

Critique

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Lies and Memories: A Film Narrative Made in Dreams



Malaikottai Valiban (India, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, 2024, 156 mins) By Lijo Jose Pellissery

"*Malaikottai Valiban*" is not a "black and white" film. Although colour films have been made in Malayalam for some time, similar to other languages, mainstream or formulaic cinema often portrays characters in a dichotomy of good versus evil, figuratively placing them in black and white cages. So, while these films are technically in colour, they can be metaphorically referred to as black and white. Lijo Jose Pellissery continues to defy this formulaic approach in "*Malaikottai Valiban*" by employing a narrative that breaks away from convention. Therefore, "*Malaikottai Valiban*" can be considered a vividly colorful movie at first glance.

Lijo Jose Pellissery completed "*Malaikottai Valiban*" after the amazing "*Nanpakal Nerathu Mayakkam*," which made obvious references to several Tamil and Malayalam films. In "*Nanpakal Nerathu Mayakkam*", Malayalam and Tamil colloquialisms were separated and explained authentically. However, in "*Malaikottai Valiban*," no

such distinction is found. Malayalam and Tamil are spoken as the same language by the characters in this movie. Valiban, the hero, often shares a philosophical thought in Tamil: "What you see is true, what you don't see is false; you see everything is false, and what you see now is true." (Kan kandathu nijam, kanaathathu poi, nee kandathellam poi, ini kaanappovuthu nijam). Between Malayalam and Tamil, the story unfolds in a remote and unfamiliar landscape where these languages blend, transcending regional boundaries within India. It becomes evident that this narrative is unfinished, marked by shifts in language and context. A nuanced interplay between "nijam" and "poi" (truth and falsehood) renders "*Malaikottai Valiban*" simultaneously truthful and deceptive.

If "*Nanpakal Nerathu Mayakkam*" serves as a compilation of vivid film memories, it becomes challenging to identify specific film references in the film. It is unclear whether the director intended for

these references to be elusive or if their absence is inconsequential. "Malaikottai Valiban" contains numerous movies-within-a-movie, including nods to films like "*Sphadikam*," "*Malaikallan*," "*Vanchikottai Valiban*," "*Ayirathiloruvan*," "*Ezhaithozhan*," "*Sholay*," "*Mirch Masala*," "*Gods Must Be Crazy*," "*Yojimbo*," "*Two Half Times in Hell*," "*Joker*," "*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*," and the "*Money Heist*" series to name a few.

"*Vanchikottai Valiban*" (1958) stars Gemini Ganesan in the lead role, with dancers and actors Vyjayanthimala and Padmini as heroines. "*Malaikallan*" (1954) features M G Ramachandran with dancer and singer P Bhanumathi as the heroine. "*Malaikottai Valiban*" is a combination of these two film titles. "*Vanchikottai Valiban*" is based on the famous novel "The Count of Monte Cristo." The plot revolves around a conspiracy by some members of the royal family to keep the Senapati princess and Kumara in hiding, then return and recapture the country with the help of the subjects. The son of the Senapati hides elsewhere, gathering strength and support to lead a similar operation. "*Malaikottai Valiban*" contains distant echoes of many scenes, backgrounds, and storylines from films like "*Vanchikottai Valiban*," featuring dances, fights, horse races, carts, and mountains. However, "*Malaikottai Valiban*," directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery, lacks an important element present in many films of this genre, including "*Vanchikottai Valiban*" — the visible presence of divine idols and deities. In films where there are sacrifices and dances in front of huge idols of Kali and Shiva, such imagery is conspicuously absent in "*Malaikottai Valiban*."

The character Valiban is clearly depicted as a movie character through a publicity cart promoting the film, showing him lying down and sitting. As the film progresses in Nattukottaka (village cinema), it brings to mind the traveling publicity campaigns seen along country roads, featuring bullock carts with "*Malaikottai Valiban*" painted on the sides. When we watch Chinnan jumping up and down, and sometimes Ayyanar calling out details about "*Malaikottai Valiban*," it reminded the announcement of movies starting in village cinema (Nattukottaka), whether with or without a loudspeaker. In another scene,

Valiban's victory is captured amidst shadows and dust, often with the actual audience visible alongside the main characters, complete with applause, clapping, and cheers from the spectators within the scene. This scene also serves as a cinematic reference.

In the title credits of the movie it says Malayalam's Mohanlal. Typically, movie titles use the format "Superstar Mohanlal (or another superstar) in and as the hero." Quintessentially, Valiban represents another avatar of Mohanlal, akin to how Vishnu manifests in his Dashavatar. In summary, the film serves as a tribute to the various characters Mohanlal has immortalized over the decades and to Mohanlal himself. Similar to many films, "*Malaikottai Valiban*" can be described as meta-cinema or cinema-plus, as it incorporates references to movie promotions and the superstar Mohanlal.

In contemporary India, as we engage with culture and societal norms, we begin to recognize the need to abandon certain established conditions. Similarly, this film presents Valiban as a hero who operates without aim or justification, contradicting the purpose traditionally attributed to Valiban's father Ayyanar's vision. This denial underscores that the reasons previously articulated, fought for, and even died for, are ultimately false or immoral.

It eschews not only culture and ideology but also nationalism. With its mix of Malayalam and Tamil dialogues, set in Rajasthan without the need to connect the narrative to another country, this film defies conventional labels of being distinctly Indian or representing Indian cinema. Instead, it evolves into a film that embodies Chaplin's vision of cinema as a universal art form even in contemporary times. It intentionally avoids emotional manipulation tied to culture, ideology, or nationalism, offering a unique cinematic experience.

There is a character Chamatakan, inspired by a fox character from the children's comic *Tinkle*. Chamatakan, portrayed by Danish Sait, sometimes behaves like a snake. Kalia, the crow, and Doob Doob, the turtle, rescue the Keechu Meechu rabbits from Chamatakan's harassment. Similarly, in mainstream movies, the villain often pursues the hero and vice versa in an irrational manner, mirroring

Chamatakan's pursuit of Valiban in this film. However, the violent and vengeful tendencies displayed by Chamatakan are chilling. The character of Chamatakan reminds me of Sagas Rakshakan (played by Shabir Kallarikkal) in Pa Ranjith's "*Nakshatram Nakarkirat*," who follows Hanuman with a mace and undergoes drama training to succeed in acting.

The final scenes of the film unfold amidst a festival (vela) crowd, where everyone except Valiban, Chinnan, and Jamanti is wearing a mask. This setting evokes scenes from Todd Phillips' Hollywood psychological thriller "*Joker*" (2019) and at times, scenes reminiscent of the popular Spanish series "*Money Heist*," reflecting the societal violence that has emerged post-Covid. Beyond physical health issues, Covid-19 has led to psycho-political-technological health problems and other complications. In the post-Covid era, there are challenges such as being attacked while in hiding, or facing threats from unknown assailants, or mistakenly attacking and defeating many individuals without proper identification. This film also highlights instances of these challenges and dilemmas.

Why are there no idols in "*Malaikottai Valiban*," despite its festive atmosphere, colorful bazaars, and heroic protagonist with wrestling prowess? The presence of shrines and idols is undeniably woven into the history, geography, politics, and cinema of India and South India. Yet, why did they not feature in Lijo Jose Pellissery's imagination for this film? It is crafted from memories, falsehoods, and dreams. The reason for this absence

could be that the visual imagery of temples, idols of gods, and worship rituals did not align with the thematic vision of the film.

In this fortress of lies, dreams, and memories, there are no idols or shrines, but instead, the brutality of Portuguese colonial rule is vividly depicted. The presence of white male and female colonial bosses and their declarations and challenges, seems to be in Portuguese, contribute to the film's intriguing and sur-real atmosphere. Similar to Alejandro Jodorowsky's "*Endless Poetry*" (2016). This is a film that defies traditional narrative structures with no clear beginning or end. While a second part has been announced, its absence would also be justified.

Cinema is an art of convergence, akin to a mythical creature like Bakan that consumes everything yet remains insatiable. Just as Valiban in "*Malaikottai Valiban*" arrives at a palace and encounters a mountain of rice, breaking it into hundreds of papads, the film itself methodically assimilates and devours all past and future artistic influences at will. The reason behind this approach lies in the film's amalgamation of countless ancient and modern art forms such as karakattam, kavadiyattam, mayilattam, and pavakoothu. Cinema is just one facet among many within this rich tapestry, or perhaps the central one. Lijo Jose Pellissery's films are a manifestation of his memories, captured according to his creative desires. As Bharadwaj Rangan rightly observes, only Lijo can discern what, why, and how these elements are integrated.

(Thanks to Medha Akam)

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