

Certificate of Merit:

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Rhythm Mandal

**The Cinematic Embrace of Mother Nature:
A Criticism of M. Manikandan's *Kadaisi Vivasayi***



Kadaisi Vivasayi, 2022, Tamil, 144 Minutes, Director- M. Manikandan

The film opens with a bluish-tinted, picturesque shot of a hill on a moonlit night. The only movement the frame encapsulates is that of the clouds. This follows a slow-moving drone shot, revealing the habitation situated within this space. The colours dominating the mise en scene are green and blue, the cool tones symptomatic of nature herself.

The first human shown in the film, Mayandi, an octogenarian farmer, is guiding a flock of hen and chicks for their feeding. With the break of dawn being established, the camera pans from a vibrantly green tree to Mayandi walking with his two cattle as he crosses an old lady praying to a stone deity guarded by a tree trunk. The images of vast

greenery, with the humans occupying only a tiny portion of the frame, come into play from this very onset. After a few shots of Mayandi walking with the cattle comes the first glimpse of a peacock framed minimalistically on a distant rock against a clear backdrop of a whitish sky. It is Mayandi who is looking at the peacock, as indicated by close-up shots of him gazing. Soon, his vision shifts to a man with his herd of goats, asking a fellow to join him by sharing 'WhatsApp location.' Comic as it may seem, this, like the entire opening sequence, adds to the thematic ambit of the film. When Mayandi returns his gaze to the peacock, it flies away, segueing to a montage showcasing the peacock in various frames, engaged in different activities accompanied

by a devotional song for Lord Murugan, whose “*vahana*” the peacock is. The rest of the shots in the opening sequence depict various human activities and farm life interspersed with close-ups of birds and insects and extremely long shots of the vast landscape.

This entire opening sequence is relevant on various levels. Firstly, it ignites the challenge to the conventional anthropocentricity that the film poses by incorporating shots of nature independent of the human gaze. Secondly, through social media’s accessibility within a specific socio-cultural context and in a space that seems out of place and even comic, the film introduces the idea of global and urban infiltration within the milieu of agrarian living. Finally, the peacock, introduced as a motif here, eventually becomes a tripartite symbol: one of the natural world, one of the ritualistic world as the chariot of Lord Murugan, and one of the democratic India, as the national bird, as the film progresses.

On a simplistic level, the story is about Mayandi, the ‘last standing farmer’ of a village near Usilampatti, Tamil Nadu, who is asked to provide the first grain offerings for the village’s annual ceremony due to a persistent drought. Lightning strikes one night, and the sound of the thunderclap transposes the visual realm of the night to a burnt-up Bodhi tree, reminiscent of the decadence that the village is undergoing. This cataclysm gives rise to the conflict in the village *panchayat*, where a prayer offering to the deity of their tribe is decided upon. While at his farm and preparing the crops for the offering, Mayandi finds three dead peacocks and buries them in his field, causing him to be

taken into police custody and remanded for weeks before he can finally make the first offering for the ceremony. However, the film is replete with symbolism and divulges a plethora of introspective trajectories, such as the conflict and an eventual cohabitation of the natural and the manmade, the urban and the rural, and the ritualistic and the legal. Through the character of Ramaiah, a supposed lunatic played by Vijay Sethupathi, who seems to have lost his logical inhibitions with the tragic loss of a lover, and Thadikozhantai, a man who buys an elephant after having sold his land to a financial institution, Manikandan explores the ideas of madness. Still, he grounds it firmly within a context of the Divinity of naturalistic forces and, therefore, posits a strong intersectionality between nature and culture.

The given points need elaboration. First is the conflict between the natural world, close to the rituals of rural society, and the urban, modernist world, rooted in science and reason. Cinematically, the framing of shots demonstrates this juxtaposition. For instance, Manikandan employs tight framing in spaces which reek of urban claustrophobia, such as the police station. The jam-packed market, or the road which the villagers are travelling through, act as intermediaries and are therefore replete with mid-shots, but most importantly, filled with man-made objects, in contrast to the expansive and almost ethereal natural landscapes which are depicted using extremely long shots, not in the sense of portraying distance, but rather, engulfing the spectator of the cinematic experience within the all-encompassing world of nature.

In one instance at the police station, the psychological claustrophobia is depicted

through Mayandi as he struggles to sit down on the floor upon being commanded to do so. His mute adherence adds to the urban claustrophobia. Furthermore, in the same scene, there is another man, accused of beating his wife, who is let off, but Mayandi, an old farmer with immense love for all beings alive, is ironically detained in the punitive space for weeks. This marks the intersectionality of discourse between class and environmental (in)justice.

However, the film's beauty lies in the idea of cohabitation that slowly unravels. Within the confined space of the jail, Mayandi teaches a man how to farm and grow plants, drawing him closer to Nature.

Moreover, every minute trajectory of people's conflict and the conflict between the natural divine and the modern is resolved by the film's end. Some instances suggesting the same are mentioned. Initially, no villagers could join Mayandi because their jobs were allotted to him by the government, so he had to work alone on the farm. The magistrate officer, the bearer of modern authority and justice, resolves this at the end and summons people to partake in the ritualistic endeavour communally, thus causing the modern to unite with the ritualistic rural, people's unity guided by the divine force of Nature. Another similar instance is when the officer orders the police constable to water the fields while Mayandi is away. Initially, he is averse to the idea of doing the task. This, however, changes as the film progresses and he begins the job. At one point, upon being given the option of letting go of this duty, he exclaims that he doesn't want to because those are the "two most peaceful hours" of his day. Furthermore, towards the end of the film, the ritual is shown

in all its glory, with these representatives of the urban world partaking in it with the tribal people. This is the ultimate harmony that the film aspires to achieve by transfusing the two worlds into a unified singular entity.

The film also postulates an intersectionality between Nature and myth through the character of Ramaiah. From their inception, he is portrayed as a lunatic. His conversations with Mayandi seem like fictive tales. From the very inception of his appearance, out of nowhere, to his bizarre mannerisms and conversions with the villagers, to his ultimate disappearance into 'thin air', the character poses a strong connection between nature and divinity, which reaches its epitome when his lost lover, is recognised by a saint, as a tree. The respite in Ramaiah's eyes, upon having finally found answers to the questions of the universe in nature itself, is priceless. Similarly, the sequence where Mayandi's relative is narrating the story about how he was handed the ashes by Ramaiah in a flashback sequence is almost ethereal to witness. The powerful close-ups of Ramaiah gazing at the sky with a distant scream of a peacock being heard evoke a strong mythic connotation, giving way to the character disappearing into thin air and the music culminating in a magical crescendo in sync with the grasping performance of the actor. This sequence binds the trajectory of the mythic world and the natural world into a perfect Romantic Sublime of the universe, mimicking the rhythm of poetry itself.

At the heart of this film lies the consonance between nature and humanity within the socio-political context of the farming world. Unlike *Kantara*, a Kannada

release of the same year as this one (dealing with a loosely similar ritualistic communal identity), this film does not fixate upon the hypermasculinity of the hero. The “hero” of this film, while on a direct level, is Mayandi, the last farmer that the title is referring to, but given from the beginning to the very end, Manikandan frames the shots in such a manner that the naturalistic world supersedes Mayandi’s individual story, the true “hero” of the film is nature herself. The point that Mayandi presents before the court when he pleads with the magistrate officer to try him for having buried a dead dog in the same fashion as he buried the dead peacocks is the idea of an eventual return to Nature, the one that bestows life upon all individuals, unanimously.

Furthermore, one of the crucial sequences of the film is towards its end, when an expired pesticide is sprayed across the field of crops. The power of anticipation runs high, as Mayandi parallelly runs a fever, being symptomatic with his dying crops. Cinematically, it is brilliantly done as the camera movement slowly moves away from the field where the medicine is being sprayed. In the next shot, the movement is rhythmically imitated as the camera maintains the slow rhythm of moving away from Mayandi as he sits helplessly, ill with a fever. He is seen in pain, and the music adds to the grimness of the situation. The music continues to bind the sequence as the bodhi tree falls, and the zoom-out movement of the camera craftily ties the shot of a dead bodhi tree lying lifelessly on the ground with the

previous two shots, foreshadowing catastrophe.

Nature supersedes Man.

However, in reaching such a conclusion of collating these trajectories, the film, by its medium, allows the camera and the filmmaker to frame nature from a human perspective. This claim can be backed by the fact that the specific instances in the film occur at particular moments, furthering the chain of cause and effect. For example, the final sequence of the film comes full circle, as Mayandi is once again shown looking at peacocks, right how the film had begun, and symbolically sees a dancing peacock for the first time throughout the film at a moment when all the conflicts that the film had offered, have been addressed, as penultimate resolution. Both the camera as well as the narrative guides Nature. Nature does not frame or reveal itself but instead reveals itself according to the needs and motivations of the filmmaker. Moreover, man holds ultimate centrality. During the climactic sequence of the film, when Mayandi finds the crops dead and is brought back to the police station, where he lies still, as though dead, the death of Nature is indicated through the death of man. However, this does not negate what the film stands for and how consciously the film's gaze is built. Besides, as argued earlier, the protagonist himself is such that instead of holding a centrality, he draws resilience from his relation with the natural world. Therefore, the camera, the narrative, and the characters negate their anthropocentricity very consciously throughout the film, in whatever limited manner possible.