

FILM REVIEW

To behead, or not to behead

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Perumazhakaalam (The season of heavy rain), 2005 (Malayalam), directed by Kamal.

The ethics of capital punishment is one topic that rears its head every time someone has been served the sentence. What follows then is a familiar debate flanked by rigid righteousness on one side and cloudy compassion on the other. Needless to mention neither side feels the real pressure of the outcome, because at best they see this subject from the comfort of a soapbox.

That's what makes Kamal's *Perumazhakaalam* worthy of attention. For the first time it puts an ordinary person, in this case the deceased's wife, in the burdensome role of deciding the fate of the accused.

The film begins in a village on the banks of the river Kallayi near Kozhikode, Kerala where a young mother Raziya (Meera Jasmine) eagerly awaits the return of her husband Akbar (Dileep) from Saudi Arabia. But soon the news arrives that Akbar has been found guilty of the murder of his friend Raghuraman (Vineeth) and under the Shariat law has been sentenced to death. As a shattered Raziya tries to grapple with the sudden turn of events, she is informed that the same law may absolve Akbar if Raghuraman's wife submits in writing that she has forgiven her husband's killer. The rest of the film is how she sets out to meet Ganga (Kavya Madhavan), the sorrowing wife of Raghuraman, and plead her for her husband's life.

Thanks to a simple narrative and well-etched characters, the film makes for easy viewing. The story unfolds almost in real time and holds you in its clasp until the very end. The brilliance of the cinematography is in not drawing attention to itself. The incessant rain serves not just as a mere backdrop, but also draws the audience into an immersive experience of the proceedings. The performances of the two leading ladies, Meera Jasmine and Kavya Madhavan are heart rending. One can't decide whose sorrow is deeper.

Which brings us to the special aspect of this movie. It takes capital punishment from the judicial ambit and makes it a personal subject. Ganga must decide whether Akbar will go to the gallows or not. Suddenly the deeply religious Ganga is forced to play god. On the one hand she feels total hatred for the man who took her husband's life and wishes the worst for him, while on the other she does not want to be one sentencing him. (Ah, the escapist push of the human nature - we wish punishment

for those who wronged us but we want the state to do the dirty work!) Ganga, realizing this, tries to distance herself from the matter. So while her relatives prevent Raziya from meeting her, Ganga feels justified in focussing on her sorrow. But not for long. She knows that no matter how much she washes her hands of the affair, they still stay bloodied. In a powerful, transformational moment, Ganga wonders if the human self is ever capable of the mercy we expect of our gods. And the good news, according to the movie, is yes.

Of course, the director has taken the mainstream route by revealing early on that Akbar had *accidentally* killed Raghuraman. This makes the viewer take the side of pleading for Akbar's clemency rather too easily. One wonders what would have been the case if the killing were intentional. Now that would have really split the audiences. An authentic debate would probably have ensued. And, think about it, Ganga's forgiveness would truly have been divine.

After all, the broad ethical question is this: When is it okay for one human to take another human's life? And if one were to leave out medical occasions (like removing life support, etc.) out of the debate, the answer seems to be "in self-defense". At a national level this could mean "a war situation", at a personal level "a simple fight between two people where one has to take another's life to preserve one's own". So where does death sentence figure? Is it societal self defense? Against whom? The killer? He or she could be incarcerated for life. Potential killers? Where is the logic in awarding punishment to one person so that it might deter others from committing the crime? Perhaps the crucial question when we root for the death sentence is this. Are we asking for justice? Or state sponsored revenge? These are just some of the questions I would have loved to see evoked by the movie.

Then again, that is not the story of the film. Perhaps that is why while *Perumazhakaalam* succeeds as fine piece of mainstream cinema it has failed to inspire mainstream debate.

Meanwhile we have specialist journals on ethics (albeit medical) to keep the conversation going.

(P S: Nagesh Kukunoor, as a jury member at the National Awards 2005, saw this movie and was so moved that not only did he champion its case for awards, he also went on to rewrite the film afresh and make it in Hindi as *Dor* (2006). Sadly, while it's definitely worth a watch, *Dor* too aspires to mainstream cinema and hence is remembered only for its cinematography, songs and teary portrayals.)