

Critique

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Family



Family, India, Malayalam, 2023, 111 mins, Director: Don Palathara,

It's a small Syrian Christian community in Kerala, tightly bound by the Church and the parish, the parishioners live in independent, modest homes surrounded by verdant forests. The pastor and the nuns are ready to help the ill and the needy, proffer advice, listen to confessions and pardon those who have sinned. There is nothing irregular here; it all seems quiet and 'normal'.

Don Palathara's Malayalam film *Family*, which premiered at the Rotterdam Film Festival earlier this year (it also won the Best Film Award at the Halicarnassus Film Festival in Turkey), is a deceptive tale of life in a community that appears 'modest' in every sense of the word: modest hopes,

modest homes and modest incomes. A life devoid of unrest and chaos. Or so it would seem...

At the heart of the narrative is Sony, winningly played by Vinay Fort. A young, educated man in his late 20s, a son to everyone around, Vinay is an angel in disguise, extending a genuine helping hand to all and sundry. He had run a coaching centre earlier but is now available 24x7 to everyone for undertaking any work that may come his way. He gives tuition, takes young Subin to see a film, offers to teach him poetry, and later counsels him on his misbehaviour; he helps Tony, who wants to study and find a job, he helps lift a cow which has fallen into a pit, he helps the pregnant Rina to scoop up grain and clean and cut vegetables; he helps build a road or

climbs trees to pluck jackfruit ...he is everywhere, a reassuring presence.

This is his life within a community that appears to be at peace. But is it really so? Don Palathara undermines what seems on the surface by subtly bringing out problems (mostly unuttered, unarticulated) that his characters experience.

The characters themselves are quiet. They gossip, and that's how news gets around, but no one is forthright, wanting to thrash out issues that bother them. The consequences of this reserve can be severe, as happens when the elderly George commits suicide following the escape of his young daughter from home one night – even though she does return.

Interestingly, the film is no more than a series of static shots. A fixed camera that takes it all in, almost reminding one of Mizoguchi's one-scene-one-shot technique. Things happen within each shot, people, birds, and vehicles enter and leave. Sometimes, the camera pauses – before verdant nature, a road or a face, or the front or side of a house, letting the viewer take in the scene or leaving him to contemplate.

Running through the film like a binding thread are prayers and the words of the Church – sin, mercy, forgiveness and repentance. Prayers are said before dinner and at various family or social get-togethers. A leopard prowls somewhere in the background and is referred to now and then, and you wonder if Palathara has used the animal as a metaphor for the danger that lurks around the characters. The leopard is shown only once in the jungle, towards the end of the film, seen by two young girls who freeze in panic, but the animal licks itself generously and walks away.

While there is no 'story' in the usual sense, there are vignettes that tell us of the inner squalls that characters grapple with. Young Neethu runs away from home in the middle of the night; Sony's father tends to drink heavily, Subin is apparently dealing with adolescent turmoil – sullen and uncommunicative, is accused of verbally abusing a girl in school, and then (probably in shame) regrets his act and flees to the forest to hide. These could be regarded as no more than routine issues faced by ordinary people leading ordinary lives.

But what of the principal character himself? Sony, the loving, loveable, ever-friendly, benevolent young man? Is he flawed in any way? The film does give us hints. He coaches a young girl in her room. The camera angle focuses on Sony, not her (although one-half of the screen does show us her father, who is watching television). Sony tells the girl repeatedly to concentrate. He then gets up and goes towards her. They are no longer on the screen, and we have no idea what transpires. But surely something has happened because the next time he comes to the house, she hides, too scared to open the door. Later, he is caught in the cellar with a girl, so there is more than meets the eye. And he can't get along with his father.

Unspoken tension, brief dialogue and lack of laughter define relationships in this pious, conservative community where moral rectitude, family traditions and prayers are central to its salvation and identity. Yet, in a scene in the woods with Neethu (he is in love with her), Sony acknowledges his helplessness before the restrictions imposed by his father. Everything now seems 'neutral', he says; he doesn't understand the world any more. He was optimistic once, but it's all vanished in a second.

Two things happen before the film's unanticipated climax. One, Sony confesses to the pastor: he admits he squabbles with his father, he has a sense of self-importance, he has skipped the Holy Mass by pretending to be busy; he has been unkind to people inferior to him (none of which is shown on the screen). The pastor listens and absolves him of his sins. Later, he asks him to teach in a local school.

Two, a nun persuades him to join a three-day retreat for young people, which will do him good (he has to get over his 'silliness', she insists, and not watch serials on TV), and to get married according to his family's convenience. Forgive, forgive, the retreat counsellor advises him; your anger with your earthly father will be removed by Jesus.

And what is Family? Not just father, mother, brother, sister, husband/wife and children. It is everyone around you, says the nun. The family is the community itself, and the stability of the family cannot be imperilled. (And you ask yourself: Do those who advise Sony know of his love for Neethu,

the girl who had run away and returned, but one old man had wondered if she had returned ‘intact’?).

A shot inside the local church shows parishioners reacting to a sermon full of platitudes. Sony is vigorously shouting Hallelujah. The Church is drawing him in; he is falling in line. His marriage is now arranged for a pretty girl by his family. Later, he is inducted as a teacher in a school, and his post is announced during the assembly. Marriage...job...he now seems to have everything, just how it should be.

As the announcement is made in the courtyard, a sharp shower has the school children running for cover. Sony runs, takes shelter, mingles with the kids, looks around, and smiles. Then, gradually, imperceptibly, his expression changes. The camera freezes on his face; his eyes seem to be laden with doubt. Is this what I wanted? They seem to ask.

Little on the surface. Much underneath. All gently conveyed. By the director. And by his camera.

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