’s representation is equally impacted by India’s colonial history, and transnational understandings of whiteness as an aesthetic of beauty. The varied signification of Jackson is perhaps best understood through the



postcolonial lens, exemplified in the work of Frantz Fanon (1961). Fanon discusses the manipulation of a nation's history through colonisation and decolonisation, and puts particular focus upon the tensions between the colonised and the coloniser. He states that the process of de/colonisation facilitates for the heightened visibility of both parties:

[i]n the colonies the foreigner imposed himself using his cannons and machines. Despite the success of his pacification, in spite of his appropriation, the colonist always remains a foreigner (1961: 5).

These clear demarcations between native culture and coloniser culture are evidenced in the propaganda films produced by the DMK, as discussed in Chapter One. In these films traditional elements of pre-colonial Tamil culture are promoted as 'true' Dravidian identity. Despite these clear-cut distinctions between native and coloniser culture, Fanon states that in some respects, "the colonized always dream of taking the colonist's place" (1961: 16). The cosmetic nativisation of Jackson thus can be seen as somewhat of a negotiation between these ideas. Despite appearing as a native Tamil woman, Jackson remains foreign to audiences who are aware of her British heritage; she is simultaneously native and foreign.

Within postcolonial studies there is also a tradition of linking the hierarchy of coloniser/colonised to other similar hierarchies of power (Fanon, 1961; Said, 1977, 2001). I continue in this tradition by acknowledging that Jackson's race and gender are intrinsically linked to one another and equally vital in contributing to Jackson's on-screen representation. Throughout this chapter, I focus on how the male/female dichotomy can be seen as analogous to the native/foreign disparity. This understanding is somewhat similar to an observation made by Edward Said, who states,

[o]rientalism is a praxis of the same sort as male gender dominance [...] the Orient was routinely described as feminine, its riches as fertile, its main symbols the

sensual woman, the harem, and the despotic—but curiously attractive—ruler (2001: 212).

Within Tamil cinema a similar kind of praxis occurs, with the masculine nativism established by the DMK functioning as the dominant group, while feminine/foreign images are figured as oppositional. As such, an intersectional approach to *both* Jackson's gender and race is necessary in understanding her on-screen representation.

I will take this opportunity to consider various debates within Whiteness Studies, which impact my own understanding of Jackson's race. My major concern with Whiteness Studies is the inherent Western-ness of the discipline. Generally discussions about whiteness have arisen from scholars with Western backgrounds, that is, from scholars operating within Western institutions and speaking about how whiteness operates within Western society (Ahmed, 1995, 1998, 2007; Dyer, 1997; Fine et al., 1997; Steyn and Conway, 2010). The discourse of critical whiteness studies has been influential on my own understandings of race and the interactions between white and non-white bodies. My personal understandings of whiteness stem from my interactions as a person of colour (POC) in a Western context and, given Tamil cinema's context, I aim to reflect on my own position in relation to certain debates when examining Jackson's role within Tamil cinema. It would be easy for me, a Western POC, to state whether or not I agree with Jackson's presence in Tamil cinema. However, attempting to define her worth, rather than understanding her function does not, in my eyes, advance representational discourse in film or feminist theory.

The discipline of Whiteness Studies works alongside many other race and representational discourses by drawing attention to a specific racial group. However, rather than focusing on a marginalised group, Whiteness Studies focuses on the dominant group. Melissa Steyn and Daniel Conway (2010) state that,

[f]ew texts in the field have not initiated their discussion with an explication of the conceptual and political gains of interrogating the centre of power and privilege from which racialization emanates but which operates more or less invisibly as it constructs itself as both the norm and the ideal of what it means to be human (2010: 284).

Whiteness studies, hence, pursues similar questions to many other critical race theories, investigating as its primary concern the invisibility of whiteness as a dominant group. However, as stated by key theorist Richard Dyer, author of *White* (1997), the prospect of establishing a discipline labeled ‘Whiteness Studies’ made his “blood run cold,” as he may have been inadvertently drawing attention away from marginal groups (1997: 10). Other authors share this concern, worrying that in creating a field for critical engagement with whiteness, they may ultimately have “reified whiteness as a fixed category of experience” or “treated [whiteness] as a monolith, in the singular, as an “essential something”” (Fine et al., 1997: xi). These concerns will undoubtedly arise throughout this chapter; however, I believe a critical approach to Jackson’s whiteness within the context of the Tamil film industry alleviates these concerns. Further to this, a critical approach to Western-ness is also constructive. As Jane Park (2014) states,

I have found myself being drawn more and more to ways that we can defamiliarise and decentre the West. The idea of a monolithic ‘West’ is just as dangerous but far less critically examined than its necessary counterpoint, the Orientalist notion of a homogenous ‘East’ (Park, 2014: 2).

Avoiding the study of a group simply because of its dominance seems counterproductive, as it continues to feed into the ‘spectacle’ of marginal groups.<sup>17</sup> Further, the context of considering a non-Western Tamil film industry and Jackson’s resulting position as a racial

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<sup>17</sup> This act of making minority ethnic groups a spectacle is similar to that of Halberstan’s claim about the necessity of interrogating the ‘quirks’ of heterosexuality in order to avoid making a spectacle out of fringe sexualities (Halberstam, 2012: 37, 38).

minority within the industry display how my approach to Jackson may vary from conventional (Western) understandings of whiteness. Jackson's heightened visibility and cosmetic nativisation, in particular, challenge notions of invisible whiteness, as Jackson is highly visible as a result of her difference from the population in Tamil Nadu. Such factors complicate concerns regarding essentialising whiteness, and point towards a need to expand theoretical mappings within whiteness studies, something I attempt to do through my case study of Jackson.

To avoid discussing whiteness as a fixed or essential category, I wish to approach Jackson's race using an approach similar to that of Sara Ahmed (2007). Following Ahmed, I reflect on "whiteness as a category of experience that disappears as a category through experience, and how this disappearance makes whiteness 'worldly'" (2007: 150). Ahmed is careful to discuss "what 'whiteness' does without assuming white-ness as an ontological given." Of particular interest to me is Ahmed's idea of whiteness as a process that continuously "orientates bodies in specific directions" ultimately dictating the way in which certain bodies, white or ethnic "'take up' space" (Ahmed, 2007: 150). However, given the non-Western context of Tamil cinema, Jackson's whiteness is figured differently to the Western context discussed by Ahmed. As such, I wish to discuss how various manifestations of this tension, whether they arise from India's colonial past or globalisation, are portrayed through the representation of Jackson's identity as a white woman.

## **The Western Woman**

As mentioned in Chapter One, C.S. Lakshmi's (2008) observation that the representation of females in Tamil cinema was reduced to a dichotomy of mothers and whores, holds much significance in understanding Jackson's representation. The films of the 1940s and 1950s easily established this dichotomy; however, maintaining it in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century would prove to be difficult. As noted in Chapter One, in the lead up to, and in the aftermath of

India's independence in 1947, colonial tensions manifested themselves more strongly within representations in Tamil cinema.<sup>18</sup> Representations of the native and the Other became heavily gendered; with males embodying Dravidian identity while females became the Other, embodying the foreign. Lakshmi asserts that the emergence of 'true' Tamil heroes,<sup>19</sup> – while no heroine could be categorised as the ideal Tamil woman – shows the depth to which male identity was entrenched in the culture. Meanwhile female identity was “of secondary importance, manipulated, venerated and set aside” (Lakshmi, 2008: 17). The representation of women could thus exemplify any aspect of society deemed threatening to the Dravidian patriarchal order. Inevitably, these fluctuations and contradictions in the representations of femininity lead to fractures, allowing even for a figure as perplexing as Jackson to grow to prominence.

The emergence and popularity of the women's liberation movement in Tamil Nadu in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century (influenced significantly by Western movements) posed a significant threat to the patriarchal nativism established by the DMK. Consequently, representations, particularly those of 'bad' women, began to aggressively assert Western/modern characteristics. K. Barathi (2013) explains the dominant representation of the good/bad women at the time, stating that the heroine, will go around in double plaits, wearing *paavaadai thaavani* fall in love, marry,<sup>20</sup> while the 'bad women' are educated women wearing modern clothes, with competitive and envious spirits (2013: 94).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that as far back as in the silent era, Tamil films were known to include anti-British sentiments (Baskaran, 1981). However, as Dravidian politics took precedence, these ideologies became even more present within films.

<sup>19</sup> Such as MGR and Sivaji Ganeshan, or perhaps more recently Rajinikanth, Ajith Kumar and Vijay.

<sup>20</sup> *paavaadai thaavani* (பாவாடை தாவணி) – traditional attire worn by young women, usually before marriage.

<sup>21</sup> Author's own translation, original text: தமிழ் சினிமா பெண்கள் பொதுவாக இரண்டு வகைப்படுவர். நல்ல பெண்கள் மற்றும் குணங்கெட்ட பெண்கள். நல்ல பெண்கள் இரட்டைச் சடை, பாவாடை, தாவணி அணிந்து காதல் செய்து திருமணத்திற்குப் பின் ஒற்றைச் சடையும் புடவையுமாய் குனிந்த தலையுடன் குடும்பப் பொறுப்பேற்று வளையவருவார்கள். இவர்களுக்கு நேர் விரோதமாய் படித்த பெண்கள் நாகரிக உடை அணிந்தவர்களாய், போட்டியும் பொறாமையும் கொண்டு குடும்பத்தில் பல குழப்பங்களை விளைவிப்பவர்களாய் வருவர். சில பெண்கள் இறுதிக் காட்சிவரை வில்லியாக வாழ்ந்து உயிரை விட்டு பிரச்சனைக்கு முடிவு தேடுவார்கள் (பாரதி, 2013: 94).

Similarly, Lakshmi discusses the dual representation of the good and bad women in the film *Velaikaari* (1949):<sup>22</sup>

[t]he good woman is poor, beautiful and the epitome of Tamil culture. The bad woman is rich, English-educated, interested in social work and insolent. The rich woman talks of women's freedom and she is part of a women's association. She plays tennis and wears pants. The rich girl is a comment on the various women's organisations in the Tamil region at that time (Lakshmi, 2008: 18-19).

*Velaikaari* clearly reflected and combatted the imported social movements of the time, leaving no doubt that women's liberation was nothing more than a stain on proper Tamil womanhood. Hence, cinema continues the role of redirecting audiences towards dominant nativist narratives of femininity in the face of social activism. Similarly, Barathi notes that in the film *Kanavan* (1968),<sup>23</sup>

the heroine Rani vows "I will not marry and become a slave to a man". When a man comes to 'see her as his prospective bride',<sup>24</sup> she argues, "that the 'seeing the bride' tradition and asking the woman 'do you know how to sing, do you know how to cook?'" is insulting to her in many ways. Her feminist thinking is put forward as a rich woman's arrogance (2013: 64).<sup>25</sup>

As seen through these examples, these dominant representations of women who become 'corrupted' by the burgeoning women's liberation movement swiftly attempted to convince everyday women that they had no place within such movements. To become involved

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<sup>22</sup> Servant Maid, not to be confused with *vellaikaari*, "the white girl/chick."

<sup>23</sup> Husband

<sup>24</sup> 'See the bride,' refers to a tradition in which the prospective groom and his family will come to 'view' the bride before making an offer.

<sup>25</sup> Author's own translation, original text: 'கணவன்' படத்தில், "திருமணம் செய்து கொண்டு ஓர் ஆணுக்கு அடிமையாக வாழமாட்டேன்" என்று சபதம் செய்கிறாள் கதாநாயகி ராணி. பெண் பார்க்க வந்தவனிடம் "பெண் பார்க்கும் படலம் என்பது உனக்குப் பாடத் தெரியுமா, சமைக்கத் தெரியுமா? என்று கேட்பது பெண்ணைப் பலவிதங்களிலும் அவமானப்படுத்துகிறது" என்று வாதிடுகிறாள். அவளின் பெண்ணியச் சிந்தனைகள் பணக்காரப் பெண்ணின் திமிர்தனம் என்பதாகவே முன்வைக்கப்படுகிறது (பாரதி, 2013: 64).

would be to shun the ideal of motherhood, and become an arrogant, selfish and undesirable spinster. This rejection of the women's liberation movement in cinematic representation would continue until around the 1970s, when seemingly 'liberated' women were shown on screen. This newly liberated woman was "presented as someone with a mind of her own but not so assertive that she will take over the job of acting out her ideas" (Lakshmi, 2008: 23). These liberated women brought with them the English-spattered dialogue of modernity, and the ever present fear that their idealism would ward away men (Lakshmi, 2008: 23). Skipping forward to the 1990s, with the unavailability of Westernisation due to the processes of globalisation, Sathiavathi Chinniah proposes a new breed of heroine:

[o]ften projected as the unmarried virgin woman, [the] modern *katā-nāyaki* is educated, brash and is even capable of taunting the hero. With the elimination of the vamp or club dancer, who in the earlier decades was representative of the negative image of the female in contrast to the good-natured protagonist, the *katā-nāyaki* of the 1990s assumed a persona that combined both facets" (2008: 37).

Modern yet chaste, the contemporary heroine ("*katā-nāyaki*") is simultaneously objectified and deified. The objectification of these heroines tends to occur during the first half of the film.<sup>26</sup> This display of modernity (and, accordingly, display of skin) is often attributed to immaturity; immaturity rectified by heeding the hero's advice and becoming traditional in the latter half of the film. While this transformation can be glimpsed in earlier films such as *Vivasaayi* (1967),<sup>27</sup> this trope certainly becomes commonplace within the 1990s and early 2000s. A notable example of this use – although perhaps only notable to me as it made a great impact on my young self – is in *Sivakaasi* (2005). *Sivakaasi* is a Masala film,<sup>28</sup> and it yielded much commercial success, further propagating the use of this trope. In the film,

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<sup>26</sup> However it is revisited throughout the film in brief *excessive* song sequences which take place outside the diegesis of the film, as discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>27</sup> As mentioned by Barathi (2013: 61)

<sup>28</sup> Masala films are referred to as such because, like the spice mix, these combine multiple (Western defined) genres, usually action, romance, comedy and family drama.

the young heroine, Hema, is out shopping with her father, and in classic 2000s style, she wears a semi-transparent netted tank top, which reveals the skin on her waist. While shopping, she is groped by a young man and she proceeds to beat him with her slipper in the middle of the street. The hero, Sivakaasi, hearing the commotion heads over to disperse the crowd, and lectures the man on harassing women in the street. He then turns to Hema; a short sequence cuts between her exposed thighs and waist and his disapproving face (Figure 1). He approaches her and the following exchange occurs:

Sivakaasi: “what’s this? I can’t see your saree or your underskirt, you’re standing here in just your underwear.”

Hema: “These are *shorts*.”<sup>29</sup>

Sivakaasi: “For you they are shorts, for us they are underwear.”

Sivakaasi (cont.): “Also, where is your Jacket?”<sup>30</sup> You’re wearing just your bra.”

Hema: “This is a *sleeveless* top.”

Sivakaasi: “Hey! For you it's a *sleeveless*, for us it's a bra.”

[...]

Sivakaasi: “You wear clothes so that everybody knows how many moles are on your body, but then you get mad when you are touched by strange men. It has become a game for you [girls].

[...]

Sivakaasi: “Look, if you behaved like a woman and came dressed covered up in a saree, men will not look at you as a girl, but pray to you as a goddess” (Perarasu, 2005).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Here, Hema uses the English word “shorts,” another sign of her modernity. The same goes for her use of the word “sleeveless.”

<sup>30</sup> A common term used for the traditional blouse worn with the sari or the *paavaadai thaavani*; not to be confused with the Western jacket.

<sup>31</sup> Author’s own Translation.



Instead of taking offense to a total stranger implying she was asking to be groped on the street, the heroine falls madly in love, rushes home and immediately begins to wear traditional attire so as to win over Sivakaasi. The irony of this change, of course, is that the saree reveals the same segment of waist that Hema was earlier chastised for revealing to the public. Nevertheless, Hema, while being objectified by the film and displaying modern characteristics, inevitably must conform to Tamil cinema's traditional archetype if she is to be a good wife and mother.



Figure 1: Sivakaasi, the hero, judging the 'inappropriate' attire worn by the heroine, Hema, from *Sivakaasi* (Perarasu, 2005).

Moreover, the above exchange between the hero and heroine shows the extent to which the notion of the female as Other is portrayed in Tamil cinema. Sivakaasi notes, “for *you* they are shorts, [but] for *us* they are underwear.” This clear demarcation between the masculine, native and respectable *us*, and the female, foreign (Westernised) and immoral *you*, further perpetuates the anti-colonial figurations of male and female characters on screen. It is necessary to consider the emergence of these impure, hybrid Westernised women alongside the figure of Amy Jackson in Tamil cinema. Given Jackson's status as a Western woman the stigma of these negative Western stereotypes are virtually unavoidable and, as I argue in Chapter Four, are a vital aspect of the construction of Jackson's characters.

## **Complications: Whiteness As An Aesthetic Of Beauty**

Given the aggressive cosmetic nativisation of Jackson, through spray tan, contact lenses and hair dye, it is clear that these negative conceptions of the Westernised woman are still very much in play within Tamil film narratives. Jackson's popularity seems inconsistent with nativist ideas surrounding true Tamil womanhood, a conundrum that calls for an analysis of the tension between these anti-colonial ideologies and notions of a transnational model of whiteness as an aesthetic of beauty.

Jackson's looks are a clear indicator of how she became successful: she is tall, slim, has strong features, light eyes and pale skin. In some respects Jackson's popularity within the Tamil film industry can be seen as a form of exoticism (as discussed in Chapter Four). However, in other respects Jackson's popularity has a direct correlation with globalised/transnational ideals of beauty perpetuated by transnational (and predominantly Western) cosmetic companies. These companies gained a foothold in India around the 1980s, and began to take advantage of Asia's inherent class/caste based prioritisation of fair skin, by promoting "whiteness as an aesthetic of beauty" through bleaching/lightening creams (Osuri, 2008). Goldie Osuri looks at the contemporary example of Aishwarya Rai, a popular female Bollywood actor and winner of a Miss World crown, and the ways in which Rai is presented in Western contexts as a transnational beauty. Often referred to as "mysterious and exotic" by Western media, Osuri points out that it is Rai's racial ambiguity, and the fact that she is not easily traced back to India, which aids her popularity (2008: 116). Similar to Jackson, Rai's light eyes and skin are enough to distance her from conventional ideas surrounding Indian women. In some respects Rai effectively, albeit ambiguously, passes as white within a transnational context. Whiteness as an aesthetic of beauty is clearly exemplified in both Rai and Jackson, who are respectively *Western-enough* and *Indian-enough* to switch between national and transnational contexts. While this aesthetic of appearing white may hold more precedence within the Hindi industry,

I posit that within the Tamil film industry it is still important to be Indian. Hence, while whiteness as an aesthetic can be considered a large aspect of Jackson's appeal, it does not fully account for her non-Indianness. In other words, why choose a Caucasian actor and make her appear Indian, when you could pick an Indian actor and make her appear white?

### **Stigma and the Appeal of a Caucasian Female Actor**

These questions bring me to the larger question of what Jackson's ethnicity and background afford her. Her popularity is evidently not simply because she *looks* white, it is because she *is* white. In other words, Jackson not only fits the requirements (thin, tall, fair) for the contemporary Indian ideal of femininity; she is also free from many of the negative associations that come with acting in Tamil Nadu by virtue of her Western upbringing. Many Tamil cinema scholars have discussed the significance of the stigma of acting within the industry (Chinniah, 2008; Dickey, 2001; Hardgrave, 1975; Mishra, 1999; Nakassis, 2015). This stigma is thought to have begun around the silent era, with female theatre actors avoiding cinema due to the belief that the camera may affect their health/beauty (Narayanan, 2008: 29-30). However, since then, there seems to be a singular reason as to why women refrain from entering the industry, as stated by Constantine Nakassis:

[o]ne standard argument invoked to explain this stigma is that from its inception India's film industries have been filled with "dancing girls," a stereotype linked to the historical overlap in personnel between actresses and women from so called *Devadasi* communities, who through nineteenth-century reform movements were rebranded as prostitutes and relegated to the margins of respectability and community (2015: 11).

Yet again, we are brought back to archetypical notions of chastity and respectability, as discussed by Lakshmi (2008) and Chinniah (2008) in Chapter One. The career of acting is, thus, particularly daunting for Indian/Tamil women who wish to live lives in which they eventually marry and have children. To be seen on screen and associated with prostitution

is to ruin one's prospects. Displays of these attitudes are perhaps most commonly seen with contemporary female actors who retire from acting once they marry (Hardgrave, 1975: 3). Most notable examples of these female actors from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century include Jyothika, Simran, Sneha, Laila, Suhashini, Revathi and Deviyaani. Other married female actors are assigned the role of sisters or mothers, even when the hero is of similar age. In many other cases, the heroes are older than the mother actors.<sup>32</sup>

Hence, one cannot be both a female actor and a common woman (Chinniah, 2008: 40). Despite male heroes such as Kamal Hassan and Rajinikanth continuing to act well into their sixties, many of their female costars fail to remain successful for longer than a decade. The increased sexual objectification of heroines, is an additional reason for women to not act or to disassociate themselves from their once negative image after, or in the lead up to, marriage. A notable example of this disassociation is from popular 20<sup>th</sup> Century female actor Jeyalalitha, who, in attempting to garner votes for nomination as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu,

encouraged party members to call her 'Amma' [Mother], and de-sexualised her image as she strove to shed her tainted reputation as an actress and create an independent political image and following (Dickey, 2008, 79).

Jeyalalitha had made an image for herself during the 1960s, acting alongside many famous actors, most notably MGR, as the epitome of peppy and beautiful love interests. Throughout her acting career Jeyalalitha became involved in Dravidian politics, and was considered the unofficial heir to MGR after he established the AIDMK party in 1972 (Dickey, 2008; Hardgrave, 2008). While her male co-star MGR had no problems earning respect from both party members and the public, the stigma around Jeyalalitha's prior occupation was a hindrance to her political career. As Robert Hardgrave notes,

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<sup>32</sup> A notable example is Saranya Ponvannan, who, in her mid- to late-forties has played the role of the hero's mother despite many heroes (Vijay, Surya) being less than five years younger than her. She has also played the mother of actor Vikram, who is four years her senior.

The actress in Tamil Nadu [...] is a source of ambivalence for most film fans. As the sacrificing and sympathetic wife or as the doe-eyed young heroine, she draws them to her but she is never fully able to escape the ambience of ‘immorality’. The actor has the benefit of the double standard (1975: 3).

Actors, such as MGR, are able to use their superhuman on-screen presence to influence their off-screen presence (as discussed in Chapter One). However, it is this duality of image, which critically aids male actors, that is the undoing of most female actors in Tamil cinema. As Chinniah asserts,

[f]ilm acting requires a woman to not only step out of the private sphere and enter an unknown public arena dominated by males but more importantly necessitates a female to present her own self as a spectacle for the gaze of both men and women. Therefore, by taking up acting as a film career, a woman immediately detaches herself from other common women (2008: 40).

The sexual objectification of the contemporary heroine furthers the idea of a female actor presenting herself as a spectacle. Hence, for the contemporary female actor in Tamil cinema, the lines between fiction and reality are blurred; non-traditional acts, such as physical touching, kissing or wearing revealing clothing, become “transgressive” acts, which could ultimately impact a female actor’s respectability in everyday life (Nakassis, 2015: 12).

It is here that we see the significance of Jackson’s Western sensibilities. Jackson has no such problems and, like many Western-raised female actors, has more freedom to kiss co-stars or wear revealing costumes without the fear of societal disrepute. It is important to note that Jackson is not the only non-Tamil female actor within the industry. In fact, the majority of female actors in Tamil Cinema are non-Tamils.<sup>33</sup> Having said this, the women

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<sup>33</sup> As noted by Nakassis (2015), even in the case of female actors who are ethno-linguistically Tamil, these women are usually “urban, English-educated Brahmins” and thus impacted less by the stigma due to class and caste privilege (Nakassis, 2015: 10).

who conventionally act alongside Jackson as proxies for Tamil women are still Indian, and carry with them similar stigmas to Tamil women. Likewise, Jackson is by no means the first European woman to use her Western sensibilities to her advantage within Indian cinemas; Aranthai Narayan states that in the Telugu film *Thraupathi Vastrapaharanam* (1936), based on the epic *Mahabharata*, the actress who played the part of Thraupathi who was stripped of clothing was European. Similarly, Narayan mentions a silent film actor called Marine Hill, an Anglo-Indian woman who went by the stage name of Viloachhana on screen (2008: 29-30).<sup>34</sup> Like Jackson, these women, by virtue of being Western, had fewer reservations than Indian women about partial-nudity or intimate sequences on screen.<sup>35</sup> However, the references to the reality of Jackson's ethnicity within the diegesis of several films make for a unique representation of her characters, and are difficult to ignore.

### A Heroine With Glamour

In 2016, Tamil film director Suraj came under fire for an interview in which he discussed how he dressed his heroines in his films. Suraj argued that he expected his female actors to wear revealing clothing. As to why, he stated,

[w]e're a low-class audience, that's who we are. For me, if we give money, we should see the hero fight, [...] the heroine should come with *glamour*. I don't like to see the heroine come all wrapped up in a saree, because we pay to go to the theatre, we don't just go [for free]. When we pay money and go it's just to watch for fun. [...] If you want [to do] acting, you should do a movie specifically for that. When you [female actors] do a commercial movie you should do it with *Glamour*. The ones who have done it with *Glamour* are the big heroines today. The boys should

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<sup>34</sup> Author's own translation, original text: 1917-ல் நடராஜமுதலியார் தாயரித்து வெளியிட்ட 'திரௌபதி வஸ்திராபஹரணம்' படத்தில் துகிலூறியப்பட்ட திரௌபதி ஓர் ஐரோப்பிய நடிக்கை. [...] மறைன் ஹில் இது ஒரு ஆங்கிலோ இந்திய பெண்ணின் பெயர். அந்தப் பெண் படத்தில் நடித்த போது சூட்டப்பட்ட பெயர் விலோச்சனர் (நாராயணன், 2008: 29-30).

<sup>35</sup> There are of course also examples of Western/Caucasian actresses working within the contemporary Hindi film industry such as Kalki Koechlin (of French descent, but born and brought up in South India) and Katrina Kaif (of half Indian and half British decent, but brought up in the UK).

enjoy the movie, so for that I ask for *Glamour* [...] I ask for the costuming [to be that way] (i.e. revealing) (Jeyaseelan, 2016).<sup>36</sup>

Long used within the Tamil film industry, the term *Glamour*, appropriated from the English word, refers to a particular quality held by female actors. From Suraj's description we can discern that glamour comes, fundamentally, from wearing revealing clothing, which makes the character objectifiable. This interview sparked many discussions online, not only about the misogyny in Tamil cinema but also regarding what *Glamour* is exactly. In response to the interview, French-Tamil YouTube comedy vlogger SutharJey stated,

*Glamour* isn't about reducing clothing it's an attitude. [...] Take [popular female actor] Trisha. For me the most *Glamour* role played by Trisha is in *VTV*. Yes! She is in a saree for the entire film, but the way she talks is what is *Glamour* to me (Jeyaseelan, 2016).<sup>37</sup>

While his alternative description of *Glamour* somewhat contradicts the idea of revealing clothing put forward by Suraj, it furthers the notion that *Glamour* is not simply objectification, but a distinct *quality* marked by Western-ness. The character discussed by SutharJey, Jessie from *Vinnaiyaandi Varuvaaya* (2010) undoubtedly fits within Chinniah's contemporary *katã-nāyaki* archetype. Despite wearing traditional attire, Jessie is a modern Tamil woman, who speaks English for the majority of the film. *Glamour*, thus, seems unremittingly tied to partaking in Western culture. To have *Glamour* is to have a quality not present in the native Tamil girl archetype, to dress in Western (or revealing) clothes, or to speak in English. I argue that by virtue of *being* a Westerner Jackson already possesses this quality; regardless of how native she becomes cosmetically, she will inherently have *Glamour*.

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<sup>36</sup> Author's own translation.

<sup>37</sup> Author's own translation.

As such, Jackson is perhaps the next evolution of Chinniah's contemporary *katā-nāyaki*, using her racial ambiguity to comfortably straddle the border between the chaste girlfriend and the tease. The example of Rita Hayworth is an incredibly useful comparison when discussing Jackson. Hayworth's ability to be both the siren and virgin figures is primarily facilitated by her racial ambiguity.<sup>38</sup> Priscilla Peña Ovalle (2011) discusses how Hayworth's racial mobility feeds into the mythos of Hayworth's characters as Other and unknowable. Hayworth's transition from exotic Latina, to fiery red head, and finally to the all American girl is underpinned by her exoticism and subsequent hypersexuality. Similar to Jackson, Hayworth's cosmetic transformation occurred in full view of audiences, and as such, Ovalle argues that fans expected callbacks to her past and ethnic roots in her films despite passing as, and becoming the epitome of, a Caucasian-American woman. Similarly, Jackson's films justify her objectification through reference to her Caucasian body, establishing her as native enough to be a worthy heroine, while revelling in the *Glamour* of Jackson's hypersexuality and exoticism. Jackson's willingness to partake in physically intimate acts, particularly kissing, stands her apart from Tamil female actors. As such, Jackson can be seen as a "proxy of the putatively authentic Tamil woman who refuses to appear on the screen" (Nakassis, 2015: 10). She becomes, in part, a representation of the Tamil woman and her experience. She operates as the alternative for the common women who do not wish to be filmed, whilst also being willing to participate in a spectacle of exposed flesh and intimate moments.

Through this chapter, I have offered an explanation of how we arrived at Jackson. Drawing on Postcolonial and Whiteness studies, I laid the groundwork for my own understanding of Jackson's presence in Tamil cinema. During the latter half of the 21st Century, nativist attitudes began to manifest in Tamil Cinema through strictly gendered roles. The fact that the Dravidian movement was characterised as masculine,

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<sup>38</sup> Rita Hayworth began her career as Margarita Cansino, a Spanish dancer, over the course of her career Hayworth underwent a series of cosmetic procedures (including dying her hair and undergoing electrolysis to raise her hairline), which enabled her to pass as a white-American (McLean, 1992; Ovalle, 2011).



meant that on-screen representations of foreign (Western) culture became heavily feminised. These Western women came to represent many factors, which threatened to infringe upon Dravidian patriarchal order. Jackson's recent emergence in Tamil cinema, at first glance, seems to herald the end of such traditions. However, the cosmetic nativisation of Jackson certainly displays the perseverance of negative attitudes towards Western culture. Having said this, Jackson's whiteness certainly aids her in terms of more recent transnational notions of whiteness as an aesthetic of beauty. The glorification of Jackson's tall, slim and fair body is unquestionably a result of transnational beauty companies and the promotion of fairness/whiteness as an ideal. However, the cosmetic nativisation of Jackson complicates the reasoning behind Jackson's role in Tamil cinema, as from a practical point of view, it seems far more difficult to painstakingly make Jackson appear Indian both physically and linguistically, when an Indian actor could be made to look simply physically Caucasian. Hence, Jackson's appeal lies not only in her physical whiteness, but also in her Western upbringing. The stigma that is faced by many Indian female actors when it comes to cinema, is easily avoided by hiring Jackson. Jackson is able to partake in physical intimacy and risqué costuming with considerably lesser chances of social disrepute (as discussed further in Chapter Four). Jackson's *Glamour*, facilitated by her racial mobility, thus positions her as Indian *enough* to act as a proxy, representing the Tamil woman and her experience by virtue of not being one.

## Chapter 3

### Let's Mix It Up: *Cinematic Excess, Masala* and

#### Approaching Jackson as a Parallel Text

As discussed in Chapter Two, Amy Jackson's racial mobility is the primary characteristic that sets her apart from Indian female actors. Her Western upbringing and cosmetic nativisation allow her to become diegetically Indian *enough* to pass as a Tamil woman. Despite this, none of these distinguishing features justify the illusion-shattering in-film references to the reality of Jackson's ethnicity. These references fall within Tamil cinema's long tradition of self-awareness and self-referentiality. As explored in Chapter One, the self-aware elements of Tamil Cinema stemmed from the participatory nature of theatre and early mythological cinema. Mythological cinema, in particular, seemed to pave the way towards a blurred border between the film world and reality. The depiction of on-screen worshippers alongside the worshipping audience "establish[ed] a vivid sense of continuity between [...] the world outside and the world of the film," (Ram, 2008: 56). In this chapter, I discuss the evolution of this blurring of fiction and reality. I start with a working definition of *cinematic excess* to encompass Tamil cinema's habit of inter-/extra-textuality, breaking the fourth wall and song sequences. I conclude this chapter by establishing my approach to Jackson as a parallel text in my case studies. I argue that situating Jackson as a parallel text positions two figures, the *Inner-* and the *Outer-Jackson*; and suggest that meaning is made specifically by the clash of these two figures.

#### Cinematic Excess

Tamil cinema has three characteristics which feed into these *inner* and *outer* figures:

- (1) Inter-/extra-textuality – references to other films and references to external world;
- (2) references within the film to the fictional status of the text; and (3) perhaps the most well known characteristic from Indian films, in-film sequences (commonly song sequences)

which operate outside the conventional diegesis of the film; that is, outside the ‘world’ of the film (Dickey 2009; Nakassis 2007; Weidman, 2012). The inter-/extra-textual references to contemporary pop culture and society present in films enrich Tamil cinema with a cultural pervasiveness unparalleled in Western films. The inclusion of these references and semi-diegetic sequences give a sense of the film overflowing beyond the traditional confines of diegesis, with these characteristics functioning in *excess* of the filmic text. As such, I employ the idea of ‘*cinematic excess*’ when referring to these meta elements.<sup>39</sup> The term *excess* has been used by many film scholars, theorising both Western and Indian films (Jha, 2003; Maruthur, 2011; Williams, 2001; Thompson, 1986). I argue that the concept of *cinematic excess* provides a framework for understanding the signification of Jackson within her films.

*Cinematic excess* has been used in film studies to denote a variety of elements within a film, which challenge the way the narrative is consumed. Kristin Thompson states that some writers have shifted from the role of simply critiquing the meaning of a film’s narrative. Instead these new critics,

have suggested that films can be seen as a struggle of opposing forces. Some of these forces strive to unify the work, to hold it together sufficiently that we may perceive and "follow" its structures. Outside of any such structures lie those aspects of the work which are not contained by its unifying forces — the "excess."  
(Thompson, 1986: 54)

Scholars discussing Indian cinemas have started using *excess* in order to put a name to the inter-/extra-textual and semi-diegetic peculiarities present in much of India’s film industries

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<sup>39</sup> While the discourses within postmodern film studies prove useful to my approach to *Inner-* and *Outer-Jackson*, I would like to refrain from naming these characteristics as ‘postmodern’. To do so would be to completely disregard the ways in which Tamil films differ from Western films, and theorise them inadequately under ill-fitting Western film theories. As Sara Ahmed (1998) notes, “[i]n post-colonial theory, the use of ‘postmodernism’ as a term for all contemporary re-writings of the script of modernity has been read as a form of imperialist mapping” (1998: 6).

(Jha, 2003; Maruthur, 2011; Mishra et al., 1989). While Maruthur applies *excess* to the Malayalam soft-core pornography industry, her understanding of extra-textual references as *excessive* is comparable to those in Tamil cinema. In addition to its use for theorising inter-/extra-textual references, *cinematic excess* has also been used to frame discussions of semi-diegetic song sequences. These sequences appear throughout the film, with some existing within the film narrative while in others characters are transported out of their urban setting and into exotic global locations. These more abstract sequences are often used to convey complicated emotional plot points, such as a character's fantasy, the beginning of a romantic relationship or a sexual encounter (Dickey, 2009: 5; Nakassis, 2007: 81). Priya Jha states,

[s]ong spaces provide an excess that opens up moments that cannot be uttered at the diegetic level. In other words, the highly stylized performance of the songs furthers the plot and gives voice to untold stories in the *mise-en-scène*. [...] [S]ongs provide moments [...] in which the genre opens itself to the critical investigations of its contradictions, both in the film space and also in its connections with the Hindi film industry" (2003: 48).

In these sequences a film can delve into material outside the constraints of plot, setting or time, allowing for audiences to participate in "excesses of phantasy which are problematic elsewhere in the film" without the consequences of conventional rules around time and space continuity (Mishra, 1985: 127).

## **Masala and Excess**

In relation to the history of cinema in India, Maruthur highlights Ashish Rajadhyaksha's observation that,

institutions of social governance from the early years of cinema have noted the social and economic consequences of cinematic 'excess' and how 'cinematic

exchanges trigger off something that can spill over into extra-textual and other social spaces' (7) (Maruthur, 2011: 281).

This 'spilling over' is clearly shown in the close imbrication of cinema and politics in Tamil cinematic history.

The blurred border in the films produced by the DMK (discussed in Chapter One) is one example of *excess* in Tamil cinema. MGR's use of his on-screen fictional heroic characters was instrumental in cultivating his off-screen real image. MGR mobilised the lower classes/castes, playing lower class characters, such as farmers and rickshaw drivers, who eventually overthrew their oppressors (Dickey, 2008: 78). As seen in the case of MGR, contemporary heroes are also aided by the collapsed distinction between on- and off-screen identities. Given this tradition of hero films popularised by MGR and other actors of the time, contemporary *excess* in Tamil cinema is cultivated best in the form of the *Masala* film. Most contemporary films fit into the *Masala* genre, which is appropriately named after the mix of spices, as these films combine various genres (Christopher, 2011). *The Hindu's* Pradeep Sebastian, breaks down the *Masala* category into a simple yet very accurate formula, "six songs, romance, side-comedy, fights and family melodrama" (Sebastian, 2002). The combination of such varied genres is perhaps what facilitates for the sheer amount of inter-/extra-textual references within these films.

Comedy is a predominant component of the *Masala* genre, and perhaps where these extra-textual references take precedence. There is almost always a reserved role for a comedian, usually male, within *masala* films. These actors enter films with their own brand of gags, and their respective styles become yet another part of the shared identity of the film. The comedian role is often incorporated into the film by portraying him as a friend of the hero; however, many of these scenes do not necessarily relate to the primary narrative. Similar to stand-up comedy, the jokes told by the comedian reference elements of everyday life and popular culture and sometimes stand apart from the fictional universe.

Given that the film industry is a predominant mode of entertainment within Tamil Nadu, the comedian frequently employs inter-textual references to previous films, cinema music, and extra-textual references to industry happenings in his quips. A recent example of a one-liner that demonstrates the domination the film industry has upon entertainment is from *Naanum Rowdy Thaan* (2015). In the scene, the protagonist is set on attacking a large man on the street in order to impress his girlfriend. The comedian grabs the hero's arm and states, "audio launch-ukku vandha Arnold maathiri irukiraan, dude" "*He looks like Arnold who came to the audio launch, dude*" (Sivan, 2015).<sup>40</sup> There are multiple factors that have been implicitly signified within this statement. To a viewer with little or no knowledge about the industry, there is no understanding of which 'Arnold' the comedian is referring to, what the significance of an audio launch is, or how any of this relates to the man in question. However, viewers in the know would already be aware of Arnold Schwarzenegger's appearance at a high profile audio launch for another popular blockbuster film a few weeks before the release of the film. Concisely, the comedian is making reference to how large and strong the man is in comparison to the protagonist. However, the joke here lies not only within the alliteration (audio/Arnold), but also in the belief that audiences will have the preconceived knowledge about, not only previous films, but also news from within the industry. Comedic moments such as these point to the temporality of the film's content. The references are so entwined with current events that it becomes difficult to understand these references when the film is consumed at a later date, this is perhaps why aside from international distribution, DVD production of Tamil films is scarce in Tamil Nadu.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Author's own translation.

<sup>41</sup> DVD and digital distribution of Tamil films has recently been the subject of some debate. With distribution executives arguing that DVD/digital distribution is far less financially viable than traditional screenings. Director of Berserk Media, Ashoka Holla stated that "DVDs or a DTH can be seen by entire families, the revenues will be lower" (Naig and Kandavel, 2015). These financial motivations, which limit audience opportunity to solely theatre-based viewing spaces, may in part be a reason for the temporality of Tamil cinema's inter-/extra-textual references.

## Inter-/Extra-textuality in Masala Hero Films

For an example of a simultaneously inter-textual, extra-textual and fourth-wall breaking instance, we return to *Sivakaasi* (2005). There are various tropes used throughout hero films in order to represent the hero as superhuman. One of these tropes is the hero introduction sequence. A fundamental part of the masala formula, a typical hero introduction would work as follows. *The general public is being subjected to a gross injustice, a crowd gathers, helpless, as gangsters, rich industrialists or corrupted government officials display their power. The public prays, cries out for some sort of justice; for God himself to save them from the subjugation suffered by their lower or middle class status. God hears these prayers (apparently) and the hero makes his entry. The hero's entry is a spectacle for the senses: colour, music, drums. He enters in slow motion, in a mist, a storm of flowers or a cascade of shattered glass; the characters gape, momentarily frozen in their awe, time freezes, rewinds and plays from another perspective. In the real world the cinema erupts, and the action is just beginning.*

Such sequences in themselves play with conventional traditions surrounding time, space and perspective; as a singular moment is slowed, replayed and segmented in order to convey a concurrently material and illusive moment. *Sivakaasi* is no different; the titular character is a welder, who works on a busy main strip, which is under the control of a gang. The rowdies (gangsters) lock up all the shops along the main road, locking Sivakaasi within his shop. Sivakasi soon escapes his confines and beats the gangsters until they leave and the shops can be reopened. Hearing this, the head gangster comes to the strip, and grabs the collar of a nearby man; the man is Perarasu, the director of the film. The gangster asks him who the man in the shop was. Initially meek, once he has been let go, the director launches into a hero-like dialogue introducing Sivakaasi to the gangsters and audience:

He is a "Gilli" in punching after a warning, a "Thiruppaachchi" in punching without warning, and a "Sivakaasi" in spinning you in words so much so that you feel punched (Perarasu, 2005).<sup>42</sup>

These descriptions seem inane to the casual observer, but loyal viewers of Tamil cinema would know them to be the names of the various films and characters the hero Vijay has played in the past. Dialogue such as this foregrounds the characteristics and morals of the yet unseen Sivakaasi, through referencing the mythology of heroic figures portrayed by the same actor.<sup>43</sup> Immediately after this speech the gangster yells, “You’re talking so arrogantly, who the hell are you?” (Perarasu, 2005).<sup>44</sup> Everything slows as Perarasu smiles at the gangster, the frame then freezes, the street behind him disappears, replaced by a yellow backdrop. The words, “STORY SCREENPLAY DIALOGUE DIRECTION PERASASU” flash on the screen in English then in Tamil (Figure 2).



Figure 2: *Sivakaasi* director, Perarasu's fourth-wall breaking cameo (Perarasu, 2005)

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<sup>42</sup> Author's own translation.

<sup>43</sup> These references to *Ghilli* and *Thirupaachi* hold weighted meanings, aside from simply referencing the names of Vijay's previous films. By referring to the character "Ghilli" as a man who gives a warning before punching you, Perarasu references the character Vijay plays in the film who is a gifted *kabadi* player. In the sport *kabadi*, which has a goal similar to capture the flag, the 'attacking' player must constantly state the word 'kabadi' while on the move, thus alerting his opponents. The reference to "Thirupaachi," which is a district in Tamil Nadu commonly associated with the *arrivaal/aruvaal* (machete), is a reference to the way in which the *arivaal* is hidden in the back on the wielder's shirt; hence, a "Thirupaachi" punch is an attack without warning.

<sup>44</sup> Author's own translation.



As soon as the sequence finishes the film resumes, as if it had not been interrupted. The gangsters continue to wreak havoc until the ensuing arrival of the hero. These inter- and extra-textual references, as well as the breaking of the fourth wall, all aid in informing audiences in a way the film narrative cannot on its own. The emphasis on the hero actor Vijay's past works is perhaps most telling of how films must be approached discussing actors as parallel to the film itself.

### **Inter-textual references to Jackson**

A more recent example of an inter-textual reference to Jackson herself is in the body-positive rom-com, *Inji iduppazhagi* (2016). A cautionary tale around the risks of unhealthy weight loss practices and the idealisation of skinny women, the film centers on plus-size restaurant worker, Sweetie. Sweetie is routinely rejected for being too big by prospective grooms, despite her own self-confidence ("I'm not fat, mother; I'm full of health!"). Sweetie's positive attitude towards her body changes suddenly when she meets and attempts to woo a health-nut documentary filmmaker, Abi. Tension mounts when Sweetie's best friend falls ill after buying into a faux weight loss pill, marketed by a company called 'Size Zero.' The primary advertisement for the company features a model who is representative of the archetypal modern *Glamour* model, as discussed in Chapter Two. The music clip is filmed with the purpose of alluding to various contemporary companies that push ideal (slim, fair) notions of beauty onto the everyday woman. As part of these allusions the model is dressed and filmed in a similar manner to an iconic dance number by Jackson from the recent commercial hit *I* (2015). The song sequence referenced, "Ladio," is a song boasting about the beauty of Jackson's character Diya in *I*. The song's chorus states "32, 22, 32," the supposed measurements of Jackson's body, and thus the measurements for the ideal woman. As shown in Figure 3, the comparisons between make up, costuming, set design, choreography and shots are near identical. Tamil cinema audiences, who undoubtedly would have watched *I* the previous year, will be well aware of Jackson's

iconic look, further emphasising the body-positive point of the film. Such references point to the pervasiveness of Jackson's image in contemporary Tamil culture, as she begins to become the new ideal for the modern heroine.

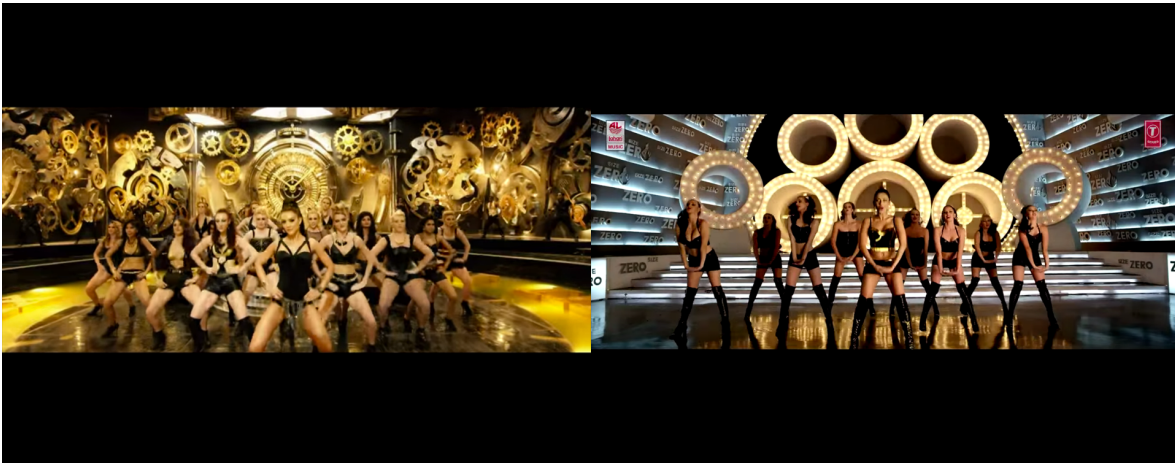


Figure 3: Amy Jackson's iconic dance number from *I* (2015) (left) is referenced in *Inji Iduppazhagi* (2016) (right). As shown in this comparison, set design, costuming and choreography are heavily inspired by the former film (Shankar, 2015; Kovelamudi, 2016)

### Reading Jackson as a Parallel Text

Approaching Jackson with specific attention to both the internal character and the external female actor requires addressing the particular interplay between these figures in *excessive* references. In regards to studying *excess*, Thompson states,

[o]nce the narrative is recognised as arbitrary rather than logical, the viewer is free to ask why individual events within its structures are as they are. The viewer is no longer constrained by conventions of reading to find a meaning or theme within the work as the solution to a sort of puzzle which has a right answer. Instead, the work becomes a perceptual field of structures which the viewer is free to study at length, going beyond the strictly functional aspects (1986: 63)

I argue that the intrinsic nature of *excess* in Tamil cinema means that audience members are—to a certain degree—able to piece together the ‘puzzle’, that is the film, using both internally given and external information. I utilise stardom studies to understand the importance of the external referent, that is the Caucasian *Outer-Jackson*, in in-film references to “the white chick.” More precisely, I will read Jackson as a parallel text to the film. Stardom studies as a discipline has stressed the idea that a star’s appeal is founded on the distinction between the on-screen performer and the off-screen body (Geraghty, 2007: 98). In other words, the star itself is only formed in the eye of the public through their perceived lifestyle; this is something that is propagated by magazine and newspaper gossip, and cultivates “an existence in the world independent of the screen/“fiction” appearances,” hence, making the star as important as their on-screen counterparts (Dyer, 1979: 22).

Christine Geraghty’s three-part theorisation of stars expands upon understandings of stars beyond the mere category of celebrity. The first category, *star-as-celebrity*, focuses on the lifestyle of the star. A contemporary understanding would best be exemplified in social media celebrities who ‘sell’ their lifestyle to fans. The second category, *star-as-professional*, focuses primarily on the artistic virtues of the star, and their ability to produce quality in their performances. The third category, *star-as-performer*, is somewhat similar to the professional, however the focus is not on the artistry of the star, but simply on their performance. In the case of the Tamil film industry; I posit that the star-as-celebrity category does not carry the same amount of influence it may carry in Western spheres. Contemporary audiences who celebrate specific actors do not partake in the lifestyle element of celebrity; unlike the days of MGR and Sivaji, many contemporary heroes and heroines in the Tamil film industry keep their personal lives to themselves. It is, for example, incredibly rare for major Tamil actors, male or female, to have social media accounts, something that modern day celebrity is founded on.<sup>45</sup> Fans of popular heroes

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<sup>45</sup> Jackson is the notable exception to this statement, with 3.4 Million followers on her instagram [iamamyjackson], and 1.5 Million followers on her Twitter [@iamamyjackson] as of September 2017.

such as Vijay or Ajith celebrate the actor not as real-life husbands and fathers, but as performers who consistently deliver loveable characters and exciting films. Given the lack of audience concern around Jackson's personal life, I intend to view Jackson through Geraghty's definition of the *star-as performer* rather than the *star-as-celebrity* or *star-as-professional* categories.

While I base my understanding of Jackson on Geraghty's *star-as-performer*, I will be using my own terminology to refer to Jackson the actor (*Outer-Jackson*) and Jackson's characters (*Inner-Jackson*). The word *outer* is used here in the sense of outside or beyond the film text, and *inner* to refer to the inside of the film text. My approach here works on the understanding of two things: first, that Jackson's Western lifestyle, broadcast on her social media platforms, does not appeal to a contemporary Indian audience; and second, that Jackson does not produce an authentic representation of a Tamil woman. Geraghty's emphasis on performance in this category, "underlines the claims to uniqueness of the *star-as-professional* but, because of the emphasis on *being* rather than acting, little attention is paid to the work done" (Geraghty, 2007: 103). As discussed in Chapter Two, Jackson's appeal within Tamil cinema is for the most part an aesthetic one. While Jackson's whiteness and her Western upbringing allow her to both embody the ideal of fair skin and perform more intimate acts, the nativist attitudes surrounding 'true' Tamil culture prevent audience interest in her non-Indian lifestyle. Her life outside of India has little significance to the lives of her Indian fans. Thus, approaching Jackson using Geraghty's understanding of the *star-as-performer* allows me to still read Jackson's star power without focusing on the near non-existent public image of Jackson's lifestyle for Tamil audiences. Rather, I focus on the perception of Jackson as a star, which is based fundamentally around her *glamorous* Western appearance.

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However, as Jackson's social media predominantly details her lifestyle in the West, it does not necessarily resonate with Indian fans in the way in which it might for a Western audience.

I believe the specific case of references to Jackson's whiteness can be further theorised by understanding that Jackson's signification operates on these multiple levels. I argue that these specific extra-textual references to Jackson as "the white chick" position two Jacksons before the audience. The *inner-Jackson* is the character, and by all accounts she is Tamil by virtue of being diegetically Tamil. The second figure, the *Outer-Jackson* is the actor and the reference point for "the white chick" references. As discussed in Chapter Four, the implications of referencing Jackson's ethnicity has a significant impact on both audience reception of Jackson's characters and the narrative outcome of the film.

Within Indian film discourse there has been much discussion of approaching the star as a parallel text. Discussing the Hindi film industry (Bollywood) Vijay Mishra, Peter Jeffery & Brian Shoesmith (1989) state that given the emphasis on the star outside of the film, the actor can be read as a parallel text: "as a series within a larger generic form, not total or inclusive but sufficiently powerful to require analysis of its own" (1989: 49). Understanding the star as a parallel text allows for a better understanding not only of the impact the self-aware tropes of *cinematic excess* have on the film itself, but also on audience reception of the text. Geraghty states that,

[t]he relationship between the audience and star is deemed to be best figured by the fan whose knowledge comes from a wide variety of sources and who rework the material in the interests of working through contradictory questions of identity (2007: 99).

Similarly, Sara Dickey (2001) states that this application of analysis is also appropriate within the Tamil film industry. The proliferation of film centric magazines and hero fan clubs add significantly to the star's image and are "substantial enough to constitute a 'parallel text,' one that audiences bring to and read in tandem with individual film texts" (Dickey, 2001: 220).

I continue in the tradition of Mishra, Jeffery and Shoesmith (1989) and Dickey (2001), and read Jackson as a parallel text. I do this by studying not only the way in which Jackson's characters are written, but also the industry perception of Jackson and how this perception, along with nativist and anti-colonial sentiments, feed into the filmic text to create the on-screen Jackson. The clash that occurs when the off-screen Jackson is referenced in relation to the on-screen Jackson is based on the fundamental understanding of Jackson's ethnic difference to Tamil identity. My predominant approach will be a close textual analysis; however, it is virtually impossible to disconnect the text from the social context in which it was produced and consumed. As such, my discussion of Jackson draws on the aforementioned dominant nativist narratives within Tamil Nadu and Tamil cinema, particularly those in relation to Western/modern subjects. The goal of the case study in the next chapter is an exploratory means of reading Jackson, and the implications of referencing Jackson as Other within the film's narrative.

## Chapter 4

### Vellaikaariya?: *Thangamagan* and *Gethu*

The following case studies offer a reading of Amy Jackson's role in two films using the theoretical frameworks that I have discussed in the previous chapters. The particular instances which refer to Jackson as "the white chick," have been chosen to exhibit how the signification of these characters does not rest simply on her role within the text. Jackson's real British-Caucasian identity changes the perception of her canonically Tamil characters and thus significantly impacts the narrative outcome of the films she acts in. In this chapter, I offer a reading of the narrative implications of references to *Inner-Jackson* as white in each of these films. What I am attempting to achieve is a reading of how these texts construct their narrative and notions of nativity around the race of *Outer-Jackson*. To reiterate, I will be using the term *Outer-Jackson* to refer to Jackson as a performer, the Caucasian female actor outside the text. I will be using the names of characters to denote the *Inner-Jackson* in each of the films for simplicity's sake. The films chosen, *Thangamagan* (2015) and *Gethu* (2016), are two of Jackson's more recent films and both fall within the conventional Masala genre, making them easy to compare with one another. Despite the similarities the films share, they differ vastly from one another in the way they engage with Jackson's whiteness. *Thangamagan* is very much in line with the dominant anti-colonial native/foreign dichotomy propagated by Dravidian parties. It is primarily concerned with Jackson's *Western-ness*, a term that I established in Chapter Two as more concerned with Jackson's behaviour and upbringing rather than simply her ethnicity. *Gethu* on the other hand, is more concerned with Jackson's *Whiteness* (i.e. her ethnicity) as a global aesthetic of beauty. There is overlap between Whiteness and Western-ness in both texts; however, as my readings will show, the focus on one of these two elements of Jackson results in completely divergent portrayals of Jackson's characters.

## Golden Girl

*Thangamagan (Golden Son)* was released in 2015 and was produced by Wunderbar Films. Wunderbar Films is a recently established production company owned by prominent Tamil hero Dhanush and Aishwarya R. Dhanush, who is not only Dhanush's spouse but also the daughter of renowned actor Rajinikanth. These connections evidence the importance of industry happenings when viewing films, as audiences undoubtedly link their own perceptions of Dhanush and Rajinikanth when watching films produced by companies associated with them. This family drama film follows Tamizh,<sup>46</sup> played by Dhanush, an urban middle-class man and his relationships with his family and friends. True to his namesake, Tamizh embodies much of the Dravidian movement's values: he values family, respects his parents and, importantly, chooses to speak Tamil over English. The plot starts when Tamizh is a young adult with little motivation in life aside from spending time with his friends and ogling girls. Tamizh spots the half-Tamil Hema D'Souza (Jackson) at the local temple and is instantly besotted by her and pursues her unrelentingly. Eventually Hema yields and the two have a passionate relationship which ends ultimately when Tamizh and Hema's opinions on family life clash. Soon Hema and Tamizh's families arrange their marriages, Hema marries Tamizh's covetous cousin Aravind while Tamizh marries the traditional and innocent Yamuna (played by Samantha Ruth Prabhu).<sup>47</sup> The peaceful life Tamizh builds with Yamuna is shattered when his father commits suicide. Tamizh pursues the reasons behind his father's death, learning that his father had been wrongly accused of a crime his cousin Aravind had committed. The remainder of the film centers around Tamizh's attempt to gain justice for his father's death while supporting his wife and mother.

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<sup>46</sup> The *zh* is used in some English transliterations to denote the hard or retroflex approximant *L* (*ḷ*) sound in the Tamil language. I use this alternative spelling to differentiate the character *Tamizh* from the language/culture *Tamil*.

<sup>47</sup> Samantha has Malayali and Telugu heritage; however, she was born and brought up in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Yamuna's own 'true' Tamil-ness is further underpinned by the authenticity of Samantha's Tamil upbringing.



Throughout the film there are various references made to Hema in which she is referred to as white, despite being half-Tamil.<sup>48</sup> Hema's ethnicity is a source of constant confusion for Tamizh and his best friend Kumaran, who frequent the temple every morning in the hope of catching sight of Hema and her (fully Tamil) friend Revathi. Kumaran and Tamizh constantly refer to Hema as the "vellaikkaari" or "white chick" (as sampled in Figure 4), a term that does little to inspire respect from audiences.<sup>49</sup> The constant referencing of Hema's supposed ethnicity, which so happens to be Amy Jackson's actual ethnicity, makes audiences hyper-aware of Hema's fundamental difference to Tamizh. My reading of these references is broken down into four smaller segments, all of which lead to the overall reading of Hema's Western-ness as fundamentally different and inferior to the nativity of Tamil characters, especially Tamizh, within the film.



Figure 4: Two of many verbal references *Inner-Jackson* (Hema) as the "vellaikaari" or "white chick/girl" in *Thangamagan* (Velraj, 2015)

<sup>48</sup> Hema is stated to be half-British and Half-Brahmin Tamil. It is interesting to note that both of Jackson's characters in *Thangamagan* and *Gethu* are positioned as either half or wholly Brahmin. This could be a means of justifying her lighter skin (as Brahmins, who are of northern origin and are at the top of the caste hierarchy, are known to have fairer complexions), but it also opens up multiple questions regarding the place of caste in these films. As my readings are focused on references to Jackson's whiteness I have chosen not to engage in depth with these caste based queries.

<sup>49</sup> The term *vellaikkaari* (or *vellaikkaaran* for males) literally translates to White Woman and carries a somewhat derogatory sentiment by virtue of its historical use in reference to colonisers. It is this derogatory meaning which influenced me to use "the white chick" over simply "white girl/woman." Having said this it should be noted that there is no other word for White Woman/White Man.

## Jokes At The Expense Of Hema's Western-ness

The first part of the film, which details Tamizh's relationship with Hema, is littered with references to Hema as "the white chick." Frequently used by Tamizh and his friend Kumaran, these references serve a few purposes. The first is to justify Hema's Western appearance; while the character is half-Tamil, the film is aware that audiences are not going to fully believe this fact, especially given Jackson's recent popularity. When Tamizh asks Hema why she goes to the temple everyday when she looks like a white woman, she responds to Tamizh that she is half-Tamil (Brahmin) and half-British, and while she may look white she certainly does not act like a white girl. This justification works in tandem with Jackson's cosmetic nativisation to make her seem native *enough* to be a viable love interest for our native hero, Tamizh. The inclusion of Hema's half-British heritage is something the film also takes advantage of in the latter part of Hema and Tamizh's relationship. I will delve further into this in the second part of my reading. Additionally, these initial references to Hema's foreignness are presented as intrinsically comedic. So while the film attempts to justify Hema's half-Tamil-ness as an attribute that makes her worthy of Tamizh's love, it also makes fun of her for not being a fully Tamil woman. A specific scene which exemplifies how these references are a joke at Hema's expense is when Tamizh asks Hema for her name,

Tamizh: What's your name?

Hema: Hema D'Souza.

Tamizh: What?! Hema Kasamusa?<sup>50</sup>

Tamizh's deliberate mispronunciation of Hema's foreign surname, D'Souza, as *kasamusa*, a slang/derogatory innuendo, ridicules her name for being unpronounceable to a 'true' native Tamil person. The nativist dichotomy between the native *us* and the foreign *them*, is

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<sup>50</sup> A word which has multiple meanings depending on the context, it is usually used to signify 'funny business.' Given Tamizh's young age and the context of the question we can assume Tamizh is using the term as an innuendo.

highly visible in this instance. The ridicule of Hema for being not Tamil enough, implicitly engages with nativist ideologies, suppressing Western culture and bolstering Tamil identity.

### **Referencing Hema's Fundamental Difference From The Native Hero**

In addition to the comedic element of referencing Hema's Western-ness, the film also employs these references to emphasise Tamizh's nativity. Tamizh's nativity is fundamentally linked to his middle-class identity within the film. Hema's difference plays an important role in emphasising this, with Hema and Tamizh's relationship ultimately ending as a result of a clash of their respective sensibilities. This break-up is foreshadowed throughout the film through a number of references, which position Hema as the *glamorous heroine*, as discussed in Chapter Two. Hema is considerably wealthier than Tamizh, and she frequents nightclubs with her relatively modern friends. These nightclubs are the antithesis of Tamizh and Kumaran's usual haunts; foreign dance music plays overhead and the bar only stocks imported alcohol. While at the club the pair settle on the cheapest drink on the menu, a 200-rupee Corona, which Tamizh begrudgingly drinks. These instances of difference set up Hema and Tamizh's relationship to fail from the start, and cue audiences to Hema's supposed disloyalty, as she sells out her culture and country by listening to Western music and buying foreign liquor. There is clearly a class dynamic, which occurs quite overtly in this sequence. The majority of audiences, much like Tamizh, cannot relate to Hema's lifestyle, and it is this clash between traditional and Western ideas of family life that eventually leads to the disintegration of their relationship.

### **Setting Up The Archetype For The Traditional Woman**

The dichotomy between the native and the foreign continues to pervade throughout other elements of the narrative, particularly in the case of the two heroines. As discussed, Hema's Western sensibilities finally clash with Tamizh's and the two split. Tamizh wishes to stay in his parents' home after their marriage, while Hema wants to move out into

a home where she and Tamizh will live alone. Tamizh accuses Hema of not caring for the elderly, while Hema accuses Tamizh of attempting to control her too much. Eventually, Tamizh marries Yamuna, a traditional woman who moves in with him after marriage into his parents' home. While Hema and Yamuna get along within the film, the similarity in their relationships with Tamizh is more than enough for the film to compare them. This comparison is undeniably similar to Lakshmi's idea of the dichotomous relationship between the mother and the whore figures, as discussed in Chapters One and Two. As previously discussed, Lakshmi (2008) illustrates how an iconic DMK film produced competing representations of females:

The good woman is poor, beautiful and the epitome of Tamil culture. The bad woman is rich, English-educated, interested in social work and insolent. The rich woman talks of women's freedom and she is part of a women's association. She plays tennis and wears pants. (18-19)

Jackson's character, Hema, is very clearly positioned as the bad woman in this configuration; her partly Western heritage comes as yet another indication of her being *too modern*. Hema's ideas on marriage conflict so heavily with the predetermined 'true Tamil' marriage narrative that she is instantly cast aside by Tamizh. She even goes as far as to assert, as the archetypal feminist activist would do, that she does not wish to be controlled by a man. Tamizh, who is positioned as not at all controlling, but as a man who values tradition, instantly dumps her, deciding to marry Yamuna, a woman who will fulfil the role of a 'true' wife (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Tamizh's relationship with Hema is heavily contrasted with his relationship with the traditional Yamuna. This is portrayed in particular through the use of public/Westernised settings such as the theatre in Hema scenes (left), and private/traditional settings such as the home in Yamuna scenes (right) (Velraj, 2015).

With the introduction of Yamuna, the loyal and innocent housewife, Hema is relegated to the category of the ill-reputed girlfriend. As such, throughout the latter half of the film, Hema is punished for her modern tendencies; she is married off to Tamizh's greedy cousin, who has no respect for his wife or family and drinks his days away with stolen money. In a critical scene, Hema confronts her husband over his criminal activities, and she is met with a slap in the face. This slap has dual meaning, firstly, it contrasts the manhood of Tamizh with Aravind; emphasising Aravind as a lesser male, based on his lack of respect for his wife and family. Additionally, the slap underpins Hema's regret over ending her relationship with Tamizh; her loveless marriage to Aravind is positioned as a form of punishment.<sup>51</sup> In realising her past mistakes, the slap is yet another reminder to

<sup>51</sup> Tamil cinema's history of punishing ill-reputed women is very much the contemporary bolstering of the mother/whore dichotomy (Lakshmi, 2008). A notable example of a similar punishment is that of the heroine from *7G Rainbow Colony* (2004), Anitha, who is very open about her sexual desires, and dies at the end of the film. Nakassis (2007) states that many viewers and the director of the film held the belief that Anitha's death was vital to the realism of the film. Particularly because the film's ending contrasted heavily with the convenient happy endings present in unrealistic Masala films (2007: 94). While I agree with this understanding, I think it also important not to ignore that this punishment is deemed fitting as a result of her 'immoral' behavior, further reinforcing the necessity for women to be chaste in Tamil Cinema.

Hema, and similar women in the audience, that her grim situation is a result of her non-traditional sensibilities.

### **Intimacy As Facilitated By Western-ness**

The last element to my reading is the way in which Jackson is represented in the semi-diegetic song sequence throughout the film. Hema and Tamizh's relationship is pocketed, quite conveniently, within a song called 'Uyire.'<sup>52</sup> As discussed earlier in Chapter Three, song sequences in Indian films deliver to the audience moments which exist somewhat outside of the film's narrative; they, according to Priya Jha, open the genre up "to the critical investigations of its contradictions, both in the film space and also in its connections with the [...] film industry" (2003: 48). These sequences are just as filled with *excess* as references to *Outer-Jackson's* whiteness are. 'Uyire' takes place within the neighbourhood that Tamizh and Hema live in, and depicts them as their relationship progresses. Throughout the song the two characters partake in several intimate acts, such as hugging and kissing on balconies and rooftops (As sampled in Figure 6).



Figure 6: One of many intimate acts performed by Tamizh and Hema throughout the song sequence 'Uyire' in *Thangamagan* (Velraj, 2015)

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<sup>52</sup> Oh my Life.

As discussed in Chapter Two, there is a long-held stigma around female actors in Tamil Nadu. Much like the films they act in, for the contemporary Tamil female actor, the line between fiction and reality are blurred; non-traditional acts such as physical touching, kissing or wearing revealing clothing become “transgressive” acts, which could ultimately impact on her respectability in everyday life (Nakassis, 2015: 12). But given her Western upbringing, Jackson has no such problems and has more freedom to kiss actors or wear revealing costumes without the fear of societal disrepute. While the *Outer-Jackson* may have little qualms with kissing or hugging, it is still logical that the *Inner-Jackson*, Hema, as a Tamil woman would have issues with performing such acts in public spaces. After all, women, fictional characters included, who engage in such activities with men who are not their husbands are not respectable Tamil women. Nonetheless, as Mishra states, the *excessive* nature of the song, allows for “excesses of phantasy which are more problematic elsewhere in the film” to exist without the consequence to the character or the narrative of the film (1985: 127). Sequences such as ‘Uyire’ function as nothing more than a means of projecting a voyeuristic phantasy for viewers, especially given Jackson’s willingness to participate in these acts.<sup>53</sup> Despite the desirable characteristics Jackson brings with her as a Western female actor, she is still incompatible within the nativist paradigm, and, as such, her character cannot ultimately win the heart of the hero and fulfill her role as a truly traditional Tamil wife. To say that the existence of *Outer-Jackson* has little impact on the narrative of *Thangamagan* is to deny all of the layers of meaning the film produces through *excess*.

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<sup>53</sup> The term phantasy is used in alignment with feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey’s theorization of scopophilia and the male gaze. Derived from psychoanalytical theory, the scopophilic instinct is defined as “taking pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object” (Mulvey, 1999: 8). Voyeuristic phantasy, as used here, connotes how spectators can derive pleasure from viewing Jackson perform these acts of intimacy. For further detail see: Mulvey, L. (1999). *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 833–44.

## Jackson As An Aesthetic Of Beauty

Released in 2016, *Gethu* is another family-oriented Masala action film. Much like *Thangamagan*, *Gethu* is also produced by the lead actor of the film, Udhayanidhi Stalin. Udhayanidhi is the grandson of DMK founder and former chief minister M. Karunanidhi and son of M. K. Stalin, Working President of DMK and heir-apparent to Karunanidhi; something that is rather ironic considering the film's glorification of Jackson's ethnicity. The protagonist Sethu (Udhayanidhi Stalin) is a disciplined young middle-class man, who is forced to play dirty when his father is wrongly accused of murder by corrupt police officers and gangsters. Jackson plays Nanthini, an aspiring Brahmin news anchor with kleptomaniac tendencies. Jackson's role exists primarily to facilitate the romantic plotline, and while she only appears on-screen for roughly twenty minutes, Jackson's race is somehow still worked into the dialogue. Unlike the previous film, there is only one overt reference to Jackson's whiteness, however, this reference is perhaps more weighted than those in *Thangamagan* as it comes from Jackson's character herself. In the scene where this reference occurs, Nanthini has taken incriminating photos of Sethu urinating on a street corner and blackmails him into accompanying her to a night-time show.

Nanthini: Be ready at nine o'clock tonight.

Sethu: What for?

Nanthini: I want to go out tonight and have a great time!

Sethu: Why do I have to get ready for you to go out?

Nanthini: I can't go out on my own. Even the average girls are getting hit on, I'm like a white chick, what if someone comes and 'pecks' me? You're coming too

(Thirukumaran, 2016).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Author's own translation. The phrasing 'pecks me' is a direct translation, the implication here is that another man may see Nanthini and 'steal' her away from Sethu.



The simple fact that this reference to Jackson's whiteness is made by Nanthini rather than by another character creates a different implication for legitimising the claim, as audiences cannot dismiss it as a simple note on Jackson's cosmetic looks. It is not that Jackson seems white, as implied in the opinion of another character. She fundamentally *is* white by her own words, an implication that leads to a greater breakdown of the *Inner-Jackson's* identity as Tamil. Additionally, unlike the references in *Thangamagan*, this reference is asserted as if to brag rather than as a joke at Jackson's expense. This is done by distinguishing herself, someone who is like a white girl, from the average, and presumably Tamil, girls. Essentially what Nanthini is stating is that she looks so white that she is more appealing to men. Her brag is not necessarily that she is likely to be attacked (even though her wording seems to suggest that) it is more of a brag that if Sethu does not come with her tonight, she will be whisked away by another man. The implication here is Sethu could miss out on Nanthini as she is far superior to Tamil-looking girls. The positive nature of the reference to Jackson's whiteness in *Gethu* points towards what was discussed in Chapter Two—an understanding of whiteness as a global aesthetic of beauty. As such, there are two parts to my reading of this reference. On a basic level, Jackson's whiteness is not stigmatised as we have seen it can be when viewed through the nativist paradigm. On the contrary, the reference made to *Outer-Jackson* in relation to Nanthini (*Inner-Jackson*) is glorified, fetishised even, as a glamorous rarity that the hero would be lucky to be associated with and should not miss out on.

The second part to my reading delves further into the implications of this glorification of Jackson's whiteness, particularly in regard to how it assists in figuring Jackson as an object of male phantasy in her films. In referencing *Outer-Jackson's* whiteness, Nanthini alerts the audience, particularly male viewers, to the irresistibility of her difference. Constatine Nakassis remarks on how the objectification of female bodies in Tamil cinema is made fundamentally easier by marking the difference between the desired

on-screen body, and the body of a family member.<sup>55</sup> Nakassis quotes a friend, who explains that watching women on-screen is similar to the act of openly ogling women in public. The man explains that, “when they aren’t our sisters or mothers, we enjoy it. But if others are looking at them [their own family] like that, we get upset” (Nakassis, 2015: 15). Hence, to render women as foreign objects is “to figure them as not kin” (Nakassis, 2015: 15). As discussed in Chapter One, the DMK and its offshoot parties promoted the notion of a unified Tamil identity, which was primarily facilitated by employing familial titles and relationships between party members and the public. Similarly, the kin group discussed by Nakassis is not a personal one; it falls within the nativist model of an essential Tamil-ness. The way in which *Gethu* exploits this familial model to objectify Jackson is similar to Sara Ahmed’s assertion that,

[r]ace [...] ‘extends’ the family form; other members of the race are ‘like a family’, just as the family is defined in racial terms. The analogy works powerfully to produce a particular version of race and a particular version of family, predicated on ‘likeness’, where likeness becomes a matter of ‘shared attributes’ (2007: 154).

So while Nanthini exists within the Tamil notion of identity, the momentary collapse between her and the white Amy Jackson (*Outer-Jackson*) draws attention to her desirability through her exclusion from the audience’s kin group, signaling to male viewers that she is a viable source from which they can derive sexual pleasure.

Other less overt examples of Nanthini’s fundamental difference occur throughout Jackson’s stint in the film, most notably in a scene where Nanthini is compared to her darker skinned friend. In this scene Sethu and his friend Kanagu have recovered some stolen books from Nanthini and request her to give them the rest. Nanthini states that she has lent them to her friend and she will take them there to retrieve them. Kanagu, presumably impressed by Nanthini’s looks, asks her if her friend is attractive. Nanthini

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<sup>55</sup> Nakassis discusses non-Tamil female actors who appear on television, but his analysis of them as outside of the audience’s kin group is equally appropriate in the example of Jackson in cinema.

responds that she is very beautiful. Convinced, Kanagu accompanies Sethu and Nanthini to meet the friend. When they arrive Nanthini goes to get her friend and the books while Sethu and Kanagu wait outside. Excited, Kanagu asks Sethu if he thinks the friend will be a good match for himself. The camera holds on a medium shot as Sethu and Kanagu react to the friend as she exits her home, Kanagu's excitement has completely disappeared, Sethu looks disapprovingly at Kanagu as if to say, *you got excited over this?* A brief exchange occurs between the two characters.

Kanagu: So she's the "beautiful" one?

Nanthini's Friend: Hi I'm Veena

Sethu's Friend: Vaenaam (*I don't want [you]*) (Thirukumaran, 2016)<sup>56</sup>

The joke here is that Veena is the antithesis of Nanthini, shorter, darker and less fashionable, she is quickly labeled inadequate by Sethu and Kanagu. Here Veena is a visual representation of the "average [Tamil] girls" Nanthini compares herself to in the previous quote. Positioned as mediocre, ugly, and non-Western, Veena has none of the *Glamour*, as discussed in Chapter Two, held by Nanthini. Ultimately Veena is nothing more than a reminder of Nanthini's fundamental difference from the audience, further positioning her outside the kin group and as an object of sexual fantasy (Figure 7).

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<sup>56</sup> Author's Own Translation

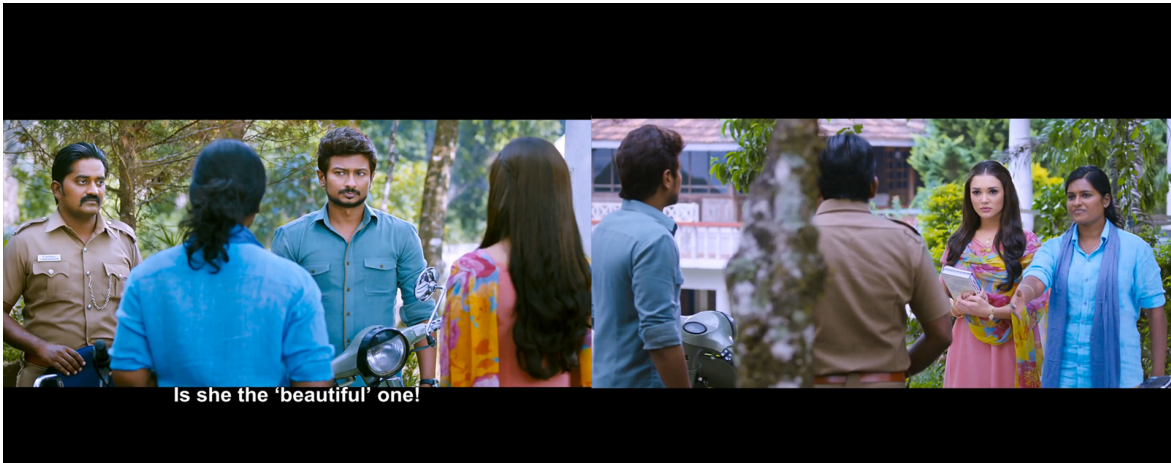


Figure 7: Hero, Sethu, and friend, Kanagu, look disapprovingly at Nanthini's friend Veena due to her dark skin in *Gethu* (Thirukumaran, 2016)

Both of the above readings deal with how Jackson's fundamental difference from Tamil actors and audiences impact the way in which her characters are written and received. Both *Thangamagan* and *Gethu* employ references to *Outer-Jackson* in order to respectively stigmatise or glorify her canonically Tamil characters. I have shown in this chapter how there are multiple layers of meaning which operate throughout the two films. These meanings only come to light in moments of *excess*, which allow for the identities of *Inner-* and *Outer-Jackson* to collapse into one another.

## Conclusion

The challenge of analysing Amy Jackson's presence brought me to two parallel phenomena, both of which equally influence her on-screen signification. Firstly, the extent to which Tamil cinema is rooted in Dravidian politics. Nativist politics took hold in Tamil cinema through the propaganda films of the DMK. Frequently breaking the fourth wall or making extra-textual references to party slogans and imagery, these films paved the way for dominant anti-colonial and anti-northern Indian ideologies that still remain in contemporary Tamil cinema, as discussed in Chapter One. Additionally, these films established a strict dichotomy of gendered representation, with males branded as native while women were branded Other/foreign. As explored in Chapter Two, this representation of women as Other/foreign led to the Westernised woman trope. These women were caricatures of women's liberation activists and embodied the ideologies of the Western 'enemy.' While this trope initially seemed to pose problems for understanding Jackson's popularity, the concerns around her ethnicity (Whiteness) could be quickly circumvented through cosmetic nativisation, making her seem less white. Simultaneously, Jackson's promotion as a glamorous figure on screen is aided by the idea of whiteness as a transnational aesthetic of beauty. The prioritisation of a fairer skin in Asia, and the transnational idealisation of whiteness are exemplified in Jackson's fame. This is no doubt brought into play by Tamil Cinema's increasing desire to depict a more authentically globalised society. In addition to the popularity Jackson receives due to her ethnicity, she carries with her the added benefit of having been brought up with Western values. The strict understandings of Tamil womanhood, which impact contemporary female actors are fortified by the stigma around acting. This stigma prevents Tamil female actors from performing intimate acts on-screen, something that Jackson is free to participate in due to the 'freedom' afforded to her by her Western upbringing.

While understanding how these two contradictory ideologies impact Jackson's popularity, the extra-textual references to Jackson's characters (*Inner-Jackson*) as "the white chick" and their narrative implications need to be analysed by viewing Jackson as a parallel text. In the case of *Thangamagan*, references to *Outer-Jackson* impact the way in which audiences react to the Westernised tendencies and values shown to be held by *Inner-Jackson*, Hema. The repeated reference to Hema as "the white chick" work alongside pre-existing nativist narratives to ultimately position the hero Tamizh and his traditional wife, Yamuna, as the pinnacle of 'true' Tamilhood. In contrast, *Gethu* glorifies Jackson's ethnicity, in the newer tradition of Whiteness as a globalised aesthetic of beauty. *Inner-Jackson's* (Nanthini's) reference to herself as appearing white, an overt reference to *Outer-Jackson*, is here presented as something for a Tamil audience to be jealous of. Her whiteness is treated as an aesthetic perk which makes her inherently superior to the native, 'average Tamil girl.' The meanings I have derived from these two films show that the multiple levels of meaning, which come about due to the qualities of *cinematic excess* present in Tamil cinema, can only be studied in a Western context through an interdisciplinary approach, which accommodates these idiosyncrasies. It would be simplistic to take one of these two readings as *the* reading, and dismiss the other. Both of these readings clearly exist alongside one another; neither is more valid than its counterpart. The contradictory nature of both of my readings show that there is no clear cut answer as to what references to Jackson's ethnicity signify. Additionally, the degree to which moments of *cinematic excess* are present in Tamil cinema, means that audiences who watch Jackson are not only understanding her characters in relation to the actor but also in relation to Jackson's canon of previous films.

By working through the complexity of Jackson's on- screen representations in Tamil cinema, I have discussed how meaning is made around Jackson. Approaching Jackson using a single theory would deny the varying significations brought up by Jackson's on-screen presence. As shown in my case studies, there are multiple layers of

meaning that operate throughout the films. These meanings only come to light in moments of *excess*, which allow for the identities of the character and the actor to collapse into one another. Analysing these films requires attention to these momentary collapses between fiction and reality. As such, when considering Tamil cinema we must approach it with a nuanced understanding of the industry's peculiarities. I have demonstrated this approach by discussing Jackson as a parallel text, in order to fully unpack the meaning of extra-textual references to Jackson's Tamil characters as "the white chick." Jackson is just one example of how these moments of *excess* allow cinema to navigate various political paradigms operating within contemporary Tamil Nadu.

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