

Critique

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## Deciphering the Social and Moral Fabric: An Appraisal of Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Naalu Pennungal*



Film, as a multi-dimensional medium with immense potential to inform and educate, profoundly influences human psychology. As a cultural fragment of human life, it has carved a unique niche by depicting universal truths. Films have become a rich heritage of humanity, capturing the heartbeats of the entire human race in celluloid form. They often use new environments or literary adaptations to encourage people to reflect deeply on real-life issues. Society establishes norms and rules that its members are expected to follow and has created mechanisms to address anomalies that could disrupt the system. Despite scientific and technological advancements, Homo Sapiens continue to live in a society where a woman's character and morality are often judged by the passage of time. The study attempts to decode and question the ethical frames of society through the select film *Naalu Pennungal*, directed by Adoor Gopalakrishnan, the veteran Indian film director, producer, and scriptwriter. The film bestowed him the Best Director title at the 55<sup>th</sup> National Film Awards.

The study unearths the portrayal of women's morality in cinema, especially when it is questioned within societal frameworks. Through an analysis of the select film, the study explores how cinematic narratives sometimes reflect and challenge prevailing societal norms and expectations regarding women's behaviour and morality as questionable. By examining these representations, the study attempts to illuminate broader cultural attitudes towards gender, morality, and power dynamics.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan is a distinguished Indian director and screenwriter acclaimed for his significant role in the evolution of Malayalam cinema. His films are characterised by their deep narrative style and exploration of socio-political themes, earning him critical acclaim and numerous prestigious awards. Gopalakrishnan's mastery of portraying the human condition has made him a revered name in art-house cinema. *Naalu Pennungal* is an adaptation of the four short stories written by

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, the renowned Progressive writer in Malayalam literature. Thakazhi is widely recognised as the writer who has given voice to the peasant life of Travancore. The Marxian ideology and Freudian theory influenced him, and he actively participated in the Writer's Movement and the literary circle led by Kesari Balakrishna Pillai. He entered the Malayalam literary arena, challenging the refined attitude of the elite class. Thakazhi also outlines the life around him in a manner derived from his understanding of the Indian context. Writing with a deep-rooted missionary zeal and a sense of duty to humanity, he strove to fulfil his mission, always bearing in mind that a writer belongs to the society wherein he lives. To serve humanity, Thakazhi chose to champion the cause of the suffering of millions around him, including the women folk, and their fate of being labelled as 'fallen', not out of their choice. His imperative characters are culled from the poor, uncared, neglected lot of Indian coastal region who perish like insects. The geographic peculiarities of his area, the vast expanse of waterscape, and never-ending rice fields dotted with coconut groves started to occupy a unique place in his heart. The magnificence of the landscape is bound to grip the mind of each Malayali reader who also shares the same locale. The region gives its inhabitants a new perspective on the geo-cultural, socio-economic, and religio-political life of which they are integral parts. Thus, with his creative attempts, Thakazhi created a literary space for himself, which soon became a literary sensibility or an inscape in Malayalam literature. Adoor Gopalakrishnan has emerged triumphant in rendering life to the pathetic plight of women folk made immortal by his celluloid marvel. The auteur has succeeded in manifesting women's hardships and harrowing struggles from various strata of society with his artistic dependence and interdependence. The pages of the stories were bestowed life-like impressions through the stages of the motion picture. In cinematic narratives, women have long been subjected to scrutiny regarding their morality, often serving as vessels through which societal values and expectations are both reinforced and challenged. Through the lens of film, the stories explore how women's morality is depicted,

questioned, and negotiated within the complex fabric of society. This article examines how movies explore the shades of women's morality, highlighting moments where societal expectations clash with individual agency and where characters cross moral dilemmas in the face of social judgment. Saritha Krishnan and Anitha Elizabeth John, in their research paper, state that:

*Naalu Pennungal* is about the non-consummation of love and the systematic seclusion of women from any transgression. One of the recurring motifs in the film is that of closed and closing doors. Sometimes, the woman closes the door upon the world; more often, it is the other way around. In the film, all the acts of rebellion on the part of women are moving away from the system's clutches – legal, familial, social, and moral – and into a solitary world of one's own. The institution of marriage and the place of women in it are central to each narrative. (Krishnan and John, 104)

The opening story "Oru Niyama Langhanathinte Kadha" (The Story of Breach of Law) introduces the viewers to the whore, Kunjupennu, who yearns to start a new life afresh. She comes across Pappukutty, who expresses his feelings to her. Finally, they have decided to begin life as wife and husband. The society does not allow them as they don't follow the rules and laws. Once a prostitute is always a prostitute for the onlookers. Nobody endorses or acknowledges, even if she yearns to come out of her fallen track. Finally, Kunjupennu and Pappukutty are brought to the court in the name of an illegitimate relationship. They have nothing to justify them other than repeating the statement 'we are husband and wife'. They have no marriage records when the court asks them to prove their relationship. The judge teases them by saying, 'No home, no hometown, no parents, and they claim to be husband and wife'. Gone are the days of nuptial relationships treated with utmost sanctity and legality. Present-day life has given way to open relationships and living relationships. Social status matters everywhere. It's hard to come out of the clutches of the immoral lifestyle lived once. Society

does not give a chance to improve or allow one to change one's perspective on life.

The second story, "Kanyaka", brings the narration of Kumari, who remains a virgin in her late twenties. Her ailing father is concerned about her marriage as well. In an interaction with an acquaintance, the topic of marriage and a suitable boy for Kumari, the virgin, arises. The typical pennukaanal (bride-seeing ceremony) finished off with flying colours. Their marriage gets solemnised, and she moves to her husband's home. He is depicted as a decent man who does not drink or smoke. He only spends money watching movies on the release date. A hapless Kumari has to remain alone even on her first night as her husband goes for the film. She remains passive in his behaviour. There comes the day when Kumari goes to her home for salkaaram (a party offered at her house for the newly wedded couple). Her delighted parents remain busy feeding them good food, but he is interested only in eating and does not bother to glance at his wife. He is depicted as a glutton. He also does not wish to sleep with his wife. He leaves Kumari at her home with the excuse of working, leaving her there. Days and weeks have passed. The near and dear people began asking questions and trying to blame Kumari. They even created stories about Kumari as an unworthy lady. She was a dedicated farm worker and rejoined the work with her mother. When people began making unpleasant stories about Kumari, her kind father asked her why he was not coming. She retorts, saying that her marriage has not happened. She does not wish to become a victim of fun and sympathy in front of others. A woman's character is only questionable here, but nobody thinks of him as gay or not. Ultimately, she boldly attempts to convey the truth that society puts all the blame on her for a failed marital relationship.

In the third story, "Chinnu Amma", Chinnu Amma has not become an Amma, a mother. The passage of time has made her old. Once, her old school friend Nara Pillai pays a visit. His visit has added to her sorrow of not bearing a child. He finds fault with her husband and asks her to find ways to get pregnant. He

even suggests that he is ready to do that favour before he leaves the place. Chinnu Amma dwindle between morality and the question of right and wrong. Finally, she has decided not to do anything illegal in her marital life, and such acts don't suit the ladies of a good home. Finally, he leaves. The story and the next scene take the viewers to a voice resembling Chinnu Amma's. Two ladies, especially one in a pink sari, are highlighted. The camera then moves to Chinnu Amma. Had she succumbed to his wishes, she would have given birth to a child to take care of her in her old age. In that case, there won't be any dignity to the life. The story ends in such a way that Chinnu Amma has some regret. It's up to the readers to decipher whether she grieves for her decision to stick to the morals in fear or whether she has lived or done things to satiate her life.

The last story, "Nithya Kanyaka" (The Spinster), introduces the spinster Kamakshi. She had to remain single in her life owing to the situation. When a good alliance finally came to hitch her, the groom wanted to marry her younger sister, Subhadra. She readily agrees to that. Her other sister, Sarojam, also gets married. She gets a chance to see them going to the new homes, coming back to their home, and treating them with pride and affection. Her ailing mother passed away, and her sisters have decided to take her with them. She moves with Subhadra. The house and the treatment of her sister make her unwanted and unwelcome. Although she cares for her pregnant sister, Kamakshi is treated disrespectfully and angrily. Only her kids loved Kamakshi. Subhadra's husband apologises, saying he has committed an unpardonable sin against her. The story even shows Subhadra and her husband fighting over Kamakshi. The next scene opens with her journey to the ancestral home. Sarojam asks her to come with them and asks how she would live without the support of a male member. She retorts, saying that the 'pillars of the home can take care of her and vice versa. The movie ends with a voice calling Kamakshi. She says, 'My mind wavered once. I won't do that again'. Here, the story ends open-ended, leaving questions for the spectators about Kamakshi. She wishes to enjoy her selfhood and a sense of freedom. She wished to



appreciate her sense of self. She does not wish to be labelled as a morally weak woman.

The opening sequence of *Nitya Kanyaka* encapsulates—spatially and otherwise—some of the critical issues in the film. The men occupy the living room, and the daughters have their segregated space inside the house while the mother stands in the doorway between the two groups. Such a division of space about gender eloquently expresses the power hierarchy. The women wait expectantly for the negotiations to produce a positive result but have virtually no say. Their silence sets them apart from the men, who are defined as the arbiters of women's fates. (Ganguly,103)

The film throws many questions. The opening story portrays a woman who needs and finds a man to give a new definition to her newfound life, whereas the closing story portrays a woman who wishes to have a room of her own. Critically, the film weaves together four compelling narratives that explore different facets of womanhood and societal expectations in a patriarchal context. The stories of Kunjupennu, Kumari, Chinnu Amma, and Kamakshi serve as poignant commentaries on the harsh judgments and double standards women face. Each character's struggle reflects broader issues of societal acceptance, gender bias, and the pursuit of personal dignity. Kunjupennu's tale highlights the unyielding stigmatisation of women with polluted pasts. Her attempt to redefine life with Pappukutty is thwarted by rigid societal norms that refuse to let go of the past. This narrative criticises the inflexible moral codes that trap individuals in perpetual condemnation, showing how the lack of social support can devastate those striving for a second chance.

Kumari's story exposes the hypocrisy in societal views on marriage and gender roles. Her husband's neglect and the ensuing blame she faces underscore the imbalance in how male and female behaviours are judged. Despite her husband's apparent failings, Kumari is the one scrutinised and maligned, a reflection of the deeply ingrained patriarchal values

that unfairly burden women with the responsibility of maintaining marital harmony. "He disregards the concerned glances of his wife and father-in-law and gorges himself at each meal" (Ganguly, 98). Her ultimate declaration of her marriage's failure is a powerful act of defiance against these unfair expectations, asserting her dignity and autonomy.

Chinnu Amma's narrative delves into the profound personal conflict between societal expectations and individual desires. Her dilemma over accepting Nara Pillai's offer exposes how childlessness can overshadow a woman's identity. Her decision to uphold moral integrity, even at the cost of lifelong regret, questions the true nature of morality and societal judgment. The story's open-ended conclusion invites viewers to reflect on the nuances of moral choices and the societal pressures that influence them.

Kamakshi's story is a poignant exploration of the struggles of single women in a society that places high value on marriage. Her journey from a potential bride to an unwanted dependent in her sisters' homes highlights the societal disregard for women who do not conform to traditional roles. Kamakshi's return to her ancestral home and assertion of independence challenges the notion that a woman's value is tied to her marital status. Her story ends with a powerful affirmation of self-worth and autonomy. There are moments of genuine intimacy between the women, especially in "Oru Niyama Langhanathinte Kadha", showcasing their authentic bond and love despite their defiant strength and deep sadness. Their connection runs deep, often manifesting in tender acts of care, such as nursing each other's wounds. This empathy can sometimes hint at a more profound affection, as Kunjupennu's friend wishes to see her get a decent life.

Society has rules for a reason. Despite all scientific and technological advancements, we live in a society where a woman's character and morality are often judged by the passage of time. Women who freely interact with men, going out for dinner and drinks, are usually viewed through a biased lens of immorality. Men often misconceive that these women can be

taken for granted and may exploit them to satisfy their sexual desires. Is it only men who drink? Is it only men who come home late at night? The standards and expectations vary drastically based on gender. As ordinary human beings, it is natural for women to have desires and aspirations. They, too, wish to soar in their imaginary skies with the viewless wings of a butterfly. However, society clips and curtails these wings in the name of morality, status, etiquette, and decorum. These restrictions, in reality, constrain the light of a woman's sustenance.

The movie *Naalu Pennungal* resonates with the tragic plight of millions of women yearning for individuality and recognition in Indian society. Therefore, posterity will not let these women's stories fade away. The film offers a poignant glimpse into women's pressing issues and deep unhappiness, profoundly affecting their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. The film illuminates the commonalities and disparities in portraying women, often considered the fairer yet weaker sex in society. *Naalu Pennungal* should not be seen merely as individual stories but as narratives highlighting the extreme hardships faced by countless women.

Thakazhi strongly opposed the social institutions that create divisions between different social strata. He believed that his creative works could be powerful tools for social transformation. He upheld human dignity, emphasising that the marginalised are also human beings with feelings, minds, hearts, and souls. He called for a social revolution to eliminate socio-political malaise. His work remains significant and relevant today, as he ventured beyond conventional paths to highlight the dignity of labour and the concept of work as worship. Thakazhi inaugurated a new epoch in Malayalam literature, viewing society as the court where they pleaded their cases. He sought to reveal the true nature of bourgeois democracy and expose the insatiable greed for women, wealth, and wine fostered by capitalism. The auteur Adoor has succeeded in giving justice to the vision and social revolution of Thakazhi through film. Veena N. Madhavan IAS, in her research paper, underscores the grandeur of Adoor's creative smithy:

Adoor Gopalakrishnan's films are drawn from real life and people, and he uses his films to address underlying social issues latent in the narrative. The director, through the kaleidoscopic stories of four female protagonists, starting with the one at the lower strata of society lacking all worldly comforts to the last with all the materialistic comforts, reveals that the life of women, irrespective of the social background is always dictated by specific social markers set down by patriarchal norms. The four stories, though distinct in their nature, are connected through patterns and rituals directly reflecting the everyday realities and socio conditions of Kerala. (Madhavan, 384)

Nobody wishes to become a prostitute by their own will. Society chooses and forces them to become one in the 'fallen' category. All these women characters depicted through the snippet of the short stories show that they are subalterns and the other. They differ in their social status, economic status, and way of life. Kunjupennu yearns to come out of the fetters of a fallen woman's life. Society finds it hard to accept a prostitute leading the life as one's partner. She craves the support of a male in her life, whereas Kamakshi wishes to remain alone in a space and room of her own. Chinnu Amma remains faithful, albeit she gets prompted by the voice of her old friend, Nara Pillai, prompting her to break the moral codes of a marital bond. Kumari of Kanyaka remains a virgin forever. Everyone is curious to throw comments and finds fault with her, whereas nobody dares to evaluate him as gay or sexually impotent. Though his mother claims his son has good character and no bad habits, she fails to convey his urge and gluttony for eating. He does not give any consideration to his wife, even from the very first day of marriage. Nobody raises their voice against the male's behaviour, whereas all arrows of questions and comments are thrown at Kumari. She proves her boldness by declaring to the world that their marriage has not happened. It was a grand bang on the authoritarian male society, just like Henrik Ibsen's *Dora of The Doll's House*, which inaugurated her assertion and identity. The film's critical power lies in presenting these stories without

offering simplistic resolutions. Instead, it leaves many questions open-ended, reflecting the complex realities of women's lives. This approach engages viewers and invites them to consider their perceptions and biases. It challenges the audience to empathise with the characters and their plights and reflect on the societal changes needed to foster equality and acceptance.

Together, these stories maintain a unison that critiques the societal norms restricting women's lives. The film portrays the harsh realities women face who deviate from or challenge traditional roles. It brings to light the pervasive gender biases and the social stigmas that continue to marginalise women. By presenting these narratives, the film encourages viewers to question and reflect on the injustices and double standards ingrained in societal structures. The juxtaposition of these four stories also underscores the diversity of women's experiences and the

multifaceted nature of their struggles. While Kunjupennu battles societal stigma and Kumari faces marital neglect, Chinnu Amma grapples with the personal conflict of childlessness. Kamakshi strives for self-determination in a world that undervalues her independence. Each narrative offers a unique perspective, yet they all converge on the central theme of women's fight for dignity and recognition in a patriarchal society. In short, the film is a powerful commentary on the societal challenges faced by women with various destinies. Through the intertwined narratives of Kunjupennu, Kumari, Chinnu Amma, and Kamakshi, it critiques the rigid norms and double standards that perpetuate gender inequality. Each story serves as a call to acknowledge and address the deep-seated biases that continue to hinder women's progress and to champion a more inclusive and supportive society where every woman has the opportunity to live with dignity and self-respect.

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