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Exploring Fat Lives: A Critical Analysis and Comparative Reading of two South Indian movies; *DaThadiya* (2012) and *Inji Iduppazhagi* (2015)

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Abstract: This article examines how the debates around body size are being mediated through its cinematic representations in two selected movies from South India, *Da Thadiya* (2012) and *Inji Iduppazhagi* (2015). It elucidates the cultural- political terrain that forms the ground for negotiation of socio cultural ideals about body image at the intersection of gender, race and sexuality.

Keywords: Body size, Cinematic representation, Cultural codes of fatness.

Introduction Interrogating negative visual representations of fat and fatness deconstructs the ways in which cultural percepts are deployed in order to construct the fat body as other: as physically excessive, and as morally insufficient. Exploring visual representations that members of fat communities have created of their starable bodies, in contrast, can reconfigure the meanings assigned to them by dominant cultural discourses while giving voice to people otherwise made socially unintelligible within the history of art and visual culture. Whether confrontational or celebratory, such representations establish new ways of seeing the frontier of uncontrollable bodies (Snider 116).

Fat studies as an academic discipline arose during 1980s and 1990s, and as a field of scholarship it examines the societal attitude towards body size and appearance. It seeks to remove the negative connotations associated with the fat body. The size acceptance movement began in 1969 with the formation of NAAFA, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (initially the National Association to Aid Fat Americans) by Bill Fabrey. A group of fat women formed the the Fat Underground in Los Angeles during 1970s. NAAFA and Fat Underground used the word “fat” instead of “obese” or “overweight”. They considered “obese” as a medical term which was based on Greek or Latin term and did not use the word “overweight” because this term hinted at a desirable “ideal” weight. Fat studies scholars have described how views about fatness in United States changed from being healthy and attractive to that of being ugly and unhealthy between 1880s and 1920s (Fraser 2009).

The intersection of fat studies with disability studies is often an issue of debate because unlike disability, “fatness is often portrayed as a voluntary condition resulting

from poor eating habits and sedentary life style” (Herndon 124). But fat acceptance advocates are of the view that non recognition of fat people as disabled “further breaks down group bonds, isolates them as discrete individuals and severely hinders the forming of politically conscious fat bodies”(Herndon 130). Thus, there is a kind of silencing of the fat body as something with inherent flaws. These notions are reinstated through cinematic representations, which often serve as a panopticon or as a disciplinary agent that focuses on the pain and suffering rather than demystifying fatness. The present study discusses the cinematic representation of fatness in two selected South Indian movies, *Da Thadiya* (2012) and *Inji Iduppazhagi* (2015). A comparative reading of these movies would initiate further discussions on related topics like the gendered nature of fatness, the rising trend of fat phobia and the positive message of health for all sizes. The above topics would be analyzed by using Foucault’s concept of discourse analysisⁱ and panopticismⁱⁱ.

Visual Representations of Fatness

Visual culture configures the fat body in a humorous, cynical and joyful manner. Media industry exaggerates the alleged ‘obesity epidemic’ and this public discourse is ‘often based on a plethora of scientific evidence around causation and guidelines on prevention.’(Rich and Evans 341). Such media centered obesity discourse is often linked with inactive lifestyles and fast food culture. These representations affect people’s sense of self and embodied entity.

This issue of individualizing responsibility is one of the most morally problematic features of the obesity discourse, when we consider the current culture of healthism that resides in Western society, placing moral obligation on individuals for their health. The pressure to obtain the right body size/shape is not simply about being healthy but carries moral characterizations of the obese or over weight as lazy, self indulgent and greedy(Gordon 2000). In other words, feeling fat carries personal evidence of stigma (Goffman 1963), which can evoke feelings of guilt, stigma and shame. The corollary of this is that control, virtue and goodness are to be found in slenderness and the process of becoming (sometimes dangerously) thin...Weight loss in this context is about more than simply aiming to achieve a ‘slim figure’. Within this discourse, individuals are deemed largely responsible for their own health and for ‘making healthy choices’ as if they were free of structural and cultural constraint that bear upon peoples opportunity to achieve the health behaviors prescribed. (Rich and Evans 353)

There is a politics of disgust centered on the visual representation of fatness, though there are a few of those that have tried to portray fatness in a positive framework. There is often a racist and opportunistic denigration of fat characters in visual media, and especially in films. The American film *Precious* (2009) directed and co-produced by Lee Daniels created endless commercial buzz and most of the reviews about the movie was centered on actress Gabourey Sidibe's fat proportions. "Across the board, writers reiterated her weight and dimensions as though they were describing a piece of furniture, a characterless piece of the *mis en sce`ne*. Besty Sharkey(2009) in the LA Times even glibly declared that "there is little that seems precious about *Precious*, whose 330 pounds and constant scowl is cross- the street intimidating" (Stoneman 197). Similar fat phobic lines were expressed by Antony Lane (2009) in The New Yorker, where he wrote that Sidibe is "grimly over-weight, her face so filled out that the play of normal expression seems restricted."

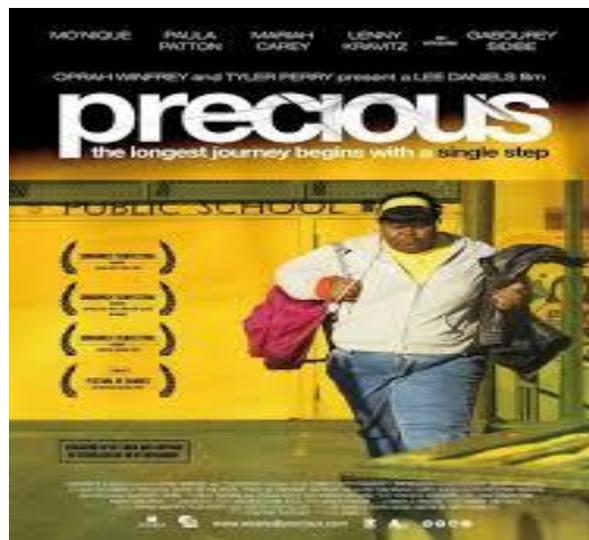


Fig 1: Poster of the film *Precious* (2009)

There is a marked difference in this prospect of fat phobia in Indian films and especially South Indian films. This article would be focusing on the aesthetic and cultural connotations of fatness in India, especially South India. Cinematic representations often shape and reflect our cultural values, norms and expectations. Embracing of fat culture was one of the typical features of South India. During 1960s and 70s, the ideal feminine body in South Indian movies was the sexy, plump full woman. But as Ashish Rajadyaksha rightly points out in his article "The Bollywoodization of Indian Cinema: cultural nationalism in global arena", Indian cinema seldom escapes from the shadows of "Bollywoodization" Thus, this concept changed during the late 1970s due to a large number of external factors like the rising popularity of beauty pageants, the influence of the Bollywood industry, the evolution of fitness industry in India, etc. With the backing of the medical discourse (often without any scientific proofs), fat came to be equated with unhealthy and being thin (or rather trimmed) as healthy. The study becomes relevant in this context, as it

discusses about two movies that clearly stand apart from the current discourses of South Indian cinema.

About the movies

Da Thadiya is a Malayalam movie released in 2012 which narrates the life of a fat youth named Luke John Prakash. He is called *thadiyan* (meaning a fat man) by everyone except his grandmother, so that the term literally becomes equated with his name. Still, he is happy with his life and people around him until his childhood love (who was then fat) comes back with a surprisingly new (thinner) look. She injects insecurity into his mind and Luke embarks Ayurvedic treatments to lose weight. The movie then focuses on the fraud marketing techniques of the consumerist industries that utilizes the insecurities surrounding fatness for their sheer profit. The film ends on a positive note when Luke finally takes advantage of the hugeness of his size to canvass people and becomes the mayor of his city.



Fig 2: Poster from the movie *DaThadiya* (2012)

Inji Iduppazhagi (Size Zero) is a 2015 Tamil- Telugu bilingual movie which tells the story of fat woman Sweety, who is bold and independent. She is confident about herself until her hopes are shattered by her dream boy who falls for another girl. She believes that this is because of her being fat and joins a weight- loss clinic which later on is shown to encourage many unhealthy practices and use deadly medicines in the name of losing weight. The rest of the movie is about Sweety's struggle against the clinic where she is joined by her dream boy who now starts falling for her. The movie has a positive ending where Sweety marries the man of her choice without compromising her existing physique.



Fig 3: Screen shot from the movie *Inji Idduppazhagi* (2015)

A comparative reading of these selected movies proves that they have many similarities which in turn highlight many of the cultural and aesthetic codes associated with fatness. Both the protagonists are portrayed as sexually unattractive and are initially rejected by their partners because of their physique. They are surrounded by a world of increased fat phobia where they become politically invisible beings with not much agency on one hand and at the same time the visibility of their oversized bodies makes them objects of laughter and ridicule. They are being monitored by the outside world all through their lives and their fatness is shown to be the result of their eating habits. Thus as said before, fatness becomes a voluntary disability and both of them are shown as flawed individuals who are to correct themselves (and become useful beings) by losing weight. It also seems interesting how the so called unattractive fat body is juxtaposed in both movies with another man/woman of desirable physique. They are criticized for their weight by their worried parents who see them as symbols of family shame. Both the protagonists are protected and pampered by their grandparents who love them irrespective of their body size. In fact, the grandparents are their only source of support and solace during the bitter days of their life. The indifference of grandparents to body size in both the movies hints at the idea that fat phobia is a recent development. Although both the movies have many instances which show the fat person as ‘the insulted other’, both the movies end on a positive note where the protagonists are accepted the way they are. Thus, the selected movies are among the few “alternative discourses that take a more humanistic approach to weight and shape and value the diversity of body types. These approaches draw upon the idea that one may be fat and beautiful, or fat and healthy, as exemplified in the

development of the size/fat acceptance movement, which attempts to change the negative social, cultural and medical attitudes about fatness”(Rich and Evans 353).

Gendering Fatness

The war on obesity has now become a gender neutral phenomenon. Health becomes equated with body size and this perception is accepted unanimously by the health professionals, the media and the general public. Still, gender equality in this area is also elusive. Women are subject to greater pressures than men when it comes to body size as in many instances. This idea of gender inequality becomes clear when we compare the titles of the selected movies. *Da Thadiya* (which literally means addressing a man as fat) is an obvious or rather a derogatory title that clearly hints at the content of the movie. Whereas *Inji Iduppazhagi* (which literally means having a curved belly resembling the shape of a ginger) is an ironical title that misleads the audience. The idea of using a word that stands for a fat woman by itself stands as something unfit/ unattractive to be considered as an appealing title. The ironical title also alludes to the tremendous pressure over the female gender to conform to the desirable body size. Romantic femininity is often associated with being thin and small (in most cases smaller than their male counterparts).

In traditional Indian weddings the bridal body is considered as a ritual gift which in turn becomes an ethnic symbol. Thus, the dress and other bodily adornments have become important cultural markers. There is an interesting dynamic in that ethnic fashion had been outdated as element of self – constitution (not as element of constructing the other) among the urban middle classes and elites until the mid- 1990s. It was conceived as “backward” and un-modern. After “the west” started to consume and promote it as “exotic” and fashionable, along with yoga or Ayurveda, Indian “folk” was re- imported and became appreciated by the aspiring Indian middle classes. Those who felt that it was part of a cosmopolitan rhetoric could appropriate the “ethnic”. In the shaping of the upper middle classes and social elites as an aesthetic community of cosmopolitans, the “cultured” body came to play an important role (Michaels and Wulf 46). In the wedding ritual, the bride does not only become a wife, but somehow the soundboard for different values and concepts that have shaped with economic liberalization. In *Inji Iduppazhagi*, we see a mother striving to get her plump (rather fat) daughter desirable in the marriage market. There are explicit statements in the movie that an undesirable daughter is a curse and shame to the family. The mother forces her daughter to wear tight fitting ethnic dress to make her presentable before the prospective groom and forces her to join an Ayurvedic treatment programme to reduce her weight. Thus, the movie projects that marriage is the ultimate goal to be achieved in a woman’s life.



Fig4: A screen shot from *Inji Idippuzhagi* (2015) where the mother makes a futile effort to fit in a tight fighting dress for her daughter

The ideal masculine body is often imagined as being tall, strong and muscular. Like in the case of women, movies try to re- establish these concepts. For example, *Da Thadiya* has a sequence where the protagonist is gifted with the figure of a superman by his lover, which exemplifies the fact that the dream man of her choice is so very different from his own physique. The movie also dashes upon the concept of the feminized fat man. There are repeated references to his oversized breasts (like that of a woman) and his soft body. But towards the end of the movie the hugeness of his body builds an aura of trust and respectability around him. At a time when he tags himself as a “big, fat, ugly pig”, his grandmother gives him confidence and tells that “you are build big to do BIG things in life.” He regains his lost confidence and becomes the mayor of his city.

Whereas, when it comes to the story of a woman in *Inji Iduppazhagi*, there is a kind of over emphasizing of the body. The protagonist becomes successful only by proving that fat is also sexy. Again success for her means winning back her dream man, who initially did not reciprocate her feelings. This man of her choice initially falls for another woman and then comes back to the protagonist all of a sudden without any reason. But she never questions this shift in his attitude and accepts him whole heartedly. The powerful fat man in *Da Thadiya* gets an opportunity to reject his girl friend who initially deserted him because of his body size. In other words he gets a chance to prove that he is complete by himself. But the woman in *Inji Iduppazhagi* never gets an opportunity to reject anyone. (Interestingly, she is approached by another well built man after being rejected by the first one and she agrees to marry him although she has the first love in her mind.) Thus success in the marriage market becomes the only thing for which she has to strive for in her life.

Thus “the discourse of maternal, wifely and romantic love converges on women to produce romantic femininity as signified in the small and thin body”, (Malson, 1988) which in reverse means “the signification of non- femininity for the fat woman’s body” (Orbach, 2006). But in the case of men, although the ideal masculine body is constructed as muscular, strong, tall and lean; “overall a large body size for men carries mainly advantages in social interactions and signifies masculinity and power”(Tischner 101).

Cultural and Aesthetic Codes of Fatness

“Culture is specifically important because it provides the connections, the links between the already enmeshed body and representations. It provides the ‘horizon’ or the back drop to our ‘being- in- the world’ and gives meaning to representations” (Tischner 30). Thus, the material body becomes a site of power struggles. Thus the question of who is categorized as fat is a social decision and the concept of ‘culturally fat’ matters more. This fact draws our attention towards the social positioning of the fat individual. Fatness is often depicted as an individual attribute and fat people are viewed as inherently flawed individuals and there is a clear bias towards a ‘fat blaming’ culture. Thus,

The truths related to health and body size are being constructed through medical/scientific discourses, which are distributed and consumed through a variety of media, from academic literature to mass media and day to day talk. They are produced and transmitted under the control of a few political and economic apparatuses (Foucault 1991), in this case the established medical (and psychological) institutions as well as the diet industry (Tischner 80.)

The different discourses like the cinematic representations often pressurize the fat people to be health conscious and to be responsible about looking after themselves. The general notion being that they are health indifferent individuals; these representations often portray them as people of some eating disorders. Both of the selected movies depict the protagonists as careless gluttons munching on whatever that come across them. They are surrounded by a world of fat phobia and they become objects of ridicule in many instances. Besides being portrayed as sexually unattractive, they are presented as unproductive and as a burden to the family. For example, in *Da Thadiya*, the protagonist is rudely attacked and ridiculed to the position of a ‘shit producing machine.’ He is considered to be a worthless individual who is only ‘fit to watch videogames and eat burgers.’ In the film *Inji Iduppazhagi*, the protagonist is portrayed as someone who is a constant failure in the marriage market. Initially, her weight stands as a dagger to all her hopes, in her private as well as in her public life. She regains her lost dignity by fighting back the body politics and by proving that fat is also sexy.

Another interesting aspect that is highlighted in both the movies is the patriarchal gaze that the fat people have to face and the constant pressure of self-

disciplining and de-individualizationⁱⁱⁱ happening as a result of this controlling gaze. Although tagged as fat by the society, the protagonists of both the movies were happy about themselves. But during the later stages of the movies, they are intentionally juxtaposed with another man/woman of the desirable body and social acceptance. This induces a kind of inferiority consciousness in them and they try to scrutinize their own body and life style. In general, powerful discourses like cinema acts as the invisible, powerful panopticon gaze which make people fit into the culturally constructed normative space. Thus the individuals become “docile bodies regulating them according to societal regulations and norms to be seen and function as good neoliberal citizen for the good of the nation’s wealth and welfare” (Tischner 45). In other words, “Disciplinarity is achieved through the micro process of self-surveillance and self regulation, with the body acting as the surface of power. (Hook .22). In this sense, through the disciplinary gaze of powerful discourses; the personal becomes the political.

Be healthy the way you are

Fat phobia and the overwhelming cultural narratives of fatness are constructions fueled far more by the drive towards normative bodies than by solid medical evidence.... It is the stigma that these cultural narratives propagate about fatness, the black cloud of misunderstanding and hatred that heavily hangs around the shoulders of people of size, that medicalized accounts and those focusing on impairments alone fail to address (Herndon 126).

There are numerous studies (mostly conducted in the West) which proves that losing weight does not mean a step towards health. ‘ For example, 1 January 1988, Dr. Jerome Kassier and Dr. Marcia Angell published an editorial in The New England Journal of Medicine that succinctly stated that...the data showing beneficial effects of weight loss, are limited, fragmentary and often ambiguous” (Herndon 125). There is a kind of cosmetic panopticon that pressures the fat people to participate in creating the ‘ideal body’. Media often becomes the cosmetic panopticon by suggesting the value of body size and how we are to feel and act according to our body size. Media representations had its impact on the fashion industry as well as the diet industries. But sometimes, people are cheated and put to danger by the unhealthy quick slimming packages offered by money- minded industries. Both these movies criticize such profit oriented institutions that instill insecurity and complex into the mind of the fat people.

“The Health at Every Size (HAES) movement is a public health initiative that focuses on health for all people, regardless of body weight. HAES emphasizes improving nutrition and enjoying food, and also on the joy of movement instead of adherence to a structured exercise program” (Rothblum 179). Therefore what we need is a wellness centered approach or health at every size approach that supports individuals to work towards a healthier life style rather than concentrating only on weight loss. “One such

possibility lies in demystifying fatness and making it possible for fat women; non-fat and those living at multiple conjunctions of these identities to work together around shared goals rather than pitting themselves against one another in struggles of power” (Herndon 133- 134). This is exactly what happens in *Inji Iduppazhagi*, where people from different walks of life and different body sizes join hands against fat phobia and to promote the ideal of health at every size.

Conclusion

There is always a prevalence of self-depreciating anti-fat discourses. The boundaries of who is fat and who is not often become contextual. The social systems around us work to silence the fat. Unfortunately representations of fatness most often focus on its negative aspects. Both the selected movies propagate the stereotyped notions of fat people as sites of ridicule, sexually unattractive, materially unproductive etc. At the same time, these movies also try to showcase fat bodies as “sites of power, entitlement and freedom rather than being the loci of fear, misunderstanding and pity.”(Herndon 133)

Visual representations matter: that art, whether considered “high culture” and placed in galleries and museums, or pop culture and part of the television, movies, books, and digital media we engage with on a daily basis, are central to the shaping of our ideas about our humanity, of our selves, and of other people. All too frequently seen as apolitical or immaterial to the “real” world, visual representations are, in fact, of utmost importance in showing us how we should and should not behave in our private lives; how we can and cannot act in public; and what is acceptable and unacceptable regarding body size and shape. The visual representation of fat and fatness, for good or bad, is a social justice issue entwining the personal and the political in numerous ways.(Snieder, 116)

End Notes

ⁱ According to Foucault’s discourse analysis, discourses are historically and culturally located dynamic webs of statements which are intersected with other statements.

Knowledges and realities are constructed in discourse.

ⁱⁱ Panopticism is a social theory named after Panopticon , originally developed by Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish*. It refers to an experimental laboratory of power and stands as a symbol of society’s disciplinary surveillance.

ⁱⁱⁱ Loss of integrity and self worth

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