

Cinematic Representation of Native Culture and Identity in Tamil Films: An Analysis of Selected Movies of Director Seenu Ramasamy

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Abstract

Village themed films have always been popular with the Tamil audience. While mainstream filmmakers used the rural backdrop to create characters and stories which mostly had a commercial appeal to reach out to the B and the C centre audience, the Tamil film industry also had notable parallel film makers who used the medium as a tool for social change. Tamil film director, Seenu Ramasamy has created a mark in the Tamil industry with his village themed films. The present study aims to analyse the films of Seenu Ramasamy who believes that rural films or 'more regional films', as he prefers to call them, are a window to different cultures and traditions, that vary from district to district. (Rajendran G, 2018).

This study aims to provide a critical analysis of the construction of native culture and identity as addressed in the big screen by the director, using auteur theory, rhetoric, sociological and ideological analysis. While analysing the films to study the representation of native cultures and identities, the study also aims to identify those features that would go to make the director an auteur.

Key: Native culture, rural films, identity, auteur, Seenu Ramasamy

Introduction

Valued at over 180 billion rupees in the 2019 fiscal year, the Indian film industry is among the largest in the world. It is also the world's biggest producer of films and has the highest number of tickets sold at the box office. (Diwanji S, 2019). 1800 digital feature films were released in 2018, compared to 500 films in the USA in the same year. While Hindi cinema continues to be the largest in India, regional language cinema especially Marathi cinema and the southern language cinemas- Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu and Tamil; made up to 30 percent of film content in 2019. (Diwanji S, 2020).

Cinema has a crucial role to play in celebrating cultural diversity, as it has the undeniable power to connect audiences to the points of view of other people, to other cultures and identities, and also to that of their own. It is thus influential in helping people understand, recognize and even empathise the cultural differences in the world. The onus of accurate and empathetic representation of other cultures and identities, be it that of gender, minorities, the homeland or native identities, therefore falls on the shoulders of those films that aim to represent them on celluloid. (Into Film, 2020).

Indian cinema has dealt with several identities: in the fifties, sixties and seventies, films were made on socio-cultural issues: the caste system, class system, women emancipation, nationalism, and rural cultures. Films on rural culture and identities, or rural films, were popular in Indian cinema. Bimal Roy's *Do Beegha Zameen* (1953), and Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), that gave a realistic portrayal of rural poverty and suffering are considered all time classics. Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* was an internationally acclaimed Bengali film, made in 1955. He went on to make *Aparajito* in 1956 and *Apur Sansar* in 1959, and the three films came to be called *The Apu Trilogy*. Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974), *Nishaant* (1975) and *Manthan* (1976) were hugely successful new wave or 'art films' which had a realistic depiction of rural life. While there was a dip in rural films in Hindi in the 1980s and 1990s, 2001 saw the rural film back with a bang with Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan*. Ashutosh Gowariker also

directed the acclaimed *Swades* in 2004. But they were few and far in between. *Peepili Live* (2010) was released in 2010. *Dangal* and *Sultaan* (2016) were also commercially successful rural based Hindi language films.

Rural films have been very much part of the regional film industry -in Kannada, Tamil Malayalam and Telugu, both as part of art or parallel cinema and commercial cinema.

Tamil Cinema and Nativity - an Overview

Early Tamil films with the rural theme, like Thirumugam's *Vivasaayee* (1967), and P. Madhavan's *Pattikada Pattanama* (1972) went on to be considered classics. But they had to work within the limitations of the Studio system and made minimal use of outdoor shots of villages.

A new wave of rural cinema, the neo-native genre, was ushered in by Bharathiraja with his first film *16 Vayathinile* (1977). He is credited for bringing the raw rural atmosphere in all its glory and reality to the silver screen. (Damodaran K, 2013). Other film makers like Mahendran (*Uthiri Pookkal*, 1979), Gangai Amaran (*Karagattakaran*, 1989) and Kasthuri Raja (*En Rasavin Manasile*, 1991) also beautifully visualised stories set against the village backdrop (Anand P, 2008).

Neo-nativity and the rural backdrop in Tamil films was improvised upon by film makers like Kamal Haasan (*Virumaandi*, 2004), Ameer (*Paruthiveeran*, 2007), Pandiraj (*Pasanga*, 2009), Seenu Ramasamy (*Thenmerku Paruvakaatru*, 2010), and Sarkunam (*Vaagai Sooda Vaa*, 2011), who used the premise not only to showcase the scenic natural beauty but exposed several socio-cultural issues that were native to the regions.

While mainstream filmmakers used the rural backdrop to create characters and stories which mostly had a commercial appeal to reach out to the B and the C centre audience, the Tamil film industry also had notable parallel film makers who used the medium as a tool for social change. Lenin Bharathi (*Merku Thodarachi Malai*, 2018), and Mari Selvaraj (*Pariyerum Perumal*, 2018), stunned the industry with their debut films. (Filmfare, 2018). Ace directors like Vetrimaaran (*Asuran*, 2019) also chose to make films with stories set against the rural backdrop. (Prokerala, 2019).

Rural films created identities that established the “*Tamizhan*” who could connect well with the characters in the films. The role that Tamil cinema played in shaping cultural and regional identity is evident through the films of this period and Tamil films have always had an influence on the social and political sphere of the state. (Kalorth N, 2016).

Cultural Dimension of Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu is the southern state of India and Tamil, which is one of the oldest languages of the world, is the language spoken by the people of Tamil Nadu. The Tamil culture comprises religious beliefs of Hinduism at its core and majority of the *Tamilians* follow Hinduism. The architectural marvels of the state include elegant *Gopuras*, which are the temple towers of the places of worship (Encyclopaedia Britannica). The Tamil culture of *Kolam*, the art of drawing designs at the doors to welcome the goddess *Lakshmi* into the house, is popular all over the country (Kumari A, 2018).

Tamilians are also famous for their tradition of weaving which is still a major occupation in many communities of the state. Performing arts are found in abundance in Tamil Nadu and *Bharathanatyam*, is the classical dance form of the state. Many rural art forms like *Karagattam*, *Villupaattu*, and *Koothu* are popular in the villages of Tamil Nadu. Apart from idols, *Tamilians* also do animal and nature worship, and their lifestyle is closer to nature. Poultry and cattle form an integral part of the life in the families of the villagers. Sports like the *Jallikattu* (Bull Taming) are iconic cultural symbols of the Tamil pride and form a part of the festive celebrations of *Pongal*, the Harvest festival of Tamil Nadu (Gurthi S, 2019).

Farming is the major occupation of the rural *Tamilian* and the life of a villager centers around the occupation. *Manjal*, or Turmeric is one of the major produces of agriculture in the state and its usage is inevitable in the cuisines and medicinal practices in every household. The *Tiruvizha* (festival celebration) is a common scene in every village in Tamil Nadu where there is a lot of festivities, art forms, fireworks, and religious processions and worship to celebrate the prosperity of their village and offer thanks to their Gods and pray for rains to enrich the soil. (Manohar R, 2015).

In her UNESDOC article on Tamil Cooking, Baskaran T, (1984) elaborates on the everyday food of the Tamils. The staple cereal in the village meal is rice and is often eaten with *Rasam* (Spicy pepper water) which has many medicinal properties.

Review of Literature

In her study of Native Americans in cinema, Boyd (2015) examines how the representation of the Native Americans remained stereotypical or quite inaccurately represented in the films for several years till the industry saw changes. The changes were brought in when Native American filmmakers began to take control of the medium thereby leading the way for their culture finding its reflection in the films they made. The Native American Indian population was generalized for their characteristics as being savage in their lifestyle. Only when the indigenous filmmakers began making their own films, were their voices heard. They made the movies with characters that were unlike the stereotypes seen in earlier films made by the non native white population. The realistic portrayal of the life and culture of the Natives was possible as the native film makers were people who lived within that culture. Boyd also recommends in her study that society must support native people as they represent the culture and life of the members of the population.

In his study of Tamil cinema, Pandian (2008) observes similar patterns of representation of Tamil villagers as being stereotyped as naïve, illiterate, unkempt and superstitious in their beliefs before the filmmakers from the Madurai district in Tamil Nadu entered the film industry. They took control of cinema and began to paint the screen canvas with the life and culture of the villages in the Cumbum Valley in the Madurai region. This remarkable change was made possible due to the work and creations of three people - Director Bharathiraja, music director Ilaiyaraaja and lyricist Vairamuthu; all of them who came from the countryside of the *Madurai* belt.

Tamil Nadu is a state that has been ruled by actor turned politicians and it becomes imperative to understand the issues of identity represented in Tamil cinema, says Jesudoss in his study on Tamil cinema (2009). He infers that the cultural traits of the masses are generally handed down the generations in the form of arts, music and *Koothu* (street play). The caste identity of the society had certain occupations reserved for specific communities. This was well reflected in films of the State as well and the identities of the characters in the films were representations of the people in the region. In particular, he says that the Tamil language was extensively used in films to form the cultural ideologies of the *Tamilians*. Regional dialects were also used to add to the nativity in the films.

The District of Madurai in the state of Tamil Nadu in India has been constantly represented and stereotyped in Tamil cinema by film makers who made mainstream commercial films. The city of Madurai is referred to as the “Temple Town” of Tamil Nadu. The study by Krishnan (2008) draws attention to the representation of *Veeram* (Valour) in the film *Madurai Veeran* which links the trait to the geographic identity of the people. The concept of caste and the pride associated with the upper classes in the society has been widely represented in Tamil films by several film makers, for example, *Thevar Magan*. His study largely justifies that Tamil cinema has represented rural values and lifestyles.

Gopalkrishnan (2019) in his study on Tamil films and representations, observes that Madurai was used as a cultural motif in Tamil cinema. He refers to the packaging of the exotic culture creating Madurai as a spectacle and refers to the film *Paruthiveeran* which shows the village not as a paradise, but one filled with caste hate and violence. The creation of the Madurai films and its representation as a spectacle space has also been studied by Leonard in his analysis of space and caste in Madurai based Tamil films.

In her study of Tamil cinema, Srilata (2008) suggests that Tamil cinema promotes Tamil pride through the *Tamil Thaa*i, the guardian deity of the Tamil culture. Whereas, Hughes (2010) analyses Tamil identity created in Tamil films of the 1930s as self - contained and linguistically bound in his article on Tamil cinema.

Pradeep (2016) in his paper, “Critical discourse analysis framework as the reproduction of knowledge and its effect on identity and subjectivity of the member of the community”, enlists several domains of critical discourse analysis of Tamil films. He suggests that songs too, are a major domain as they help make meanings of the many aspects of everyday life and construct identities.

The present study aims to provide a critical analysis of the construction of native culture and identity as addressed on the big screen by Tamil film director, Seenu Ramasamy who has created a mark in the Tamil industry with his village themed films. He believes that rural films or ‘more regional films’, as he prefers to call them, are a window to different cultures and traditions that vary from district to district. (Rajendran G, 2018).

While analysing the films to study the representation of native cultures and identities, the study also aims to identify those features that would go to make the director an auteur.

Methodology

Seenu Ramasamy was noticed with the success of three of his movies dealing with native culture and identity: *Thenmerku Paruvakaatru* (2010), *Dharma Durai* (2016) and *Kanne Kalaimane* (2019).

The study will analyse the three films, written and directed by Seenu Ramasamy, with the following objectives:

Objectives

- To understand the central theme of the selected movies and the characters through whom the narrative is told.
- To analyze the narrative of the movies selected in terms of story and plot.
- To identify the ideology of the director, if any.
- To observe patterns, if any, in the cinematic construction of native culture and identity by the director.

Definitions

In the Preamble to the final report on the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development in Stockholm (1998), UNESCO reaffirmed the definition of culture that was recognized in the Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies (1982), "...that in its widest sense, culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs". (1998, p 12)

The General Conference of the UNESCO meeting in Paris in 2005 emphasised that cultural diversity is a defining characteristic of humanity adding that "culture takes diverse forms across time and space and that this diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities and cultural expressions of the peoples and societies making up humanity." (2005, p 2)

Closely linked to cultural diversity is the concept of identity. Stuart Hall (1990) looks at identity in two ways. The first definition, according to him, is to consider cultural identity as 'one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self,' hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common' (In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Rutherford J, ed. 1990, p 223). This provides people with a common, unchanging frame of reference and meaning through the changes in their actual history.

The second way of looking at identity is to recognise the fact that "as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical point of significant difference which constitute 'what we really are' or rather- since history has intervened- 'what we have become'...Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being' ... It belongs to the future as much as to the past". (ibid, p 225).

In the present study, native culture will be seen as rural culture or village-based culture.

Since the focus is on one director and his personal stamp in representing rural culture and identity, the study will also use auteur theory in the analysis of his selected films. Apart from the auteur theory, selected films of the director Seenu Ramasamy will be studied using rhetoric, sociological and Ideological analysis. The analysis will focus on the theme, narrative, character, point of view, mise en scene, and the technical elements used for narration.

An auteur is normally the director or a major person like the star (Corrigan T, 2007) of the movie. Just as a writer uses his tools to script a screenplay, it is the director's responsibility to tell the story through cinematic representation of what is written; to transfer the story from paper, to a magical, entertaining, larger than life audio visual medium. Thus, it is the director who ties all the elements of film together and is therefore responsible for the ultimate style and structure of the film narration.

Therefore, it makes sense to study a film using the auteur theory.

Central to the French New Wave cinema, the auteur theory (so named by Andrew Sarris, American film critic), or the concept of the director as author of a film, came about in the late 1940s in France, the main proponents being Andre Bazin and Alexandre Astruc. According to this theory, the director holds the 'camera-pen' as Astruc termed it, meaning that it was the director who brought together the audio-visual elements of a film, and is therefore the

actual author, and not the screenplay writer.

As could be expected, there was criticism to this theory, but as supporters of the theory argued, a good film always bore the personal imprint of the director of the film. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

While auteur theory acts as a good base to analyse films, it has to be acknowledged that not all directors are considered auteurs. Hitchcock, Kurosawa, Fellini, Coppola, Bertolucci, Scorsese and closer home, Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, Guru Dutt, Bimal Roy, Adoor Gopala Krishnan, Ritwik Ghatak, K Balachander, Mani Ratnam and others to name a few, have been regarded as auteurs, who have their own unmistakable personal stamp on the films they make, apart from being largely commercially successful.

As part of the auteur theory, Aristotle's Rhetorical model will be used to study various dimensions of the ethos or the source of the narrative, be it the director himself or the main characters. The putting together of the narrative and narration, use of symbolic and technical language in order to put the audience in the intended frame of mind, will be analyzed using Rhetoric analysis.

Sociological concepts of class, culture, identity and so on will be used for the analysis.

Ideological analysis will look at the philosophy/solution put forth by the director, in terms of construction of native identity and culture.

Unit of analysis will be the sequence.

Analysis and Interpretation

Thenmerku Paruvakaatru (2010) is the story of a mother who struggles to raise her son after the death of her husband. The movie begins with a gang of thieves trying to steal goats in the night. The title of the film appears followed by the mother creating a ruckus over issues which involve her son, Murugayyan being harmed by the people who lose in a goat fight with him. Veerayi, the mother, fixes the wedding of Murugayyan with a distant relative to which he reluctantly agrees. Soon after, Murugayyan, who is a goatherd, chases after the gang who come to steal his goats at night and catches one of them; he finds that she is a girl. He searches for the girl in neighbouring villages in the pretence of catching the thief, and one day, sees her, but she runs away. But her brother attempts to kill Murugayyan and he identifies the girl to the police as part of the gang that stole his goats. The men get six months sentence in court, and Murugayyan develops a liking for the girl, who identifies herself as Pechi. Pechi comes to his village for a school camp and is yelled at by his mother. Murugayyan decides to marry Pechi against his mother's wishes. Her brother who get released from jail vow to kill him. Pechi tells Veerayi that she will give up her love for his life. The brother stabs the mother and escapes. At her deathbed in the hospital, Veerayi advises her son not to take revenge on them, but to marry Pechi and live happily. Murugayyan realises the sacrifices his mother made for him.

Narrative structure of the film

Thenmerku Paruvakaatru follows a linear narrative pattern except for a couple of very short flashbacks, of the death of the Murugayyan's father and his mother being stabbed by Pechi's brother. The plot points are well placed across the narrative to add interest and relief to the narration. The transition between the scenes is seamlessly put together in the film.

Story and Plot

The story is simple, intense and emotionally powerful, and is narrated by the director in a style that is unique to him. The sequences are coherently stitched together by the use of tools like editing and music. Though the hero of the film is Murugayyan, the son, the actual protagonist of the film is the mother, Veerayi.

Characters

The speciality of *Thenmerku Paruvakaatru* lies in the way the characters have been written and portrayed. The director who has also written the screen play, has succeeded in penning down the subjects and bringing them to life on the screen with perfection.

Veerayi's character arc in the film takes several turns. She appears rude and uncouth in the beginning, but the audience come to understand her towards the end and develop a strong liking for her. Being a single mother who lost her husband early, she struggles to raise her son who she is extremely possessive about. She also manages to build a house and owns a farm. The title song that plays at the beginning and at the end praises the village mother,

and Veerayi is the hero of the film. The message the director wants to convey to the audience through the film comes from her in the final sequence when she says, “The desire for revenge will spoil the peace in life.”

The hero of the film, Murugayyan, Veerayi’s son is a simple goatherd. He is good willed, donates blood to the needy, fights for his goats and stands by what is right. He does not understand his mother and is a cause of concern for her. He goes against Veerayi’s will to marry the girl he likes and is very firm on it though he fears his mother. His character takes a big turn when his mother dies and he says, “I have done nothing for you, mother”.

Though Pechi belongs to a family of thieves, she has no attraction for money. She likes Murugayyan but waits for him to develop strong feelings for her as she fears that he might reject her because of his mother, Veerayi’s dislike for her family. She leaves a mark in the minds of the audience with her concern for Murugayyan, when she decides to forego their wedding as she doesn’t want him to get killed by her brother.

Kalaichelvi, the girl who Veerayi fixes her son’s marriage with, is another remarkable character though her presence in the film is only for a few minutes. She is good natured and innocent. When the wedding is called off, she meets Murugayyan and wishes him the life he desires.

The hero’s father, Sivanaandi appears only for a couple of scenes in the film in the flashback, but he is shown as a man of principle when he decides not to rob the house where they find a woman dead and when confronted by his peer says, “ Why? shouldn’t thieves have principles?” and insists, “this is wrong”.

The other characters like Kezhanga, who is Murugayyan’s friend is very supportive of him and most of the political and sociological ideologies of the director is expressed as comical lines from him: “Are there so many good people in town?”, “Black is also colour”, “Drinking water is one rupee, and to pee also one rupee?”, “This year the rate of a vote is high”. Another character is the goat thief Mookaiyan, Pechi’s brother. He wants to take revenge on the hero and tries to kill him but kills his mother. He gets killed by his former enemies. Though he is a ruffian, he surrenders to the police when Pechi is in trouble.

The director’s central message is passed on through a farmer through his comment, “The name is South West Monsoon, but it is hot there and cold here. Poverty and prosperity are next to each other, that is why these problems occur. If this is a natural defect, shouldn’t humans change it?”, leaving the viewers to ponder upon the issue and judge the situation.

Every character that appears on screen is meaningful, including the loyal, crippled guard working for Veerayi, Kalaichelvi’s father, the school watchman, Veerayi’s old neighbour, and the hospital compounder.

Framing and composition

Every shot in *Thenmerku Paruvakaatru* is framed to perfection and remains true to the context. It doesn’t distract but draws the spectators into the story and evokes the right emotion.

Wide angle shots help to cover the vast landscapes composed in picture perfect frames. The establishment shots of many scenes are framed in top angle with the camera covering the scene of action elaborately. Most of the key dialogues are framed in mid shots. The camera moves only when required and low angle shot of the legs is shown repeatedly in the film, when the goats are stolen by the thieves and when the mother comes running towards the dead husband. Close up shot of the eyes is also used in the film at occasions when Murugayyan sees the Pechi for the first time; when she hides from him; and when she comes to his house and gets whacked by his mother.

Slow motion shots are frequently used to express the emotions of the hero and his lady, when he tries to protect her from his mother trying to whack her, and especially whenever Pechi runs away from him. Shift focus is used when lights glow in the dark during the goat robbery, when Murugayyan identifies Pechi to the police, when he keeps her bangles for her to see them, and when the mother clenches her fist when Pechi says her brother is after her son to kill him.

The colour tone is predominantly warm to reflect the hot and humid climate prevalent in the region and the nights are shot in a deep blue tint. The title song and the flashback of the hero’s father are shot in an old-fashioned sepia tone with desaturated colours.

Costumes and make up

The village atmosphere is represented with authentic costumes. The title song shows photographs of actual rural women. The mother wears ordinary, worn out sarees reflecting the hard life she has to deal with. Murugayyan wears shirts and dhoties like a boy next door seen in any rural district of Tamil Nadu. Pechi is attractive with brightly coloured half-sarees typically worn by south Indian young rural women. Kalaiselvi is seen wearing a typical men's shirt over her skirt when she works in the fields. Veerayi's old neighbour wears thread sarees with pleats at the back as worn by older women in the villages.

One might find it challenging to observe any kind of make-up used for the characters in the film as there is hardly any. Pechi applies *bindhi* with kumkum, the detailing is close to perfect. The sweat on the faces is also natural representing the hot climate that prevails in the region and the holy ash worn on the foreheads of some characters add a lot of credibility to the cultural beliefs of the community.

Sound and Music

Thenmerku Paruvakaatru has a powerful soundtrack with soul stirring songs and background score which add a complete new emotional dimension to the narrative. The lyrics of the songs are aptly worded according to the native language and slangs used in the locality. Voice over is used only once momentarily in the film when the mother starts narrating her story about her husband. The sounds of crickets at night and chirping of birds have been added across various scenes to create the natural atmosphere. Sounds of instruments that are native to the land like the *Udukkai* and the *Urumi melam* are added effectively.

Locations and properties

The film is shot in the dry, arid lands of the districts in Tamil Nadu whose vast, barren, immense stretches of land devoid of lush green agricultural stretches are dependent on the monsoons for the seasonal crops. The unfair distribution of resources and geographical conditions affecting the lifestyle of the people living there which forms the crux of the plot dealt in the film. The dry lands with rocky mountains, cacti plants and shrubs growing abundantly are included in the frames and they represent the mindset of those people for whom everyday life is a struggle. The corn fields, village school and hospital, empty road with hardly any vehicles, goatherds, hilly rocks, and the village temple have been shot on location and no artificial set design has been used.

The materials placed in the frame are naturally occurring and most commonly used by the people in the villages of southern districts of Tamil Nadu. The semi-finished house of Veerayi is well captured with chicken baskets, Pechi's house, the milk conch which is treasured by Veerayi, the "colour" cooldrink which Kalaiselvi buys for Murugayyan, the *surukku pai* or collapse bag used by Veerayi, the *trunk petti* or the suitcase which was used by Veerayi, the *manjappai* or the yellow cloth bag which the hero and the heroine carry around, Pechi's bicycle, the three-wheeled cart pulled by hand, the mini bus that is used by the characters for commuting, the shaving knife used by the barber, the stick that Murugayyan carries around while herding the goats, the red glass bangles of Pechi and every other set material used in the film are cultural symbols and icons of the native land and the people.

Dharma Durai (2016) is about the life of a villager who faces ups and downs in his life and how he eventually bounces back to lead a happy life. The film begins with the hero, Dharma Durai, being portrayed as a drunkard who spreads distrust among the villagers regarding his own brothers who he says will cheat them with the money they collect in the name of chit fund business. His brothers lock him up in the house and plan to murder him, but he is saved by his mother who helps him escape. Dharma Durai breaks free and leaves the house with a bag which unknown to him, has the chit fund money. He visits his college where he studied to become a medical doctor and reminisces his college days which he says is the happiest part of his life. He travels to Kodaikanal to meet one of his friends, only to find that she is dead. Dharma Durai then travels to Tenkasi to find another friend, Subashini. He reveals to her the truth about his addiction to alcohol due to the death of Anbuselvi, the girl he loved, who committed suicide unable to bear the dowry demands made by his brothers. Subhashini helps him to come out of his addiction to liquor and also helps him with setting up a clinic for the poor villagers and they plan to get married. They discover the chit fund money in the bag and Dharma Durai goes back to return it to his brothers who hit him unconscious and is taken by his mother to the hospital. He recovers and the film ends with a positive note.

Narrative structure of the film

The film revolves around the life of Dharma Durai, the protagonist. The film goes back and forth starting with the introduction of the hero in the present day - a flash back to his college days, then back to the present day where he searches for and meets one of his college friends; back to a flashback sequence where a new character, Anbuselvi

is introduced; and back to the present. The non-linear narrative is cohesive and the director takes care to keep clarity in the shifting timeline.

Story and Plot

The story takes several turns and moves along the sequences in varied timelines. But, all of these are well scripted and positioned in the film. Flashbacks are used to unravel the past of the hero.

Characters

Dharma Durai the hero is the voice and the face of the director in the film and the director personifies the character with realism and liveliness. He embodies all the virtues the director wants to convey to the audience and each move and dialogue uttered by the hero is in fact that of the director. Though he comes from a family where no one is educated, and all the three brothers are highly cunning and money-minded, the hero is a good and kind hearted individual who believes in helping and uplifting the others.

He beats up his college friend when he teases his professor, but takes the blows when the villagers trash him for Anbuselvi's suicide. He comes out of the addiction through sheer self control. He treats everyone in the society with respect, from the college peon to the transgender he employs, suggesting that every human being deserves to be treated with due respect and dignity. The final dialogue of the film ends with the hero saying that 'he is coming', thereby leaving the audience to assume that his service to mankind will continue and his personal life is also happily reinstated.

A central theme of the film-that medical doctors should serve the poor who lack medical facilities in the villages of India, is conveyed to the audience through Doctor Kamaraj the professor, and his students Dharma Durai and Subashini live up to it. He symbolises the poor students who come from the villages with farming as a background and the first-generation graduates from rural areas.

There are three strong female characters in the film- Dharma Durai's mother, Pandiammal, Anbuselvi and Subashini. The mother is a brave woman who helps Dharma Durai escape, when she decides to ask Anbuselvi to marry her son knowing that he likes her against the will of her other sons, or confronting the police when the inspector says he will file an FIR on Dharma Durai. She is also compassionate. She knows her children well and stands by Dharma Durai who is good hearted, just like her.

Anbuselvi is a dynamic young village woman who works in the fields, reads books from the village library and writes tips and columns for local magazines. She is helpful- she brings the village ladies to the doctor as she says she was not able to save her mother at a young age. But, her act of committing suicide exposes how vulnerable the women in villages are when it comes to handling love and emotions. She exhibits her concern for others when she decides to leave a note not to endanger Dharma Durai who might be mistaken as a reason for her act. She is another inspiration for the hero to serve others.

Subashini is righteous and dignified. She helps the hero to give up his drinking addiction and lead a purposeful life. She also follows her professor's principles and has the courage to divorce her husband when he aborts their child so they can go abroad. She chooses to stay strong and serve people here instead. She also sets an example for others when she registers for organ donation. Subashini is a woman of high morale, independent and lives by her principles. The director leaves a message to the audience by showcasing her lifestyle and thereby encourages women to be more self-reliant like her.

The transgender, who is addressed as "watchwoman, not watchman" by the hero, breaks the stereotype of transgenders as always being shown as demanding for money or as sex workers. She earns for her living in a respectable way.

The supporting characters like Anbuselvi's father also play a strong role. He wants to get his daughter married to a man who works in the land (a farmer) who he says will take care of her till the end. This dialogue is a very clear message from the director that explains the natural tendencies and characteristics of the farmers in the villages of India. The lady inspector also leaves her mark in the film as she symbolises women taking up professions that are no longer restricted to men. Hassan, the college rival of the hero is the doctor who does his duty sincerely at the end and saves Dharma Durai's life. Though his presence in the film seems to be inserted for commercial reasons, it is meaningful.

Even the animals in the film have been used realistically. The temple cow, the hen and the chicks at the hero's house, the temple elephant, the turkeys and geese at the heroine's house, the mural fish that appears in a song -all of them are typical cultural symbols of the lifestyle in southern villages of Tamil Nadu where the animals are a part of everyday life and shows how close to nature their lives are.

Framing and composition

The beauty of the villages of Tamil Nadu are shown through extraordinary visual imagery. There are a few techniques of compositions that the director has specifically used as motifs to appeal to the audience. Aerial drone shots have been used to establish the major plot settings. The beauty of the frame leaves the audience to wonder at the stunning beauty of rural India.

The use of the mid shot is used often in the film and some of the most important dialogues are conveyed in the mid shots only. The key dialogues of the film uttered by the hero, his mother, the professor, Suba, Anbuselvi and her father for example, are composed in mid shot.

There is also a striking repetitive camera movement when locations are established in the film like the houses of the various characters, a pan movement from right to left and a few shots which have a tilt movement from up to down, contrary to the standard practices.

Another shot composition used as a motif by the director is a point of view shot behind the window bars, used to convey the point of view of the hero who is locked up inside a room. It is used in Anbuselvi's house to show her point of view behind the window bars, and also at the police station where the hero is locked up inside the jail.

Costumes and make up

Being a village subject, the costumes are down to earth. The mother's sari is worn in typical village style. Anbuselvi is poor and the clothes she wears are mundane and simple resembling the lifestyle of the farmers: when she is seen working in the fields, she wears a shirt over her saree. The brothers and Dharma Durai wear simple clothes and the hero wears a strikingly coloured shirt (which is gifted by Suba) only once. Suba is from an affluent family and her costumes are typical of a modern girl. Make up is minimal.

Sound and Music

Voice over is used a couple of times in the film when the hero narrates his past, and when he recounts his memories of the college days and when Suba recalls the story of her relationship with her ex-husband which led to divorce, and these too last for not longer than two minutes.

The background score and the songs in the film give a whole new dimension to the film in terms of emotional output. The songs blend well with the narrative of the story and lead to a progression of the events in the film. The lyrics are well tailored to communicate the mindset and the condition of the characters and expressive of the native culture and lifestyle of the people in the villages.

Locations and properties

The choice of locations are exemplary. The aerial shots of the locations stand proof to the beauty of the natural landscapes. The drone shot of the Tenkasi temple tower reveals the beauty of the architecture of the temples, a cultural symbol of South India. The aerial shot of the Vaigai dam is breathtaking.

All the houses used in the film are typical of the region. Dharma Durai's house has the name of the mother written on its wall and the year mentioned on it. This is a common sight found in many houses of that district. More so, it has a huge open space inside the house and the pillars, furniture and the walls are also very aptly picked to stay close to reality. The wooden door to the room in which the hero gets locked up by his brothers is real and natural. The doors are also very short, again, this is common in the rural neighbourhoods. The mat on which the hero sleeps, the pillows and the spreads, are all typical of the lifestyle of village houses.

The heroine Anbuselvi's house is a work of art. The house is located on a hill as her father is the local watchman, so can see the village from his house. Also, there are not many houses surrounding the house and it shows how remote the village is. The bird cage placed in front of the house is made of old wood. The sprayer that is used to spray pesticides to the crops is also perfectly chosen and is used in the scene where the Anbuselvi commits suicide.

The apartment of Suba is new and modern as it is an example of how the new lifestyle of villagers are changing due to globalization. The name board of the clinic which Suba sets up for the hero is also skilfully representative of the methods of signboards used by the local shops and hospitals.

Kanne Kalaimane (2019) tells the story of an educated villager who promotes organic farming and his relationship with a bank officer to whom he gets married. This film is not a parallel film made in the artistic style, but the director brings in to the narration his subtle storytelling style and layering of social issues in the plot in his own way.

The film focuses on the life of an educated young man, Kamala Kannan, who is quite affluent in his village with a good deal of farms and houses. Yet, he promotes simple lifestyle close to nature and follows organic farming methods and preaches the same to the villagers. He happens to meet the heroine, Bharathi, who arrives to the village bank as a manager and the initial misgivings towards each other ends up in affection. The hero's grandmother objects to their marriage, but Kannan manages to convince her. They get married but their happiness is short lived as Bharathi is going blind. How they handle the situation for the better forms the rest of the story.

Narrative structure of the film

The film follows a linear narrative structure, it is like a river that flows from its source with the various paths it takes till the end except for a few very short flashbacks of the hero's mother and the heroine's situation. The story takes the audience along this flow.

Story and Plot

The sequences in the film are coherent, one leads to another and allow the story to continue smoothly from one to the next. The prominent sequences are those involving the hero and the heroine and how their relationships evolve overtime.

Characters

Kannan and Bharathi are the central characters in the film, but there are other prominent characters who contribute to the development of the story and communicate the director's ideology.

Kamala Kannan, born and brought up in a rich farming family in his village is supported by his father and grandmother. He is soft, educated and good-hearted. He studies Agriculture. He practices and promotes organic farming methods in his village and manufactures vermicompost, a natural manure for agriculture, which has been practised by farmers for long. He also helps the villagers by getting them cattle loans borrowed in his name. Though the film focuses on his life, the central theme of serving the native community, which should be the true purpose of education is the underlying message. He is obedient, and never speaks against his father or grandmother. He also respects his spouse and shares the household work without any ego.

Bharathi, is a self-made woman who is educated, straight forward, honest and bold.

Kannan's father is a simple man who encourages the couple to live independently after their wedding and tells Bharathi, "Your education and job appear as arrogance to my mother".

The grandmother, who takes good care of Kannan after his mother dies, is dominant and conservative. Initially, the audience tend to think that she hates Bharathi but, she later reveals that she was only concerned about her working as she might take her grandson away from her. In fact, she is the one who supports Bharathi towards the end during her troubled days. She depicts the typical, strong, hard-working village woman.

The other characters like Muthu, the hero's friend and her husband, the senior officer at the bank the village priest, and the money lender of the village play meaningful roles.

Framing and composition

Kanne Kalaimane has extreme long shots of the village with fields and farms on both sides of the road. Aerial shots with moving camera suggest the vastness and expanse of the fields. Mid shots are used for key conversations. The visuals are poetically composed in the frame following the two-thirds rule with the horizon line. Almost every scene in the film begins with a wide angle shot of the village road and fields on either side. Several scenes end with a fade out and following a fade in to the next.

Slow motion is used to express Kannan's state of mind through various emotions like anger, romance, anxiety, remorse and sorrow. The opening and the closing shots of the film are both extreme long shots of the landscapes. The opening shot occurs during the night and the closing shot occurs during the day suggesting a new life ahead. We get to see the natural occupations of farmers and their everyday activities like planting the crops, the work at the coconut farm, how the vermicompost is made, ploughing the soil and so on, all well included and framed in sufficiently wide angled shots.

Costumes and make up

Characters are down to earth and realistic. The hero, Kannan is mostly seen wearing a kurta and is simply dressed, representative of his ideology. The Grandmother is given the traditional seven yard cotton sarees worn in village style with pleats at the back. Muthu, the hero's father and his friends are shown in simple clothes in dull and earthy colours, and represent the way of life of farmers.

Bharathi wears colourful cotton and handloom sarees neatly draped, representing her education and profession. She is very fair complexioned. Bharathi's make up is kept minimal. She does not wear make -up for her wedding as she is against it. She wears the cotton sarees as a tribute to the weavers.

Sound and Music

The soundtrack of the film is as pleasing as the visuals. The background score is minimal and mostly plays during the scenes where Kannan goes through emotional disturbances. The absence of background score in the dialogue sequences facilitates the audience to stay focussed on the conversation. Background narration is absent. Songs are melodious and lyrics suit the situation.

Locations and properties

Kannan's house is quite small with a lot of backyard and front yard space and people are seen in the yards often, a scene common in village homes. The cot which Kannan lies on is also typical in the villages and is used by people to rest outdoors. There are long shots of ponds, mountains and fields, throughout the film. The opening song has covered even the minute details of the village temple festival.

The village government hospital and the village bank are also characteristic of such locations. Bharathi's house is set in the outskirts and stands as a typical example of the modern city buildings.

Conclusion

Auteur directors may be defined as those who have "solid technique, a well-defined vision of the word, and a degree of control over their productions... through the auteur, the popular art of cinema is able to achieve the traditional goals of poetry and the fine arts, goals of authentic expression and genius" (Auteur Theory: Motion picture- directing, pg 8. <https://www.britannica.com/art/motion-picture/Types-of-motion-pictures>)

When one looks at a movie from an auteur's way of looking at things, the concept of ideology invariably comes into play, since it can be agreed upon that the auteur is using the medium to pass on a message, or to project his way of thinking of an issue.

Thenmerku Paruvakaatru is set in the arid farmlands of south India and the heat and sweat of the people remain in the minds of its audience even after the film gets over. It not only brings to light the culture and the occupations of the people of the land but also exposes the beliefs and mindsets of the communities in the landscape.

The director manages to bring to light the questions of one's own identity, and tells the story about the important values of life in a subtle, and metaphorical way, which is his unique style of film making. The film won the best feature film at the national awards for its raw and realistic depiction of rural life and culture. The film is a masterpiece woven carefully with the intricate threads of the villages of Tamil Nadu.

In *Dharma Durai*, a great deal of wisdom that has gone into the filmmaking pattern and style and a wealth of ideologies that need to be cherished. The film is a classic example of how the director can take full control of the medium and paint his picture with his signature imprinted on it. *Dharma Durai* is a perfect choice for one who studies film and how nativity is represented through visual media. The film is a cultural symbol of the traditions, beliefs, occupations and practices in the villages of Tamil Nadu and it is highly contemporary as it deals with social, political and economic issues prevalent in the current scenario.

With *Kanne Kalaimane*, the director has made yet another film that appeals to its audience to understand and empathize with the protagonist and hopes to bring about change in the society: "Change will happen, if not now, but sooner". The director reveals his concern for the society when he addresses issues that are prevalent today. He has a unique approach in spinning together a lot of political, economic, religious, communist and socialistic ideologies in an understated manner.

The importance of motherland and service to community are the central themes propagated by the film. The Indian village economy, lifestyle and the family value systems are highly appreciated through the scenes subtly and the kind of life one must choose to live is also implied through the characters. The audience are left with a deep sense of appreciation for farming and a positive note with which the film ends that “there is always hope ahead”, resulting in a sense of satisfaction of having watched a film that makes one feel good at the end.

Though Seenu Ramasamy comes from the school of the legendary Tamil film maker Balu Mahendra, he has his own signature visual style. He is also the screen writer for his films and pens the dialogues of all his films. His films are generally slow to medium paced, without any rush in the screenplay, and yet, they keep the viewers hooked. He sets the premise of his films mainly in and around the central districts of Tamil Nadu. His films are noted for the breathtaking images of the country side.

Seenu Ramasamy gives special attention to cinematography in all his films, and the beauty of the villages is flawlessly captured through the stunning, wide-angle and aerial shots that he generally uses to establish the locales. Also, he uses the Rack focus technique to set the context of the story in many of his films. The most important messages are delivered by his characters in eye-level mid shots not letting the cinematography draw attention to itself. Characters, including the hero, appear in the screen in their natural flow of the story.

The editing pattern in all his films is like a smooth river gliding its way across.

The director is very specific in sketching the characters of his films with a complete character arc and every character in the film has a definitive role to play. The speciality of the director lies in making almost every character unforgettable in the minds of the viewers. In particular, the director pens strong female characters in all his films and they are not mere objects of glamour. It is those female characters that indeed uplift the lives of the protagonists. He also appears in cameo performances in most of his films.

Music is another strong element in the director’s movies and the songs in his films have thought provoking lyrics, and two of his films have won the national award for best lyrics. He makes sure that the village life is best reflected and the culture of the people is well encapsulated through the words and sounds in his film. There is a focus on plants, animals, soil, climate, monuments, food, rituals etc., in his films and its songs. A strong sense of positivity and hope is seen in the lyrics of the songs and scenes of his films, in a subtle yet obvious manner. The director’s reference to biblical verses and their implied meaning to the central theme of the film is very prominent in all the three films under study. Symbolic references and metaphors using native plants, animals, and objects in the frames is yet another signature style of the director.

Seenu Ramasamy is one such auteur who leaves his imprint in his films with his unique storytelling techniques, strong characters, emphasis on family values, socially relevant dialogues, use of cinematic techniques like camera angles and shots, appealing lyrics and positive, hopeful closures which offer solutions to the problems dealt with in the story. One can identify patterns in the cinematic construction of native culture and identity by the director. Authenticity of presentation of the rural context or the plot setting and a common ideological thread in the three movies are established in the study.

If we were to define auteur as someone who holds the ‘camera-pen’ as Astruc put it, as writer and director of his films, we can conclude safely that Seenu Ramasamy is doubly an auteur.

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