

Critique

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**Moving with the Undercurrent:  
Vagaries of Women and Nature in *Ullozhukku***



***Ullozhukku* (Undercurrent, Malayalam, 2024, 123 mins) Dir: Christo Tomy**

The dead body of the heroine's husband remains peacefully in a coffin and on the other side, the attention of the spectators is taken by her lover whose seed she is carrying within her womb. There comes this inevitable moment towards the climax when the protagonist must decide between the mother of her deceased husband and the lover she has ditched once. The spectators also encounter the same dilemma as the choice is a make/break decision. "Wandering between two worlds, one dead/The other powerless to be born, /With nowhere yet to rest my head,/ Like these, on earth I wait forlorn." (Arnold 1) - These renowned lines sum up the harrowing plight of the character as her

decision is going to make many forlorn. At times, it can be a song, a shot, the focus, or the out-of-focus canvas that can make one ponder over the leitmotifs for a long time. *Ullozhukku* (Undercurrent) released in 2024 is a celebrated Malayalam, stirring umpteen emotions in the psyche and the creative smithy of the audience. This debut feature film of Christo Tomy has emerged triumphant in churning the emotional undercurrents of the characters with all the human virtues and weaknesses. His brilliance is seen in painted patterns of shots with the focus on and off the characters. Silence articulates more than the volume of words and this film is a testimony to the art of articulating stillness. The film

unravels the labyrinth of human emotions blurring in the altar of right and wrong. The power-packed and empathic performances of the women heroines make one feel the reel life coterminous with real life. Anju played flawlessly by Parvathy Thiruvothu and Leelamma played impeccably by Urvashi take the viewers to the world of women who came across an O Henry twist in their choices. Sailing through the undercurrents of life is never smooth. One must make a lot of permutations and combinations of decisions in life when the going gets tough. The general absurdities of life can label people with a questionable character and volley of abuses and omens can suppress their conscious self. It is up to the individuals to choose what is best for them. It's up to the individuals to paint the upcoming patterns of life with the decisions that gratify them. *Ullozhukku* is flowing with that torrential rain falling in the minds of the characters especially both prominent women characters who craved and still crave for a world of their own.

### **Unchosen Roads to the Destined Paths**

Dreams, ambitions and aspirations are an inherent part of everyone's life. The film opens with a scene introducing the sales girl Anju who is madly in love with Arjun, who moves from one job to the next. The next scene presents Anju as a bride posing for pictures with a new bridegroom named Thomas Kutty who belongs to a family of decency and dignity. The film introduces Anju and the spectators to her home where she is welcomed by a warm gesture of affection and adoration by her mother-in-law, Leelamma. Soon after the wedding, Thomas Kutty falls sick and he attains a bedridden

state. Anju starts behaving like a caregiver and she performs her obligation with utmost honesty. The day he shows some sudden and violent reaction at night, Anju gets scared and calls her mother-in-law law Leelamma. She gives them some medicine and asserts that he would be ok. She consoles both of them. Once he is asleep, Anju comes out of the room and she happens to see a grieving Leelamma praying to the Almighty. Here Leelamma begins to open up her heart. Although she scored good marks in pre-degree, she was not allowed to join Medicine and the world got confined to her husband and her kids. She even says 'Even God felt jealous of her happiness'. A mother-in-law who became a mother at the age of 21 is sharing her sorrows with a daughter-in-law who was forced to follow the decisions of her parents in wedlock. Slowly and steadily, their relationship gets strengthened over the angles of the story. Although Anju's relationship with her husband is unhappy, she is overwhelmed by the love Leelamma lavishes on her. Both the heroines share a rare emotional connect that's quite uncommon. Leelamma and Anju had to choose the paths they never wanted to. They somehow followed the destined paths as they had no other choice. There comes a point where Leelamma says to Anju "I understand you more than anyone else". That's why she is ready to accept and send Anju with her lover with whom she had an extramarital affair.

### **Vagaries of Nature and Women**

The film gives the true and naked picture of Kuttanad brimming with the momentum of that lashing rain. It takes no time for Kuttanad to transform into a flood-affected area. Life

and the struggles of people from a flood-affected zone are poignantly portrayed along with all the emotional undercurrents here. In an interview, the director Christo Tomy says, “My mother’s house is in Kuttanad. Every year, the area experiences flooding. I was there during the flood in 2005 when my grandfather passed away. We waited for eight or nine days for the water to recede before conducting his funeral. The inspiration for the film ‘Ullozhukku’ stems from this experience. While many of the anecdotes and characters in the movie are drawn from people in Kuttanad, the story itself is not based on any single individual.” The distressing life of people hailing from the southern tip of Kerala is brought to the limelight during the severe floods. They are always on the verge of survival during every monsoon season. The nature of women also changes. Like the harshness and cruelties of nature, women also come across life flooding with multifarious problems. From the beginning till the end, the film shows water or heavy rain or flood. In short, water has turned out to be the objective correlative of the film. The calm amidst the storm in the climax scene depicts Leelamma and Anju moving slowly in a boat together all set to fight all their physical and emotional vagaries together.

### **Sailing through the Undercurrents of Life**

Life seems harsh for everyone to make a smooth and calm sailing with challenges coming in multiple forms. Anju, a newly married woman has to take care of a bedridden husband. She betrays her lover and goes ahead with the family's decision to marry a suitable man. She happens to meet Arjun at the hospital. When she permits him to call in

between, he has become an unavoidable voice in her life. When Thomas Kutty is battling with the disease, she becomes pregnant. Anju accepts her unplanned pregnancy with shock and fear where as Leelamma openly declares and celebrates her happiness to welcome her grandson. Anju does not disclose the truth to Leelamma that it is not her son’s baby she is carrying. When Leelamma forces Anju to disclose this delight to Thomas Kutty admitted to the ICU, he undergoes a sudden uneasiness and takes his last breath. The story moves with the immobile dead body for more than one hour in the film. A Pandora’s box of secrets starts sinking and flowing in the minds of Anju and Leelamma. Anju is forced to reveal the truth about her love affair and the pregnancy to Leelamma. Leelamma had not disclosed the details of her son’s disease to Anju. She gets to know and questions her mother-in-law. She is finally aware that it was a brain rumour, a truth her mother has hidden from Anju and her father. Leelamma and Anju have a lot of affairs to close and disclose even when the dead body is writhing in the pains of nature in the form of a flood. Leelamma has dreamt and started her preparation to welcome her son’s baby without knowing anything. Anju has made up her mind to leave Leelamma and go ahead to lead a new life with her dream man. Everybody has to wait till the dead body is taken to the cemetery for the next decision. The undercurrents of life and the colours of people make both Anju and Leelamma make a decision that seems right. They do not want to remain a burden to anyone. Nor do they want to cling to anyone’s life with lifelong abuse. Anju does not wish to live with a man who “ is willing to accept her even after living



with someone else. Rajeev's statement might be a stentorian one she has to hear throughout a new wedlock. After sailing through all the undercurrents of life, Anju and Leelamma have made their choice and the final balance. Luci and Hani in their study say "Agency invokes an ability to overcome barriers, to question or confront situations of oppression and deprivation, and, as individuals or together with others, to have influence and be heard in society. Agency has intrinsic value; it is important in its own right regardless of whether its exercise leads to increased well-being". Anju and Leelamma have reclaimed their agency their ways, if not for the viewers.

### **Questioning the Moral and Ethical Frame**

Anju has broken the shackles of her marriage with a "man who never looked and touched her with love" by proceeding with her love affair. Leelamma has arranged the wedding of the son without disclosing the truth about his tumour to Anju's parents. Anju's love story was also not disclosed by her parents. When Anju questions Leelamma why she has hidden the details of a brain tumour, she says it's not that a grave sin in comparison to what she has done. Anju retorts by saying that Leelamma and her son deserve her wrongdoing of her relationship with Arjun. She even humiliates her that there's nothing here in this home even for human beings to feel jealousy and they have not experienced love in a minor version of family life. Finally, Leelamma agrees and prompts Anju's parents not to force against her desires. The film shows a mother-in-law who supports her daughter-in-law to go with her lover. She asks her to come and stay with her as it's their

home. Leelamma is extremely sincere and hence Anju takes the bold decision to lead the rest of her life with her mother-in-law. Had she been sincere, she would not have kept her son's disease a secret from Anju. Had Rajeev been sincere, he would not have asked Anju to inherit Leelamma's property before their relationship began a second time. Anju has betrayed him or his material nature once more. Leelamma wants her son to have a good family life. That could be the possible reason for her to hide the truth. Her love is pure and that might have prompted Anju not to leave Leelamma. Everybody has their ways of deciding the right and wrong. Anju and Leelamma justify this.

### **Conclusion**

The film, '*Ullozhukku*' hints at the reality that women should never be downgraded as "weaker" or "fair" sex. Despite the role of wife, mother, daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, they too have choices in life which is often rejected by the patriarchal hegemony. One person's 'right' choice might be the 'wrong' choice for another one. The film stirs a tsunami of questions in the emotional undercurrents of the audience. The background music and the biblical verses add to the theme. They speak for the mindset of Leelamma, Anju and the incessant rain. Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark has been right in saying "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (Shakespeare 99). The film *Ullozhukku* ends with a resonating sound asking one to think and decide the right or wrong in the mental makeup.

## References

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Ullozhukku. Directed by Christo Tomy, performances by Urvashi,, Prasant Murali , Parvathy Thiruvothu and Arjun Radhakrishnan, Central Pictures, 2024.

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