



Communication
Volume 3, Issue 1, Feb-Jul 2026, pp. 146-155

Role of Media in Promoting Education and Gender Equality: A Semiotic Analysis of Ayali Web Series

D. Valarmathi¹, Dr. P. Veeramani²

¹Department of Women Studies, Alagappa University, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu

²Department of Women Studies, Alagappa University, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu

Email ID : valarofficial2022@gmail.com

Received on: April 23, 2026 | Accepted on: May 11, 2026 | Published on: July 15, 2026

ABSTRACT

Women have many obstacles in Indian society, such as gender inequality, patriarchal harassment and menstrual taboos. The society seems to be evolving scientifically, but a socially sensible approach towards gender inequality has sparked broad discussions in various genres, especially in the media. This research paper investigates the Tamil-language web series Ayali. The series focuses on the struggles of education, gender inequality, and patriarchal dominance in the village, which is portrayed in the dominance faced by the girl children. Semiotic analysis is employed to examine the connotations and denotations of various components represented in the Ayali web series. The study concludes that the Ayali web series is an effective vehicle for addressing social issues and advancing girls' education. The protagonist, Tamil, is portrayed as breaking the conservative myths practised in the village, emphasising the importance of family and parenting, especially for their daughters, in shaping their education. The study highlights the importance of the media and its impact in fostering social consciousness and promoting constructive social changes. The Ayali series is a provocative and inspirational television series that highlights the transformative potential of self through education while shedding light on significant social issues. The Ayali series is one of the operative tools for advancing gender equality and education in rural areas.

Keywords: #GirlsEducation #Empowerment #Patriarchal #SocietalNorms #SemioticAnalysis #Webseries #Menstrualtaboos

INTRODUCTION

Education empowers women in decision-making, builds their self-esteem, and makes them economically independent, all of which are highly relevant to individual and social development (Dhiman, 2023). To promise better health and higher incomes as well as to make more informed decisions for the family and community, education is crucial and ought to be equally accessible to all, including women. However, poverty, cultural norms, and early marriages that view girls as workers rather than students have caused millions of girls around the world to face numerous significant obstacles on their path to education. Despite these struggles, women and girls are fighting for their right to an education by building schools in remote areas and advocating for laws that would grant them equality. By restricting women's participation in politics, the workforce, and education, patriarchy intensifies all of these obstacles.

The promotion of women as role models, the legal protection of women's rights, and cultural change are not just important, but urgent, as they are the only ways to overcome these obstacles. Government initiatives, such as the Girl Child Protection Scheme, have increased Tamil Nadu's female literacy rate to over 80%. However, issues still exist, as school attendance in rural areas continues to decline due to cultural barriers and poverty. Above all else, the media has severely misrepresented girls' education by promoting gender stereotypes and excluding other groups (Magudapathy, 2025). To help shift attitudes, we must create a comprehensive picture of girls' education that encompasses its diversity and complexity. Education leads to better health outcomes, greater potential to earn higher incomes, and increased participation in household and community decision-making.

Education not only enhances economic and social well-being but also serves as the foundation for women to assert their authority more actively, hence promoting gender equality (King & Winthrop, 2015). The Tamil feature film *Karuthamma* (1994) focuses on education and patriarchal issues in women's lives. *Karuthamma*'s protagonist fights against societal norms, empowers women, and promotes women's education. The movie *Amma Kankaku* (2016) discusses the importance of education for girls. The film highlights a mother's sacrifice for her daughter's education and the impact of education on personal and societal development.

However, the majority of them concern the consolidation of stereotypes. Web series like *Made in Heaven* (2019) have championed women's education and emphasised that gender equality is impossible without education. With a primary focus on how education can break oppressive cycles and change futures, the *Ayali* (2023) web series powerfully highlights the struggles of girls in a patriarchal setting. Leading the web series is Tamizh, a resilient character who defies established social norms.

Ayali Web Series and GIRLS' Education Disparities:

Early marriage is a significant problem affecting girls' education in India. UNICEF (2020) states that an essential proportion of girls are married before the age of 18, which describes the absence of education and empowerment. Gender bias and patriarchal attitudes are influencing the education and empowerment of girls. Stereotypical gender roles imply domestic roles and responsibilities for girls, constraining the opportunities for empowerment and education for girls. Girls are restricted in their schooling because their contributions are entirely caregiving and household responsibilities (Dreze & Sen, 2013). Patriarchal norms influence the belief that education prolongs gender disparities in education.

The *Ayali* web series is a powerful portrayal of the challenges girls face in accessing education in patriarchal societies. The *Veerapannai* village, a patriarchal-themed setting in the Series, reflects the reality of Tamil Nadu: misconceptions, stereotypical thinking, and societal expectations that restrict girls' access to education. The protagonist of *Ayali* is *Tamizhselvi*, a young girl who dreams of becoming a doctor. Her ambition is to support girls' Education and break the belief that girls are married immediately after puberty to the goddess *Ayali*. This misconception not only controls the lives of young girls but also prevents them from pursuing knowledge, freedom and identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As Molyneux and Razavi (2002) note, 'old gender relations' continue to reproduce such inequalities: it is in this sense that stereotypes about women's roles contribute to unequal access to education. According to

Kabeer (2005), education thus has a catalytic effect, empowering women with the knowledge and skills to forge new norms within society and take on new leadership positions.

Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) examine the social stigma surrounding menstruation and its psychological effects on women. Using interviews and surveys, the authors find that societal perceptions of menstruation as unclean or taboo lead to feelings of shame and embarrassment, negatively impacting women's self-esteem. They call for public education to challenge these ingrained views and reduce menstrual stigma. Unterhalter (2014) also asserts that the under-representation of female education leaders detracts from the few female role models and contributes to the poor educational experiences and aspirations of girls. Another global issue within the literature is the restrictions that deny girls access to education.

According to Filmer and Fox in 2014, socio-cultural norms, early marriages, and violence against women would disproportionately delay girls' educational opportunities, particularly in underdeveloped countries. Yadav and Gaur (2023) have examined how Hindi cinema often portrays menstruation as a taboo subject, associating it with shame and alienation. This cultural imagination creates a narrative where menstruation is depicted as something unclean or undesirable, similar to bodily waste. Sruthy C R and Shaju (2023) analyse the portrayal of menstruation and womanhood in the *Ayali* Tamil web series. The study explores how the series challenges societal taboos around menstruation and emphasises the importance of educating girls to empower them. Through the character of Tamizhselvi, the series critiques patriarchal traditions and highlights the need for financial independence and gender equality.

Research Methodology

This study investigates the education of girls in the web series *Ayali* and combines qualitative research, semiotic analysis, and a feminist perspective. It challenges how gender identities and roles are depicted and symbolically represented in the media. It uses purposive sampling, selective episodes that emphasise issues related to girls' education, thereby focusing data collection on scenarios that align with the study's objectives. The context data analysis of these scenarios is gathered from secondary sources such as books and movie reviews, employing denotation and connotation techniques. This method yields a satisfactory understanding of how media influences cultural perspectives on gender and education, enabling an evaluation of how the series supports or challenges gender biases and social norms in girls' education.

3.1 Objectives

- To conduct a semiotic critical analysis of how girls' education is portrayed in the *Ayali* web series.
- To investigate how the visual signs and symbols used in the series to symbolise girls' education have meanings and denotations.
- To investigate the hidden meanings, principles, and beliefs that are expressed through the way that girls' education is portrayed in the *Ayali* web series.

SUBJECT ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION



Image 1- (Screenshot of ZEE5 Ayali page, 2025).

Denotation	Connotation
The two females are the same age, but when one of them has a baby, her life changes, while the other continues to enjoy her childhood.	The image's connotative meaning suggests that growing up and having a baby can limit a woman's freedom and her ability to enjoy simple pleasures, such as playing, even when she is young. Marriage and motherhood can bring significant changes to a woman's life. "While we may experience carefree joy and playfulness in our youth, the responsibilities and demands of adulthood, particularly marriage and motherhood, can drastically alter our lives and restrict our ability to enjoy such activities."



Image 2 - (Screenshot of ZEE5 Ayali page, 2025).

Denotation	Connotation
The villagers are moving away from the screen, and Tamil walks towards the screen with her stained uniform and school bag.	The majority of the villagers are adhering to the patriarchal ideology that girls should not study after puberty. Tamil breaks all the ideologies imposed by the villagers and walks towards her new path.



Image 3 - (Screenshot of ZEE5 Ayali page, 2025).

Denotation	Connotation
The girl students in 9th grade are afraid, so they move back and stand with the 8 th graders.	The education of girls is often halted at the 8th grade due to societal norms in the village; as a result, the literacy rate among girls is low. Moreover, the next phase of life for those girls, filled with hurdles, starts here. Tamil changes the village's scenario and marks the beginning of a new era in girls' education.



Image 4 - (Screenshot of ZEE5 Ayali page, 2025).

Denotation	Connotation
Tamil and Mythili wrote their names on the SSLC first-ranking holders' board with chalk. The teacher observes the scenario.	The teacher encourages the children, reminding them that the chalk will get erased, but the students who secure the rank will have their names written on the board with paint, which will not get erased. The teacher's hope lies in these students who aspire to study, and she encourages them to achieve their goals.



Image 5 - (Screenshot of ZEE5 Ayali page, 2025).

Denotation	Connotation
Tamil's mother admires her daughter for writing the SSLC examination.	Kuruvammal's daughter is the first girl from a patriarchal society to take the SSLC exam, and her mother, forgetting all the other struggles, gains the confidence to support her daughter in pursuing her dreams. She is proud of her daughter's achievement.



Image 6 - (Screenshot of ZEE5 Ayali page, 2025).

Denotation	Connotation
Tamil hands her mother a nameplate with “Dr Tamilselvi” in English. In the background, the women from the village write their wishes on the blackboard.	Tamil makes the women from the village realise the importance of education and their dreams. The desire to study is evoked in women, and the classroom stands as a place of growth and change in society. Tamilselvi dedicates her victory to her mother, which inspires other mothers to support their daughters’ education as well.



Image 7 - (Screenshot of ZEE5 Ayali page, 2025).

Denotation	Connotation
Tamil’s father points at the SSLC first-rank board and talks to the villagers.	Tamil’s father, who is also prey to the norms in the patriarchal society, has changed and supports his daughter. He enlightens and encourages the villagers to support their daughters' education and provide them with a better future.

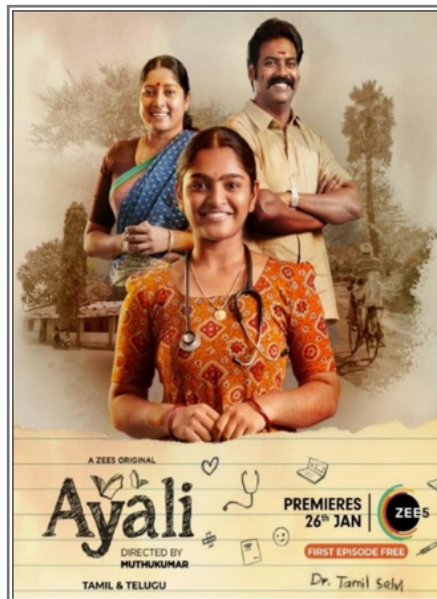


Image 8 - (Screenshot of ZEE5 Ayali page, 2025).

Denotation	Connotation
Elements on a notebook paper background: “Ayali” text, doodles symbolising education, scribble text “Dr Tamil Selvi”, details of the movie in text. Tamil stands smiling with a stethoscope in front of her mother and father, smiling proudly. Background: Veerapannai village in sepia tone.	The use of sepia tones in the background suggests nostalgia and a connection to the past. The doodles and scribbled text on notebook paper symbolise education and the importance of learning. The image of Tamil standing confidently with a stethoscope in front of her parents, who are smiling proudly and standing behind her, indicates their support for their daughter's education. Her smile reflects her hope and success, which is a positive representation of the potential impact of education in overcoming societal barriers.

Key Findings

- Tamilselvi reflects her hope and success, which is a positive representation of the potential impact of education in overcoming societal barriers.
- Ayali depicts the main context of the web series, which is the struggle for education in a village setting where girls' education is not prioritised.
- Tamil has become a symbol of hope and inspiration for the women in her village.
- The Ayali web series portrays the patriarchal ideology prevalent in the village where girls are not allowed to study after puberty. Tamil, the protagonist, challenges and breaks free of these societal norms to pursue her education, symbolising the importance of empowering girls and women through education.
- Her achievement has encouraged other girls and women to pursue education and strive for their dreams.
- The group of women following Tamil may represent a shift in societal attitudes towards education for girls, as more women begin to recognise the importance of education and its potential to improve their lives and communities.

CONCLUSION

After analysing the Ayali web series, it can be concluded that the series is a powerful representation of the struggles and triumphs of education in rural India, particularly in the context of girls' education. The series effectively showcases the challenges young girls face in rural areas, who are often denied access to education due to societal norms and financial constraints. The character of Dr Tamil Selvi serves as an

inspiring role model for young girls, demonstrating that education can lead to empowerment and social change. Through her struggles and accomplishments, the series emphasises the importance of education in creating a brighter future for individuals and communities. Moreover, the series effectively highlights the critical role of parents and families in supporting their children's education, particularly their daughters'. It emphasises the need for a collective effort by the community, government, and non-governmental organisations to ensure access to education for all, particularly in rural areas. Overall, Ayali is a thought-provoking and inspiring series that sheds light on critical social issues and emphasises the transformative power of education.

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