

Critique

Pranjal Borah

**The Mirror to the Self and Society:
Unfurling the Aesthetics and Politics of *Aattam***



***Aattam* - The Play, Malayalam, 2023, 139 mins. Dir. Anand Ekarshi**

Anjali: Do you all think I was lying about what happened to me?.....You don't have to believe it..... Do you think I was lying, Aji?

Aji: First you said it was Hari. We believed it. Then it was Nandan. We believed that too. What if tomorrow you get a feeling that I did it? What do we do then?

(Anjali left and Vinay followed her)

Vinay: I have been following you for ten minutes. Say something. You want to get a down bus standing here. Let me drop you home.....Anjali, please say something.

Anjali: All that is over, Vinay. I quit Arangu.

Vinay: I begged you to tell them that you saw him.

Anjali: I didn't see him, Vinay! That's why I said, "I didn't see him." Did you notice something? None of them even asked that.

Vinay: What?

Anjali: If it was not Hari, who was it? None of them asked that.

Vinay: When I think about it now, I feel you were right. Nothing happened to you. No one did anything to you. Don't you want to believe the same? That's enough. To tell the truth there was no need for us to tell Madan. Not us. I mean, me. What do you really think? Could it have been Hari? I was so confused when Jolly showed that photo. What do you think, Anjali...!

Anjali : I don't know. But when I saw everyone defending Hari--, I felt Hari's presence in that house.

Vinay: Your instincts are right. When I came to pick you up, something happened there.

Anjali: What? (Silence)..I see....So, I didn't leave the group. They kicked me out, right? To go on that trip, you said.

Vinay: Not exactly. They got dazzled by the offer. When Nandan told me about it, I felt like beating his brains out. Then I thought over it. When a driver, or a plumber, or a gas-station worker is hit with such a huge offer, how else would they react?

Anjali: What is the chef thinking?

Vinay : I.....But I'm sure of one thing. If we're going on this trip, we won't go without you. I'm sure of that.

Anjali : Laughing , laughing , and bursting into laughter...

(02:03:05—02:07:33)

Patriarchy is monolithic. So are the system it feeds on and the individual it breeds. It often makes us figure out the intricate nature and operation of core patriarchal hegemony, the victimhood psyche , victim shaming, gaslighting and how all that culminate in a certain kind of defining behaviour. *Aattam* critiques this ubiquitous and somewhat cliché spectrum. But ,to me, what probably makes it stand apart is how subtly *Ekarshi* juxtaposes certain highly veracious extra-patriarchal dimensions with his thematic matrix in an aesthetically fluid and cinematically subtle diegesis. . What if the troupe members were not flooded with Hari's lucrative offer! In a milieu like ours with masses mostly living from hand to mouth and caught up in perennial penury , money and any benefits that accrue to one for money could often be a compelling *quid pro que*....! This resultant opportunism could transcend far beyond all endemicities of patriarchy to emerge as the determinant of dominant human behaviour. This behavioural pattern is almost tantamount to a Seligmanian 'learnt helplessness' for the males who

otherwise have deeply entrenched patriarchal mores....!



The much hyped 'wonder' chemical in human brain, Dopamine is not only associated with all forms of pleasure-seeking, reward -anticipating and positive reinforcement, but also plays a pivotal role in emotion regulation and cognition. As such, it is naturally bound to play a significant role in how we experience films, and profoundly influence our emotions, motivations, and overall enjoyment. As a diehard cine buff with an unabashed predilection for 'no nonsense', cerebral and aesthetically impressive films, I often wonder how my dopamine pathways work when confronted with varied cinematic narratives....! *Aattam* popped up before me just when I had finished

savouring Yorgos Lanthimos's stunner *Poor Things*. The haunting magic of *Poor Things*'s weirdness, Lanthimos's signature blend of dark humour and surrealism, the film's muddling and meditative questions on female autonomy, gender dynamics and identity in a predominantly male world, socio-psychological conditioning and systemic biases were still lingering on in my hippocampus. I confess I was not much optimistic of the kind of a dopaminergic experience that could match the preceding one....! But to my sheer amazement, what I tasted in *Aattam* was a nuanced contemplation on the same familiar questions set in an ecosystem endemic to this part of the world and, albeit, clad in a savoury film narrative and a language which may not be as brilliant as Lanthimos's, but definitely as cathartic as his film's. It challenged the way I'm conditioned to confront and come to terms with these old vexing questions. With *Aattam*, Ekarshi turns his story of a local theatre troupe and its ecosystem subtly and systemically impinging on the individual psyche and cognitive biases of the characters into one of the most intense, twisty, contemplative, introspective and aesthetically impressive films I happened to watch in 2024. No matter where and when we get dropped into, Ekarshi manages to create a sense of looming discomfort, unease and suspense literally in every frame. Watching how Ekarshi unfolds this story scene-by-scene, culminating in sort of a 'cinematically fluid' theatrical yet thrilling denouement is a thoroughly satisfying experience in this somewhat unusual, leisurely paced chamber drama that is sure to keep a cinephile on the edge of his seat.

The story revolves around a theatre group where the sole female actor, Anjali, is groped by one of the twelve men in the group. An urgent meeting is called to decide the fate of the accused, leading to a series of revelations, suspicions, and intense discussions. Who is the culprit? Does it really matter who he could be? Why is the relatively new yet glamorous crew member under the scanner? Are Anjali's male counterparts truly serious about bringing the culprit to book and ensuring justice? Or, are they just fiddling with their own whims of settling the score with someone? Instead of confronting these muddling questions head on, *Aattam* critically examines how men in positions of power manipulate situations to their advantage. The film portrays its male characters, each with their own biases and hypocrisies, as they navigate the sensitive issue of sexual harassment. These characters' conflicting perspectives highlight the pervasive nature of misogyny and the challenges of achieving justice in such cases. Although starkly in contrast with them on several fronts, the film reminded me of Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman* and even Ryusaku Hamaguchi's *Drive My Car*. The contemporary classics in world cinema. In all of them, the theatre is somewhat fallen back on as a vital leitmotif in one way or the other to portray the nitty-gritty of life and society.

But *Aattam* is also a socio-psychological thriller about how patriarchy constricts and constrains women- and, even more, men in some contexts, who, all for their freedom and desires, too often succumb to 'necessary evils' that could even be independent of the core aspects of patriarchy. Socio-psychologically 'conditioned' males

often do not appreciate themselves why they do what they do....! Even the females cannot undo the profound impact of such a socio-psychological conditioning that often molds and creeps into their psyche. It becomes evident when Anjali tries to figure out who could be her perpetrator. This emphasis on theme gives the film a particular emotional resonance, particularly in connection to its female protagonist's internal struggle to break free from the grip of traditional customs and gender roles. By tying the structure of a local play as a literal and metaphorical device, Ekarshi reinforces how people are cast members of the 'play' of their own lives, shackled to a script dictated by society. The meta-narrative slaves each function of gender and class to exercise power over themselves in exchange for the storyline of a play within a film that mirrors the characters. From this perspective, the film is a significant psycho-social document, and the critique that the film levies on the way these roles condense and absorb individual desire and identity is deftly done.

Almost the first thing that would probably strike an ardent cinephile most about *Aattam* is Anand Ekarshi's film bears testimony to a measured hand from the filmmaker, a care that few directors can balance this adeptly and gracefully, and a story that one would soak in rather than zip through. His film is indeed a meticulously designed, dilatory tale, punctuated with the rare jarring moments that jolt one to attention. Without giving away too much, Ekarshi works with a measured narrative style — one that favours atmosphere and subtext. The technical components, in tandem, serve to highlight the emotional weight of the

narrative without falling back on dramatization. The Malayalam movie is culturally rooted in Kerala giving it a certain socio-cultural context. This manifests in its visuals, soundscape and overall mise-en-scène. The film's real-time approach adds to its intensity, ramps up the drama and pulls the audience into action, making them feel as though they are part of the unfolding drama. This technique also emphasizes the immediacy and urgency of the characters' decisions and actions .



Aattam's naturalistic visuals are the peachy outcome of well contrived, engaging and emotionally resonant shot designs. Anurudh Aneesh's cinematography is quite impressive, capturing the essence of the narrative with visually striking and thought-provoking images. Effective use of lighting and framing, specially in the interior scenes, successfully creates a sense of tension and atmosphere. The film's camera work is barely visible in the sense that it immerses the audience thoroughly in the film- a hallmark of top notch cinematography. Attention to details, use of hand held kinetic shots, natural lighting , earthy tones, and dynamic framing creates a rich visual language that mirrors the emotional and socio-psychological depth of the narrative. The camera often lingers on characters and their blocking and setting, enhancing the meditative quality of the film.

While *Aattam*'s tight screenplay is its greatest strength, its superlative, content driven editing is its biggest technical forte. To cut a leisurely paced meditative chamber drama consistently exuding a sense of suspense with a content driven focus on as many as 13 characters literally from the first scene to the last must have been a formidable challenge. Mahesh Bhuvanend pulled off that feat with panache. His editing evokes the languorous, measured pace of the plot but manages to elicit quick reflex and sustain tension. The transitions are mostly smooth, and the structure feels organic, letting the viewer appreciate the nuances of the characters and their interactions. The use of sync sound adds to the realism and immersive feel of the film.

Aattam features top notch performances from a mostly new cast, several of them passionate theatre actors. All the actors put up restrained and nuanced performances with emotional depth unhindered by any sense of melodrama. The characters' inner lives — the internal struggles, biases, prejudices and opportunistic behaviour — play out in the smallest gestures or silences or in micro-expressions making the film's sharp narrative style still more catchy. On the other hand, the film's bloated pacing, somewhat meditative narrative voice, and lack of action driven adrenaline rush and familiar dopaminergic stimuli might disappoint the hardcore mainstream moviegoers despite the film's sustained ability to keep its audience on their toes.

Ananad Ekarshi revealed in a recent interview : *“My goal was to talk about the*

myriad aspects of such a crime; to talk about the aspects that are not much discussed, in a way that is not preachy or condescending or involves any sloganeering.” (The Hindu, August 17, 2024). *Aattam* critiques the complexities of relationships with their attendant emotional and psychological cores in a patriarchal set up, the different struggles of men and women in a society where the personal as well as social spheres are regulated by patriarchal mores. It subtly brings under microscope certain endemic extra-patriarchal contexts that could decide dominant human behaviour. The film effectively falls back on a blending of nuanced characters, implicit storytelling, meditative narrative and fluid film aesthetics to portray the social realities which tend to get missed out or remain unstated or unvoiced in a certain context, almost all of whose extractives lie in patriarchal set-ups.

Although not without faults in the strictest sense of the term, *Aattam* stands out as a film that is unlike the standard fare in multiplexes, for those who choose to wallow in its emotionally resonant yet cerebral narrative. A solid piece of Indian indie cinema, it has in essence the benefits of quality independent film as a form — the potential to interrogate dominant narratives, hold a mirror to society, and pave the way for innovative creative forays. Anand Ekarshi's maiden venture begins and ends like a play but everything else in between is pure cinema and therein possibly lies the biggest pleasure for an astute cinephile.