

5th Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition for Film Criticism 2024 :  
Certificate of Merit

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*Aattam*



*Malayalam Film Written and Directed By Anand Ekarshi, (2023, India)*

**Introduction**

*Aattam* presents unique cinematic experience that intertwines modern life with traditional story telling. Effectively utilizing the medium of stage drama. The film narrative structure is commendable, as its maintains suspense regarding the identity of the culprit until the very end, which keeps the audience engaged and invested in the unfolding mystery.

One of the film standout elements is its visual composition. The cinematography

captured the natural beauty of the location. The emotions of the artists, enhancing the overall aesthetic appeal. The choice of blend contemporary themes and classic story telling techniques executed with the fineness. Allowing for a refreshing take off of tropes. This approach not only pays to traditional narratives also resonate with modern audience making it relatable modern audience.

## A Subtle Exploration of Womanhood, Identity, and Relationships

*Aattam* Cinema, in its purest form, is a reflection of society, capturing the nuances of human emotions, relationships, and the complex dynamics between people. *Aattam*, with its modest budget and minimalist approach, accomplishes this beautifully, offering a poignant exploration of womanhood, human behaviour, and the moral compromises people make in their pursuit of personal and professional fulfilment. It is a film that subtly yet powerfully showcases the quiet struggles of an ordinary woman, blending themes of personal growth, friendship, betrayal, and societal expectations.

In the context of Indian cinema, where extravagant productions often overshadow intimate storytelling, *Aattam* is a refreshing deviation. It sets itself apart by focusing on the subtleties of everyday life while diving deep into the psyche of its protagonist. The film does not rely on heavy-handed melodrama or over-the-top spectacles; instead, it builds its narrative on the delicate balance between the protagonist's personal ambitions, relationships, and societal pressures. Through a seamless integration of location, minimal costumes, and contemporary storytelling techniques, *Aattam* emerges as a nuanced reflection of a woman's life in modern India.

### Plot Overview and Structure

The plot revolves around a woman who is juggling multiple roles—her professional career, her passion for acting, and the responsibilities of her personal life. What sets *Aattam* apart from typical narratives is its

grounded approach. The story doesn't follow a magnificent arc of transformation or monumental victory. Instead, it captures the slow and sometimes painful progression of a woman trying to make sense of her world, torn between societal expectations and personal desires.

The central plot device—carrying biriyani for a group of 13 individuals—may seem inconsequential at first, but it serves as a metaphor for the weight of responsibility the protagonist bears. This seemingly casual act of service encapsulates her role within her family and social circle, where her contributions are often taken for granted. The narrative structure uses this theme to gradually peel back the layers of her relationships and reveal the subtle power dynamics at play.

The film unfolds at a measured pace, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in the protagonist's journey. While there are moments of quiet reflection, they are punctuated by interactions that reveal the deeper complexities of the characters. The film cleverly intertwines themes of mockery, jealousy, and the shifting dynamics between friends and family members, adding layers to what might otherwise appear to be ordinary exchanges. These moments feel authentic, drawing viewers into the protagonist's internal world as she navigates the fine line between resilience and vulnerability.

### Minimalism in Cinematic Technique

*Aattam* is a film that thrives on minimalism— not just in terms of budget but also in its approach to storytelling. The use of limited locations, minimal costumes, and understated production design creates an

intimacy that mirrors the protagonist's internal world. The lack of overt spectacle allows the film to focus entirely on its characters and their emotional landscapes.

The film's aesthetic choices are deliberate, reflecting the protagonist's own restrained demeanour. Her surroundings are neither luxurious nor destitute—they are the spaces of everyday life, familiar and unremarkable yet imbued with emotional significance. The cinematography emphasizes the beauty of the mundane, using natural light and simple compositions to create a sense of realism that grounds the film's narrative.

This minimalism extends to the film's use of music, which is sparse but effective. The score never overpowers the scenes but rather complements the emotional undercurrents. There is a notable absence of dramatic crescendos or overt musical cues, allowing the film to breathe and letting the performances take center stage.

### **Themes of Friendship, Family, and Ethical Compromises**

At the heart of *Aattam* is the exploration of human relationships - particularly the way individuals behave when placed in familiar and sometimes competitive environments. The protagonist's friends and family members present a facade of support, but beneath this veneer lies a current of casual mockery, subtle insults, and, at times, outright manipulation. The film expertly portrays how friends and family, while often well-meaning, can also become obstacles to personal growth, unwittingly or otherwise.

The dynamics within the protagonist's circle of friends are particularly well-drawn.

The film captures the way in which people often wear masks, behaving kindly and respectfully in public but revealing their true natures when they believe no one is watching. The protagonist is subjected to mocking remarks, both about her professional ambitions and her personal choices, and these moments of casual cruelty are depicted with a realism that will resonate with viewers. This is a reflection of the societal pressure many women face in India, where professional success is often undermined by the expectation to conform to traditional gender roles.

What is particularly compelling about *Aattam* is its refusal to paint these relationships in black-and-white terms. The characters are not villains or heroes; they are complex, flawed individuals who, like the protagonist, are struggling to find their place in the world. The film does not condemn them for their actions but instead shows how people often act out of fear, jealousy, or insecurity. In doing so, *Aattam* offers a nuanced commentary on the nature of human relationships, showing how even the most well-intentioned actions can cause harm.

The theme of ethical compromise is another central element of the film. As the protagonist navigates her professional life, she is repeatedly forced to make difficult decisions, often at the expense of her personal values. This is particularly evident in the film's depiction of the corporate world, where success is frequently achieved through manipulation and dishonesty. The protagonist's quiet resignation to these ethical compromises reflects a broader societal issue, where individuals are often forced to choose

between personal integrity and professional survival.

### **Physical and Emotional Vulnerability**

One of the film's most striking themes is its exploration of physical and emotional vulnerability. The protagonist's relationships are not just sources of support- they are also spaces of tension and discomfort, where her emotional and physical boundaries are often tested. The film does not shy away from depicting the ways in which women are often subjected to unwanted physical contact or emotional manipulation, and it does so with a sensitivity that avoids sensationalism.

There is a particularly touching scene in which the protagonist is physically touched by someone she trusted, and the moment is handled with a subtlety that speaks volumes. The film captures the quiet trauma that often accompanies such moments, and it lingers in the protagonist's mind long after the incident has passed. This depiction of physical vulnerability is a reflection of the broader issue of women's safety in society, and it is presented in a way that feels authentic and deeply personal.

The emotional vulnerability of the protagonist is also a key theme in the film. Her relationships, while offering moments of comfort, are also sources of deep pain and frustration. The film deftly portrays the tension between the desire for intimacy and the fear of being hurt - a universal human experience that will resonate with viewers of all backgrounds. This vulnerability is not limited to romantic relationships but extends to her friendships and familial bonds as well, where the protagonist often finds herself

questioning whether the people she loves truly understand or support her.

### **Comedy and Revenge**

*Aattam* masterfully blends moments of light-hearted comedy with its more serious themes. The humour in the film is understated and often emerges from the protagonist's interactions with her friends and family. These moments of cheerfulness serve to break the tension and provide a sense of balance to the film's emotional weight. The protagonist's wit and sharp sense of humour are key aspects of her character, and they provide a means for her to cope with the challenges she faces.

However, beneath this humour lies a current of quiet defiance and revenge. The protagonist, while often the subject of mockery, does not retaliate overtly. Instead, she finds ways to assert herself through her actions, particularly in her professional life. Her success becomes a form of quiet revenge against those who doubted her, and this theme of understated vengeance adds an additional layer of complexity to the film. It reflects the idea that success is the best form of revenge, and it is a theme that will resonate with Indian audiences who are familiar with the concept of karma.

### **Exploring Desires, Greed, and Moral Conflict**

The film also delves into the desires and greed that drive human behaviour. As the protagonist advances in her career, she is confronted with the shifting attitudes of those around her. Friends who once supported her become envious of her success, and colleagues who seemed trustworthy reveal

their true motives when opportunities for advancement arise. This exploration of greed and ambition is presented in a way that feels natural and grounded in the reality of professional life.

The protagonist herself is not immune to these forces. Throughout the film, she grapples with her own desires- both personal and professional- and the compromises she must make to achieve her goals. Her journey becomes a meditation on the nature of ambition, as she learns to navigate the fine line between pursuing her dreams and staying true to her values. This tension between desire and morality is a universal theme that will resonate with viewers, particularly in the context of contemporary Indian society, where success is often achieved at the expense of personal ethics.

### **Conclusion: A Cinematic Achievement Rooted in Authenticity**

### **References and Acknowledgement**

1. Baradwaj Rangan: A renowned critic and editor of Galatta Plus, celebrated for his insightful reviews and deep understanding of Indian cinema's artistic and cultural essence.
2. Anna M. M. Vetticad: An acclaimed journalist and film critic, known for her fearless and thought-provoking analysis of cinema as a medium for storytelling and social change.

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*Aattam* is a film that defies conventional cinematic expectations. With its minimalistic approach, authentic characters, and deeply personal themes, it offers a powerful reflection of the human experience, particularly the challenges faced by women in modern India. The film's exploration of friendship, family dynamics, ethical compromises, and the search for personal fulfilment is both relatable and profoundly moving.

In an industry dominated by big-budget blockbusters, *Aattam* stands out as a testament to the power of intimate, character-driven storytelling. Its nuanced portrayal of relationships, coupled with its sharp social commentary, makes it a film that will vibrate deeply with film critics, scholars, and audiences alike. By weaving together themes of vulnerability, ambition, and resilience, *Aattam* not only tells the story of one woman but offers a universal narrative that speaks to the human condition in all its...