

6th Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition 2025: Certificate of Merit

Soumoyadip Samanta

**Exploration of Self Through the Simplicity of Familial Connection
And Love in *Meiyazhagan* (2025)**



Introduction –

a. The concept of self in Cinema:

The concept of self in its entirety of origin and evolution has been a puzzle in itself. Camus believed the "self" is an elusive and ultimately non-existent concept, as it evaporates the moment you try to define, seize, or summarize it; he suggested our existence is an ongoing flux of experiences and perceptions that cannot be pinned down. (Camus, 1991) On the other hand, Bowen believed the concept of self develops in an individual mind through the emotional system of "family". By family, he denoted the congregated system of lived experience and behavioural pattern administered to a new and secluded unit to make it a part of an ongoing reality. (Bowen, 1994) Alfred Adler, on the same line, emphasizes on how family bonds are primary social influence that fundamentally shapes one's identity. (Adler, 1938)

As we are all aware of, the stream of evolution of concepts related to lived humane experience, always finds its way into the

world of cinema through the conscious or subconscious denotation and connotation of ideas. Similarly, this idea of "self" and "family" finds its way in cinema more often than any other themes. For example, one can find in the filmography of Wes Anderson how family dynamics are a recurring theme in his movies not by intentional design, but because it is a natural element that arises when creating casts of characters. Even if a story doesn't appear to be explicitly about a family, the core dynamic can often be traced back to childhood and the family unit like in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, the dysfunctional family of former child prodigies, and in *The Darjeeling Limited*, the complexities of sibling relationships. Whereas, French-Canadian writer-director Anne Émond explored the intimate family drama of cyclical suicide and grief in her film *Our Loved Ones*. The story, which draws on the director's personal experiences, examines how trauma and loss reverberate through generations. On the other hand, in the film *Brief History of a*

Family, Chinese director Jianjie Lin investigates the complexities of family dynamics and identity in a changing societal landscape. The story explores the ambiguous intentions of its characters, particularly an enigmatic figure who enters the family's life. Lin's approach reflects a more modern, global perspective on family, where structure and belonging are less defined, inviting audiences to question and discuss the nature of identity within these changing units. Films like *Still Walking* and *Shoplifters* of Japanese filmmaker Hirokazu Koreeda delve into the subtle intricacies of family bonds, exploring themes of loss, forgiveness, and unconventional families.

b. *Meiyazhagan* and the beauty of connection:

Prem Kumar after his journey of nostalgia laden unrequited love with “96”, presents us with the journey of a 40-year-old Arul (Arvind Swamy) with “*Meiyazhagan*”. The story begins with the family’s reluctant move from their ancestral home in Thanjavur to the bustling city of Chennai in 1996 (Kumar's most significant year in life, I suppose.). (Jyothika & Suriya, 2024) This transition is not limited to a physical relocation but a symbolic severance from the past, an uprooting of a tree with a trunk larger than the bygone time. Arulmozhi, a then teenager builds walls around his heart so high that his 40-year-old self struggles to look past that after so many years as an invitation from a close relative (Bhuvana sister) comes from that land. Arulmozhi now 40, living a seemingly settled life in Chennai with his wife Hema and daughter Janhvi faces a facade when the invitation to his sister’s wedding in Needamangalam after twenty-two years

serves as a catalyst to force him to confront the ghosts he has long buried. The walls he had built refuse to bow down as he prepares for a brief journey to and fro. The rest of the film blends itself in the disruption of that brief, almost perfunctory visit by the unexpected arrival of his cousin, Meiyazhagan, the self-appointed companion played with infectious energy by Karthi. The rest is all about how Arul rediscovers himself in the streets of Needamangalam, the shadows of the night sky and the conch sound of the local temple. (Of course, in the unrealised guidance of his forgotten yet found cousin). Prem Kumar through his exquisite writing backed with Govindaraj’s editing and Govinda Vasantha’s score knits a world so real that through Arul, a lot of middle-aged eyes find their lost selves. In the journey of Arul, not only the past unresolved issues find their solace but the present self, content yet volatile find its resting chair which provides an embrace firmer than the sorrow of partition. It is as if that the walls were only within, they had no foundation whatsoever in the reality of matters.

Critical Analysis –

Through critical analysis, I will delve into the exploration of self, encountered by the protagonist Arul, in the course of the film. This will not involve the explanation of the entire story but the analysis of several cinematic tools employed to emphasize and curate the journey of “self” through the lived experience of Arul during the course of the film.

1. Re-Discovery of Self and Exploration of detested past:

George Herbert Mead argued that the concept of self develops through social interaction,

not at birth. The self is composed of two sides: the "Me" (the social self that internalizes societal attitudes) and the "I" (the spontaneous, reactive part of the self). (Mead, 1934) In *Meiyazhagan*, this "I" of a young Arul blends with us in the very initial moments when he caresses the huge elephant trunk, with tears in his eyes just before leaving his ancestral town permanently. The sense of partition with his own self is presented to us the moment he utters "we lost the house" to the temple caretaker. It was not like he just lost the house he used to live in; it was as if he lost the version of himself who lived there. (Meiyazhagan 00:02:47) Post this, the evacuation sequence is a proper blend of several cinematic decisions which enhance this protruding pain of separation. Whether, it's the last-minute upper angle shot of the estranged cycle Arul leaves behind (which later on, becomes the catalyst of the re-discovery), or it is the extended few seconds of delay while cutting the scene where Arul closes the door for the last time. The sheer darkness lingering in the frame for an instance as Arul closes the door, immediately sucks us into the void of loss the teenager encounters at an age like that. Additionally, the soothing yet heart churning score which matches the rhythm of the passing shadows of the known streets and alleys of Arul as the lorry leaves everything behind, engraves the loss of initial "I" of Arul and a shift in his "me" which frames his next fragments of life. (Meiyazhagan 00:13:28)

Next, we find a 40-year-old Arul, in his rented house where he stays with his parents, wife and daughter along with the majestic flock of parrots in his terrace. This Arul may have retained some of the "me" of the

teenager Arul, but has never been the same since then. Whereas a reply to his reluctance to attend the wedding of Bhuvana, she playfully describes him as angry and lonely (the sudden change in angle and the proximity of the shot is the cherry on the top). (Meiyazhagan 00:16:06) The anger and the loneliness she refers to is nothing in its literacy sense but is the unfilled void which kept growing inside Arul since that partition. One must note how subtly Prem Kumar makes Arul mention to his wife that he is planning to buy their rented house (as a potential fulfilment of character arc), almost as a desperate measure to not repeat the same suffering. But we soon realise the suffering had percolated to greater depths. It is only when Arul reaches his ancestral town, we feel that "me" finds its way back, though not in its entirety. The temple, the now majestic elephant, known streets and alleys seem to breathe a long-lost sense of identity in Arul. Then, we encounter Meiyazhagan, a cousin whom he has forgotten (almost a poetic allegory of his former self), who enters the marriage ceremony like a storm and then after, retrieves the lost self; Arul has been missing all along. The warm embrace of unknown completely washes away the painful presence of betrayal laden memories and their correspondents. (Meiyazhagan 00:59:16) Post missing the bus, the anger of Arul soon finds its way lost in the revolving wheels of the cycle as two brothers traverse the night streets. (Meiyazhagan 01:48:05). The rural beer gulps down the years of sorrow stored in the throat of Arul as his tear moistened eyes stare at his unrecognised brother (Meiyazhagan 01:24:53). It is at this point of time, the old "me" of Arul is restored. He is

overpowered by the immense guilt as he is not able to recognise who that person is. Just like the old Arul, this overwhelming emotion pushes him to break down; eventually leaving the house without informing anyone. This departure poetically encapsulates the beautiful return or reunion of Arul with his old "me"; where he is no longer a passive observer but a direct participant in the abyss of time and emotions. There is a sequence where his maternal uncle calls his father and as the conversation goes on, both of them keeps promising to each other then they will come and meet. (Meiyazhagan 00:47:00) This sums up the whole concept of revisiting the left-behind, resolved issues as with time, the issues evaporate, the sense of closure lingers on. This closure is provided to Arun in terms of a tight embrace of love of Meiyazhagan, in whom he finds his old self.

2. Reflection of long-lost self and Fundamental simplicity of love:

-Kanagarasu?

-Yes?

-Are you asleep?

-Yes... yes...

-Okay, wake up. (Meiyazhagan 01:47:02).

It's like Prem Kumar from the beginning initiates a conversation with us where he tries to convey: *Meiyazhagan* is not just the story of someone trying to remember a name. It delves into deeper areas of human experience. Right from the start, the film through its carefully curated mise en scene of temple, alleys, vacant hallway pushes us into an emotional limbo. It establishes how deeply Arulmozhi is connected to his village, his home, the people around him, and his family. That house was his world... the town was his everything! Now all of a sudden, his existence

was being uprooted. When we see him again after 22 years, he is unrecognizably changed. The boy who was once a hero to the active village kids, always mingling with people, has become a reserved man who barely talks to anyone. and right here comes Meiyazhagan, a man who stands for everything Arul used to stand for. It is here one may refer to Carl Rogers's humanistic theory of personality where he proposed that an individual's self-concept has three components: the real self (or self-image), the ideal self, and self-esteem. (Rogers, 1961) It is this ideal image which Arul finds in Meiyazhagan. From the later collections of his left behind past, we realise the current life Arul is living is just a shadow of his former self. Once he steps in his village, he starts getting back glimpses of what he used to be and perhaps, what he wanted to be. From his father's old student who gives him directions in the bus, wavy touch of Latha (someone he was supposed to marry), his uncle somehow returns him, a fragment of his former self. This reaches its pinnacle when he adorns Bhuvana's feet with the jewels. A man shy hitherto, starts crying during the act as a stream of lost reality brushes off his spine. This is where his suppressed emotions start flowing like a stream which reaches its estuary in Meiyazhagan. Right then, the presence of three individuals reminds him of his painful partition. this is where he tries to get into his shell again; but he is not allowed to. An unrecognized cousin forces him through a caravan of lived nostalgia which reignites his former "self". It is to be noted, though he tries to recall Meiyazhagan's name, but he never bothered much. He didn't feel the need to know it, because deep down, he knew he'd

never see those people again. But when Meiyazhagan tells Arul he's naming the child 'Arul Mozhi', it's as if the companionship and comfort he experienced with Meiyazhagan suddenly make him feel guilty. He realizes he has lost more than he conceived by the loss of land. He has lost his own self, his care which grew outwards. It is this guilt and the shame, which pushes him to leave. Meiyazhagan brought back memories of everything Arulmozhi lost by leaving his land. Arulmozhi finds himself through Meiyazhagan!

"I figured out who I am only because of you." (Meiyazhagan 02:22:24).

This is the truth. He realises what he ignored all these years for whatever reasons. Selfish motives from other family members drive Arulmozhi away from his family, and consequentially his guilt for not being able to recognize his own family drives him away. Every character in this film shares Arulmozhi's trauma in some way. From Sudalamuthu, played by Rajkiran, to Arulmozhi's father, to Latha, who was supposed to marry him, to Bhuvana's father, who hasn't seen his daughter in years, to Arulmozhi's own daughter who has no connection to the village—everyone is part of this shared pain. Though he superficially completes his character arc through the decision of buying their rented place; it is the character of Mei which allows Arul to actually return to his former self and dissolve his trauma. The character of Meiyazhagan represents something we've all seen in our lives. He is loved and respected in his village (just like former Arul). He is someone who takes responsibility and knows about the political and social situations around him;

with his innocence which sets him apart from others. He's someone who values human connections as much as he values the history and elegance of his homeland. If we ever met such a person in real life, we might dismiss him as an uneducated fool. That's exactly how Arulmozhi first perceives him. But even at the beginning, he says he came from a protest at Taluk Office. There's a deleted scene where Meiyazhagan talks about various issues in the village, the struggles he fought against, and even the Jallikattu protests he led. He's the kind of person we might wish to be but cannot become. But Meiyazhagan says, "I'm like this because of Arulmozhi." You used to talk to everyone so kindly. I learned that from you, Athaan." (Meiyazhagan 01:53:24).

Maybe if Arulmozhi had stayed in his village, he too might have become like Meiyazhagan. Arulmozhi leaving his village and his bicycle completely transforms Meiyazhagan's life. This makes us wonder: How many changes, big or small, have our actions knowingly or unknowingly brought to someone else's life? Just like the Bhuvana episode for Arulmozhi, the cycle episode becomes the highlight for Meiyazhagan. Meiyazhagan is driven by love. It's this love that pushes Arulmozhi's guilt, even when Meiyazhagan realizes that the person he's admired since childhood, the one whose life was changed by a cycle, doesn't recognize him, he doesn't show anger or ego. He simply wipes his tears and starts to help Arul. At this moment, Mei never utters his name, he just mentions the family tree. This scene poetically concludes the reconnection of Arul with what he left. It is here where he doesn't only remember who Mei is, but he completes

remembering who he is. (with a whole lot of radiant laughter).

Conclusion:

To conclude, one might end on the note that Meiyazhagan is a film about connections and what connections ignite amongst us. Here, one can delve into the three deleted sequences of the film which in so many layers, emphasize the theme of realisation of "self" through collective and individual experiences. On the front of individual experience, in one sequence we find Arul spending some time in a sacred land of the Tamil people reminiscent of the left-behind glorious past. The same experience is reiterated by his cousin in another sequence. A primary criticism against the film was of the political framing of the topics which followed the Chola Dynasty conversation. (Jyothika & Suriya, 2024) Personally, that made me more connected with the narrative as it effortlessly creates a connection of relatability between Arul and Meiyazhagan

and also reminded me that knowing our history is extremely important. It's essential for us to engage in the politics around us—especially in these times when histories, nations, and identities are constantly being rewritten and forgotten. Though at that moment, Arul can't recognise the person; his eyes stare in awe towards a person who embraces anyone and everyone with effortless love but also proudly takes a stance against power structures (13 rounds of fire reminiscent of the Sterlite protest and the Jalikattu sequence were icing on the top). To sum up in the stream of conclusion, Meiyazhagan paves a way of re-discovering one's forgotten self through reflection in a mirror embroidered with simplicity and love. On the journey, we are made aware about the musicality of family structure and universality of love. It feels like running back to some now forgotten, (once dear) doors and keep on knocking until a tight embrace sets everything right.

Works Cited:

- Adler, A. (1938). *Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind*. London: Faber And Faber.
- Bowen, M. (1994). *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice (1978)*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Camus, A. (1991). *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other essays*. New york: New vintage.
- Jyothika, Suriya (Producers), Chandran, P. (Writer), & Chandran, P. (Director). (2024). *Meiyazhagan* [Motion Picture]. India.
- Mead, G. (1934). *Mind, Self, and Society: from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rogers, C. (1961). *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Soumoyadip Samanta is a student of SRFTI, and a Mass Communication graduate from St Xavier's College, Kolkata.