

Sethu Madhavan's *Maruppakam* and Sumathi Ram's *Vishwa Thulasi*- A Comparative Study of Cult Classic Tamil Movies

Dr. S. Suganthi

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Amrita College of Engineering and Technology, Nagercoil.

Abstract

The story of *Maruppakam* revolves around Kumbakonam, a temple town in Thanjavur. The scenes of action in *Vishwathulasi* are Sundarapuri and Palakkarai, places adjacent to Thanjavur and Nagapattinam. Both the movies talk in detail about tradition, love, culture, man-woman relationships and a whole lot of other themes. The aim of this paper is to make a comparative study of these two soul-wrenching films that are very close to the composer of this paper's heart. She has watched *Maruppakam* and *Vishwathulasi* at least seven times. This paper also envisages to throw a flood of light on the similar issues that have been discussed in the films.

Key Words: Tradition, love, culture, man-woman relationships

Maruppakam, The Other Side was released in the year 1990. Starring prominent actors like, Sivakumar, Radha, Jeyabharathi and Shekar, the film received many awards and accolades including the Swarnakamal (Golden Lotus) award for the best feature film. Directed by Sethu Mathavan, *Maruppakam* was the film adaptation of Indra Parthasarathy's novel *Ucciveyil*. The running time of the movie was eighty-eight minutes. National Film Development Corporation- NFDC in association with Doordharshan produced the film. *Vishwa Thulasi* was directed by Sumathi Ram. Besides direction, she had donned the role of lyricist, screenplay, dialogue writer and producer. With Mammooty and Nandita Das in the lead roles, *Vishwa Thulasi* got rave reviews from critics and won a number of awards. It was well received upon screening at the 2005 World Fest Houston International Film Festival and screened in 2005 at Zanzibar International Film Festival of Dhow Countries - South Africa, World Film Festival at Montreal - Canada, Bollywood Festival in Praha - Czech Republic, Moffom in Praha, Czech Republic, American Arts Council Film Festival - New York, USA, Cinema St. Louis International Film Festival in Missouri - USA.

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Maruppakam narrates the story of Vembu Iyer. Vembu Iyer is an orthodox, Brahmin Pandit. He is a great exponent in Vedic literature. Everyone in his village looks up at him for guidance. His son, Ambi who has been working in New Delhi falls in love with a Christian girl, Sweety. Iyer does not relish their marriage. Much against his father's wishes, Ambi has married the girl. After the marriage, the father-son relationship is strained. Sweety offers to smoothen the relationship and goes to Ambi's village only to get insulted by Vembu Iyer. She is offended by the uncouth behaviour of her father-in-law who has openly humiliated her by throwing water on her. Sweety asks her husband to choose between the two, his parents or his wife. Ambi chooses the former and that is the end of the marriage. They are separated. Aravamudhu, a distant relative of the Iyers tells Vembu about his son's failed marriage. Aravamudhu thinks that this news would make the conservative father happy instead he falls sick and loses his memory completely. What happens after his dementia makes the rest of the movie.

Vishwa Thulasi portrays the lives of two individuals, Vishwam and Thulasi. Thulasi comes to Sundarapuri to teach dance to the girls on Vishwam's manager's invite. She begins to stay with an elderly woman, Aachi. It is revealed after two or three scenes that Vishwam and Thulasi were lovers once. The love that blossomed during their teens is still intact. Now both of them are in their early forties and what impedes their marriage marks the remaining plot.

Tamil culture and tradition have been brilliantly portrayed in both the films. Classical music (Carnatic) and classical dance (Bharathanatyam) are integral parts of these works of art. One cannot think of these films overlooking the music. The music for *Vishwa Thulasi* has been scored by M.S. Vishwanathan and Ilayaraja, the two great doyens of Tamil film music. There are more than eight songs in *Vishwa Thulasi*. The songs are penned by Sumathi Ram and Ilayaraja. Highly poetic and aesthetic, the songs blend with the story like icing on a cake. Songs express the feelings of the major characters. In a song called, "Kannama Kanavilaya" the male voice questions his beloved. "Ennidam theriyalaya?". "Ennidam naan theriyalaya?" Literal translation of these phrases could be "Don't you know my place?", "Don't you find myself in my place?", Words are arbitrary and they could be translated only loosely. For, it is impossible to translate human emotion.

There is another number called "Aayakalaigal arubathinangu" where the hero sings the physical beauty of the lead lady. The song is akin to Aadhi Shankara's *Soundariyalahiri*, a divine poem beautifully describes the physical perfection of Goddess Parvathy from head to toe. All the songs are unique in their own way. On the contrary, Sethu Madhavan's *Maruppakam* has no songs. But kudos to L.Vaidyanathan for his background score. It has been a heavenly experience to listen to Avayam (Vembu Iyer's first wife) and Vembu singing Mohanam, a raga. Avayam, an expert in Carnatic music wouldn't stand even a minor mistake. She corrects her husband when he includes a 'ma' in Mohanam. Besides being a good singer, she proves to be a gifted dancer. Her versatility mars her marital bliss. Though Vembu likes his wife's dancing and singing skills, he will not let her dance or sing in his mother's presence. It is not that he will not, he cannot. Vembu's

mother, a conservative widow, is narrow minded and she could not approve the idea of a family girl flaunting her singing and dancing skills. His mother's rage is justified. Her life has been ruined by an unfaithful husband who has gone behind a *dasi* (courtesan).

Dasis are renowned for their songs and dance. Her husband's devotion to a *dasi* and his untimely death have deeply affected the forsaken wife. *Sringaram*, (2007) *The Dance of Love*, a movie by Sharada, Bharatanatyam exponent showers encomiums on *Dasis*. The Vassal of Mahadevapuram, Thanjavur is in relationship with a *Devdasi* called Madhura. Madhura is respected by everyone in the village and she has been referred to as a temple maiden. In the village panchayat, she has a place and her opinions are taken into consideration. When the Vassal wants Madhura to entertain the Tanjore Collector for political gains, she refuses and elaborates him the difference between a *Dasi* (courtesan) and a *Vesi* (sex worker).

Avayam, an accomplished woman knows the difference between *dasi* and *vesi*. She tells her husband that dancing is a divine art. Moreover, she realizes her mother-in-law's plight clearly. She has nothing against her. She accuses her husband for being a hypocrite. He could have explained his love for fine arts to his mother but he has never tried to do so. Instead of making things simple, he makes them complex by marrying another woman, to appease his mother. Avayam is empathetic but her mother-in-law is too myopic to comprehend all this. Moreover, the 'in-law' relationship in India has always been a strained one. Raja Rao, in his masterpiece, *Kanthapura* has showed this complex relationship bluntly. Here is waterfall Venkamma's description of her sister-in-law

Why should a widow, and a childless widow too, have a big house like that?... And you have only to look at her gold belt and dharmawar sari. Whore! "Tell me" said Venkamma one day to Akkamma, bringing forward her falling sari over her shaven head, 'why should our family feed theirs? If her parents are poor, let them set fire to their dhoti and sari and die. Oh, if only I could have the courage to put lizard poison into their food. (*Kanthapura* pp 5)

The worst part is Venkamma who calls her sister-in-law a widow is herself a widow. In *Marupakam* Vembu's mother presents the same figure with a sari over her shaven head. Moorthy, friend of Ambi, tells him that his widowed grandmother could not stand the love between her son and his wife. He further adds that she must have been jealous of her young and exuberant daughter-in-law. On the other hand, Vembu doesn't have the nerve to explain things to his mother. He loves his mother too much to hurt her. Moorthy calls it Oedipus Complex. Ambi snubs Moorthy by calling him a cynic.

Vishwa Thulasi, on the other hand shows a prospective mother-in-law, Vishwam's mother who is kind-hearted and broad-minded understands Thulasi completely. Vishwam's niece attains puberty and Thulasi is the first person to notice the stains. According to Tamil tradition 'that' person should be a *Sumangali* (Happily married woman). The astrologer of Vishwam's family asks about Thulasi's marital status and a visibly upset Thulasi goes away sobbing pathetically. Thulasi's past has been revealed to everyone in the family by an elderly woman. Twenty years ago, Thulasi's maternal uncle, her guardian, in his death bed had asked her to change garland with his own son, Shiva as a mark of marriage. Thulasi obliged

to her uncle's wish because she didn't want to be ungrateful but after the marriage, Shiva ran away and no news about his rendezvous. After listening to the past of the poor woman, everyone in the family sympathises with her. Vishwam's mother is not bothered about Thulasi's past. She supports her emotionally.

Vishwam's mother reminds one of the female characters in Satyajit Ray's *Asanisanket* (Distant Thunder) 1973, an award-winning Bengali Film on the great famine in 1943, a cataclysmic event that claimed 3 million lives. In the movie many women are forced to go out of the way to feed their starving children. The priest's wife has been raped and the women in the village are all aware of it and keep it a secret and no one ever knows about it or the revenge women are planning to take. Jhutki, the neighbour's wife gives herself to a man for some rice. Again, all the women support Jhutki. Despite the differences in the female characters in both *Maruppakam* and *Vishwa Thulasi* are all portrayed sensibly with a lot of sincerity; they are not regular heroines of the main-stream Tamil Cinema who bare their midriff to garner the attention of the heroes.

Another important aspect in *Maruppakam* and *Vishwa Thulasi* is the depiction of cultural ethos. The male and female protagonists are classical scholars. They possess deep knowledge of Indian culture and tradition. Vembu Iyer, in sick bed is tested by a doctor. The doctor lifts Iyer's hand and holds his fingers. Iyer, now inarticulate thinks about his youthful days when he has explained the significance of five fingers. The number five holds a marvellous position in Indian heritage. Pancha, the Sanskrit word for five is very serene. Panchakshara (Namashivaya mantra), Panchabootha (Five elements), Panchainthriya (Five senses) are all sacred. Iyer further tells the difference between 'artha' (meaningful) and 'anartha'(meaningless). Artha is moolavar , the deity in the sanctum-sanctorum. Sabtha is the deity who goes on procession, Urchavar. If one unthoughtfully presumes to teach, artha it would become anartha.

Thulasi performs Gopujai (Worshipping the cow) and Vishwam's niece asks her about its importance. Thulasi answers her in a beautiful way. She tells her that cow is an abode of all the deities. Worshipping the cow is equivalent to worshipping all gods. Vedic Scholar, Frederick M. Smith describes Kamadhenu as a "popular and enduring image in Indian art".

All the gods are believed to reside in the body of Kamadhenu—the generic cow. Her four legs are the scriptural Vedas; her horns are the triune gods Brahma (tip), Vishnu(middle) and Shiva (base); her eyes are the sun and moon gods, her shoulders the fire-god Agni and the wind-god Vayu and her legs the Himalayas. Kamadhenu is often depicted in this form in poster art.

(*Animal Deities". Rituals and Culture of India* pp. 119–120)

In the third millennium, the world is rapidly changing into a barren heath as described by T.S. Eliot in his pioneering work, *The Waste Land*. There is no value for culture and tradition. Life has become too mechanical. All the youngsters are hooked to social media and cinema. Cinema has become an indispensable part of the Indian society. Of late, it is disheartening to watch movies that literally do not carry any artistic value or well-etched characters. They perpetuate immorality and indiscipline. These are all shrubs in waste land.

Movies like *Marupakam* and *Vishwa Thulasi* come as silver lining from diligent directors. The protagonists in the films bear testimony to the three solutions offered by Eliot finally in his masterpiece, Datta (give), Dayadhvam (sympathise) and Damyata (control). One could see the unity of time, place and action in classical plays, the same can be mentioned about these films in which all the characters possess the aforesaid three noble qualities.

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