

Critique

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The Illusion of Power and Masculine Spaces in *Bhramayugam*

Bhramayugam terrifies the viewer with its images of decay and destruction and the misty images of the dense forest surrounding the building that houses the persona of evil, the demonic power named Chathan. A spatio-temporal identity is established right in the beginning, and we are informed that the story takes place in South Malabar in the 17th century. But the visuals of the two men lost in the mysterious woods, treading into the unknown, remind the viewer that spatial and temporal markings have lost their significance. As *Bhramayugam*, the era of illusions, begins, temporal and spatial dimensions are suspended. Thevan, one of the protagonists, has a greying beard as the story progresses but has no sense of time. The space then becomes the one shared by the male psyche, the collective space of patriarchy, the exploitative space of hegemonic powers that will dwarf individual selves into powerless creatures lost in the darkness of their souls. But we are constantly reminded of their potential to become perpetrators, although they are victims of absolute power. It is psychological warfare, where the male ego struggles to accommodate himself in a world of authoritarian

power, tropes of power signalling how it gets legitimised. By the film's second half, the challengers have started plotting to bring down the tyrant. Ideally, fairy tales end at this point of glory for the protagonists/challengers when they find the lamp that holds Chathan's strength. But this film's politics is unravelled at this point, as the battle continues with a weakened Chathan fighting it out, refusing to cave in; the manipulative nature of absolute tyrannical power is revealed in the way the story shapes itself.

The film seems to symbolise contemporary India as it is turning into a male space where women feel threatened by the pervasive presence of hate and violence. The angst of the Indian Hindu male, caught in his primordial world of desires, and while hate, anger, and violence get validated in this world, the rest of his passions, especially sexual desires, are constantly negated. Thevan cannot escape from this world caught between the forest and the waters. He has to confront his primal self, only to evolve into another persona who has succumbed to the world ruled by a violent, wicked power, himself embodying it, as the film reaches its end.

The patriarchal dominance is established as women are depicted as subservient, silent, and offering themselves to the powerful. The lone woman in the film is imagined as a vision of a woman with long hair and a voluptuous body, and Koran, Thevan's friend, walks behind her in a trance. He ends up crawling behind her, only to be annihilated by her. While her sexuality becomes her source of power in the film, she can claim no agency or authority throughout the film. This world is suffering from women, except for the enticing *yakshi*-like woman. The fear of everything that creates desire in the male psyche is vilified as evil and destructive.

This male psyche is depicted through three individuals, namely Kodumon Potti, the master of the house who is also a Brahmin; the cook, who is also the illegitimate son of Potti; and Thevan, the lost wayfarer, who is also an artist, since he is a Paanan, belonging to the community of folklore singers. All three of them are under the sway of Chathan, the evil power who managed to escape from the command of humans. Therefore, the film also reflects the fear of losing hegemony, the uncertainty, and the constant presence of the threat of upheaval that weakens all the characters in the film. The environment of degeneration pervades every shot in the film. The house is a *mana*, the traditional house that belongs to the Brahman community and is in ruins. The kitchen, a prominent space in the film, is filthy; the cook is constantly spitting even while cooking, and food is prepared and consumed in careless, violent ways. The servant who cooks seems to enjoy some power over his life, but we realise later that it is an illusion. Bodily fluids in the form of sweat, spit, and blood are used as tropes in the narrative to establish the state of decadence and decay. The film also uses the mad

woman in the attic trope, where there is someone chained and kept captive in the attic, which could be the voice of reason, compassion, and righteousness.

Through the character of Thevan, the singer, the film unravels the potential of artists within fascist societies, the artist with his ability to capture memories in art forms, thereby establishing the reality of the moment, hailing the populace to challenge these forces of oppression. Thus, The film becomes the story of an artist who seeks to look in an age of degenerate decadence. He is denied his art and creativity, as he starts questioning authority. Memories are fuzzy, and art becomes meaningless and created by the ignorant. A conscientious artist is a threat to the establishment that is rotten to the core, and the visionary artist cannot survive unless he surrenders and becomes the source of that power as well. Thevan is an artist, bard, and storyteller who creates a sense of space by weaving stories from memories. But he succumbs and thereby survives.

The film, in this sense, becomes a response to the fascist discourse that seeks to discipline the body and mind, with every source of power and authority striving to gain control, be it in the form of a mythical character or the gun-trotting white men. Fascism triumphs when bodies are fragmented, alienated, and controlled in various ways. As *Bhramayugam* ends, Thevan, the sole survivor, the artist with the potential to be the voice of dissent, compassion, and humaneness, too falters and becomes another tool for the hegemonic powers. The illusions have given way to the reality of the tyranny of power. The monochrome film thus becomes an artistic form of resistance, foregrounding the nature of absolute power that can create a world of fear and hatred devoid of the colours of diversity and multiplicity.

Bhramayugam (2024) is a Malayalam film with Mammooty, Arjun Asokan and Sidharth in prominent roles, in fact there are just two more characters in the film played by Amalda Liz and Manikanda Rajan. The film is directed by Rahul Sadashivan is unique in several ways., the use of monochrome throughout, the setting, and the treatment. The film falls under the genre of fantasy horror and explores the legendary tale around the mythical character of Chathan, a vile mythical power popularized through works like *Aithiyamaala* (Garland of Legends written by Kottarathil Shankunni) in Kerala.

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