

*Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition on Film Criticism 2020*Certificate of Merit

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**Super Deluxe: Portrayal of An Existential Maze**

With a multitude of promising films made in our country in the recent years, the 2019 Tamil black comedy *Super Deluxe* directed by Thiagarajan Kumararaja has indeed proven to be one of the most thought-provoking creations made in the history of Indian cinemas. The film might seem bizarre and even asynchronous at one distracted watch for some, but once it arrests the attention of a cine-surgeon it is an elixir to the senses along with its well-bound roots into the soil of philosophy. I would like to cultivate the latent seeds of Existentialism implanted in the film *Super-Deluxe* through the perspectives of some eminent existential philosophers, to unravel the maze-structured narrative that offers the seamless pleasure of film-watching.

*Super-Deluxe* at the beginning roughly divides the narrative into four parts: the love-triangle between Vaambu, Kannamma and Mugil; the acceptance of a new relationship and identity for Manickam/Shilpa,

Jyothi and their son Raasukutti; the mischievous quest of the group of adolescent boys and the resurrected pastor Arputham, his wife Leela and Ramasamy. These individual stories set up a marveling maze that tend to get solved through a very existentialist conclusion. This film wonderfully questions our well-bound faith of day to day lives as each character deals with pretty absurd scenarios leading us to witness how a person is fundamentally free to live outside a normative shell— and that's where the essence of existentialism lies. To begin with let us examine Manickam's character, who has a devoted wife and an adorable son, however he chooses a different identity to express himself by bravely returning from Mumbai as Shilpa, now a transwoman. She believes in what Sartre rightfully said—"Being precedes essence" that our lives are not bound by one identity or a specific role we play but we are free underneath to choose many alternative lives. However this freedom triggers anxiety and not

pleasure since society shackles us to a plethora of conventions right from birth, just as Shilpa is challenged to shower her love on her son, as her new trans-identity is considered to be misfit for parental affection by the society. We also notice a similar kind of abhorrence from the character of Soori towards his own mother Leela, after he becomes aware of his mother's previous job as an adult-film actress. The existence of life itself becomes very much norm-obeying, as for our well-being we confine ourselves to certain roles, however each day regretting our choices. The entire film showcases all these characters who are flawed and suffer from "double regret", as to if they hadn't committed the chosen course of actions, how the other path would welcome them with a better choice, however as the philosopher Kierkegaard brilliantly states how the concept of binary choices is the birthplace for ambiguity that leads to the realization of an existential crisis on the first place. As he states—"If you marry, you will regret it, if you do not marry, you will also regret it..." which can very well be applied to the young married couple of Vaambu and Mugil, caught in a marital unhappiness. However they get to the bottom of this unhappiness as they spend a bizarre day of trying to dispose Vaambu's lover's dead body. They face an existential challenge, ultimately coming to terms with the situation, and slowly bond along. Their relationship resounds another existentialist philosophical quote uttered by the renowned German philosopher Nietzsche in his book "The Gay Science"—"Life is no argument. The conditions of life might include error."

Speaking of Nietzsche's another echoing statement that shook the Modern Age, as he comments—"God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him..." this has a very subtle yet significant connection with this film. In a scene where Shilpa and Raasukutti walk down a narrow alley, Raasukutti asks why God initially didn't put Shilpa into a woman's body, to which she replies that God must have got confused; just when the camera is brilliantly lifted towards the sky as an airplane flies by. Similarly, an airplane again flies by right after the filthy-minded police officer Berlin is suddenly killed in an unexpected accident saving Vaambu from

becoming a prey of lust. This airplane is the mock-symbol for God, as science is the new shrine where religion seems to be dead.

*Super Deluxe* also deals with the dynamics of religion, faith and resurrection through the character of Arputham, who is a survivor of the catastrophic Tsunami and devotes his resurrected life to the Sea God which apparently is the saviour deity. However Arputham's religious faith-feud begins from the moment his son Soori stands at the door of death. It is Arputham's wife Leela who sheds light on his shady superstitious belief along with Shilpa's confession of being saved during the same Tsunami by holding onto some piece of rock that Arputham thought was the Sea God. As Kierkegaard reminds us to embrace the "Leap of faith", Arputham finally towards the end of the film thrusts the statue of Sea God, breaking it into pieces only to discover diamonds hidden inside the statue that can be a great solution to arranging of the money needed for his son's operation. He realizes that faith is sometimes too blinding and it should be always reconciled with reason to survive. As Arun Joshi in his book 'Last Labyrinth' points out—"You want to have faith. But you also want to reserve the right to challenge your own faith when it suits you." and this forms a vital tenet of existentialism where faith triggers us to enquire about our own existence.

In this film the adolescent group of boys while stealing money for purchasing TV-sets from a North-Indian's house have a surreal encounter with an alien girl. This section of the film might seem a bit disconnected, however it adds a vital existentialist point of view, heavy-handedly. As the whole notion of human existence is filled with ambivalence, that triggers questions like—Who are we? Who defines us to act in a certain manner? Why do we fear anything outside our conventional boundary of life? What fetches success, is it by crossing a boundary or staying within limit? We can only get back to Camus' saying—"Life is the sum of all your choices." No matter what, we should never be bound to one option and irrespective of what we choose, someday we all will be on the voyage that will experience a shipwreck. *Super Deluxe* cruises through these

different narratives involving a microcosm of modern-day characters making us realize that life is an existential maze that holds its beauty in being lost and clueless, where solution to a problem can fetch a temporary peace but never a sense of completion. As Sartre has deliberately hammered us with his words—“Nothingness haunts being.” It is only that in order to keep us away from the realization of this nothingness, we do construct a maze around us, to chase the rest of our lives through a never-ending process of trial and error much like the sole characters of the revolving narrative in this film, who even after

going through challenging situations somehow come to terms with what they have emerged to be; while their mazes might have intersected in some way or the other, none of them have escaped the mazes and this is the sheer beauty of this film that hits us hard with such a profound thought in the guise of a mockery thrown at our contemporary society. Thus, as an ardent admirer of philosophy, literature and cinema, I would want Kumararaja’s treasure film *Super Deluxe*, to be unearthed by all the cine-souls of the globe.

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