

Negotiating Morality And Desire: Feminist Re-Readings Of Jayanti In Yaddanapudi Sulochana Rani's *Secretary* And Its Cinematic Adaptation

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Abstract:

This article investigates *Secretary*—the acclaimed Telugu novel by Yaddanapudi Sulochana Rani—and its 1976 film adaptation by K. S. Prakash Rao, analyzing the way the transition from the page to the screen shifts how the female protagonist is represented and the feminist ethics of the original text. Utilizing Laura Mulvey's male gaze, Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism, and Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory, the analysis concludes that while Yaddanapudi's Jayanti represents moral virtue and professional independence, Prakash Rao's Jayanti becomes a sentimentalized object of patriarchy that collapses agency within patriarchal visual regimes. By comparing textual evidence in Telugu and filmic representations, this article exposes systematized ways to temper feminist voices in commercial cinema while also exploring larger issues related to author respect, gendered authorship, and adaptation ethics.

Key Words: Yaddanapudi Sulochana Rani, Telugu Literature, Feminist Adaptation, *Secretary*, Moral Autonomy, Indian Cinema.

1 INTRODUCTION

In Telugu fiction produced after independence, a strong female literary figure emerged in Yaddanapudi Sulochana Rani (1940 – 2018). Yaddanapudi Sulochana Rani was adept in giving voice to middle-class women who struggled with education, employment, and morality within constraining social codes. Throughout an impressive output of over fifty novels, she forged what might be called a feminism of restraint—women who exert agency through self-composure, dignity, and moral intelligence instead of through defiance.¹ The 'heroines' of her novels rationalize work and love within a moral framework upholding the value of self-respect, conversations of mutual respect, over brute-force domination.

In particular, *Secretary* is noteworthy, as it allows socially realistic, and thematically modern storytelling. The titular heroine, Jayanti, is a young educated woman who ventures out into the world of work in order to support her ailing grandmother. Throughout the novel, she is constructed as competent, self-aware, and very aware of the boundaries between professional behavior and personal behavior. The 1976 film adaptation of *Secretary*, starring Vanisri and Akkineni Nageswara Rao, takes this moral premise and converts it into a melodramatic narrative of romantic submission. At the conclusion of the novel the story begins to pivot towards conversation and reconciliation, and the film ends at the moment of erotic implication as if intellectual resolution is to be exotic emotional sexual subjugation.

The difference raises important questions previously posed by readers and now at the heart of adaptation studies: Why do filmmakers take the liberty to reshape feminist heroines for the purposes of commodification? Is this not a figural erasure of the author's feminist intention? The questions reflect the asymmetrical relationship between women authorship in literature and film production as male dominated institutions, an imbalance that this paper explores by way of textual and visual analysis.

2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Critical scholarship on Yaddanapudi Sulochana Rani has mainly centered her renown and the romantic aspects of her novels rather than engaging with her novels' feminist considerations. Articles in *The Hindu*, *The Times of India*, and *The Hans India* recognize her as a woman novel writer, who "inspired courage in the middle-class woman to dream"—but few went so far as to read her as a feminist realist.^{2 3 4} The academic work on Telugu popular fiction (e.g., Ramakrishna 2005, Suryanarayana 2010) recognized her ability to domesticate modernity without the loss of moral consciousness. However, few have explored the ideological implications of transcribing that morality for film.

In film studies, Ravi Vasudevan discusses the way that the melodramatic form of Indian cinema operates to privilege male redemptive storylines and to showcase women's suffering as emotional spectacle of *The Melodramatic Public* (2010).⁵ Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti (2008) argue that mainstream forms of adaptations not only feminize tasks but discipline yearning in relation to reproduce patriarchal equilibrium.⁶ These frameworks are applicable to *Secretary* in a literary logic of professionalism becomes coded as romantic submission.

Feminist adaptation theorists such as Linda Hutcheon consider adaptation "repetition without replication," arguing that every adaptation interprets as much as it imitates.⁷ For the feminist adaptation theorist, interpretation assumes more comfortable, often predictable, many times more accepting forms within the context of adaptation. When interpretations occur within a form constrained by patriarchal ideologies, the result can reproduce some of these ideologies while privileging the original text. Laura Mulvey argues this point in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) where she shows how cinematic language turns woman into spectacle, where narrative pleasure "consists in substituting the patriarchal, voyeuristic gaze."⁸ Within the context of Indian cinema, Tejaswini Niranjana (1992) and Susie Tharu & K. Lalita (1991) have shown how translation and adaptation of women's writing oftentimes resequences narrative hierarchies while claiming they were in the interest of introducing to a more popular audience feminist texts.^{9 10}

This project extends these debates into the Telugu cultural space by providing a close reading of *Secretary* and the film version. In this way, alongside the close reading the juxtaposition adds to an understanding of how feminist ethics in Yaddanapudi's novel are aesthetically softened and ideologically domesticated within the adaptation.

II. The Novel: A Feminist Narrative of Integrity

The novel *Secretary* follows Jayanti, a young woman with an education who takes on a secretary position in order to support her grandmother. The text establishes her as economically independent, and as having a strong moral center. She enters the workforce self-assured of her capabilities and conscious of working woman vulnerabilities, ingrained in a patriarchal setting.

1. Characterization and the Moral Center

Jayanti has a moral center in the form of moral intelligence. Yaddanapudi builds her agency with decision, speech, and self-control, as opposed to defiance. When her supervisor or any other men act upon an inappropriate desire, Jayanti resists emotionally-drivenness with rational, compelling dialogue. If those dynamics could become romanticized, she always distinguishes between interest and ethics - indicating that the literature is subverting fictionalized womanhood from male desire.

2. Narrative Voice and Narrator

The novel provides an internal feminine view. The narrative voice is aligned with Jayanti's consciousness and gives the reader access to her rationality, doubts, and emotional logic. The structure of this voice modifies the normative experience of patriarchal narration - instead of being told, Jayanti tells; instead of being viewed, she perceives. Her authenticity base is also the center of morality for this narrative.

3. Gendered Space and Resistance

Yaddanapudi places Jayanti in professions dominated by men and gendered structures are evident. Yet Jayanti's challenges to these structures is more nuanced - she reclaims dignity through silence, refusal and professional competence. In the face of exploitation, Jayanti's choice to resign rather than comply is celebrated victory versus defeat. In this instance, Secretary mobilizes what Showalter (1977) calls "gynocriticism," a female-authored moral code that asserts womanhood should be grounded in integrity and intellect.

III. The Film Adaptation: Commercialization and Re-Gendering

The 1976 film adaptation of Secretary, featuring Vanisri and Akkineni Nageswara Rao, interprets the moral world of the text as a popular film. While the plot remains largely faithful to the novel, the emotional and ethical focus shifts drastically from inwardness to spectacle.

1. Opening Scene and Character Introduction

The transcript demonstrates the protagonist's job interview scene: Jayanti remains witty and calm throughout the employer's frivolous questioning ("Do you swim?", "Who wrote the Ramayana?", "School is what flower do you like?"). The novel presented the exchange as a moral test, whereas the film does so purely for comedic effect and romantic chemistry. The subtle shift turns Jayanti's expression of identity into flirtation; rather than being framed by ethical dimensions, she is framed within a light-hearted visual dimension.

2. Cinematic Framing of Female Subjectivity

Throughout the transcript, the director takes advantage of interactions to make Jayanti's appearance, gestures, and emotional vulnerability into a visual spectacle. Her verbal self-confidence is contextualized throughout the transcript by camera cues of softness and submission. This is a pertinent example of Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, as the filmic gaze systematically transforms Jayanti from an agentic narrator to a visual spectacle of desire. She is looked upon and admired, and she is emotioned into submission and compliance. In the novel, she is allowed to ...

3. The Harassment Sequence (Varma Episode)

A crucial episode in the novel and film involves Jayanti who, during a business meeting, is sexually harassed by a male client. In Yaddanapudi's story, this serves to expose the moral hypocrisy of patriarchal respectability and demonstrates Jayanti's own moral superiority. She resigns as a form of protest. In the film, the same episode is staged through heightened melodrama; the emphasis is on her distress, rather than her ethical position. The narrative swiftly pivots after her resistance. The incident is reduced to a moment, demoting the structural significance of Jayanti's ethical stance. The camera aestheticizes the trauma that

Jayanti went through, what Mulvey identifies as fetishistic scopophilia (transforming the suffering of women into pleasure).

4. Transformation of the Romantic Dynamic

The film converts workplace tension (which in the novel is played out as a meaningful) into romantic inevitability. The male lead's insistence (framed as charming) is enough to displace the woman's agency. In the film, the heroine is shown to eventually give in emotionally as if to be expected as a natural process, erasure of the intellectual line Yaddanapudi mediates between respect and desire. Adaptation represents what Hutcheon (2006) has called "re-interpretive domestication," that is to say, reshaping subversive literature to fit popular form.

5. Resolution and Ideological Closure

Reconciliation arrives in the ending of the novel through mutual understanding and dialogue; Jayanti holds onto her dignity and ethical clarity. In the film, however, emotional surrender is positioned as closure. The adaptation, therefore, re-inscribes patriarchal ideology: that feminine fulfillment is achieved through emotional dependence rather than ethical independence. The feminist moral code of the novel is replaced with cinematic sentiment.

IV. Comparative Theoretical Reflections

Dimension	In the Novel (as written work)	In the Film (as visual representation)
Narrative Control	Focus on female inferiority	Focus on male observation
Agency	Intellectual and Moral	Emotional and Reactive
Ethics	Love Without Loss of Identity	Love Requires loss of self
Gaze	Female self definition	Male visual Privilege
Closure	Through Dialogue and Equal Exchange	Through sentiment and surrender

Thematic Analysis of Film and Literature: "Secretary" through Yaddanapudi's Feminist Lens

1. Parameters

In both source texts, Jayanti, the heroine, is an educated, young woman seeking work to assist her family. However, the tone and treatment of her official capacity, as a worker, are demonstrated quite differently.

Aspect	Novel (Yaddanapudi)	Film(Transcript)
Motivation for Work	Jayanti aims to achieve self-respect and independence; she can do this through work, which is a legitimate	The interview scene has some humor built into it: the male interviewer (Rajasekhar) asks her

	declaration of her competence.	irrelevant personal questions — "Do you swim?" "Who wrote the Ramayana?" "You know shorthand?" — in effect, devaluing her competence.
Author's Intention	Yaddanapudi's Jayanti embodies (or represents) the educated woman whose mere existence disrupts patriarchal views of working women and the suspicions that attend their work lives	Humor and flirtation are invoked early in the film, as Jayanti's first internship is framed as charm rather than skill. It is at this moment that the male gaze enters — manufacturing Jayanti's worth as a point of amusement not ability.

2. Initial Assertion of Agency

In the dialogue, Jayanti's first line of defense is very clear:

"Why should I have to look like somebody? I have my own style. I want to be me."

This line follows closely to Yaddanapudi's character — in her novel, the women assert their individuality without being contentious. Nonetheless, while the novel ends up depicting this dialogue as being morally courageous, the film invokes sexually flirty banter — softening feminist assertion into a playful act of resistance.

3. Family Scene

Jayanti says to her grandmother:

"Women are doing a lot of work — they fly planes, they fight the wars, they rule the country."

While the strengths of this scene decidedly reflect Yaddanapudi's feminist optimism, the moral feminism of the novelist rests on women's ability to do their job within a conventional frame — which precisely what Jayanti argues here.

However, similarly as her action is somebody streaming, the film follows her by transforming the moment into melodrama with her immediate follow-up,

"but I am excited to get married soon" -- and doesn't that mean that symbolically she is now being placed back inside the home.

4. Gender Relations and the Maintenance of Power

Later in the transcript, her manager, exceeds professional boundaries in his persistent and almost overtly sexual claims about desire:

"Why do you come after me every day?"

"Do you know who you look like?"

"I thought you were conceited, but now I know you are crazy."

"I will do anything for you."

Jayanti resists at first, saying, "Don't follow me anymore," but the film emphasizes this pursuit in romantic terms, not actually harassment.

The police scene acknowledges the risk of workplace vulnerability for women, but she is re-assigned quickly under the same man - signaling narrative forgiveness for male proximity. In the novel, this is addressed with psychological seriousness and tension between moral aspirations or Jayanti questioning the ethical nature of desire and never compromising. In the movie, this exchange becomes an unavoidable indication of romantic pursuit - which upholds the power and authority of the patriarchal construction of love pursued through persistence and eventually some form of amour.

5. The Varma Scene (Assault Scene)

Key moment to follow: Jayanti has to go to a businessman (Mr. Varma) to handle some paperwork, and he attempts to sexually assault her.

The transcript reads:

“My wife told me everything about you...that you are very beautiful...and not just a Miss, you are fresh too.”

She fights him off — “Leave me!” — and resigns.

At this moment we still have the feminist core of Yaddanapudi — the heroine resists exploitation and simply resigns instead of enduring humiliation.

But with respect to the filmic treatment, this traumatic moment is treated lightly — there is no introspection or condemnation of the abuse of patriarchy — it’s possible to see that it does not have the core of the moral victory in the novel version of Jayanti too — the film version can’t spend too much time on either consequence at the moment.

Feminist Theoretical Analysis (Utilizing Mulvey)

1. "Scopophilia" (The Pleasure of Looking)

Mulvey's concept can be easily applied: The camera (and male audience) takes pleasure in observing Jayanti's emotions, her dress as she weeps, instead of being focused on her ideals. Even scenes of humiliation (assault by Varma) are presented for the sake of dramatic tension, and not an assessment of the abuse. In this case, her pain is justified and normalized as a spectacle.

2. "Active/Passive Dichotomy"

In the novel: Jayanti; acts, decides, and resists. In the film: she is pursued, she is tested, and she bails. This change is, of course, in keeping with Mulvey's analysis here, "In the determining male gaze, the figure of the woman withdraws, and can only rearrange herself — not for her own sake but in her roles contained by the male -- in an evocation of the glorious spectacle that it hopes for."

3. "Narrative Closure"

The film concludes with reconciliation on the romantic level, which implies that female fulfillment by way of male acceptance has occurred. The novel concludes with moral stability, rather than any means of romantic closure. In conclusion, the adaptation shifts autonomy → dependence Ø ethics → emotion Ø subject → object.

Synthesis: How the Film Changes Yaddanapudi's Feminism

Yaddanapudi Sulochana Rani's novel, *Secretary*, glorifies a woman who stands up for her self-respect in the face of patriarchal oppression. On the other hand, the film adaptation from 1976 reorients the woman's position to that of male fantasy - romanticizing dependence, vanquishing principled intelligence, and rendering her mute. Viewed through the lens of

Mulvey, this is cinematic colonization of feminist literature: the woman's mind is supplanted by her image.

The novel, from a feminist theoretical perspective, gives voice to a female gaze that disrupts patriarchal narration, whereas the film remediates a male gaze that objectifies. Moving from the mode of the written word to the visual, the woman's voice becomes an image of virtue positioned for consumption; the adaptation illustrates the systematic erasure of feminine agency that exists in commercial cinema and transnational cinema and does not merely exist as a quality of Telugu film but is symptomatic of commercial practices of representation.

DISCUSSION

The change of *Secretary* from text to film demonstrates the way in which the patriarchal industry mediates women's stories. Yaddanapudi's Jayanti is a moral subject; Prakash Rao's Jayanti is a moralized object. That is an ontological difference.

From a feminist perspective, this shift is symbolic violence—a re-narration of a woman's autonomy through a male authority. Patriarchy re-makes itself with discursive colonization, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, and writes women's agency into moral orientations we know all too well. The adaptation of *Secretary* does exactly that.

Commercial cinema values the hero's transformation, not the heroine's constancy. Jayanti's moral solidity threatens the ending narrative of romantic closure; as such, it is tamed. The adaptation thus balances authorial ethics with audience agency, but ultimately serious cinema carves out territory for the marketplace. What is lost is not only feminist meaning, but respect for the author's creative autonomy.

Yaddanapudi's journey is similar to that of many Indian women novelists who provided their texts for an industry dominated by male producers and directors. As Leela Gandhi observes, the postcolonial public sphere tends to harvest women's texts as cultural capital, but without ideological agency.

CONCLUSION

Yaddanapudi Sulochana Rani's *Secretary* asserts, albeit quietly, a feminist ethics that sits within a middle-class Telugu sensibility. The novel imagines a woman who ensures respectability and refuses to be alienated from her tradition — she shows a consideration for agency, intellect, ethics, and independence. Contrary to the novel's significant development of agency and empowerment, the 1976 film, while narratively faithful, strips agency and subjective integrity and interprets the moral strength of the original story through the conventions of melodrama and romance, thereby thoroughly reformulating moral strength into emotional softness and a moral quandary not present within the novel's conventional literacy narrative. The transition from narrator of the female gaze to the use of the male gaze illustrates that, through Laura Mulvey's approach to feminist film theory, the narrative embodied within the adaptation of *Secretary* exposes the differing mechanisms of patriarchal spectatorship that appropriate women's subjective narration into visual pleasure. The adaptable study, if for no other reason, can conclude that representing the novel as a film form creates a discourse that exists beyond the notion that the work is simply text and text translation. In this case, the adaptation is the negotiation of feminist authorship and patriarchal visibility that adaptively illustrates how adaptation can preserve story and betray feminist ideology at the same time.

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