

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition 2021: Certificate of Merit

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Minimalism, Space and Narrative



Santhoshathinte Onnam Rahasyam (Joyful Mystery, 2021) by Don Palathara

Don Palathara is one filmmaker who is an avid explorer of experimentation and innovation in cinematic style and narrative strategies. From his first film *Shavam* (Corpse, 2015), which sketches the progression of a funeral and unfolds in real-time, he has been subverting classical cinematic concepts such as framing, editing and sound mixing. His oeuvre includes *Vith* (Seed, 2017), *1956*, *Central Travancore* (2019), *Everything is Cinema* (2021) and the recent *Santhoshathinte Onnam Rahasyam*. The cinema's narrative occurs within the interior of a car, during a couple's journey to take a pregnancy test. Malayalam filmmakers have been attempting movies shot within confined locales recently, and films such as *Joji* (2021) by Dileesh, *Pothen*, *Kala* (2021) by Rohith V.S., and *Aarkkariyam* (2021) by Sanu John Varghese exemplify this.

Santhoshathinte Onnam Rahasyam unravels through the conversation between Maria (Rima Kallingal) and Jithin (Jithin Puthancherry), an unmarried couple living together en route to taking a pregnancy test. A narrative with only two predominant characters is not new to cinema; Richard

Linklater's *Before* trilogy and Abbas Kiarostami's *Certified Copy* are mightily popular now. But the fact distinguishing Don Palathara's movie is that the narrative happens inside a moving vehicle in a single shot. Saji Babu's camera is static and is focused on Jithin and Maria. By shaping a minimalist, dialogue-driven narrative, Don Palathara provides the viewers with an experience of giving in to the mindscape of the characters. In *Minimalism: Origins*, Edward Strickland asserts that "minimalism is a style distinguished by the severity of means, clarity of form, simplicity and texture" (1963, 4). By focusing on a private space, Don Palathara weaves a fabric of perceptions out of the ordinary experience. The minimalist mode reveals the immediate and personal emotions in a subjective yet mellifluous tone. The real-time format engages the viewer cognitively, resulting in the construction of a concrete perception.

The film opens abruptly with Maria complaining about the anxiety that she bears and the social stigma that she and her family is about to face as an unmarried pregnant woman. Jithin's attitude infuriates her, as he trivialises the issue and his

ultimate solution is him getting a stable job and getting married. Society views getting married as a way to show family and friends that someone has a successful personal life, as reflected in Jithin's mindset. The only other character that appears briefly, whom Maria offers to drop off on their way back, also expresses conservative scepticism about their relationship.

Although the focus is on domestic and private space and visible involvement with the internal mindscape of the characters-their anxiety, trauma and conflicts, the narrative provides observations on the power equations in society by bringing forth the fragility of their relationship. In public life, Jithin is a progressive, "woke" individual who aspires to be politically correct in his engagement with his friends. A phone call he receives while Maria is undergoing the test establishes this. But Maria is more pragmatic and aware of the stigmas surrounding her, which comes to the fore in a phone conversation during the ride. These phone calls serve as the medium to express the dichotomy of the private and public life of individuals. One incident that Maria reminds; about how Jithin made a fuss when she put a "love" reaction to an old friend's Facebook status reveals her struggle with ossified patriarchal structures and inherent male sexism.

Another phone call that turns out in the narrative is an interview given to Maria by a filmmaker (voice by Don Palathara), which imparts a satirical tone to the narrative. The director's contempt towards tik-tok videos and such is a contemplation of the post-cinematic era, of which Don Palathara is a part. The interview becomes a meta-commentary on self-proclaimed progressive men as the director claims his movie to be feminist while at the same time declaring that his grandmother was an exceptional cook who

made great "sambar" and had she taken up a government job, a lot of people would have missed a great culinary experience. The tension between Maria and Jithin and the fragility of their relationship become axiomatic to the phone calls. The movie ends on a happy note, with Maria getting her periods and Jithin patting her on the head, but the terrain of sophistication in their relationship is held at bay as a crisis yet to be unveiled.

Here, the interior of the vehicle is transformed into a sweeping presence, a vestige of a society where power divisions are negotiated, and the brilliance of the film lies in its ability to make the space a sensory and existential issue on a human, everyday scale. By focussing on the characters' minute bodily movements, gazes and glances, the movie constructs a logical orientation of the disquiet surrounding them, and the documentary realism captures the emotional tumult in their life. In *The Viewer's Embodiment into Cinematic Space: Note on a Space Image Cinema*, Antoine Gaudin claims: "According to the space image paradigm, a movie should not only be regarded as an exhibition of space. It must be considered as a spatial phenomenon in itself, engaging the entire viewer's body, not only their vision and hearing but also their kinaesthetic sense" (195, 2019).

By entering into a play with cinematic space and by overturning the conventional topological narratives, *Santhoshathinte Onnam Rahasyam* initiates a fresh encounter of sensory experience. In the narrative context, the perceived and conceived space becomes the point of subjectivity, a way of representing the characters' mental state and how it becomes intelligible to the viewer, or in a way, the viewer becomes a part of the narrative scheme. This process gives a sense of identification with the enunciated situation.

Works Cited:

- Gaudin, Antoine. "The Viewer's Embodiment into Cinematic Space: Notes on a 'Space-Image' Cinema". *New approaches to Cinematic Space*. Ed. Filipino Rosario and Ivan Villarme Alvarez. New York. Routledge, 2019. 193-204. Print.
- Strickland, Edward. *Minimalism: Origins*. Indiana UP, Bloomington, 1993. Print.

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