

Article  
Pradip Biswas

## Shaji N Karun's Journey into Soul



Shaji N, Karun is one director who never peddles febrile words, long-spun dialogue to make the art of his cinema click. A director, possessed of inner freedom and poetic logic, rather uses more of silence to elevate his state-of-art to a height where one is convinced to look into the soul to understand a soul. Incidentally, he amazingly sounds like Plato who once said: "To understand a soul, a soul must look into the soul". *Nishad* (Octave), Shaji N. Karun's fourth feature film, already shown in the prestigious Indian Panorama of IFFI, Delhi, appears as an artistic discovery, a hieroglyphic of absolute truth. It is the result of artistic experiments made in the previous films such as *Piravi*, *Swaham* and *Vanaprastham*, with silence used as metonym. *Nishad*, said Shaji N. Karun, is a film born out of psychological trauma that haunts today's souls in an unmitigated vein. It is the constant fears and shadows of war that continue to haunt the modern civilization with its inmates trapped

in an unknown fear. The film is a strong contender for the highest National honour this year.

Shaji N. Karun was born on New Year's Day, 1952, as the eldest son of Mr. N. Karunakaran and Mrs. Chandramati in present-day Kollam district in the former state of Travancore state (now Kerala), India. In 1971 he entered the Film and Television Institute of India, where he took his diploma in cinematography. His diploma film *Genesis* (1974), directed by Rahul Dasgupta, got many awards and started his career. He won the GOLD medal on graduation in 1974. After graduation, he worked in ISRO Ahmedabad, Mumbai TV, Madras Film Industry on contract basis till 1975 when Kerala State Film Development Corporation (KSFDC) was about to realize. He became responsible with founder Chairman P R S Pillai, and its then Managing Director G.Vivekanandan for the planning, designing

future visions of KSFDC to bring back the Film Industry that was till then rooted in Madras.



His role with the participation in meaningful cinema activities through the contribution of KSFDC and well-known giants in Malayalam filmmakers resulted in many landmark achievements to the Malayalam Cinema nationally and Internationally. 1998, He started and presided the first film academy in India as Kerala State Chalachitra Academy under Government of Kerala and leadership of then Cultural Minister Marxist Late Shri T K Ramakrishnan. It is in the same year he started the International Film Festival (IFFK) as competitive and further FIAPF recognized the festival as International competitive under his tenure. He has presented three films- Piravi, Swaham, Vanaprastham consecutively to Cannes official sections, a rare achievement for any filmmakers worldwide, where the film Swaham was in competition of Cannes in 1994. Since then, till now, no films from INDIA selected to compete for Cannes' Palme d'Or. He is the Only Malayalam filmmaker who achieved three national best films (Piravi, Vanaprastham, Kuttysrank) for the Malayalam language.

His *Vanaprastham* is in a way a big departure from the films that so long overlook the desperate, solitude, loneliness and mental willies. That in old age the members of the unit family, development a dispathy towards the parents, the main tree, soar and do things that hurt every part of the survival of the aged parents. In modern times such malady runs supreme. the result of the scar could be found in prolific growth of Old age home!! Shaji has routed the narrative of the film through a grotesque familial journey replete with

miseries, inhuman conduct and social animosity. The parents of *Vanaprastham* have confronted the backlash of the barbaric treatment and ill behaviour of the siblings, now enough adults, and finally decide to choose the painstaking way of leaving for *Vanaprastham* with grave disillusionment and tragedy.

In this work the director seems to have riveted our keen attention to the pathetic state of affairs with the "parents" left to live in the emptiness sans any values and familial sympathy leading to final departure and more rigorous survival, dark, uncertain, poor and hellish. There is no relief in the film and the director wants us and the viewers to share such grief and suffer perennially. Trajectory of the film runs down from a peak to nadir of degrading societal pit which is infernal and death like. *Vanaprastham* won Shaji Karun the highest honour like the President's Gold Medal as the best films of the year. The same film travelled to Locarno, Busan, Fribourg and were highly applauded. According to the festival director *Vanaprastham* is a "commentary on post modern societal and sociological denigration" of Parents in nuclear families around the Globe. The film is heavily marked by subtext, leaving a sharp message, not loud but subdued in tone.

Shaji Karun's latest film *Olu* (She) is the story of a girl Maya (Esther Anil), who is raped and discarded in the Kerala backwaters. She mysteriously survives underwater and is carrying a child. On full moon nights, she can see above water and on one such night, she sees a painter Vasu (Shane Nigam), as he is wandering the waters on his boat. An unsuccessful and uninspired artist, Vasu is struggling to create something spectacular in his paintings. Maya decides to help and empowers him to create a painting which changes his life. As Maya falls in love, she confronts Vasu's contrasting ideas about love and realizes that they seek different things from each other.

*Olu* and its weaving blends a sort of fantasy in a quaint manner or rather in aesthetic and sensitive way that prods us to look into the director's pulsating mood and cheerful pattern to make the film a work of wonder and amazement. Structure from the beginning

displays Shaji's painterly vision; and this vision of the director seems to chase the viewers to see for what happens next. Love is kept in backdrop and feminist outlook is kept above everything. The director takes the fancy to charm the inner vibes of thinking mind and at times we come across "stream of consciousness" at play. This is apparent in the flighty love affair between Maya and Vasu. If this love is consummated is not clear or the director makes no attempt to show us the interior happiness of two souls!! here lies the gullible mystic line and shadow of blurring. Despite net of mystery we never know how Maya undergoes such living under the shaft of water!!! We are invited to fancy and certain imagination that reminds of the author Virginia Woolf who prescribed the theory of "stream of consciousness."

Here, Esther Anil is convincing in this unconventional role but Nigam, playing a wandering artist, could have added some depth to his character as one who is caught in the throes of creativity and love. Kani Kusruti, who plays Vasu's sister, delivers a fine performance in a short but memorable role. Set in a village, the film blends ancient beliefs, customs, religion, and mythology to create a densely layered film which engages on several counts. In imagining a different fate for its protagonist, melding her fate with that of a goddess, the film offers the woman an empowering choice instead of the one intended by her rapists.

The role of nature as the giver of life and charm is foregrounded and intertwined with Maya, as nature finds primacy in the myth of the goddess as well as in the creativity of the artist. The stunning choreography, a hallmark of Shaji's films, brings this unusual fantasy to life as the Kerala backwaters are created in exquisite spells/ In some way we go with the film and again we feel prone to ask the director how long the Maya myth is valid in a post structuralist era!!

The underwater life was created through the extensive use of CGI that marks a departure from Shaji's earlier works. In the case of *Olu* however, the narrative demands the extensive use of gaffe of

technology as the creation of a fantastical waterscape would not have been made possible without it. The film also affirms Shaji's second collaboration with French producer Pierre Assouline, who co-produced *Vanaprastham* earlier.



Though *Olu* (She) starts with suggestions of brutalities on a young woman, it moves into dreamy space. Shaji said : " I never wanted to show the violence of rape. A girl is gang-raped and dumped in deep water but she still dreams of love. She even asks the painter if he can portray her dream. They share a platonic relationship — just like the sunflower and the sun. In the movie, I have tried to depict such imageries. Tell us about the underwater visual effects." It is said ,It took eight months to complete the VFX work. Water is never still — he had to create effects of undercurrents, high tide and low tide. The team have tried to show how fish gradually become friendly with her. All this had to be done in 3D.

As someone who has been making art-house movies for three decades, what Shaji is thinking now? Said he: "Today, the release and promotions have become a strenuous exercise. Commercial cinema relies heavily on digital campaigns. Have you ever seen a movie's content being promoted? It's one way of killing small movies. It's like supermarkets, when they came in, small businesses were affected."

He maintained that the common belief is that multiplexes have given a boost to indie and small-budget movies.

Multiplexes were originally conceived for art cinema. However, it has proven to be a lie. We don't get multiplex screens easily. Film production has gone

up. However, if a big-budget commercial film wants 3,000 screens, it gets them. Said he : "Cinema was made without such associations. After such bodies were set up, rivalry and oppositions have come up. The industry has always been a male-dominated place. Now, this issue has become a point of debate for the media. Women issues are debated in Kerala more than any other place. Cinema is a major tool to convey a message subtly. That's also something great authors such as Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky have done. The realities they portrayed are still relevant. Such interpretation is what art needs and not money-making machines."



Shaji Karun who was with this critic at Fribourg International Film Festival (FIFF) Switzerland some years back said: "The innocent humans are becoming the donation of the political rudeness and oppression. The humanity existing in the world, is progressively drying up like a river chosen to human knowledge, a sacrifice or an execution?" *Nishad* which was received with overwhelming response at Fribourg reveals how an unexpected or untimely phone call brings unpleasant news - news of death, sickness or some misfortune. In the Gujral household, one mistaken call from a young boy trying desperately to reach his mother disrupts the peace and tranquillity of their home. Looking at the digesis shows Sati and Dr, Gopi Gujral, a couple in their fifties, leading a placid, turmoil free life. Sati is a part-time music teacher in a school for Tibetan children run by Tibetan Government-in-exile whereas Gopi is visiting

medical practitioner in the district jail. Their only son, Ashok is a pilot with the Indian Air Force, and calls home at an appointed time, unerringly every week. But at a particular point of time, the scheduled call ceases to come as the country is on the brink of war and instead a surprise call, a voice of a child is received by Sati which suddenly alters all equations of peace. Sati is perturbed and Dr.Gujral, despite his initial resistance, too, becomes infected by the magnitude of the snowballing fears. The calls seem to have reversed the entire ground realities and the family suffers from within. From here begins the journey of the souls and the souls begin the inner process of immense sufferings on a mental as well as physical plane.

Said Shaji N. Karun: "Sati's reaction to the voice of the child on the phone reveals the very nature of her character, her highly sensitive mind. And this sensitive mind has had its own share of tragedies, from the early death of her parents, the custodial death of a naxalite brother and to her little child Anand washed away in the flood. And what emerges along the way is a mind that has lost its distinction between reality and fiction". In the realm of its illumination of tragedies shown in the characters of the film, Shaji N.Karun seems to have taken an interior journey, leaving aside the linear time into mind-time. "In the silence and the incomplete answers", revealed the director, "that surrounds her and in the tragedy of the mysterious *Gomati ma*, Sati finds a secret truth being played out and in her anxious wait for her son's call, she squirms in recognition". The subtext of the film has it for us: in the voice of the mysterious child, Sati hears the desperate voice of her Anand calling for help.

In the film is woven a rare fabric of human sensibilities running into the journey of the soul. The film as it stands is a string of mute images of human figures, trapped in an unknown fear, for more tragedies to strike with a vengeance. It is here the string of images form the essence of the film signifying "eternal anxieties" the human souls bear for betterment of mankind and its survival. Said Shaji N. Karun: "Ours is a time torn with wars and detonations only. A frantic war mentality has caught

up with the big powers and leaves little room for peace and rehabilitation of people, ripped apart by madness of wars and global conflicts". A corrupt system that is ever growing on the social and political scene is a syndrome that seems to be advancing to devour our civilization any moment. What do we need to counter it? Is it a mere silence or a counter violence as adopted by Goutham Kumar in the film? According to Shaji N.Karun Goutham Kumar is the "violent reaction of generation" towards an increasingly parasitic society, sinister, caste-ridden, its decrepit intellectual and cultural life, its squalor, misery and poverty. Armed with the slogan like "back to villages" he seems to have pronounced his formidable reading, theories and analytical powers to examine the social and intellectual rot of a society. Though he is the advocate of the wretched of the earth, he had to go for political confrontation and die with passion.

Woven in many layers, *Nishad* is a voice of the oppressed and claustrophobic people who are on a minority list. Yet, one discovers a tremendous power of the journey, an artist with a soul takes to find out if the "fear is the last word". In many ways its treatment is unique and conveys its meaning to be interpreted in its polysemy. The telos of the film, almost a silent film laden with mute images, tries to replace narrative causality with poetic articulation. Here Shaji N. Karun's striving for perfection leads him to make a spiritual discovery, to exert the utmost moral effort. He seems to suggest aspiration towards the absolute is the "moving force" in the development of mankind. Tarkovsky once said: "Art is realistic when it strives to express the ethical ideal". Shaji N. Karun, a follower of similar principles, has only cared to reflect the same spirit with a soul's devotion making it possible for us to discern how the aesthetic coincides with the ethical through poetic images, known as the impressions of absolute truth.

---

*Mr. Pradip Biswas is Film Critic and Author, a former Member of Fipresci-India, based in Kolkata.*