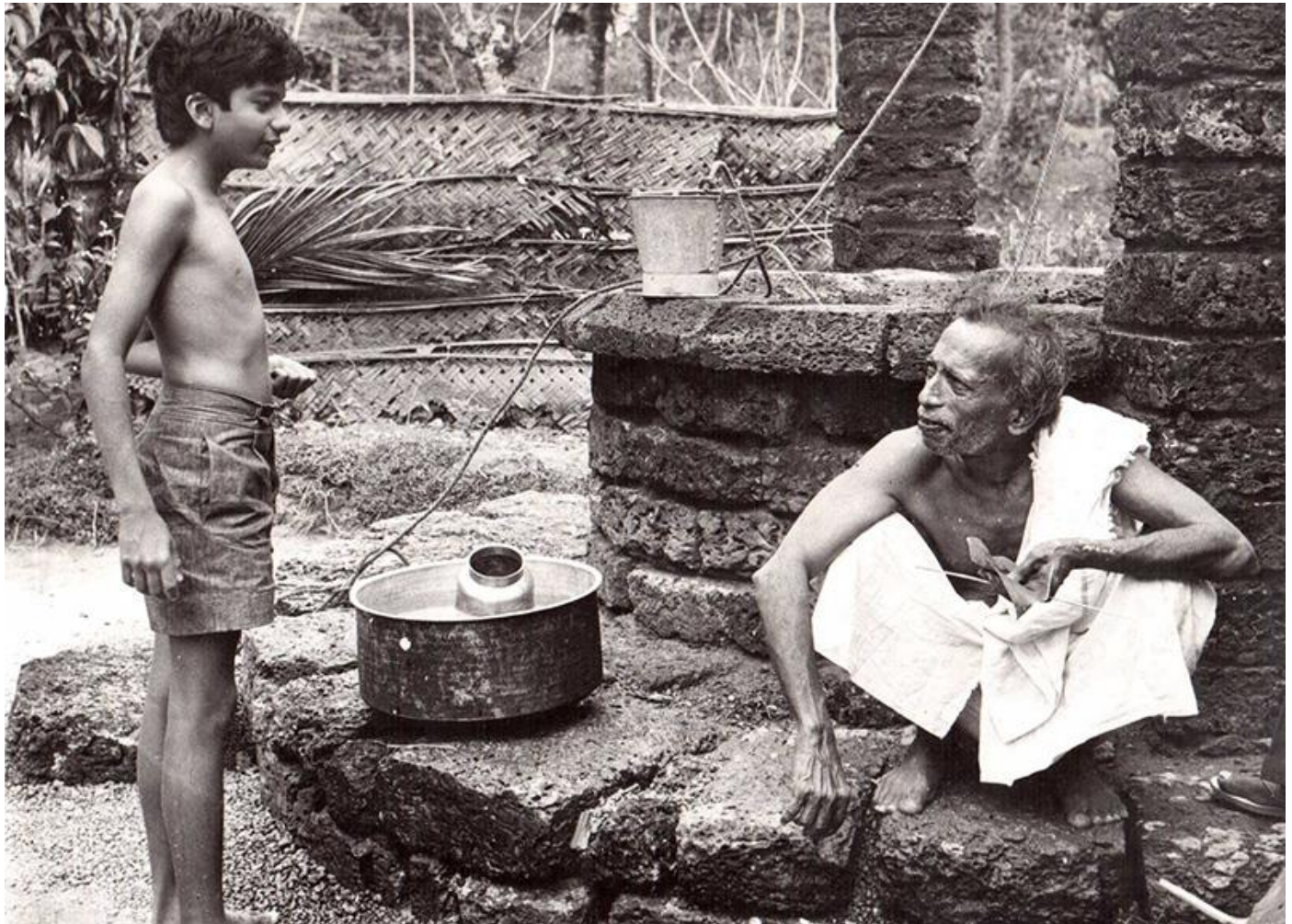


Critique

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The Leader in his Labyrinth: Narrative Ambiguity Leading to Multiple Interpretations in Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Mukhamukham* (1984)



'*Mukhamukham*' (1984), the fourth film of Adoor Gopalakrishnan, is set in the political landscape of Kerala in south India, making it a vital movie to analyse. Adoor's third film '*Elippathayam*' (1981), deals with declining feudalism. It was the strong political left in Kerala that caused it. Adoor's first film '*Swayamvaram*' (1972), highlights the social issue of acute unemployment in the state during 'the 60s'. It shows a political meeting and a march protesting retrenchment of workers. Kerala was the first state to have an elected communist government

in India as early as 1957, although it got dismissed in 1959, bringing the state under President's rule. The communist party split into two, and the solid leftist faction formed its party in 1964. The rise of the left in Kerala, capturing the govt, losing power and splitting into two forms the background of '*Mukhamukham*'.

The film's first part is set in the decade ending in 1955. [1] The plot of the film is as follows. The title sequence and the following introductory sequence are in the omniscient point of view of

Sreedharan (P. Gangadharan Nair), the trade union leader who is on a protest against the management of a tile factory. But photos and newspaper cuttings about him suggest that he is dead. Then there are the reminiscences of him in the third person point of view by people knowing him, such as the tea shop owner (Vembayam), Sudhakaran (Ashokan) who was the boy who brought tea, the old farmer (B.K. Nair) and the factory owner's minion (Alumoodan). Then there is a gap of a decade in which he goes into hiding as he is implicated in the murder of the tile factory owner. The film rightly doesn't disclose what happens during that period. From the omniscient point of view, the second part shows Sreedharan after his return from hiding in 1965. [1] We see him in person, as the title goes ('Mukhamukham' meaning face to face) and not through others. A pale shadow of his past, he is vastly different from the image of him created by others. He drinks liquor and slumbers most of the time, not participating in any activity. There is no clue as to why he behaves this way as information about Sreedharan is given from the outside, and we do not understand his psyche.

With this film, Adoor deviates from the classical narrative by creating ambiguity. A denotative meaning based on the plot presented is inadequate. We are pushed into a connotative reading which gives rise to higher-level interpretations. In the first part, we learn about Sreedharan through the eyes of people who know him and newspaper cuttings. The question arises as to what the truth about him is. What we have seen is the image of him, which is not valid, as he looks far from an idealistic leader when he returns from hiding. Or he was an idealist, as most say, and he doesn't have the spirit any longer after what he has gone through.

In the first interpretation, Sreedharan is just a party worker elevated by the party, giving him the image of a leader. He may not be a leader with great ideals as others think of him. So, what we see in the first part of the film is the image of him that they hold, not the authentic self. He is playing the role of a leader as the party wants him. As for the murder of the factory owner, there is ambiguity as the audience does not know who committed the murder. After living in hiding for a decade, he may no longer want to play

the role of a leader. He has turned into a drunkard. He completely stops all his activities which are shown by his frequent slumbers.

In the second interpretation, Sreedharan is a true leader, as many people thought of him. This is the view of Adoor himself reflected in his statement on the film: "There lives an idealist, a revolutionary — not necessarily political — in every individual. But over time, as a matter of common experience, this spirit either dies out or becomes dormant. The idea of this film was born out of my desire to search for this spirit. Hence the investigative character of its structure." [2] Living in hiding deprives him of his family life. The farmer's daughter Savitri (Kaviyoor Ponnamma), with whom he lived, was in a family way when he left home. He hasn't even seen his child, who grows into a boy, as though he has been in prison for a decade. He would not have had proper food and physical activity. Living in a state of privation would have affected his psyche deeply, and his revolutionary spirit might have ebbed. Also, living under different names in the underground might have made him lose his identity to a certain extent.

When he returns after hiding, he has no more energy left to continue his political activity. His frequent napping shows his inaction. Solitude is a recurring theme in the film. From his trade union days, he has been portrayed as a loner without a family till the farmer takes him home when he is seen lying on the road beaten up. After that interlude, he would have continued to be mostly alone when he was underground. There is a suggestion that he might have had contact with another woman. He has been distanced from his family by the decade of hiding. His propensity to solitude might make him appear apathetic. The party gave him up for dead and built a memorial for him. By now, the party is split into two. He becomes an embarrassment to both of them. Once he is killed by unknown assailant/s, the two communist parties unite in their march to resurrect his image as the leader and celebrate his martyrdom by carrying his garlanded photo. The International is played on the soundtrack for the second time in the film.

Adoor has said that '*Mukhamukham*' is not for or against any party. He has shown the reality of

that time. Most of the comrades who went underground suffered from ailments of the intestine, causing severe pain. Since they couldn't go to a physician, they drank to assuage the pain, which became a habit. [3] However, the film created a controversy in Kerala as it was thought to be showing the communist movement in poor light. Adoor has said that the former Chief Minister of West Bengal, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, did not find anything objectionable in the film and welcomed it. [3]

A third interpretation can be made thanks to the built-in ambiguity in the film. From Adoor's second film *'Kodiyettam'* (1978) to his fifth film *'Anantaram'* (1987), the approach is that of a biography of an individual. *'Mukhamukham'*, his fourth film, is very much part of this approach. The individual happens to be a political leader in the movie. It is an unusual biography in that it presents an individual as a changing entity which questions the notion of personhood. While everyone undergoes some change over a prolonged period, some people undergo drastic change. It may be due to a neurological problem, FTD (Frontotemporal dementia), impacting one's personality and behaviour. Sreedharan's loss of embarrassment (in taking a currency note from the pocket of the beedi maker in full view of his followers, stealing from his wife's purse, and passing out drunk near his son's school) and apathy also happen to be symptoms of FTD. Hence the third interpretation is that the phenomenon of personhood undergoing a meaningful change depicted in *'Mukhamukham'* may be attributed to biology.

The film critic M. K. Raghavendra has mentioned Vladimir Nabokov's short story "A Forgotten Poet" (1944) as a literary parallel for *'Mukhamukham'* as the former "simply describes the devastation that time inflicts on the human psyche." [4] The Nabokov story is about a revolutionary poet who is supposed to have drowned and stages a comeback after fifty years. Without taking anything away from Adoor's original film, viewing it alongside a literary work enhances the understanding of the film. Yet another academic work we can look at is Gabriel García Márquez's novel "The General in His Labyrinth" (1989), considering the mysteries

surrounding the political leader Sreedharan and his apparent personality change. However, it cannot be called a literary parallel like the Nabokov story. Certainly, Sreedharan, the small-time union leader, cannot be compared to the leader of Gran Colomb, in General, Simón Bolívar, known in six Latin American countries as the Liberator. However, like the Márquez novel, the film *'Mukhamukham'* also has several labyrinths that lead to a dead end. It is unknown who murdered the tile factory owner and what happened to Sreedharan during the ten years of hiding, which resulted in a change in his personality. The Márquez novel covers Bolivar's retreat from public life, like the last part of *'Mukhamukham'* in which Sreedharan makes a comeback mentally exhausted and withdraws himself from all activities. The heroic liberator of Gran Colombia is a confused and diseased man who faces dead ends on multiple fronts: personal, political, and geographical. Metaphorically, Bolivar is caught in a labyrinth. After his return from hiding, Sreedharan is also trapped in a labyrinth. He cannot relate to his son, who eagerly waits for him to get up and talk to him. Politically he can neither align with the left-wing communist party nor the right-wing communist party. The young rebel Sudhakaran looks up to Sreedharan, who does not guide him. Finally, it is not known who killed Sreedharan. There is a dead end as the film ends with his death, and all the secrets about him are buried along with him. The structure is that of a series of labyrinths in Sreedharan's life.

In his first three films - *'Swayamvaram'* (1972), *Kodiyettam* [1977] and *'Elippathayam'* [1981] - apart from presenting the real world, Adoor incorporated another level of meaning conveyed by the title. The denotative meaning is fuzzy in *'Mukhamukham'*, forcing the viewer to look for connotative meanings. In *'Anantaram'* (1987), Adoor goes one step further by doing away with the denotative meaning; we are left only to make connotative meanings. *'Mukhamukham'* is a significant film in Adoor's oeuvre as subject-wise, it is set during the communist movement becoming a political force in Kerala, and, in terms of form, its ambiguity makes the viewer go beyond what is shown and look for higher level meanings.

Title: Mukhamukham
Year: 1984
Duration: 107 minutes
Language: Malayalam
Editing: M.Mani
Audiography: Devadass
Music: M.B. Srinivasan
Cinematography: Mankada Ravi Varma
Producer: K Ravindran Nair
Story, Script and Direction: Adoor Gopalakrishnan

References

1. Adoor Gopalakrishnan in the interview with Bikram Singh, [“Mukhamukham: Face to Face”](#), The Sunday Observer, 2 December 1984
2. Adoor Gopalakrishnan, “The Director’s Statement”, 2017, <https://adoorgopalakrishnan.com/2017/04/12/mukhamukham/>
3. Adoor Gopalakrishnan in conversation with VK Cherian, [“Creative world of Adoor Gopalakrishnan - Swayamvaram@50-Episode -4 Mukhamukham \(Face to Face\)”](#), Swayamvaram50 Channel on YouTube, 2022
4. M.K. Raghavendra, “50 Indian Film Classics”, Noida, HarperCollins; 1st edition, 2009, pp 236-237.

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