

Article

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**“Paava Kadhaigal”... Sinful Tales or REAL Tales?**

“It’s our society and caste that decides what ‘Honour’ means to us”- A dialogue by Mathi in Vaanmagal, part three of Netflix original series ‘Paava Kadhaigal’ reins as one of the main themes of this series. This widely acclaimed anthology crossed all language barriers, caste, creed, and race and became the most-watched in India after its release in December 2020. The universality of the emotions ringing with truth to this day in India and even the world where the meaning of honor for the family is decided by the society that surrounds them.

The four stories are arranged chronologically in terms of time from the 1980s to the late 2000s and four different family settings in different parts of Tamil Nadu. Ranging from a trans woman in rural 1980’s who willingly gives in to rape and death for the sake of her sisters and their family’s honor as told by her mother and for helping one of the sisters elope with her best friend and unrequited lover in ‘Thangam.’ A village chieftain killing his daughter and lover for falling in love with the lower caste driver and his family to protect his honor and pride, instigated by his lower caste followers who insist on the keeping the

chasm between them always wide to wield more power and fear in ‘Love Panna Uttaranum.’ An urban middle-class family deals with the horrors of their twelve-year-old daughter being raped and thinking that killing the girl would save their honor in ‘Vaanmagal.’ A father poisoning his daughter and unborn grandchild as punishment to save his honor because his daughter eloped with a lower caste man and living happily in a city while the family faces ostracization by the village in ‘Oor Iravu.’

However different they seem on the surface, each of these stories has common factors that string them and make them a wholesome gripping watch. The main denominators being honor, caste, gender, power, and fear. The common denominator is the female gender, which is targeted and faces the harshest consequence-death.

The four tales bring to light the gender politics that plays into the lives of the characters, norms that are accepted even to this day. *‘The honor and pride of the family lies in the women of the household, lies between their legs and that must be protected at all*

costs', even at the cost of their life at times. Mathi in Vaanmagal even contemplates killing her daughter because she cannot bear the taunts, rumors, and shame associated with the rape of her daughter. She lies to relatives saying her daughter is unwell.

A consequence of this gender politics is taking the justice system into their hands; Bharath, Ponnuthaayi's brother, castrates the guy who raped her as their mother refused to complain to the police. Janakiraman poisoning Sumathi to death; the various "accidents" that Veerasimman lets happen, including the death of Aadhilakshmi, to restore their family's honor. Veerasimman even uses the police system to his advantage by making them commit crimes, further engendering casteist beliefs on those whose duty is to keep the innocent safe.

In Love Panna Uttaranum, directed by Vignesh Shivan, Penelope sees the hypocrisy and the underlying truth of the caste system, of the father who preaches equality to people by performing inter-caste marriages but later gets them executed in the name of power, and this is instigated more by his followers who believe that this divide has to exist between the haves and have nots to maintain balance and wield power and fear.



Narikutty, his follower, gives examples of famous movies in Tamil and even of 'Titanic' and says that Titanic would not have been a success if Jack and Rose were united- because of the class difference between them and the divide must always be there. His understanding of equality is balance. He believes that he must maintain the balance by killing people who try to cross the caste barrier, equating class and caste. He convinces Veerasimman to sacrifice his daughter for the sake of the community even though he was ready to agree to the union as it was his daughter.

Caste and sacrifice in the name of God are used as justification for the killings committed in the village. Narikutty says that he wants permission to kill Penelope and Bharani along with Aadhilakshmi and her lover all in a day and make it a day of human sacrifices. No remorse is felt when saying these hurtful statements because there is always God to justify humans' beliefs and actions.



The tone is one of darkness and satire, as seen through Theni Eswar's cinematography. Most of the crucial scenes are shot in dimly lit areas. The scenes of killing or death are avoided but presented skillfully as the audience feels them even though they don't see directly; this can be considered Vignesh Shivan's unique characteristic as a director. The tale also brings to light and questions the very notion of love and what is considered love, and is it only honorable when chosen by the parents within the community, or is it still love if it crosses boundaries of gender and caste? Jothilakshmi and Penelope use lesbianism as an excuse to rescue Bharani from being killed, which is problematic because it questions whether caste or gender is higher in priority and is being a lesbian so

wrong that it lets Bharani off the hook? These questions and answers are put forth through the rap song at the end of the tale as Jothilakshmi goes away with her friends.

Aadhilakshmi's death disturbs Veerasimman so profoundly that he does not stop Jothi from getting away and later manages to escape from this village, its strict conventions that make him guilty of his daughter's and many more innocent people's deaths. He goes on to live with Jothilakshmi in France a few years later. It took his own daughter's death to make him realize his grave misdoings, depriving so many innocent families of their loved ones of hope and joy caused due to caste. In a beautiful song 'en uyirile' by Anirudh, the father's pain is brought out, one that is often shut inside and never expressed, the pain of the father sacrificing his daughter in the name of honor. At the end of the tale, Bharani raps and mocks society by posing questions and giving answers to society's conventions and norms and how one must think and evolve before taking these further to the next generation.

The story of Janakiraman poisoning his daughter to death for his family's sake in 'Oor iravu,' directed by Vetrimaaran, is one of the many stories that is known but remains an open secret in society. In fact, all these stories are kept as open secrets, hardly getting the attention they deserve.

In 'Oor Iravu,' education is blamed for Sumathi's choice not to seek permission for her marriage with Hari and elope with him, 'disregarding' the consequences or feelings of her family members status in the village society. She elopes with him knowing the result of even trying to convince her father and family about her love after seeing Moorthy's sister's arbitration a few years ago. Moorthy even confronts Janakiraman and questions the hypocrisy that is taking place. Wherein his sister underwent humiliation of the whole society when she fell in love with a lower caste man. Still, because it's his daughter, he is performing a baby shower. Her younger sisters are forced to drop out of college so that they don't go 'astray' like her, and her brother-in-law abandons her elder sister and children as he

doesn't wish to be associated with a low-born child. Her entire family suffers humiliation from the society with their social standing and status decreased.

Education gives Sumathi the courage to elope, buy a house and live in the city, disregarding the caste barriers that she's brought up with. It gives her agency and strength to build a life of her own with Hari in the city where they wouldn't be discriminated against on a caste basis as opposed to the village. The poison serves as a metaphor for poisoned relationships caused by the stringent norms and conventions that society places on its people. With no knowledge of his/her caste and creed, the unborn child pays for society's misdemeanors with its death. Sumathi and Hari elope to Bangalore, where they live freely without casteist judgment from others as it would be impossible to live in peace in a village. The urban space becomes a metaphor for freedom for Sumathi's sisters and Sarvana and Sahira as they elope to Coimbatore to search for a better life. In both these tales, the characters find solace in the cityscape. Unfortunately, in the present context of India's heated political climate where love jihad laws threatened to be implemented, very few spaces are safe for diversity to thrive peacefully. Marriage between caste and faiths without the interference of the political and judicial structures meant for protection but ironically doing just the opposite as the country is completing seventy-four of independence this year as the personal is becoming mostly political.

Inter-caste and interfaith marriages are protected by law. The couples who feel that they are in danger from either family, relatives, or friends can approach the government for help. There are safe houses that they can live in. The Kerala government in 2019 announced that it would give Thirty thousand rupees to couples who are marrying outside their religion if their income is below one lakh (The Times of India, 4 December 2019. PTI 5 December 2020) and if they have lived together for one year (The Times of India, 4 December 2019). NGOs also protect couples who are in danger of being killed by family like Love Commandos; This organization has safe houses located in many parts of India and are to this day

fighting for couples who are protected by law but not by their family or society.



These safe houses are in remote locations where finding the address is impossible. Many couples live together in cramped quarters, trying to get safety and justice for the violence, harassment, death threats, and even death of their partners only for falling in love with the 'wrong person' who isn't accepted by family society. According to *Tribune*, safehouses lack space and have poor hygienic conditions (The *Tribune* 22 April 2018). Even if they are on the right side of the law, and the organization is trying to protect them, many times, the police do not give their support as their palms are greased by wealthy and influential families who want the couple harmed. Dhanak of Humanity, an NGO founded by a couple in an interfaith marriage, helps couples and their families in marriage and relationships against forced marriages and honor-based violence. They support the individual's right to choose their partner in terms of relationship or marriage and even counsel them and family members in terms of making them aware of the legalese and the fact that every interfaith marriage does not need to involve conversion, and that they can marry through the Special Marriages Act 1954.

Gautam Vasudev Menon's *Vaanmagal* highlights the struggles of the rising middle-class nuclear family in the city. The family dynamics slowly changing in the cityscape and also stuck in the age-old values and beliefs as seen through Mathi, the wife, an extremely loving and caring mother of three. Her dialogues are powerful, rings with truth, not only for that tale, the series but for all the young girls and women of the past and present generation. When her older daughter

Vaidehi comes of age, she advises her about purity and pollution's various nuances. *"It belongs only to you from now on. Many will come yearning for this body; they will be desperate, deceivingly friendly, and even fight amongst each other. They'll turn into animals too, But this body only belongs to you, Only you have rights over it"*. When Ponnuthayi gets raped, Mathi's world shatters as all age-old beliefs passed down to her about 'purity' and 'impurity' come crashing and questioning her reality.

Mathi's beliefs about purity and impurity are seen through the ritual of bathing. When Vaidehi hits puberty, all the older women give her a bath to celebrate her coming to age. The same bathing ritual becomes futile when Ponnuthayi is raped. She even contemplates killing her daughter, hoping that it would restore their lost honor. She realizes later that she shouldn't let one incident define and shackle Ponnuthayi's future dreams and desires. Menon captured the middle-class family's true essence regarding costume, production design, dialogue, and mentality of the characters.

The father played by Gautam Menon himself portrayed the struggles of a father as he copes with the horror of his youngest daughter being raped. Through his dialogues, he reflects every father's pain who had to undergo this hurt when he says that he feels ashamed, naked, and unable to look his daughter in the eye as a man himself. In the end, he musters up the courage to be the supportive father as always to Ponnuthayi and assures her that she can fly high and be like Kalpana Chawla. The father-daughter relationship is strong here, with him being the pillar of support she needs and ensuring that nobody can get in the way of fulfilling her dreams, and not allowing this one incident to define her or hold her down. The family and their struggles become microcosms of the new urban middle class rising in large numbers as migration from rural to urban spaces becomes inevitable in India.

Sahira and Sathar's father in 'Thangam' uses domestic violence to wield fear and control over the family. He even lets Sathar be raped and die rather than giving shelter and protecting her. He is ashamed

of her and blames his wife for raising their child to be a transgender woman. Her mother tells her that her death is a better option than facing the society's taunts that Sathar will pimp her sisters out one by one as she did with Sahira, and that's why nobody wants to marry the other sisters and even go to the extent of asking whether they are truly girls or boys. Sahira and Sarvana, unable to digest the hurt the two families and society caused to Sathar, don't meet their families and drive away. Sahira doesn't let her mother touch her baby as she knows and tells her mom that if the baby grows up to be like Sathar, they will kill her too! Unfortunately, this conscious and strong move can rarely be seen in today's non-inclusive hostile atmosphere of the country—anyone who differs or defers from what is supposedly dictated as 'normal' by society and government.

Sathar's story weaves another layer of unspoken narrative, one of the transgender people falling in love, that they too feel the same emotions of love and desire in them. Though most of them remain unrequited love stories, as the title of the tale goes, she gives up her money saved up for surgery just for Sarvana so that he may lead a good life with Sahira. Unknown to Sarvana and Sahira, Sathar sacrifices her love for him, gives the money she saved up for the sex reassignment surgery, gets disowned, and ultimately killed by the villagers. Love, desire, and feel are the things most people do not associate with transgender people, that they too long for the same things which all humans do, as expressed in a tear-wrenching dialogue of Sathar as Sarvana hugs her goodbye. She says nobody has ever touched with the intent of love her whole life; it's to either beat up or take advantage of her. This dialogue in a fictional narrative voices all the transgender people's concerns, and Sathar becomes a ray of hope for other transgender people.

Sathar's bravery in the story is one to be recognized and highlighted. Still, as usual, the attention focuses on Sarvana and Sahira. They fell into the heteronormative category even though it was an interfaith marriage that everyone was opposed to. She sacrificed her love for Sarvana after finding out he's in love with her sister Sahira and ultimately dies for

the sake of honor. Her death is not even acknowledged, taken as a case of good riddance, and the villagers act as if talking about her brings bad luck. Her death is not considered honor killing to society, even if it is. The village and families prove that lineage is more important by the end of the story, even though an interfaith marriage and Sathar's death are considered collateral damage.

Kalidas Jayaram's acting in this tale leaves everyone spellbound as he garners and takes the audience with him through Sathar's journey of love, sacrifice, and death. Everything from the costume, lighting, tone, and angle of the camera moves his role away from fiction towards a reality that everyone can relate to. The dialogues ring with truth as she understands that the men only tease her and threaten her only to get some sense of authority and control, which they don't get at home, being abused by their wives. Her grip on reality is stronger than the cisgendered characters as she understands what true love, acceptance, and sacrifice mean. The only people who accept her for who she is, are Sarvana and Sahira.

Sudha Kongara(director) and Jomon T John (cinematographer) brought out the true essence of Sathar, without ever needing to sexualize the portrayal but focussed on the character as a loving and caring human being rather than a transgender person who is always ridiculed and taken advantage. The lighting through the tale remains moves from well lit to dim and dark depending on the mood, and as the plot moves on, from happiness to pain and eventual death, sacrificing herself for her loved ones. In the last scene of the tale, Sarvana cries on the river bank as he sees "Thangam" carved on all the rocks and finds the bag with her belongings and photo as young boys. He Cries in pain and regrets the loss of his loved one, truly jerks the tear ducts of the audience as reality comes crashing with no happy ending or closure.

Unfortunately, most transgender people today still face the same kind of discrimination. People assume that transgender people only deserve to beg, not have a career or dream of their own and not wish for a loving relationship and a secure future with a family. With the conventions of society and government

being ambiguous and no clear protection in terms of health, violence, or even rape, transgender people are prey to the country's people, political and legal systems. Current politicians claim that there is no use in transgender people becoming police officers as society will not even listen to them. Of the thousands of transgender people, and only now, some are getting the chance to pursue and fulfill their dreams, which brings a few rays of hope to many others. But it also does not mean that, because some of them are in the spotlight, the grueling circumstances and grievances the others face have diminished. Their voice needs to be heard, and action must be taken to give them at least the fundamental rights they are denied due to no fault of theirs.

Getting an OTT platform to showcase their work gives these directors much more freedom and creative control over their projects with less disturbance and lesser load from production, marketing, and logistics,

which comes with the making of regular movies. It also gave the actors the chance to work with such brilliant directors on this beautiful anthology, even if it was for an hour, as voiced by Sai Pallavi, the actor in 'Oor Iravu.' The directors got to break beyond the label of making 'Art movie' and tell the story that touched them personally; they also broke out of the normal convention of telling a love story or a tale progressing through the episodes in a usual anthology but brought out four different tales interconnected and interspersed so beautifully.

This anthology helped Kollywood be recognized on the Indian mainstream platform that focuses mostly on Hindi cinema. The four directors brought to the screen an anthology of tales so deep and triggering which would not have been very easy to bring forth to the mainstream cinema theatre. The title of the series and the message that arises truly subverts the term sin and its meaning.

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