

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition 2021: Certificate of Merit

N Ramachandran

**A Tale of Fractured Relationships Healed by Love
In the Eponymous Kumbalangi**



***Kumbalangi Nights*, Malayalam, 2019, By- Madhu C Narayanan**

How often are we told stories of flawed, broken men trying to cope with life's difficulties while making space for each other and their emotions?

How often do you find a movie dedicated to the isles of a small place like Kumbalangi, far away from the dazzling lights and skyscrapers of the metro cities?

How often do we find tall palm trees swaying to the wind, boats gliding along the backwaters and fishing nets sprawled across the lake?

Not only this, but a lot more is what Kumbalangi offers.

Brothers Saji (Soubin Shahir), Bony (Sreenath Bhasi), and Bobby (Shane Nigam) live in a small house, a house devoid of women, borders, and even basic facilities. A shanty is run shabbily by the brothers, often bickering and climbing over one another amidst petty quarrels. This is also the primary

reason why Frankie (Mathew Thomas), the youngest brother, sponsored by a state scholarship, avoids staying indoors and is often found playing football.

Their life seems directionless as none of them has good jobs and neither the inclination to seek one. While Bobby chills at the shore with his friend, Saji and Bony seem contemplative and clueless initially. Madhu C Narayanan explores men of a completely different stature – not confident and assertive, but ones who lack self-esteem while still recovering from the grief and abandonment faced after losing their mother.

The movie progresses with Bobby falling in love with Baby (Anna Ben), who seems to be a cheerful, carefree girl staying in a rich house commanded by the eccentric Shammi (Faahadh Faasil). His quest to be a complete man rarely flickers as he is found trimming his moustache while

removing the forlorn bindi on the mirror – again, a symbol of how manly he is (Is he?). The women in the house (Grace Antony and Ambika Rao) are unnerved by his comical yet sinister presence as they must take permission for every excursion, and so do the kids who play in their backyard, as they are scared to claim their football once it crosses the fence.

While the tender and soothing Cherathukal hums in the background, the music, visuals, and detailing deserves a special mention. While each of the characters is intricately observed and portrayed, the story never loses its grip, rather keeps adding, pretty much like Kumbalangi itself – calm, composed and picturesque. It is often a sight to behold, and Shyju Khalid deserves special praise for this. It is very rare to find nature so beautifully blended into the lives of imperfect humans seeking solace and affection in tough times.

Without giving a potential spoiler, I would love to mention how the film successfully deals with the much deliberated issue of toxic masculinity. In a norm-defining sequence, Saji meets a therapist and bares his heart out, citing all the incidents which have hurt him. After voicing all his concerns, he breaks down, and the tears don't stop. They flood the therapist's shirt as he consoles Saji with a hug. Just the sheer audacity and honesty of this scene is a breakthrough moment, possibly for Indian cinema. As the camera slowly pans into Saji's face, he is seen sobbing and slowly regathering himself as he steps out of the chamber. Guess what, he finds Frankie there, ready to escort him home.

A silent reminder of the fact that elders often need support. Yes, they are allowed to break down and not be apologetic about it, and just as Frankie

lends his shoulder in support without giving a stare or a judging glance is what is much needed.

To be fragile, broken, expressive, hesitant, unsure, and remorseful – yes, a man can be all this and still be a complete man.

We also find beautiful moments sprayed evenly throughout the movie, the visual of a new mother (also a widow) being accompanied across the backwaters on a boat, the fleeting romance of a young couple, who are committed to not letting consequences get the better of their mutual desires, a disjoint family suddenly uniting over a dish prepared by an outsider, actually a foreigner, who falls in love with the ambience of Kumbalangi and the warmth offered by its natives and many more.

As the film prepares itself for a tense climax while revealing the toxicity hidden behind Shammi's bone-chilling smile, the end is measured and well-paced. A broken hut, once rendered incapable of housing four brothers, now accommodates more people, more women to be precise and thereby, Madhu C Narayanan hints at how accommodating broken, fragile souls can be and how colourful, and plentiful togetherness can feel.

After all, what is love if it cannot accept the weakness and fragilities of a human being?

After all, what is a house if it is unable to accommodate the vulnerabilities of its residents?

While subtly brushing away the evil hood of patriarchy and masculinity, the film stays pleasing, pretty much like the ambience it is set in, letting us throw our fishing nets to the immense possibilities that await us in future, asking us to persevere to stay free, affectionate and enabling us to break all shackles.

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