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Certificate of Merit

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**Unmasking the Theatrics in *Aattam*:
Exposing the Wolves in Sheep's Clothing**



Aattam, 2023, Malayalam, 139 minutes, Director: Anand Ekarshi
Cast: Zareen Shihab, Vinay Fort, Kalabhavan Shajon, Madan Babu

In a poignant tableau evoking Leonardo da Vinci's iconic *Last Supper*, a young woman Anjali, sat besieged by a phalanx of twelve men, her fellow thespians, their inquiries raining down upon her like a tempest. The accusation of sexual misconduct that she had dared to utter against one of the troupe's members now hung in the balance, as each man vied to outdo the others in a macabre dance of scepticism. Eyes narrowing in suspicion and voices dripping with incredulity, they demanded, "What happened that night", "Did you see him clearly?", and "Why did you leave the window open?"

As the questions mounted, Anjali's sedate countenance and down-turned gaze seemed to echo the serene yet beleaguered visage of Christ, surrounded by his apostles. But these men were no disciples; they were

betrayers, each striving to outdo the others in a perverse competition to put her on trial. One among them, a self-appointed doubting Thomas, dismissed her testimony with a wave of his hand, spinning conspiracy theories of 'tactile hallucinations' and fanciful delusions. However, her conflicted boyfriend, with his own vested interest, turned out to be worse than Judas himself, as he planted the kiss of betrayal upon her cheek. Despite their attempts at victim-blaming and misogynistic attitudes, the woman stood firm, her resolve unshaken, proclaiming at the end in the film's epilogue, "I don't want to know who you are. For me – you and the other eleven are one and the same."

In his debut film *Aattam (The Play)*, writer-director Anand Ekarshi masterfully probes the efficacy of our seemingly

progressive society in addressing sexual harassment, particularly within the post-#MeToo landscape. Adjudged as Malayalam cinema's compelling response to Sidney Lumet's cinematic masterpiece *12 Angry Men* (1957), the film scrutinizes the legitimacy of allegations levied against self-proclaimed male allies, laying bare the intricacies of masculine behaviour behind closed doors. With unflinching candour, it strips away the façade of progressiveness that men often wear as a mask, revealing the insidious ways in which even seemingly welcoming spaces can turn hostile towards women who dare to stand up for themselves.

Honoured with the Best Film, Best Editing and Best Screenplay awards at the 70th National Film Awards, *Aattam* was written in three months and shot in 26 days with a shoestring budget and a cast predominantly comprising newcomers. Set in a drama troupe named *Arangu* in Kerala, the film revolves around thirteen theatre artists – 12 men and 1 woman – who play different characters in the theatrical production of Girish Karnard's renowned play *Hayavadana*. The sole female member Anjali (Zarin Shihab), a talented architect by day and a theatre artist at night, is in a clandestine relationship with her co-actor Vinay (Vinay Forrt), a married chef, who is seeking a mutual divorce from his wife. Hari (Kalabhavan Shajohn), a burgeoning movie star awaiting his leading role, commands attention within the group due to his relatively high profile. This perceived stature, however, breeds quiet resentment among some members. Notably, none of the troupe members rely solely on theatre for financial sustenance, supplementing their artistic

passions with alternative sources of income. Their diverse financial realities reflect the challenging economic landscape of a career in the performing arts, with some struggling to make ends meet while others enjoy relative comfort.

At the post-performance party at a resort, Anjali shares a good rapport with her male castmates established through years of collaboration and creative camaraderie. Amidst lush surroundings, they indulge in enjoying the place, savouring fine drinks, singing and dancing and basking in the warm, convivial atmosphere. In the wee hours of the night, after the party disperses, Anjali falls victim to molestation at the hands of a colleague, leaving her shaken and vulnerable. Although the perpetrator's identity remains unknown to her, lingering doubts and suspicions cast a shadow on a particular individual. As the troupe convenes to address the allegation, Anjali finds herself exposed to the entrenched societal and systemic responses to sexual assault victims: suspicion, victim-blaming, and intrusive questioning about attire, conduct, and sexual morality. In a narrative spanning 2 hours and 20 minutes, Ekarshi weaves a complex tapestry of 13 distinct characters, laying bare their unique struggles, motivations, deep-seated prejudices and unconscious biases. The investigation, spearheaded by Anjali's closest confidants, mirrors the harsh realities faced by women who courageously break their silence against sexual violence.

Duality of post-#MeToo Reckoning

The Indian #MeToo movement sparked a transformative shift in societal awareness, shedding light on the pervasive nature of

sexual violence and harassment. However, a disturbing duality remains, where survivors are empowered to articulate their experiences, yet some progressive spaces continue to perpetuate a culture of silence, enabling the protection of predators and the marginalization of victims. In *Aattam*, this duality is exhibited in the way the co-actors respond to the sexual harassment allegation raised against Hari, before and after Hari dangles the prospect of a lucrative European show, promising them recognition and remuneration.

Aattam draws inspiration from the 1954 teleplay by Reginald Rose and its adaptation for the silver screen *12 Angry Men*, a legal drama in which a twelve-man jury, metaphorically resembling the biblical archetype of twelve ordinary men turned apostles, deliberating over the guilt of a youth accused of killing his abusive father. But what makes *Aattam* different from its predecessor is that when it comes to societal views on sexual violence; it is the victim who invariably ends up being on trial, uniquely placing the burden of proof on the victim. She has to prove not only the perpetrator's culpability but also her own innocence to validate her experience.

As the camera pans over Madan's well-appointed living room, it comes to rest on his large dining table, a familiar hub for the drama troupe's informal gatherings. Now, this familiar space transforms into an impromptu tribunal. Here, 11 men convene to deliberate on a sensitive sexual harassment allegation threatening to upend their artistic community. Madan (Madan Babu), a former newspaper editor turned seasoned theatre aficionado, who embodies the ideals of a

liberal intellectual a senior group member, indulges in dramatic pursuits as a hobby and seems to be living off his wife's income. The sound of a coconut crashing onto the rooftop heralds the commencement of the trial, resonating like a judge's gavel. Madan divulges the reason for Hari's absence and the incident of molestation to the group. The reactions of the men are typical – anger, outrage, repulsion, suspicion – followed by a flurry of questions – Did she see the man? So it happened in her sleep? Not when she was awake? So she didn't see who it was? Did she say the window was open?

The camera moves around the table gathering accusations against Hari and each member's statement reveals underlying motivations and biases. Nandhan, once Hari's driver aspiring actor cites Hari's off-color, bawdy jokes as evidence of his questionable character. Prasanth, still smarting from Anjali's rejection, feels compromised by his debt to Hari, prompting him to question Hari's intentions. Vinay's advocacy for Anjali stems not only from a desire for justice but also from envy; Hari's film stardom and popularity have catapulted him to the role of hero, a part Vinay covets. Sijin, still nursing a grudge against Anjali for rejecting his marriage proposal to her cousin, citing his perceived temperament issues and substance use, alleges she consumed alcohol on the night in question. Aji, a petrol pump worker, expresses sympathy for Anjali, affectionately referring to her as "molé" (daughter), revealing a paternal concern. Sanosh, a temple priest, harbouring deeply ingrained misogyny and distrust of women, possibly rooted in past betrayal, views the situation with suspicion. Selvan, a theatre veteran

expresses concern about their inability as artists to redeem inherently flawed individuals, questioning the transformative power of their craft.

However, when Hari proposes the opportunity of performing in the National Theatre in London, the tables turn. The external atmosphere, once sunny and bright, gives way to gloom and rain, eerily echoing the dramatic shift in the group's dynamics. The men, who initially rejected the compromise, now reconsider their stance, conveniently shifting focus to Anjali's perceived shortcomings, and subtly rewriting their narrative to rationalize their change of heart. She is no longer seen as a victim, but as an obstacle they want to discard.

Selvan and Sudheer voice concerns about Anjali's attire casting aspersions on her morals while Selvan further criticizes her for consuming alcohol alongside men at the party, implying loose morals and promiscuity. However, when Jolly presents photographic evidence showing Hari asleep at the time of the alleged incident, the group's focus shifts, and they proceed to question Anjali's character and integrity. Madan exposes the absurdity and hypocrisy of their stances by introducing the concept of Tactile Hallucination, starkly illuminating the ludicrous and self-righteous nature of their assumptions. When the group discovers Anjali and Vinay's clandestine romance, they begin to doubt Anjali's credibility, suggesting that her concealed past compromises her reliability. Prashanth slut shames Anjali, and Sijin posits a conspiracy theory, claiming Anjali and Vinay orchestrated a deceitful plot to manipulate Hari's departure from the troupe.

As Anjali grasps the group's rationale behind seeking compromise, Anjali seeks Vinay's opinion, hoping for support. However, his response reveals his own self-interest, as he declares that he will only participate in the trip if Anjali is involved. Anjali bursts into laughter, her eyes wide with realization as she grasps the hypocrisy surrounding her – the seemingly innocent faces now exposed as cunning predators – the pack of wolves hiding behind sheepish disguises. The climax brings a stunning catharsis as Hari reveals his masterful ruse: the entire trip was a fabrication, a tit-for-tat for Madan's deception of Hari, who promised him a lead role in a film. The shape-shifting, manipulative, and opportunistic nature of progressive patriarchy is uncomfortably relatable, impossible to dismiss them as mere fictional characters. These characters' subtle machinations and self-serving biases hit uncomfortably close to home, making them 'progressive' wolves in sheep's clothing in post-#MeToo world.

The Play of Meta-Theatre

William Shakespeare's poignant declaration in *As You Like It*, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," (the idea of the *Theatrum Mundi*) encapsulates the pervasive theatricality of human existence. In *Aattam*, the troupe's name *Arangu* (which translates to "the stage") is a metaphor for the film's central irony: each character's real-life performance surpasses their on-stage personas. This paradox is compounded by the contrast between their seemingly progressive facades – donned as educated liberals or virtuosos of refined art – and their true, flawed selves. Despite recognizing the

repercussions of Anjali's public disclosure, the actors inexplicably opted to dismiss and downplay her allegations of sexual harassment. Moreover, they exacerbated the situation through gaslighting and shaming tactics, further silencing and victimizing Anjali. The director of the play is no different who admittedly chose economics over talent. As tensions escalate, the masks of moral rectitude slip, revealing individuals willing to sacrifice principles for personal gain. This stark dichotomy exposes the universal human conflict: the struggle to reconcile ideals with self-interest.

The film incorporates meta-theatrical elements, employing self-referentiality, self-awareness, and reflexivity to blur the lines between reality and performance. The title *Aattam* deftly alludes to the dual dimensions of performance: the literal play enacted on stage and the metaphorical theatricality of life itself, where individuals assume roles, navigating the intricate drama of existence. The film showcases glimpses of two staged performances aptly placed in the beginning and the end – the first being that of Karnard's *Hayavadana*, a play inspired by Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads* in which a young woman Padmini is torn between two suitors: Devadutta, a man of intellectual prowess, and Kapila, blessed with physical allure. The quintessential ideal of a harmonious blend of intellect and physicality seems within reach when fate intervenes, merging the two entities. Yet, paradoxically, this synthesis fails to bring solace to the characters. In the play, the characters use horse masks to represent incompleteness and the incompatibility between the character's head and body. In the meta-theatrical twist,

Vinay's on-stage beheading and unmasking by Hari eerily foreshadow the eventual exposure of his hypocrisy and flawed character. Just like the play delves into the complexities of human identity, torn between head and body, the men find it difficult to distinguish the victim and the perpetrator, throwing light on their words/action disparity and double standards.

The second staged performance, directed by Anjali, is a meta-theatrical production incorporating self-referential and reflexive elements. Anjali's directorial choice serves as a powerful vehicle for self-expression, as she dramatizes her own experiences within the troupe. In the play, Anjali assumes the role of Sophie, a character navigating a poignant journey mirroring Anjali's own. Twelve men wearing masks resembling her co-actors in *Arangu* surround her, interrogating and implicating her. In the end, Sophie's story culminates in a liberating climax: when confronted by her perpetrator, she resolutely refuses to acknowledge his presence, seeking to disavow the traumatic experience. She transcends victimhood, challenges the trauma's hold on defining her identity and regains control over her life. Thus, this self-reflexive play in the climax interrogates the main characters' moral discernment through its meta-theatre structure.

The performative nature of life is astutely highlighted through Vinay's character, whose affected demeanour is astutely called out by his fellow actors. Madan and Nandhan, who are aware of his ulterior motives, caution him against overplaying his pretentious role, thereby exposing Vinay's duplicitous identity.

Additionally, the better part of the film unfolds in near real-time, eschewing conventional pacing for an unrelenting, kinetic rhythm. With rare, fleeting musical interludes signalling transitions between “acts,” the film seamlessly integrates stage and screen.

A Microcosm of Humanity

In *Aattam*, Ekarshi brings together a cross-section of society within an amateur theatre group. This diverse ensemble includes individuals from disparate walks of life, transcending socio-economic boundaries – a former newspaper editor, film star, architect, plumber, driver, gas station attendant, temple priest, chef, stay-at-home husband, entrepreneur and so on. Employing an in-depth character study, Ekarshi astutely observes that education and social standing are poor indicators of a man’s true character, suggesting that even the most refined and educated individuals can harbour patriarchal mindsets. It is an intricate study of male psychology, their hypocrisy and mystification and their knee-jerk reaction to the accusation raised at the first appearance of an unpleasant scandal. By maintaining the perpetrator’s anonymity, the narrative subtly implies that potential harm can lurk in anyone, regardless of appearance or affiliation, reinforcing the disturbing ubiquity of toxic behaviour.

Anjali, like Padmini in *Hayavadana*, is left with a haunting question after her life went into a tailspin: not whether an ideal man can be formed from various admirable traits,

but rather, whether men, regardless of their distinct characteristics, are inherently indistinguishable. She wonders quite loudly: beneath the façade, do men share a common, unvarying nature? Ekarshi gives his answer to this introspection in a scene where Vinay, amidst the group’s discussion, poses a seemingly innocuous question: “Have we ever misbehaved with her? Has any one of us even thought of her in that way?” The group’s deafening silence, their downcast eyes and averted gazes betray the lot of them. The irony is palpable: Vinay, the very person concealing his relationship with Anjali, dares to inquire about others’ transgressions.

Aattam is a drama of moral epistemology that offers a near-perfect social commentary on the entrenched gender disparities that permeate art and life. It transcends superficial explorations of male violence and the struggles of female complainants, revealing Ekarshi as a dedicated scholar of gender politics and the intricate power dynamics governing gender relations. Ekarshi’s determinedly realistic storytelling presents more than just empathy; it showcases a keen observational eye that has meticulously examined the pervasive marginalization of women in various spheres. Despite its intimate chamber play format, that mirrors a locker room, it raises questions about society’s collective mindset, dexterously exposing blatant misogyny, ego, envy, selfishness, and pseudo-righteousness that control human behaviour and actions.

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