

## Competition for the Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Award for Best Film Criticism

2nd Best Award (Joint Winner)

Ashwini Jain

### *Kumbalangi Nights* – A Breakthrough in Character Based Cinema



*Kumbalangi Nights*, 2019, Malayalam, 135 minutes, Director: Madhu C Narayanan

Interfacing multiple elements of interest in one movie is a risk not every director is willing to take owing to the easy possibility of dilution of each element. Climax oriented plotlines with a single significant theme have hence been the mantra of movies for decades now, but few new-age directors are experimenting with unforeseen techniques and forgoing the norm of 'story and climax' based cinema. Malayalam cinema has constantly

forgone the popular ways of film making and in the process inflicted a debate of whether realism is in fact art after all. Stern inclination towards realism has created a distinct mark for Malayalam cinema in India but the trend is now challenged by a visible search for the bliss point that perfectly blends realism and decorative artistic depiction in cinema.

*Kumbalangi Nights*, the directorial debut by Madhu C Narayan is a Malayalam movie exploring multiple facets of human emotions, film making and character arcs. While it lingers on the edge of realism, the comfort of aesthetic appeal imbibed through skilled cinematography of Shyju Khalid gives it the romantic touch. The risk taken by the story writer Shyam Pushkaran and Madhu C Narayanan to encompass multiple dimensions of cinematic experiences is what distinguishes *Kumbalangi Nights* from its contemporaries in not just Malayalam film industry, but on a national level as well.

*Kumbalangi Nights* is a story of four brothers – incomplete, disoriented and broken men leading unfulfilling lives in a pitiful abode on an islet in Kumbalangi. The place recognized as the dumping yard by the rest of Kumbalangi raises four men who end up having the most breakthrough character arcs in modern cinema. These character arcs, the biggest element of the movie is carefully distributed to the brothers and the rest of the characters that appear throughout the movie, along the way brushing upon a few social issues such as patriarchy, feminism and mental health that are expected to be included in a modern-day movie. Narayanan, however, does not care much about picking up a social concern and addressing it with a message at the end. He instead has chosen to showcase the presence of different social elements in the movie and their influence on these characters to arrive at a conclusion that is purely intended draw impressive character arcs within the movie and not necessarily have social impacts.



Saji, Bobby, Bony and Frankie are the four brothers. The oldest of the four, Saji and Bobby do not get along and constantly brawl, contributing to the inhabitable ambience of their abode. Bony, the third one, has found his place amidst a group of friends who keep him busier than his older brothers and away from home. The youngest one, Frankie, a promising football player who has found a way to educate himself through a scholarship is the most mature one in the group who is already grown over his oldest brothers and craves some kind of order where they live. This youngest one does not get a prominent character arc – he is a teenager that starts off as someone mature beyond his age and ends up with a happier state of mind than he started because the others around him undergo serious changes. This choice of placing a significant bystander who can validate the growth of the rest of the characters in a character driven movie is an intelligent element. As if to compensate for the absence of his character arc, this youngest one is through whom a few meticulous details are conveyed such as his attention towards the idol of Mother Mary holding an infant Jesus, and his happiness upon the arrival of the Tamil lady to their household who is dressed very similar to the idol and holds a child.

As for the three brothers, two of them fall in love and the eldest one, Saji, loses the only friend he had to a tantrum he throws out of false sense of dignity. The death of this innocent man leaves a lasting mark on all the characters indirectly – by bringing a woman and child into the pitiful abode, with no romantic connections. The idea of positive feministic influence on a house full of disoriented men without romantic implications is empowering, fresh and subtle all at once. Romance is also an important theme – Bobby and Bony fall in love with two different types of characters and eventually bring them home too – but both the love sequences blossom in a song and are not given too much screen time. Babymol, Bobby's love interest, is the strongest female character who stands up for herself but is still influenced by the conservative norms of romance because of which she holds on to Bobby despite his shallow sense of male ego, that often attempts to push her beyond her boundaries. She is a typical female character that is conservative and modern at the same time, much like the rest of the characters written carefully and unquestionably. The writer and the director have carefully advocated female empowerment but haven't gone out of their way to enforce the ideal on the story.

While all these characters make way for each other through their simple yet emotionally evoking journeys, an anti-hero based in the popular theme of toxic masculinity, obtaining an edge over the rest through an elevated sense of identity while the rest suffer from self victimization, is Shammy. A mysterious personality with a cold smile, narcissistic passive aggressiveness and OCD, Shammy poses a challenge to the brothers and keeps

the story going. This character is the only one in the movie for whom the audiences would expect a penalizing ending, but Narayanan plays it differently as he concludes to infer that such levels of toxic masculinity that almost lingers on misogyny, is mental illness. Shammy does get the end he deserves as the brothers capture him but Narayanan does not penalize him – carefully balancing the expectations of the audience for him and not penalizing or mocking mental illness. The movie does give a positive end to a mental condition with Saji, who, despite his poor orientation, realizes he needs a therapist and ends up crying his heart out to move on for better.



Shammy, the only imposing character in the movie, played by the carefully casted Fahad Fasil who grabs distinct camera attention through his appearance, gets a backdrop of rousing music and a few extra close-up angles. Rest of them are always placed in a background that justifies their place in the story. While the cinematography does its best to incorporate the stunning natural beauty of Kumbalangi in almost every frame, it goes easy on the characters and gives them the space to blend into the scene and not impose themselves. This way, *Kumbalangi Nights* forgoes the trend of hero worship and sets itself apart from all defined genres.

For a movie setup on the beautiful islets of Kumbalangi, it would be easy to strongly advocate the beauty of rural lifestyle and somehow conclude that it is flawless and better than all else. *Kumbalangi Nights*, however, chooses to showcase the raw and conservative personality traits that are far from ideal or even impressive. The only one who is slightly less conservative than the rest hailing from the same place is the youngest one who has access to education. While the beauty of rural life is a significant part of *Kumbalangi Nights*, Narayanan keeps it real in terms of conservative traits of such life. This can also be seen in Shammy's household where the women in the family initially give in to Shammy's sense of power and even the eldest lady of the house tends to fear him. Even Simy, his wife, finally gains the courage to stand up to her husband but does not see him eye to eye. Patriarchy, though challenged constantly, is a part of conservative rural lifestyle and this fact is not ignored in this movie.

*Kumbalangi Nights* is a movie that dares to break generic stereotypes and employ multiple significant themes and character arcs in one cinema, keeping each one subtle yet influential. Even the smaller characters such as the mother, Bobby's friend Prashanth and Bony's love interest are influential towards the collective end. The constant fluctuation of characters that are conservative and modern is showcased and driven to a climax in a slow yet pleasant pace. The movie does not aim at sending out a strong message but addresses multiple concerns of everyday life in thought provoking manners. It is a breakthrough in new age cinema and explores a whole new dimension of film making, sidelining the motifs and focusing on character development. It's a movie encompassing social elements such as patriarchy but aiming at emotional fulfilment for the viewer as opposed to giving out socially important takeaways. It is a novel approach to story writing and direction and has worked out for the general audience.

***Ms. Ashwini Jain is an Assistant Professor in Digital Media at SDM College Ujire. An ardent blogger, with culture studies as the major area of interest. Based in Halekatte, Udupi, Karnataka.***