

Voices of Fire: Feminine Power Through Moral Consciousness and Ethical Choice in *Frozen* and *Kothanodi*

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Abstract

Cinematic retellings of fairy tales and folk narratives have long cast female characters as moral emblems, their virtue or suffering reinforcing fixed ethical codes. Contemporary films, by contrast; reimagine feminine power through moral consciousness and ethical choice, presenting women as ethically reflective subjects rather than passive bearers of moral weight. This paper undertakes a focused reading of *Elsa in Frozen* (2013) and *Tejimola in Kothanodi* (2015) to trace how ethical choice, exercised freely or under severe constraint functions as a transformative narrative force. Treating moral awareness, responsibility, and ethical decision-making as core analytical categories, the study examines how these characters navigate fear, suffering, and justice within culturally distinct frameworks. *Elsa's* arc foregrounds

conscious ethical recalibration through choice and accountability, while *Tejimola's* narrative shows how ethical choice endures even when agency is violently curtailed. The paper contends that contemporary cinema redefines feminine power not through domination or rebellion but through ethically grounded decision-making and moral endurance. Positioned within the sub-theme of Ethics, Spirituality, and Consciousness, the study offers an original perspective on how cinematic storytelling re-conceives female subjectivity as a site of ethical imagination and cultural critique.

Sub-theme: Ethics, Spirituality, and Consciousness

Keywords: Moral consciousness, ethical choice, feminine power, fairy tale cinema, folk narratives, *Frozen*, *Kothanodi*

Introduction: Rethinking Power Through Ethics and Choice

Fairy tales and folk narratives have long served as vehicles of moral instruction, passing down cultural values through archetypal figures (Zipes; Bacchilega). Female characters within these traditions were often denied ethical choice altogether; their moral worth rested on obedience, sacrifice, or punishment rather than on reflective decision-making. Femininity, as a result, became aligned with moral inevitability rather than moral agency.

Contemporary cinema represents a marked departure from this tradition. Female protagonists increasingly appear as ethical subjects who confront moral dilemmas, weigh consequences, and make choices some transformative, some tragic. This shift also marks a turn away from paradigms centered on visual spectacle and to-be-looked-at-ness, such as Mulvey's influential account of the cinematic gaze, toward a model in which feminine power is constituted through interiority and moral reflection rather than image (Mulvey). This shift calls for a rethinking of feminine power as an ongoing ethical process rather than a fixed trait.

This paper traces that transformation through Elsa (*Frozen*, 2013) and Tejimola (*Kothanodi*, 2015). By centering ethical choice as it operates alongside moral consciousness, the study considers how cinema reimagines feminine power across both global fairy-tale adaptations and indigenous folk narratives.

Moral Consciousness and Ethical Choice: A Conceptual Lens

Moral consciousness denotes an individual's awareness of ethical responsibility and capacity for moral reflection, a formulation that resonates with feminist ethics of care, particularly Gilligan's account of moral reasoning as relational and responsibility-based rather than rule-bound, and Noddings's insistence on caring as a distinct ethical orientation (Gilligan; Noddings). Ethical choice, by contrast, marks the point at which that awareness becomes action or deliberate restraint. Crucially, ethical choice does not presuppose complete freedom; it frequently operates within limitation, fear, or coercion.

In narratives centered on women, ethical choice has often been obscured by structures that deny autonomy altogether. Cinema, however, through its attention to interiority, silence, and hesitation, shows that choice can persist even under constraint. Understood this way, feminine power lies not simply in what characters do, but in how and why they choose to act a formulation that also resonates with Butler's account of gender as constituted through reiterated, performative acts rather than a fixed essence, since it is the repetition of ethical

choice, rather than any singular trait, that constitutes these characters as feminine subjects of power (Butler).

This conceptual lens allows the paper to examine two contrasting modes of ethical choice: Elsa's capacity to consciously recalibrate her moral decisions, and Tejimola's ethical steadfastness within a world that systematically denies her agency.

Elsa (*Frozen*, 2013): Fear, Responsibility, and Ethical Choice

Elsa's story is organized around fear treated here not as weakness but as an ethical problem. From childhood, she comes to associate her power with potential harm, which leads her to adopt restraint as a moral safeguard. Though self-destructive, this choice is ethically motivated.

Elsa's ethical trajectory unfolds through repeated decisions: concealment over expression, isolation over connection, and eventually, responsibility over fear. These choices mark her as a morally conscious subject reckoning with the consequences of both action and inaction. Scholars have read this trajectory as part of a broader reworking of Disney's gender script: Streiff and Dundes argue that Elsa's autonomy disrupts the romance-centered plotting long attached to Disney princesses, while Davis situates this shift within a longer history of increasingly complex heroines in Disney's feature animation (Streiff and Dundes; Davis).

Her transformation comes not from mastering her power but through ethical re-choice recognizing that fear-driven restraint is itself harmful. In choosing emotional openness and accountability, Elsa recasts power as relational and ethical, a negotiation that Rudloff reads as characteristic of the film's post-feminist balancing of empowerment against vulnerability (Rudloff). *Frozen*, in this sense, frames ethical choice as an ongoing process rather than a single heroic act, locating feminine power in consciousness itself.

Tejimola (*Kothanodi*, 2015): Ethical Choice Under Extreme Constraint

In *Kothanodi*, Tejimola inhabits a world that leaves almost no room for free choice. Her life is shaped by abandonment, cruelty, and systemic violence. As Rana and Hinds observe, Hazarika grounds this folkloric material in a materially detailed premodern Assamese setting, so that the film's horrors register as recognition rather than shock (Rana and Hinds). Yet ethical choice survives in quieter forms through endurance, a refusal to internalize brutality, and a moral clarity sustained against overwhelming injustice.

Tejimola's choices are not dramatic; their power lies in persistence. She neither replicates violence nor relinquishes her humanity. Her silence becomes an act of moral resistance, and her suffering lays bare the ethical failure of the social order that consumes her. The film's horror register invites comparison with Creed's theorization of the monstrous-feminine, yet Kothanodi complicates that framework: where Creed reads horror cinema as staging cultural anxieties about female bodies and maternal power, Hazarika locates ethical clarity precisely in the figure most vulnerable to monstrification, redirecting the genre's gaze from spectacle toward testimony (Creed). Hussain likewise reads Hazarika's adaptation as an uncanny intervention into Bezbaroa's source tales, one that interrogates rather than simply reproduces the gender dynamics embedded in the original folklore (Hussain).

Here, ethical choice is less about altering one's circumstances than about choosing *how to exist within them*. Read against Propp's account of the folktale's structural functions, Tejimola's endurance departs from the rescued-heroine pattern that typically resolves the tale-type, replacing narrative rescue with ethical testimony (Propp). Tejimola's moral consciousness turns suffering into ethical testimony, making her a moral agent whose endurance undercuts the legitimacy of cruelty.

Ethical Choice Across Cultural Narratives

Read alongside each other, Elsa and Tejimola show how ethical choice operates across radically different cultural contexts. Elsa's choices speak to modern concerns with selfhood, emotional regulation, and responsibility, while Tejimola's are shaped by folk ethics in which endurance and moral memory carry ethical weight. This divergence recalls Bacchilega's argument that contemporary fairy-tale adaptations refract a shared narrative grammar through radically different cultural imaginaries (Bacchilega).

Both narratives push back against empowerment models that equate agency with visibility or resistance. Instead, they suggest that feminine power can reside in the ability to choose ethically even when that choice is painful, constrained, or invisible.

Cinema heightens these ethical moments by treating silence, hesitation, and suffering as meaningful narrative acts, prompting audiences to reconsider how power and agency are culturally constructed.

Ethics, Spirituality, and Consciousness

The narratives of Elsa and Tejimola resonate closely with the sub-theme of Ethics, Spirituality, and Consciousness. Elsa's arc foregrounds ethical self-awareness and responsible choice, while Tejimola's endurance reflects a spiritually inflected ethics rooted in suffering, compassion, and moral witnessing.

Spirituality, in these films, emerges not through ritual but through ethical depth the capacity to remain morally conscious and to choose ethically under conditions of fear or violence. This reading resonates with indigenous and philosophical traditions that understand ethics as lived consciousness.

Conclusion: Ethical Choice as Feminine Power

Through Elsa and Tejimola, this paper has argued that ethical choice, grounded in moral consciousness, constitutes a powerful and underexplored form of feminine agency within cinematic retellings of fairy tales and folk narratives. Whether enacted through conscious recalibration or silent endurance, ethical choice emerges as a culturally embedded yet universally resonant form of power.

This study's contribution lies in reframing feminine power as ethical imagination rather than spectacle, opening further avenues for interdisciplinary dialogue on cinema, gender, ethics, and consciousness.

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