



A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN AND SRI LANKAN CINEMA THROUGH THE FILMS *TONI ERDMANN* AND *BURNING BIRDS*

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Cinema is a powerful medium for reflecting and challenging societal gender norms. This study compares how traditional gender roles are constructed and contested in contemporary German and Sri Lankan cinema through representative case studies of Toni Erdmann (Germany, 2016) and Burning Birds (Davena Vihagun, Sri Lanka, 2016). Selected for their thematic depth, female protagonists, and critical acclaim, these films depict women navigating patriarchal systems. The films were chosen through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research focus on gender, national identity, and female agency. The research objective was to compare how Toni Erdmann and Burning Birds portray women's agency and resistance within patriarchal structures, examining the influence of Germany's entrepreneurial culture and Sri Lanka's post-war trauma on these representations. The research question asks: How do these films construct and challenge women's agency and gender roles, and how do national contexts shape these portrayals? Using qualitative comparative film analysis informed by Feminist Film Theory and cultural studies, the study analyzed each film's narrative, character development, mise-en-scène, and dialogue through semiotic and narrative analysis, then compared their gender role portrayals. Specific attention was given to emotional labour, visual symbolism, and the social positioning of female protagonists in relation to national ideologies. Findings indicate Toni Erdmann critiques workplace gender stereotypes through the protagonist's subversive humour, such as defying corporate norms, while Burning Birds portrays women's resilience through acts of economic independence in a war-torn society. While Ines resists neoliberal pressures through ironic detachment, Kusum's silent endurance challenges victimhood narratives through embodied suffering. Germany's entrepreneurial culture reinforces corporate hierarchies in Toni Erdmann, while Sri Lanka's post-war trauma amplifies survival strategies in Burning Birds. The films both affirm and subvert national gender stereotypes by presenting complex portrayals of women who neither fully conform to nor reject societal norms. This research contributes to film, gender, and intercultural studies by highlighting cinema's role in redefining gender norms across contrasting national and historical contexts, and advocates for further study of underrepresented national cinemas, particularly from the Global South, to enrich global feminist discourse.

Keywords: gender roles, comparative film analysis, Feminist Film Theory, German cinema, Sri Lankan cinema

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INTRODUCTION

Film has a long history as both a reflection and critique of society. Film reflects prevailing cultural narratives but also provides a platform to subject them to scrutiny. Gender roles in film, in particular, can provide valuable insights into the manner in which societies conceptualize the space, power, and agency of women in family, economic, and political spaces. This study critically investigates the portrayal of classical gender roles in two geographically and culturally differentiated film cultures: Sri Lanka and Germany. The study compares two films released in 2016: *Toni Erdmann*, helmed by Maren Ade, and *Burning Birds*, directed by Sanjeewa Pushpakumara. Both the films, which were released in the same year, confront strong women protagonists trapped between personal desires and limiting social constraints. Despite being based in differing settings, German corporate urban life, and Sri Lankan post-war rural society, both films explore women's resistance to patriarchal control in an affective and political context. This study is guided by the following research question: How and in what ways gender roles are constructed and negotiated within the films *Toni Erdmann* and *Burning Birds*, and in what ways cultural and national contexts are influencing these representations? The study aims to be useful to feminist film analysis and cross-cultural gender research by highlighting the influence of local histories, ideologies, and film traditions on gender representation. It also bridges a gap in academic research on non-Western cinema, in particular, Sri Lankan cinema that normally is not represented in global feminist discourses.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, comparative research design, informed by Feminist Film Theory, intersectionality, and cultural studies. The films were selected through purposive sampling, based on their thematic relevance, narrative focus on female protagonists, and critical engagement with sociocultural gender norms. Theoretical application was guided by scholars such as Laura Mulvey (1975), Judith Butler (1990), and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003). The research followed two broad stages. Firstly, all the films underwent a multi-faceted analysis which included narrative analysis (plot structure, pacing, and character development), visual analysis (staging, camera movement, costumes, lighting, and symbolism), and dialogue



analysis, sound, and use of silence. Pay attention to how gendered meaning was constructed. To be included in consideration also were the emotional labour and embodied feelings of protagonists concerning social restrictions. In the second phase, findings of each film were compared systematically. Their systems of patriarchy, motherhood, sexuality, labour, bereavement, and resistance were compared for similarities and differences. Cultural values expressed in each film on the basis of Germany's late capitalism and Sri Lanka's post-war trauma were examined as well. Several secondary sources were employed to ground this comparative study, including academic journal publications, critical reviews, and director interviews. National historical contexts, e.g., German economic restructuring and the aftermath of the Civil War in Sri Lanka, were also considered to measure their effect on the gendered narratives of the film.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Both *Burning Birds* and *Toni Erdmann* offer discerning critiques of patriarchy with culturally particular cinesthetic languages and woman-centered narratives shaped by broader political and economic conditions. Ines is in the male-dominated, global, capitalist corporate world, and Kusum is in post-war Sri Lankan society. Ines is a professional woman who suppresses her vulnerability to neoliberalism. Her outrageous interventions by the father are a counter-narrative of the subversive kind, reclaiming femininity and emotional connection through satire and irony. Kusum's account, in contrast, accounts for a mother who endures structural violence and social alienation with stoic strength. Her refusal to be heard as a victim is shared by many marginalised women, and it is shown realistically, empathetically, and aesthetically. Both films undermine mainstream concepts of femininity by showing women who quietly challenge social norms without fully accepting or rejecting them. While *Toni Erdmann* uses humour and emotional distance to confront the dehumanizing effects of a corporate culture, *Burning Birds* presents a raw and intimate portrayal of gendered suffering, shaped by post-war trauma. These portrayals are deeply rooted in national experiences: Germany's entrepreneurial and individualistic ethos is reflected in Ines's internalized pressures, while Sri Lanka's post-conflict social conservatism informs Kusum's silent resistance. The films not only challenge gender expectations, but also highlight how such expectations intersect with class, labour, and national ideologies. Ines must perform emotional labour to succeed in her career while Kusum's labour is domestic and invisible, but essential for survival. Both films, in their unique stylistic forms, ironic detachment in *Toni Erdmann* and visceral realism in *Burning Birds*, reveal the ways women resist patriarchal systems by navigating the roles assigned to them, often subverting these roles from within. Ultimately, the films offer both affirmation and subversion of national gender



stereotypes: they reaffirm the existence of those norms while simultaneously questioning their legitimacy through complex female protagonists who do not conform to simple victim or heroine archetypes.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that Toni Erdmann and Burning Birds both offer significant critiques of traditional gender norms by presenting culturally grounded portrayals of women's agency and constraint, with the persistent struggle against patriarchal expectations at the heart of their narratives despite differing contexts. The research recommends increased academic attention to underrepresented cinemas, especially from South Asia, to enrich and diversify global feminist film discourse; the incorporation of comparative film analysis in educational settings to deepen students' understanding of the intersection between gender and culture in visual storytelling; and further exploration of audience reception in the films' home countries to evaluate how effectively their gender-related messages are perceived and internalized. Additionally, future research could explore comparative gender representations across post-socialist and post-conflict national cinemas to reveal how intersecting histories, economies, and ideologies shape feminist narratives. This would provide deeper insights into the global dynamics of gender representation and enrich transnational feminist dialogue.

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