

Alternate Aesthetics as Epistemic Delinking: Cognitive Justice in G Aravindan's Kummatty

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Abstract:

While the early parallel cinema in India was modelled upon the realistic representations of the Eurocentric film movements, G Aravindan digressed from these trends and produced films that are epistemic shifts in the technique of film making and established, what Shiv Visvanathan terms as, “cognitive justice” towards Indian Epistemology. Kummatty (1979) is a film by G Aravindan that broods on the threshold of mythology and reality. The film is a classic as it sets the path for cinematic innovation and epistemic delinking, in a philosophical enquiry of all existence. This paper is an enquiry of how the film aligns with the Indian epistemological perspective. The paper also examines the alternate film making style and the embodiment of Indian Epistemology through the portrayal of myths as organic in Nature.

Keywords: Indian Epistemology, Decolonial delinking, cognitive justice, G Aravindan, Kummatty

Introduction

The coexistence of varied knowledge systems, such as the astika and nastika schools, alongside each other, validates the essential pluriversalism of Indian Epistemology. The spiritual essence of Indian Philosophy springs from dialogue and not dominance. Recent research in decolonial studies has focussed on this quality of equal validity to all knowledge systems against Eurocentric essentialism. Rather than affirming the superiority of epistemologies from non-European sectors, Decoloniality studies put forth the idea of pluriversalism, a concept of epistemological coexistence (Arturo Escobar).

However, as with most countries that were colonized once by the British, the artistic endeavours in post-independence India have portrayed indigenous experiences through systems formulated along the methodologies of Eurocentric Epistemologies. Cinema, a primarily Western import, was adapted into the Indian mould through its own cultural manifestations, but followed the cinematic techniques initiated by the West. The early films exploited the medium to narrate mythology, while the next phase focused on nation-building in India. Parallel cinema in India was critical of the postcolonial Indian condition in the same technique and cinematic language, and thus, the philosophical possibilities of cinema were restricted. The films of G Aravindan, especially Kummatty (1979), presents the modernized world through the amalgamation of mythology with everyday life. Kummatty has always been a cult classic of parallel cinema in India due to the cinematic innovation and for paving the path for further production of movies that espouse the philosophical essence of cinema. Recently the film garnered much attention when Martin Scorsese's The Film Foundation (an international non-profit organisation for film restoration and exhibition) restored Kummatty from the prints available at the National Film Archives in India.

The film is perceived as a classic both due to the thematic concern and technique employed by G Aravindan. To quote Scorsese, “Aravindan was a visionary director and ‘Kummatty’ is considered among his greatest works. “World Cinema Project” of The Film Foundation will share this film with the wider audience it deserves, making it a true cinematic discovery” (“Martin Scorsese’s The Film Foundation, Film Heritage Foundation and Cineteca Di Bologna Restored Celebrated Indian Filmmaker Aravindan Govindan’s Film ‘Kummatty’ (1979) - Film Heritage Foundation”).

Methodology

Kummatty is a classic as it provides an “alternate aesthetics” to present the philosophical understanding of human existence as different from other films. The amorphous border of myth and reality overlaps in Kummatty to provide an understanding of the human predicament in a world populated by animals and plants alike. This representation is a manifestation of decolonial ontologies that populate a pluriversalist world. Kummatty is already acknowledged as a classic in alternate film making as it perfectly aligns with the philosophical nature of “cinema” as an art. This paper tries to establish Kummatty as a classic testament of Decoloniality. This paper also reads Kummatty in the light of decolonial pluriversalism to establish a deliberate attempt at affirming “cognitive justice” (as proposed by Shiv Visvanathan). This paper will evaluate the film as a discourse in Indian Epistemology, rooted in pluralism.

The Metaphysical and the Human

The Malayalam movie Kummatty was written and directed by G Aravindan. Shaji N Karun was the cinematographer of the movie and was produced by General Pictures. The film positions humans against the metaphysical and is based on a folktale from Keralam. Rooted in religious mythology, Kummatty is believed to be a magician who takes many forms and transforms children into animals. The belief of kummatty is not fear-inducing but presents a friendly companion for enjoyment to children. Kummatty was awarded the “Best Children’s Film” by the Kerala State. About Kummatty, Prof Tadao Sato says, “I haven’t seen a more beautiful film”. (Vasudevan, 00:01:11 – 00:01:14).

Kummatty is set in an idyllic village and tells the tale of a small boy, Chindan, who has a carefree life and is more interested in roaming around than in studying in his school. The film establishes the setting and the people through the wanderings of Chindan along with his friends. The concept of the mythical kummatty is also introduced through the characters. The entry of a middle-aged man with bohemian paraphernalia and animal masks initiates the manifestation of the mythical figure in human form. This happens through the self of Chindan, as he confirms the same to his friends due to his own conviction and experiences of magic, with the man.

Later, the children befriend him, and on one fun-filled evening, the man converts the children into various animals. The children find the shape-shifting entertaining. Chindan, who is transformed into a dog, is chased by another black dog he had tried to harm previously. When the man was converting the children back into human form, Chindan was in hiding due to the scare of the black dog. Chindan comes back only after everyone leaves. So, he remains in the dog form while the other children are brought back into human form by the man. Chindan wanders around, gets tied by a girl, and is later set free, all while being a dog. Later, back home, his mother recognizes him. A year later when the man comes back to the village, he compassionately recognizes Chindan. He holds Chindan close and seeing his plight, hugs him and weeps. Later he transforms Chindan back to his earlier human form. The film ends with Chindan’s realization of freedom when he frees his caged pet parrot.

Kummatty narrates existence in a realistic world, with mystic elements, where mythical figures are conjoined with supernatural engagements. Realism and magic are shown woven together in an organic manner as these two blend seamlessly in the lives of the humans portrayed. About Kummatty, it is mentioned in ALA BLOG as follows: “This is distinct from the fantasy genre, which takes place in an unreal world or a universe with its own established rules of functioning” (Rajeevan). Throughout the movie, the man associated with the figure of the mythical kummatty interacts with great love and compassion with the children. This is in contrast with the extreme emotions of dread or love, usually associated with alternate systems of existence, as shown in Western discourses.

Through various interactions with the living and the non-living world, Kummatty shows Chindan attaining a realization of the human predicament. It is through his interconnected and organic engagements, with the realms of magic and reality, that Chindan achieves understanding of concepts like freedom, class divide and existence. These perspectives enhance his contemplation. It also, rightly validate his name, Chindan, which means “contemplation” both in Sanskrit and Malayalam. In Kummatty, G Aravindan asserts the possibility of such a knowledge system (based on folklore, religious mythology) in understanding human existence. This is a perspective that extends beyond the Western Epistemology.

Indian Epistemology

In Indian Epistemology, religion and philosophy cannot be demarcated into water-tight compartments, as evinced through the discourse of Kummatty. This system cannot be understood using Western logic. This film puts forward the connection of the concepts of bhakti and yukti from Indian Epistemology, as something that cannot be empirically defined, in the same manner, as concepts of Western Knowledge systems are understood. “The director’s primary preoccupation here is the representation of the geographical and cultural landscape. The people are as figurines moving across the film’s grandiose yet intimate rural stages” (Kummatty).

Kummatty employs the Samkhya stream of Indian Philosophy to establish this interconnectedness and realization of Chindan. In the film, the lives of humans and animals, myth, and reality, appear, against the static and majestic landscape where these interactions take place. According to Samkhya philosophy, the whole existence is defined by the duality of prakriti and purusha. Prakriti is perceived to be dynamic in nature, while purusha is pure consciousness and is static. In his human form, Chindan exists merely as purusha. While the children transform into animals and are shown enjoying it, Chindan remains as the dog for over a year. He is seen recognizing himself as prakriti. After regaining his human form, he realizes his true nature, that is pure consciousness. This helps him realize the true meaning of existence. This is reflected in his first action after reaching home - uncaging his pet parrot.

Epistemic Delinking

The philosophical perspective that G Aravindan tries to present, through the medium of cinema (which is a primarily Western import) could be understood only using the Indian Epistemological system of plurality. Kummatty communicates these ideas through a technique of cinema not seen before. So, both in themes and method, G Aravindan establishes what Shiv Visvanathan terms as cognitive justice in his *A Carnival for Science: Essays on Science, Technology and Development* (1997). Cognitive justice is the right of varied forms of knowledge to co-exist, thereby asserting the essential plurality of knowledge. Visvanathan says:

Cognitive justice recognises the right of different forms of knowledge to co-exist, but adds that this plurality needs to go beyond tolerance or liberalism to an active recognition of the need for diversity. It demands recognition of knowledges, not only as methods but as ways of life. This presupposes that knowledge is embedded in ecology of knowledges where each knowledge has its place, its claim to a cosmology, its sense as a form of life. (Visvanathan)

G Aravindan's films were stark contrasts against both, the Western cinematic technique and the Indian cinema, till date. His films are considered masterpieces of parallel cinema. It was not the case from the beginning. Previously, his films were first condemned for not following the basic grammar, as proposed by the West. About Aravindan's method and vision, Satti Khanna says:

Combined with what I have called equality of regard, the documentary undertone to his work was liberating ... We could sense his belief that from within our ways of living we could address problems like that of mass migration from villages and insufferable conditions for the new immigrants in cities. His cinema was not positioning us in some superior reality from which to cauterize India. He was one of us even when he was behind the camera. (Khanna 180).

Like most of his films, in *Kummatty*, "...the beauty of the world in the frame is not simply a background in the character's action" (Vasudevan 00:08:36 – 00:09:04). The spiritual awakening of Chindan happens in tune with Nature and is benevolently captured in the movie. Aravindan's films are all composed of flat, balanced shots set against the horizon. Horizontal and perpendicular lines distinguish and define different existences. His essential cartoonist self reproduces the frame of cartoons into that of cinema.

Kummatty, like all Aravindan movies, features wide-angle static shots of the land sandwiched between enormous expanses of water beneath it and the sky above it. The human subject is frequently positioned on the ground, facing the enormous elements. One frame that is repeated in *Kummatty* is the one with the characters moving across a horizontal stretch of land with some plants and trees in the middle, with a water body lying below and a wide sky above. *Kummatty* employs a series of wide-angle long shots with an immobile camera to capture the various moods of the landscape and the movements of nature. The repeated frames and shots assign a meditative quality to the film. Human beings are manifested through the indigenous epistemological system.

Conclusion

G Aravindan engages in an epistemological delinking when he employs the Western medium of cinema to present Indian philosophical positions and then uses it to serve his purpose. The specific technique employed in *Kummatty* asserts these themes and concerns towards the achievement of cognitive justice and decolonial plurality. The "cognitive justice" established by G Aravindan springs from the reason that, while filmmakers who headed the parallel cinema in India were products of film schools, Aravindan was unschooled and untrained in the Western Epistemological system that these film schools were modelled upon. A stark contrast is found between the films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Aravindan, who were contemporaries and spearheaded the parallel cinema movement in Kerala. "The lack of training in cinema gave Aravindan a chance to explore the medium of cinema and the craft of cinema-making." (Vijaykrishnan 34).

G Aravindan was deeply involved in the film society movements in Kerala, and this remained his sole source of learning cinema. He was already established as a cartoonist who dealt with deep philosophical questions of existence. This unschooling in the Western system of education could be seen as resulting in the alternate aesthetics that Aravindan generated through his films. Aravindan, "..., attempted to delineate

the spaces of cultural and aesthetic authenticity on grounds distinct from realism through the use of myth and by bringing cinema closer to practices of visual art and music...(Radhakrishnan 99). Kummatty could be seen as a celebration of physical and metaphysical hues, as much as it celebrates the Indian Epistemology.

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