

Haritha Cinema: Exploring Themes of Nature and Ecology in Malayalam Cinema



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Abstract: Ecology has been a major theme of world cinema from the time immemorial so much so that the former has become inextricably interwoven to the latter. The same is true with Malayalam cinema which contributes a major share of the vast reservoir of great cinema produced in India. The paper entitled *Haritha Cinema: Exploring Themes of Nature and Ecology in Malayalam Cinema* seeks to explore themes of nature and environment in Malayalam Cinema. It specifically studies three major ecological movies; *Oru Cheru Punchiri*, *Aranyakam* and *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty*. The paper also looks at how themes of ecology forms a major part of the Classic movies produced from Kerala.

Keywords: Ecology, Haritha Cinema, Nature, Environment, Culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, ecology and nature have been the favorite themes of filmmakers and script writers alike. This is not just the case in one particular realm but is true to the entire world cinema. Humans and nature have always had this connection with each other and literature, which is said to be the reflection of life, has never failed to depict it. The extensive use of nature as a theme can be seen in literature as early as the Romantic age, especially in the works of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Byron etc. Thomas Hardy also gave it a special significance in his works where nature appears not just as the backdrop or the setting, but something of equal importance as the characters in them.

II. SURVEY/REVIEW/METHODOLOGY

Nature or environment has been a major theme in Indian cinema. In Satyajit Ray's movies, nature has a significant role to play. For instance, in his magnum opus *Pether Panchali (The Song of the Road 1955)* [6] an adaptation of a novel written by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, people live in close proximity to nature. Set in the Nishchindpur village, the novel captures the life in the rural landscape of impoverished Bengal. It is not a romantic portrayal of nature that we see in the film, but a rather realistic, true-to-life depiction of nature.

Manuscript received on 17 October 2022 | Revised Manuscript received on 29 October 2022 | Manuscript Accepted on 15 December 2022 | Manuscript published on 30 December 2022.

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As in Bandyopadhyay's novel, nature and all its inhabitants, ranging from the tiny insects to the huge animals and human beings live in peaceful coexistence with each other. Human activities and natural events go side by side and the former do not disturb the natural flow of things.

Malayalam cinema has been noted for its creation of films of international standard in terms of themes, story and making. Even today, in the age of new wave cinema, quality films are being made which attract attention from the global audience and get screened at international and national film festivals. From the beginning, Malayalam cinema has always turned to nature and environment for its themes. Directors and script-writers like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, M.T. Vasudevan Nair(M.T.), Bharathan, Padmarajan, Hariharan etc. have increasingly used nature as a prominent part or a backdrop in their movies.

III. DISCUSSION/ RESULT ANALYSIS

M.T. is known for addressing the social and cultural issues of contemporary Kerala in his movies. *Oru Cheru Punchiri (A Slender Smile 2000)* [7] is an award winning movie written and directed by M.T. which can be undoubtedly called a 'haritha cinema' or a green movie as the writer M. Chandrasekhar calls it [1]. The movie revolves around the life of a married couple, Krishna Kuruppu (Oduvil Unnikrishnan) and Ammalukutty (Nirmala Sreenivasan), in their twilight years. The husband is in his seventies and the wife is in her sixties. They are a very amiable couple with nothing but love for each other and for everyone around them. Their children are all grown up, married and settled in the town. In spite of being asked several times by their children to move in with them to the town, they continue to stay in their own ancestral home and do not want to be out of place in some unknown land. They live in tune with nature by engaging in agricultural work in the property adjacent to their house and eat what they grow. The couple lead a very happy and peaceful life by being there for each other and their close ones who are in need of them. The film is set against the backdrop of rural Kerala known for its scenic beauty. The frames are full of coconut trees, banana plantations, lush green paddy fields, and traditional ancestral homes or *tharavadu* built in harmony with nature. The characters wake up to the chirping of birds, the sounds of other animals, that of water flowing in the crystalline streams and the smell of the earth after maiden showers. These people live and die in the lap of nature. The beautiful portrayal of their lives make the audience want to return to mother Nature away from the monotony and boredom of their mundane existence.



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The film won the Indian National Film Award for the Best Film on Environment Conservation/Preservation in 2001. It also won the Kerala State Film Award for the Best Director in 2000 apart from several other accolades. *Aranyakam* (*The Forest* 1988) [3] is another movie which deals with the theme ecology written by M.T. Vasudevan Nair and directed by Hariharan. It depicts the political realities of the Naxal movement in Pre-Emergency Kerala. The movie traces the story of the sixteen year old Ammini who has just completed her schooling from a boarding school which she calls a prison. Ammini is essentially an orphan; her mother died when she was young, and her father got married again and settled in Delhi with his family. She has returned to her paternal ancestral home where she becomes the object of everyone's dislike due to her 'eccentric' character as everyone calls it. She is bold, outspoken, and does not hesitate to speak her mind. Her demeanour as well as her body language is considered to be less feminine by others. She finds the atmosphere of that house totally uncongenial to her and turns to nature for support. Nature embraces her wholeheartedly and gives shelter to her.

From the beginning, Ammini seems to love nature and all its inhabitants. She makes her presence known by telling a passing bird, "I have come. Go tell everyone I have come." By everyone she probably means the flora and the fauna of Mother Nature. Every morning, she sneaks out of her house with binoculars and a notebook to her favourite hiding place in the woods, the ruins of an old abandoned temple. There she engages in her favourite hobby of writing imaginary letters, which she never posts, to celebrities she loves- Basheer, Sugatha Kumari, Madhavi Kutty and Indira Gandhi. Her other pastimes are watching birds, reading books and enjoying solitude. It is during her forest expeditions that she runs into a stranger who turns out to be a Naxalite intent upon killing her uncle who is a feudal landlord. He happens to understand and appreciate Ammini's talents like Mohan, the son of a family friend, who loves her for what she really is.

The movie is as much personal as it is political. It deftly portrays Ammini's deep rooted relationship with nature. The forest is her abode. It protects the innocent girl from the corrupted world of humans outside [5]. She does not want anyone to trespass into her parallel world and thus keeps her hiding place in the forest a secret from everyone else. She enjoys the company of trees, birds and streams pregnant with life that feed her spirit with imagination and inspire her to write. The forest stands for everything that is good in the world, everything she loves and everything unaffected by the cruelty of the outside world. Thus, *Aranyakam* beautifully traces the story of a lone girl, who cannot find peace in the outside world, lulled by Nature in her lap. It is the story of the interconnectedness of man and nature in this world [2]. *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (*With Love, Janakikutty*) [4] is yet another film by the writer-director duo M.T.-Hariharan released in 1998 based on the former's short story titled *Cheriyā Cheriyā Bhookambangal* (1992). It follows a similar paradigm as *Aranyakam* where a lone girl resorts to nature for comfort in life. Starring Jomol in the lead role, it narrates the story of Janakikutty, a ninth grade adolescent, and the challenges she faces in her everyday life. She does not find peace at home as she has no

one to befriend her and is often scolded by her elders or teased by her cousins and siblings. The only people she likes at her home are her grandmother and her neighbour, Bhaskaran, whom she loves secretly. Gradually, she learns to enjoy her own company and turns to nature to pass time. She is lured by the beauty of nature; the wilderness, the untrodden ways, the seldom used mossy ponds etc. around her house. It is during one of her solitary escapades into the restricted area of the forest that she encounters Kunjathol, the beautiful bewitching ghost (Yakshi) of a Namboothiri woman who was murdered by her husband. She, along with her associate Karineeli, is believed to be capable of killing vicious men who crossed that area and drinking their blood. She, however, does not have any intention to harm Janakikutty who is an innocent girl and expresses her wish to befriend and protect her. Kunjathol comes to her aid whenever she needs help and they become best friends. Janakikutty's change in character is noticed by her family and she is given medical aid. Kunjathol and Janakikutty have to part ways at the end considering her mental health. It is true that every girl wishes to have a Kunjathol in her life; to make the wildest fantasies real, to make the impossible possible, to pay heed to the weirdest thoughts, to have someone just for herself. The audience is enchanted by the sweet music of nature, the picturesque scenes of the country, the natural and the supernatural. Thus, *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* becomes the story of a teenage girl being aided by natural and supernatural powers to give colours to her little desires in life.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be observed from the study that *Oru Cheru Punchiri*, *Aranyakam* and *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* are ecological movies at different levels. Whereas the first movie, which is a movie of nature in all aspects, becomes a clarion call for environmental conservation, the second and third movies depict the relationship between a girl and environment. Whereas *Aranyakam* becomes the story of a girl shielded by Nature from the corrupted outside world, *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* becomes the story of a young girl aided by natural and supernatural powers to realize her wishes in life.

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