

Interview with Shaji N Karun

Utpal Datta

**‘Most of the Simple Concepts have Complex Insights’
– Shaji N Karun**



Utpal: Sir Namaskar!

Karun: Namaskar Sir!

Utpal: Sir, I would like to know about your latest film, ‘*Olu*.’

Karun: *Olu* is, in fact, a fantasy film. All human beings, although not only humans, I think even animals and birds, need a dream to continue living with a lot of optimism. Optimism, in this sense, also includes poetry made out of dreams, and many stories are also written with a certain element of fantasy and everything. Why all those things? As good human beings, we need good dreams and fantasise and wonder. If you don’t wonder, then there is no cinema either. Due to this reason, this time, I made a dream into

cinema for a good reason: cinema must be able to translate a person’s mind into a visual interpretation. This is something you have visualised in your brain and are watching now on a big screen, which gives a certain feeling watching the dream appear in front of you, and then it disappears, but certain memories remain intact in your mind for a good reason. So, the cinema should also keep and store a few good memories in your mind and brain. At this moment, we need such a kind of interpretation of mind through cinema.

Utpal: Sir, would you tell us the story outline of *Olu* for our readers?

Karun: Olu is about a girl, an innocent girl who was gang raped and thrown in the backwaters of Kerala. The rapist destroyed all the evidence. As she was a gypsy from Rajasthan, the root wasn't known to the public, and she had been immersed in the backwaters to kill all the evidence. The bottom line is, she was rescued by a Buddhist place as in the olden days, many of the places in Kerala were influenced by Buddhism, and she is forced to live for ten more months till she gives birth to the child, a result of the rape. Like any innocent girl, she also used to have dreams. Love is the most common desire of any girl stepping into adulthood. So, this dream is something that has always been on her mind. During the full moon days, ten full moon days mean it's a complete cycle to have periods. During the full moon days, she could watch anything from outside, beyond her world underwater. It means she could see the water's surface where she suddenly meets a male, an artist, quite an unknown artist, and not a talented artist. There, she finds in him a certain resemblance with her lover in Rajasthan. So suddenly, she realises he's the one for her. So it's also a fantasy for the film. This girl asks can you draw my dream of love as he's a painter, and I would support you in a supernatural way. Suddenly, he realises many paintings are being sold, and then he becomes rich. However, he cannot see the girl underneath the water. She also says if you come down to see me, it's the end of their love. So, he's afraid to go down to meet her. So, it's a film about platonic love. Human beings, as you know, always love somebody whom we respect, like platonic love with God. For example, you go and worship the Goddess,

and there is a platonic love between the individual and God. Not for a good reason, but we feel God would protect and care for you. So platonic love is anything against sexual pleasure. However, the girl, without seeing him, makes more money through his paintings, inspiration, support, or help in a sense, and there is some kind of energy that has been passed by the girl to him. He mistakes anybody who loves her and thinks it's the same girl I named Maya.

Utpal: Why 'Maya'?

Karun: Maya itself means fantasy for all of us.

Utpal: There is a dialogue in the film-Who is Maya?

Karun: Yes! Who is Maya? So, he falls in love with them in physical times, such as physical pleasure, and then suddenly she again feels this gentleman, the boy who she's in love with, is the person who had raped her for his physical pleasure. So she ponders, "*Is he the right person I should fall in love with?*" Then, suddenly, she withdraws her love, and he also realises that he has been unable to paint during these ten months. Moreover, when she gives birth to the child, the child is innocent. The child needs to be innocent for a woman, for the mother, and for the Buddhist. It's kind of an element which I would instead call 'Moksha'. The child becomes a Buddhist form as the Nirvana kind of element, and then at the end, the child is taken into a kind of spirit, and everybody has some myth regarding that spirit. This spirit is also a concept of love in the film, too. I've interpreted this in the form of the bird going and falling in love with the moon and dissolving into it. That's the idea...It is all fantasy, but the idea is that, in

India, particularly in Malayalam cinema, now everything is being put down to the level of stark of what you call the reality part of it, more than a story part of it, more than an interpretation similar to reading in between the lines for a novel or book which isn't there. So, I'm sad. Human beings are unable to dream for various reasons. So this cinema is made to ignite them. See, the basic problem I faced was... The girl needed to speak under the water but nobody could speak underneath the water as the sound wouldn't be audible. So, these need to be reconstructed in a studio with proper VFX and everything as the technology is now available. For example, this was done for the film *Avatar*, even for *Titanic*, where most of the film was shot under the studio lights, and then you see them floating in the big sea. In the same way, in India, technology and talented people are available now. The only thing is that the spiritual part of the girl living under the water needs to be regenerated in such a way that there are Lotus flowers and a kind of fish and everything. These spiritual symbols are reconstructed through certain types of what you call a painting. Whether it's real or not, the real part is we constructed everything to seem real. Nobody had seen the layer under the water, so I had the freedom to reconstruct the spirits from the painter's point of view. So, it also gives you some similarities with movies like *Avatar*. So, many images have been reconstructed like paintings, so it's exactly what happened.

Utpal: Was the scene filmed inside the studio?

Karun: Yes!

Utpal: In Trivandrum or Mumbai?

Karun: It was done in Madras, Chennai. However, now there is a studio named Axel. My script fascinated him, and he said he has most of the time. The VFX people get to show the car driving over the top, hitting each other, the bloodshed and all such stuff, don't they? Here, it gets a real quality for the painting, with more of a spiritual layer. So, any VFX person would love and be excited to do these kinds of work here. It's actually what happened.

Utpal: The Lotus flower was a predominant element in the underwater portion.

Karun: Absolutely! I just wanted to say, the Buddhist elements or any. Lotus is extremely important even in Hindu philosophy, as it comes from the soil, the dirt part of it and still from the dirt, giving you lovely flowers, including water lilies. So, it's also a symbol of platonic love. See, when the sun comes, it blossoms, and when the sun goes, it goes down. So, the idea of the flower is she is falling in love with the sun. However, she is also in a difficult position due to the sun's heat, but she still loves the sun, so there is a platonic element there. So, I used this symbol for the platonic element, including lilies, water lilies and everything. Moreover, water lilies never grow. I mean, they never blossom at night. Here, for the dream's sake, it blossoms at night when the full moon comes.

Utpal: Those were water lilies or Lotus?

Karun: They are water lilies, but underneath, they are Lotus.

Utpal: Why this difference?

Karun: See, these are different; I would instead call water lilies and lotus, as they are different species of flowers, such as roses. You have a red rose, a white rose, and

everything if you look at the idea of the plant. It's the same but has a different kind of smell. It's sometimes the beginners' part of it, the colour part of it, so the water lilies are of a different colour, as you know, sometimes it's maroon, blue, and occasionally white. However, you have only the rose shades and probably white too. But the use of colour on these water lilies gave me a more predominant area to discover. The colour in the cinema on a large screen produces different emotions, so Water Lily was a part of my thoughts for them to show them above the water. Underneath the water, Lotus has gotten a more spiritual look. Many political parties also use Lotus for anything similar. Also, the Lotus is the symbol of knowledge. The Lotus is also associated with Goddess Saraswati. So, I kept the knowledge part under the water.

Utpal: What about the underwater portion? You were restricted to simple and straight angles, and you haven't changed your angle in most shots.

Karun: I could have done it, but to tell you very frankly, the film is made with an extremely merged budget. If I move around, it's not very expensive. Quite a lot of people helped me to do it. It's not a very expensive film. If I wanted to make an expensive film and had moved the cameras around her, it would have cost us more, so I used simple technology such as, you know, the Christ or the deity in front of you in the Temple, you don't see them moving. They are stagnant as well as static. So it doesn't take away your attention, so that's one of the reasons. The cinema can move around three-sixty degrees, but my problem was if I moved three-sixty, I would have a problem with the

budget as I would need to reconstruct it with all 3D forms. I would have to reconstruct everything from the Lotus and the background, which would have cost a lot. As I didn't have much money, for this reason, I made it simpler. It's why... I could have done so, but you would charge twenty thousand if you see one second of VFX 3D formation in any average studio. Thirty-five minutes, how much cost would it be? So, if I had done so, it would have been very expensive. It's another reason.

Utpal: What about the backwater portion shooting? You did a significant portion of the shooting at night, on a full moon night. Was it 'day for night' or a real real-time shoot?

Karun: It was a day for night—the reason the entire film needed to be shot looking like a full moon. So, full moon, you need the other shore to be seen a little bit. So, I needed to shoot it in the day and bring back the colour by using digital effects to create it as a full moon day. The problem in Kerala's backwaters is that nowadays, due to tourism, there are so many boats. So, at night, you don't see so much of tourist boats moving in the backwaters or anything. So, I needed to find a place where the boats had less movement during the daytime. The reason is that I wanted to show it as a full moon night. So, I needed to travel a lot to find a place in Kerala, the northern part of Kerala, the extreme north where the tourist hasn't penetrated much yet. There, I was able to make this place.

Utpal: Was the moon created artificially?

Karun: In certain areas, but sometimes the sun was the moon. It's how I've constructed it because sometimes the size and some shots

were cut during the VFX, which we reconstructed, and then some shots were planted on the frame.

Utpal: Because during your shoot, the sun changed its position.

Karun: Yes, it changes. Generally, you know what happens, it's like 6 o'clock, 8 o'clock... 10 o'clock, 12 o'clock, so the moon's position always changes this way. Within ten full moons, I needed to show the entire film because ten full moons means the girl needs to get pregnant and give birth, so ten full moon cycles equals two hundred -- seventy days, the span of time for a girl to give birth to a baby. So, the pregnancy period is two hundred and seventy days, not ten months. It's also there; the full moon is also a reflection. Moon is also a symbol for the... If you look at the moon, it's also a strong symbol of Buddhism. As you know, there are many stories about the moon, such as 1001 Nights in the Arabian stories. The moon has also become a symbol to tell love stories. Moreover, for Buddhists, it's a spiritual centre; again, it's a platonic concept. Many people tried landing on the moon before a person finally did, am I right?

Utpal: Ya!

Karun: Male or female, it was also there. So, it was as if all my elements were used in different ways and were kept secret to give a certain interpretation of the dream as well as some spiritual interpretation. It's more to identify a girl's innocence being expressed, the one who is being destroyed by male pleasure and her idea of love is being told to the audience through various layers of interpretations. It was my idea.

Utpal: What about the Buddhist monk entrusting the artist boy to draw a logo for

the temple? How do you connect this to the story?

Karun: As it's one little interpretation. This boy in the Buddhist monastery was sunk underneath the backwaters in the area where this girl, Maya, was being immersed by the rapists. There is a myth regarding it. A bird appeared there, but only the islander was able to see it. It was a kind of myth for the Buddhists that a bird fell in love with the moon. So, it's again a fantasy. The Buddhist fantasies were the ones they wanted to make a symbol out of for their new monastery, the relationship with a bird falling in love with the moon. The moon is a strong symbol of Buddhism. Therefore, this person, the painter, could see the bird. It's what he felt due to the girl's intensity or devotion to this boy who could make different paintings. Suddenly, she realised only the islander could draw the bird's image. So, it was a Buddhist settlement area where the monastery was built. They knew the boy living on the island was a painter and would be able to draw. It's what they thought, but he couldn't.

Utpal: How did they realize this bird isn't their visionary bird? As they have some idea of the bird, they felt the bird the boy had painted didn't resemble that one.

Karun: Yes! Yes! That's true!

Utpal: So, have they seen the bird?

Karun: They say, the spiritual birds, as you know if you ask anybody. If I ask, give me a picture of Saraswati. Ravi Verma did Saraswati before many people had done Saraswati, with images of *Saraswati*, *Kaali* and everything. Generally, people, even when they don't have a vision, never accepted that image. We would never accept

it; it's not like that. We would always say, give me a beautiful female's spiritual face; somebody would paint it and show you for your approval. No! In the same way, the Buddhists didn't say this isn't the real one, as from their insights and knowledge, this isn't the correct one. They aren't ready to accept it because an older man, a Buddhist monk, comes there. He has his images, which he cannot explain, and he thinks somebody can translate them. However, generally, after watching such a thing, he recognised it was unsuitable as it wasn't what he had in mind. The bird is at the end of the film, too. You see, the bird is flying. So, the girl's child is turned into the surprise image of the bird.

Utpal: That girl- she got freedom. She attained Moksha and became a bird!

Karun: Yes! So, the idea of cinema is the spiritual bird that is being transplanted into the audience's mind. Otherwise, if I don't explain this thing through this one, they won't be able to connect this bird to the moon. That's the reason.

Utpal: We thought the girl attained Moksha, transformed into a bird and took us to infinity.

Karun: Ya true! However, the bird has a Buddhist connection too. Otherwise, the boy wouldn't be able to do such a thing, and the girl wouldn't be able to make it.

Utpal: I noticed you gave the film a simple touch of humour, which was usually not seen in earlier films. The tourist looks at the painting, asks who Panikar is, and says he's a famous painter. Please tell the local artist not to write his name on copied drawings.

Karun: True! These are...

Utpal: What was the purpose of including humour in this film?

Karun: Thank you for your observation! See certain things, such as when you become old by the time you experience certain things. Humour and express much more. It's like when your ambitions are different in your house, when you've done certain things halfway, you are content, and the rest of your life is here. Again, you began probing the questions, such as what I hadn't seen and what I hadn't heard. All these are reflected in your works, and I think all my films, from one film to another, are different.

Utpal: Yes, sir, all your films are different. However, the only similarity we might notice is an absence of a humorous tone.

Karun: Might be! Very true! I love humour; I love it a lot.

Utpal: But your films don't support that.

Karun: The reason is I would tell you. If you look at the content part, all my films are about pain.

Utpal: Yes! Pain.

Karun: There wasn't much placement for humour, and there must be a reason for it. Even this film is about pain. Yes, pain, but it has different spiritual layers. Making a cinema under the spiritual layer, where you need people to get a little bit of, you know, pauses such as full stops and commas in writing. You also need a certain basis; otherwise, you must choose the techniques to make the people think and then make them stop and breathe as a person breathes. Once you take it, you need to take it out, too. So pauses are essential when you cannot behold the pain. If you have pain, you are a painful person as your brain is constantly being soaked with certain kinds of stressful

supports from everywhere. Here I was to leave or live it. In the whole film, I had to leave or leave it.

Utpal: Is this your realisation after *OLU*?

Karun: Must be! Returning to *Olu*, maybe the humour you noticed, I also addressed it and looked at how it happened. Actually, this is the tenth screenplay I went to shoot. It took me two years to write this screenplay. How do you make these kinds of visuals and elements, such as small flowers to the moon, then Buddhist, and all kinds of stuff underwater? Writing the tenth screenplay draft took two years and was extremely difficult. It wasn't like, as you know, so many layers, I mean, to be undergone. So, humour must have come out occasionally here and there.

Utpal: On the surface level, your film is quite simple. It's like narrating a simple story. All of your films are simple on the surface level and narrated in a simple flow. However, the internal structure is quite complex and multilayered. In *Olu*, too, you have worked at two different levels. The surface level is simple, like a fairy tale, and the other level is philosophical, which is extremely complex and deals with abstract themes, such as the purity of art. Discourse on such issues as 'purity of art' is an example of philosophical maturity.

Karun: Might be similar to all of us. It's true in this way. Most of the simple concepts have complex insights. Any simple word you know, 'be', the idea of 'be', meaning the English word 'bee' and 'be'. Even *though they sound the same, they have two different interpretations*. In the same way, simplicity has a lot of complexities. Why? To make a complex element for any artist worldwide,

whether a musician, painter, or filmmaker, to transform a difficult interpretation into simplest terms, you need much of what you can call more than devotion. It's like meditation. Only through meditation will you be able to achieve it. For personal reasons, maybe two and a half to three years, my meditative quality must have worked, and I am so glad you discovered it. When you said you saw it and experienced it, then as a creator, I'm a really happy person. It's what I wished to translate to an audience, and like you, when you addressed and experienced it, I was more than a contented person. I'm so happy it reached you and reached you, and I'm so glad my attempt is now in flowering shape. It's what I believe. I'm so glad the film is in *Indian Panorama*, and you were there as a selector, and it's an opening film, too. What a way, as a filmmaker, I am at the height of my meditation now, more than happiness. Thank you so much!

Utpal: Sir, I want to know more things about the film. You shifted the location from Kerala to Mumbai. However, the narrative for the Mumbai portion is quite different from the rest. Moreover, the Kerala portion has a kind of rural feeling with the camera movement, your cutting, your taking, and the lighting experience, which are also different. However, the Mumbai people are different. It's kind of mechanical, urban look, and so is the behaviour of the persons, their inter-relation, inter-personal relations; in that place, the boy came from the village, and he got some connection with that girl. Is it possible? Whether a boy from a village, he was deeply engrossed with Maya and would

surrender to a girl when she casually asked her for company. Is it possible?

Karun: See, he isn't quite an intelligent painter; it's why he copies. He cannot create anything, so he copies everything. So, for him, copying is his habit or imbibing from what is in front of him. So, he cannot even create anything. In such a beautiful location, too, he couldn't conceive himself as a painter. Then, he sells somebody's painting and writes his name, Panikar, on it. So, he's the kind of human being who decides to sell everything and can copy it. When he goes to Mumbai, he suddenly realises the pleasure of life. The pleasure of selling somebody's work in his name is wrong thinking. So, he couldn't identify what was wrong and right.

Utpal: But you haven't shown him to be so serious.

Karun: Yes, he isn't so serious. He wanted to become a painter; it's what is always said.

Utpal: To earn his livelihood.

Karun: Yes, livelihood and then he always..., but the girl underneath who wasn't like Saraswati, such as in our images. We always ask Saraswati the Goddess, "Give me enough strength to do our work before... we pray before we come saying just give me strength, and in the same way, the girl gave him strength. For him, the pleasure is the idea of pleasure, and the currency is the pleasure. You could recognise it in Mumbai so that he would do anything. So it's why the love, even for the physical pleasure he found in the people there and again the physical pleasure was there in his mind when the girl asked him. She is in a platonic love while he is looking for physical pleasure. This conflict is there, so the boy can't recognise himself. Moreover, he isn't intelligent enough to

comprehend who he is. If he understood, the girl was giving him the pleasure or the idea of living as a better human being, but he couldn't, so he used these situations such as painting or copying pictures. It was the idea, too.

Utpal: Your film ends at a certain point; the girl achieves Moksha, but what happens to the boy?

Karun: He comes back to the original boy. The film ends with him drawing another copy and then placing his line on the hand. So, it's his fate. He concluded, "*This is my fate.*"

Utpal: However, the experience he went through during the days didn't have any effect on him.

Karun: No, because he isn't able to comprehend many things. So finally, he ended...*it's my fate.* Now I cannot as I need to copy it again and sell it. So, he was the painting, at the end of the film you see he is painting. This *Mr Panikar* is another very well-known painter. His name is also *Panikar, K.C.S.Panikar*. So, he copied a concept of male and female, and after copying it, he wrote Panikar. He placed it on the hand, and that's how it ends.

Utpal: if you need to sum up the entire story in one line, what would it be?

Karun: I would rather call loving someone without wanting anything in return has a better meaning in your life.

Utpal: There is a dialogue in the film... "*What is love... Beauty is love.*" In your earlier film *Swapaanam*, there was a line, "*Dance is the silent speech of a mind*".

Karun: The mother also says in *Swapaanam*. "*If you want to forget someone you love, you need your entire life to do*

that.” If you have someone you love, it takes your entire life to forget, but to forget certain... other physical interpretations you can forget, but you cannot forget the devotion. However, you can forget the physical pleasure easily and don't need much time to forget it. That's the concept.

Utpal: Sir, let's talk about the film's music... but where was the music in the film? I never heard any music while watching it.

Karun: You see, screen music is different from stage music.

Utpal: Kottukappally did the best in this film. In the film, music should be seen.

Karun: Yes! Music is always there to underline the emotions and for the audience to underline where you want to have it. But in many areas, the music is overdone for the sole reason to keep suppressing the time. In two hours of a film, if you put two hours of music into the cinema, it's similar to the inside of the sea. Sound-wise, if you look at the chronological progress of the sound. First, it was mono, then it became stereo, then it became four points, then five points, and now. So, the amount of sound used in cinema is huge. Through this kind of technology, music has played a massive role in keeping the audience inside the theatre in the last ten to fifteen years. So, I always find music is given more power or is being used or even felt as if you know it's been imposed on the audience unnecessarily by many film creators, which isn't right. We generally have incidental sounds that should be heard, but natural sounds are more important. It shouldn't be killed by music. So, in cinema, these incidental, natural elements should be considered as the elements of the music. All these effects and everything are also a part of

bringing out the final output. Music shouldn't overpower these things. So, I always want this to be kept at a lesser level, where it's necessary and shouldn't be like many people don't know where the music should be used, as the musician, here the Kottukappally is an FTII graduate in direction.

Utpal: In direction?

Karun: Haan! He had never done a film.

Utpal: He had never done a film!

Karun: Yaa! But I invited him to compose music in 'Swaham'.

Utpal: How did you discover his musical talent?

Karun: He had done a lot of music for the Church. Isaac Thomas has done a lot of small details for the Church from the beginning and has a wide knowledge of the musical side. Being a filmmaker who has done his direction in FTII, it was easier for me to convince him as he understands what music is for the cinema. Music for the cinema, music for the theatre, and music for the folk is different. So, it should be interpreted in various layers and wherever necessary and is being called a cinema. Like screenplay, writing for the cinema is quite different; writing for the theatre is different; writing for the dance is different. In the same way, music needs to be different for cinema. Where you find out in a real sense, music isn't there, but still, music is there; that's the beauty part of it. Thank you for the observations.

Utpal: Now tell me about your actors. How did you select those actors? Are they professional or not?

Karun: They have some experience here and there, but the basis of my choice was that the boy and the girl should look innocent.

Utpal: Yes, the girl seemed quite innocent with widened eyes.

Karun: The innocence must come out. Only then would you be able to feel pain out of it? This boy doesn't know anything about the background because, as I said, he's an illiterate and an innocent person and doesn't know anything. His intelligence goes a different route, so he cannot conceive what is before him. He cannot understand well, so in this way, he's innocent. Still, I wanted to call him innocent, and the girl is innocent, too. The remaining people were to support them; the father, the grandmother, and all kinds of people must support this innocence to understand. Grandmother said, *"Don't go inside the water on every occasion and still, what will you do that thing? It's a habit for you to go every time in the night. Don't do that thing as there are spirits, bad spirits there."* However, he doesn't listen to it and has his way of handling things. So, these are the other characters that I moulded in this way. Father also said, *'Don't do that thing,'* but he still goes there. The painter says, *"Don't write your name or copy that thing,"* but he doesn't listen. The girl says, *"Why don't you draw my dream. You wouldn't be able to recognise it"*. In Mumbai, his money was there, and the money was being utilised by him for no reason. Then, he doesn't understand who he is. So, the innocent part is extremely important, and I needed to keep

it during the performance throughout the film. So, that's how I placed them.

Utpal: From where did you pick him up? Is he a screen actor or a stage actor?

Karun: I picked up several actors here and there, and then while short-listing, as a cinematographer, I can recognise them by how they talk and behave in front of me. So, it's how I interact with them when I interview them. Moreover, I know what I am looking for, so I picked up the candidates after a few interviews with several people. I talked to them. Many of my actors, including Piravi, the main lead, were eighty years old. Everybody told me he wasn't a father but a grandfather. However, I said his image is of a father, so I transformed him as needed. So afterwards, I didn't hear anything from other people. How can an eighty-year-old father have a twenty-four-year-old child and study in college? However, the more important thing is the image he reconstructed in front of you as a father. In the same way here, the innocent girls' young age, the innocence who doesn't know anything, impacts you much more in cinema.

Utpal: Thank you so much, sir, for being with us! We would love to talk more and more, but the time is constrained. Despite your busy schedule, you came here and gave us your time. I thank you once again!

Karun: It was my pleasure to be here in Assam. I always feel this place is surrounded by love and innocence and interpret it. Assam has this quality. I always find it during my visits to this place, which gives me much pleasure. Thank you.

Mr. Utpal Datta is a Filmmaker and Critic.