

Critique

Vaisakh Somanath

## Art Lives



Fortyfive minutes into the film, there is a scene where all the actors leave the hall in the evening after the rehearsal and the camera slowly moves up to the picture of Ayya Adhimoolam hanging on the wall. In that photograph, we see the reflected image of actors rehearsing on the next day. This particular scene can be considered the crux of the film as the entire film revolves around whether art dies after the artist dies. This timelessness of art which is very rare these days has been brilliantly portrayed in the film by showing the difference in the kind of respect people give to plays (art) and popular cinema (product). The filmmaker here doesn't just get away by simply saying cinema is bad. In the later half of the film, we see the unpopular-and-outdated-while-alive Ayya Adhimoolam or art itself acting in popular cinema and bringing a mass audience to good cinema which is again art. In other words, Ayya was an artist when he was alive but he became art when he died.

The Legend of Seethakaathi is something which I should mention while discussing this film. Sheik Abdul Kader popularly known as Seethakaathi was a Tamil scholar, poet and philanthropist who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. "Setthum Koduthaan

Seethakaathi" is a popular Tamil phrase which means Seethakaathi did good deeds even after his death. Director Balaji Tharaneetharan used this idea to tell the story of an artiste who "gave art" even after his death. The film with its one-liner sounds like a supernatural film but it was not at all treated that way. Else the director cleverly uses characters and situations to make fun of the lack of truth and sincerity in art these days. It's hilarious and philosophical at the same time.

*Seethakaathi* is full of metaphors, in the form of characters, colours used and in the way music is used. For example Saravanan's character is used to show how stardom ruins the artist in you. When the track "Avan" progresses, there is a scene where Saravanan climbs upon the platform in front of the screen as the camera captures his larger-than-life shadow falling on the screen. Here the filmmaker without saying a single word shows that people are cheering for his shadow or Avan (the art in him) and not him (the artist). Another example for a character being used as a metaphor is the character of Dhanapal. Dhanapal is that rich guy who wants to become a star and make a lot of money through movie

business. Dhanapal symbolises money and power. Here art gets traded for money. Initially, art tries to exist in its truest form. But as you see in the subsequent scenes when money solely becomes the driving force for art, art loses its truth and dies.

Use of colours is another aspect that needs to be discussed. The director has used blue colours for the walls of Ayya's house where as we see shades of red in the stage and on the walls of the backstage where he performs daily. This symbolises Ayya Adhimoalam's strong identity as an artiste and his weak helpless nature when he is at his home. Ayya always belonged to the stage and that is why he (or the art in him) refused to leave the stage. More of these colours are used when Saravanan rises to fame. In the initial scenes when Saravanan is starting out in films, he is wearing shirts in different shades of red. When that particular scene where he terribly fails at delivering a simple dialogue plays out, we see Saravanan wearing a blue jacket. At the same time the bench he is sitting on is red. It could well be a clever way to show that Avan (art) is not inside him anymore. The use of colours is not over the top but it still plays in favour of the film even though we might not notice it.

The way music and songs are used in this film is actually a learning lesson for contemporary Indian filmmakers. The music never overpowers any scene yet it is very well a part of the screenplay itself. The use of breath sound as percussion in the song "Avan" gives us a feeling that Ayya is still alive. Flute is an instrument which has been used extensively, the reason I believe is flute is a wind instrument and wind is breath. Use of silence is another highlight of the film.

The first twenty minutes of the film is stage plays only showing the journey of Ayya Adhimoalam's character from a young boy to the present day. The slow pace of that portion is deliberately done and it sets up the pace for the rest of the film. Here editing is not treated as a tool to make something more enjoyable or crisp, else it is

used to show stage plays as it is. In other words, we could say that the first twenty minute portion is Ayya himself.

Amidst all these arthouse qualities, *Seethakaathi* has its cinematic moments too but in a very straightforward and honest way. The wall art of "art lives" or the last monologue by the judge are some examples. If you look closely, you can draw a parallel here. It's the same way Ayya acted in movies too, isn't it? He did popular movies but were all good movies. Ayya bridged the gap between commercial and arthouse cinema the same way Balaji Tharaneetharan did it through *Seethakaathi*.

*Seethakaathi* was released in the last month of 2018 and was a box-office flop. Why would I write about the box-office verdict of a film in its criticism? Because isn't it the same scene where Ayya looks at a *meager* audience and feels bad for the play and his actors? The film had the same fate. Instead of Ayya, Balaji Tharaneetharan is sitting in that place and his film *Seethakaathi* is being played on the stage. But I believe the film will have a cult following in the coming years. As all the titles roll out, at the very end of it that one line is being repeated.

"*Kalai Saavil Mudivadhillai*" meaning Art never ends with death.

### *Seethakaathi*

Dir. Balaji Tharaneetharan

Duration: 173 minutes

Language: Tamil

Country: India

Year: 2018

Lead Actors: Vijay Sethupathi, Mouli, Archana

Cinematography: Saraskanth T. K.

Editor: R. Govindaraj

Music: Govind Vasantha

Production: Passion Studios

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