

The Cinematic Signature of Director Shyamaprasad



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Abstract: *Auteur theory which arose in France in the late 1940s considers the director of a film as a gifted creative individual who leaves his imprint, if not all, in most of his films. With his distinguishing film-making style and personal leitmotifs, the creator's signature sweeps through his films and the director triumphs in articulating his personality through them. In Malayalam cinema, where auteurs are finite, the director Shyamaprasad has managed to be distinguished as one, with his recurring style and themes. A mise-en-scene analysis and content analysis of his films reveals that he can be appraised as a successful auteur based on the consistency with which the director expresses a uniquely personal point of view in his films through the use of recurring themes, characters and situations. His films transcend the individual and become universal with the distinctive imprint of the unconventional director.*

Keywords: *Auteur theory, Mise-en-scene, Shyamaprasad, Malayalam cinema*

I. INTRODUCTION

The idea of the 'author,' initially applied in the domain of literature, became relevant to film also at the end of the nineteenth century. A fairly recent advancement, the idea regards the director of a film as a gifted creative individual. The primary attraction of film was a novelty. Actors were given due and more often, undue credit for the success of a film. But there existed the doubt whether an actor can be perceived as the 'author' of a film. If so, which other persons may be considered for 'authorship'? The director is the person to whom the 'author' status is commonly accorded. 'The Birth of a New Avant-garde: la camera stylo,' an article by Alexandre Astruc for Cahiers du Cinema sowed the seeds for a reassessment of the director's role. He ascertained the impression that film-making was corresponding to writing. The Auteur Policy operated by film critics in Cahiers du cinema in the 1950s, valued all the films by certain film-makers whom they considered to be the governing creative forces behind the films.

Astruc's texts on auteur theory provoked debates and changes, and was not received as 'theory.' Other French film critics, including Francois Truffaut, persistently sought after a cinema which would innovate and explore the cinematographic possibilities of the medium. They criticized the French cinema for its cinematic unimaginativeness.

Their pursuit led them to examine the films by a specific director to identify leitmotifs or signs of a distinguishing film-making style. Common themes and preoccupations and a consistent characteristic usage of mise-en-scene were found in the films of directors. In many directors, they found the 'director's style' or an 'authorial signature' linking all his films.

Francois Truffaut essay A Certain Tendency in French Cinema triggered a significant shift in assessing a director's role and argued that the tools accessible to a director were tantamount to a literary author's pen. In the same manner a writer employs his pen or a sculptor uses his tools and clay, a director can use his commercial and creative scheme of film-making. In fact, Truffaut once defiantly said that: "There are no good and bad movies, only good and bad directors" [1]. André Bazin, elucidate that the theory was a method of identifying the personal factor as a yardstick in artistic creation. It also assumes that the factors continue and in fact, advance from one film to the next. The director's triumph in articulating his personality in at least some of his films owe to the aesthetic value of the films made by him. Auteur theory proposes that the finest films will manifest the creator's 'signature' which may exhibit itself as the hallmark of his or her distinct personality or possibly even emphasize on recurring themes within the body of work.

"A true film auteur is someone who brings something genuinely personal to his subject instead of producing a tasteful, accurate but lifeless rendering of the original material [2]." In the making of any film, the director is the auteur but, however, it would be impossible for the directors to produce the entire film on their own. Hence, they join forces with others and team up with writer, cinematographer and actors, but the director is still an auteur in the sense that they supervise everyone and monitor everything in the production.

Andrew Sarris has proposed three criteria to be met by a director in examination in order to be a true auteur. Firstly, the director must possess "technical competence as a criterion of value"; his role as a technician. Secondly, the director must have a "distinguishable personality"; his role as a stylist. Sarris in his article, 'Notes on the Auteur Theory' in 1962 has said, "Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serves as his signature. The way a film looks should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels" (Sarris 562). The third, the decisive premise of the auteur theory "is concerned with interior meaning"; the director's role as an auteur. [2]

Hence, the following three basic criteria can be considered to term a director as an Auteur.

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- The consistency with which the director expresses a uniquely personal point of view in his films through the use of recurring themes, characters and situations.
- The Director's personal vision or signature should be imprinted on the films.
- The Director should have conceived the film right from its creative conception to execution rather than merely executing another's ideas.

The highly acclaimed Indian film director, Shyamaprasad's films have been selected to establish the director as an auteur. With a degree in Theatre Arts from the School of Drama, Calicut University and Masters in Media Production from the Hull University, England, he continues to push the frontiers of Malayalam cinema and television and also redefined the parameters of tele-films and documentaries. His cinematic oeuvre as a director includes 14 films out of which four have been selected for the present paper - *Agnisakshi* (1999), *Akale* (2004), *Ore Kadal* (2007) and *Arike* (2012).

A. Objective

- To prove that his films have recurring and consistent themes and techniques.
- To prove that Director Shyamaprasad can be termed as an Auteur on the basis of recurrence and consistency of themes and techniques.

II. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methods have been employed in this research. Mise-en-scene analysis and Content analysis are the two qualitative research methods employed in this qualitative research.

A. Mise-en-scene analysis

Mise-en-scene is a French term that is roughly translated as "what is put into the scene." It refers to all those properties of a cinematic image that exist independently of camera position, camera movement, and editing. The term had its origin in the theater and it has been used in the English language for theatres and films since 1833.

Mise-en-scène can be defined as the "articulation of cinematic space." In spite of many professionals being involved in the creation of a mise-en-scene, the director is the one who oversees the entire mise-en-scène and all of its elements. In critiquing films, *mise-en-scene* is valued for helping set the tone, emotion and meaning of the shot. For film, it has a broader meaning, and refers to almost everything that goes into the composition of the shot, including the composition itself: framing, movement of the camera and characters, lighting, set design and general visual environment, even sound as it helps elaborate the composition.

The various parameters analyzed under mise-en-scene are:

1. Setting
2. Props
3. Costume
4. Performance
5. Lighting

B. Content Analysis

Bernard Berelson defined Content Analysis as "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of manifest content of communications" [3]. Content analysis is a research tool focused on the actual content and internal features of media. It is used to determine the presence of certain words, concepts, themes, phrases, characters, or sentences within texts or sets of texts and to quantify this presence in an objective manner.

The various parameters analyzed under Content Analysis are:

1. Story and theme
2. Characters
3. Treatment of love
4. Representation of women
5. Realism
6. Climax

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Findings of mise-en-scene analysis

1. Setting

The settings of Shyamaprasad's films are not grandeur. With locations that are natural and not build up, simplicity and realism are apparent in them. Stories seem to happen in their own settings which add to the realistic appeal of the films. The settings are all unidentified in the films. In *Agnisakshi*, the beginning of the film is happening in an unnamed holy city where Thankam and her son go to perform her brother's rituals. The latter part of the story takes place at a *Namboothiri Illam* in an unnamed place in Kerala. The beginning of the film *Akale* takes place in an unnamed city where Kamala, Neil's wife leaves for U.S. The rest of the film takes place in some part of Kerala. The house where Margaret lives with her family is situated on a sea side. In *Ore Kadal* also, the city where the city can be identified as some urban milieu similar to Chennai or Mumbai. *Arike* happens in a city in Kerala and from the locations it can be identified as Kozhikode. The whole story of all the films happens in very few locations which are not identified. The settings are all of low budget.

2. Properties

The director has not paid much attention to the use of properties. Properties as such are absent in *Agnisakshi* and *Ore Kadal*. In *Arike*, the letters that Shanthanu writes to Kalpana can be considered as a property even though it is not used throughout the film. Being the story of a woman fascinated by glass menageries, *Akale* demands the use of it as a property throughout the film. Both the films use properties not purposely but because the story demands it.

3. Costume

The costumes in all the films are not superfluous but simple. It also helps to highlight the realistic appeal of the films. The stories are simple and so are the costumes. The director uses the costumes to showcase the nature and emotions of the characters. In *Agnisakshi*, all the characters wear costumes according to the demands of their religion and caste. The period of story also influences the costumes.

In *Akale*, the characters are Anglo-Indian and so are the costumes. *Ore Kadal* is a story of middle-class people living in an urban milieu. Their costumes are simple and not extravagant. In *Arike*, the two female characters are contrasting in terms of their character and also their costume. Kalpana being the lively woman appears in vibrant colours whereas Anuradha's outfits are sober.

4. Performance

The director Shyamaprasad has selected some of the best actors in Malayalam cinema and they have given their best performances. All the main actors have performed roles which can be considered as different and appraisable in their career. Shobhana won the Kerala State Critics Award for her performance in *Agnisakshi*. Sheela won the National Film Award for Best Supporting Actress. Meera Jasmine won the Kerala State Award and several other awards for her performance in *Ore Kadal*. Mammooty also won several awards for Best Actor in the film *Ore Kadal*.

5. Lighting

Lighting plays a key element in all the films of Shyamaprasad which have been taken for the study. He uses lighting to convey the mood of the films. In all his films natural and low-key lighting are used. This gives a realistic appeal to the films. The low-key lighting conveys the darkness in the story. He also uses close up shots to convey the emotions and turmoil in the minds of the characters. Lengthy shots are a peculiarity of his films. Lengthy and slow conversations make up lengthy shots.

B. Findings of content analysis

1. Story and theme

All the films have dealt with deep emotions and highly sensitive themes. The films deal with love, in one form or the other. *Agnisakshi* deals with the love between a husband and wife; *Akale* deals with love between mother, son and daughter; *Ore Kadal* with an extra-marital affair and *Arike* with lost love and the search for the existence of true love.

In all the films, it is seen that women are struggling in one way or the other. In *Agnisakshi*, it is struggle of Devaki to rise above the shackles of tradition and to fight for her country. In *Akale*, it is the struggle of a woman to look after her children and also the handicapped woman's struggle to find love. *Ore Kadal* shows Deepthi's struggle to realize her dreams and also Bela's resistance against the life that doomed her. *Arike* exhibits Anuradha's effort to move forward and also to find the existence of true love.

The life of most of the characters in Shyamaprasad's films is doomed right from the beginning. Devaki, Rose, Deepthi and Anuradha are victims of fate and they did not get the life they dreamt of. Relationships are complex in all the films. The characters are living a life they never wanted to and also living with people they are not comfortable with. The characters' dreams and aspirations are given more importance in the films. All the main characters have high aspirations. They have dreams which motivate them to live their life. A series of abandonments takes place in the films. Devaki leaves Unni, Neil leaves his sister and mother, Deepthi leaves his husband and Kalpana leaves her lover.

Human fragility is a recurring theme in all the films. The characters are not strong enough to stand against the fate that

dooms them. The emotional imbalance existing between couples are yet another recurring theme. In *Agnisakshi*, Devaki and Unni do not lead a happy life. In *Akale*, Neil and his wife also had a disturbed life. Jayan and Deepthi of *Ore Kadal* seem to lead a happy life but at the core it is not balanced. Shanthanu loved Kalpana deeply but failed to understand her. She left him for a better man.

2. Characters

The characters and how they have been written in the films of Shyamaprasad is different from the conventional style of characterization.

Female characters have more importance compared to male characters and it is they who take the story forward. In *Agnisakshi*, Devaki plays the most important role. Thankam plays a significantly important role throughout the film. Both the characters are strong and bold enough to take decisions about their life. Even though *Akale* is seen through the eyes of Neil, it is Rose who occupies the centre stage. Margaret is strong enough that she took care of her children after being abandoned by her husband. Deepthi, in spite of seeming to be a weak woman, is strong that she took the decision to leave her husband and to live with the man she loves. *Arike* depicts two women with whom the story moves. Kalpana and Anuradha are strong but the wavering mind of Kalpana made her take decisions to leave her lover. Anuradha resists the grasps of men who approaches her with bad intentions.

Men occupy less important roles as compared to women. Unni, Neil, Jayan, Dr.Nathan and Shanthanu are victims of what happens around them. All the male characters have a world of their own. Unni lives in the world of spirituality, Neil in the world of dreams, writing and cinema, Dr.Nathan in the world of economics and Shanthanu in a world where he dreams to live happily with Kalpana.

All the films have negative and positive characters. Negativity does not mean that the characters are cruel at heart. It is circumstances that have made some characters negative.

3. Treatment of love

Love, in all the films, is unfulfilled and discontented. None of the characters received the love they desired for and many failed to express their love. Abandonment in love is also recurring in all the films. In *Agnisakshi*, Devaki never received love from Unni. He loved her but failed to express it. She left her husband in search of her desires. In *Akale*, Neil failed to express his love to his mother, sister and wife. He left his mother and sister behind to suffer. Margaret was also abandoned by her husband. Rose is given hopes of a bright life by Freddy which was broken in a short time. In *Ore Kadal*, Jayan, struggling hard to make ends meet, forgets to satisfy his wife. Dr. Nathan also, at first, left Deepthi. He did not love her but wanted her for his physical needs. In *Arike*, Anuradha was cheated by her own cousin, which led to her loss of faith in true love. Kalpana cheated Shanthanu who loved her deeply.

4. Representation of women

Women occupy centre positions in all the films.

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The story highly depends on the past, present and future of the female characters.

Women in all the films are strong in one way or the other. Devaki and Thankam are bold enough to stand for their rights and needs. Margaret looked after her children after being abandoned by her husband. Deepthi is bold enough to take care of her child in an unknown city in spite of her husband's absence. Bela, in *Ore Kadal* is bold and strong that she lives despite life's cruelty on her. Anuradha is not the woman who remains inert to the physical and emotional advances of men but is waiting to react in rage.

Even Kalpana takes decisions in her life. There are weaknesses in every woman but they appear to be strong. All the women in Shyamaprasad's films crave to love and be loved. Devaki longs for her husband's love which he failed to give her. Margaret lost her husband and Rose waits for someone who can love her despite her physical flaws. Neil's wife Kamala also did not receive the love and care from him. Deepthi being a village born girl with dreams and aspirations crave to love and receive love. As her husband fails to satisfy her, she is drawn to the man who loved her body more than her mind. Anuradha was cheated in love by her cousin in her teenage. This incident made her loose her faith in the existence of true love. She tries to regain her faith through the success of her friend's affair. She admits being a woman who wants a man to fall desperately in love with her, so that she could then turn down his passionate appeals without another thought.

5. Realism

All the films of Shyamaprasad transcend the period, time and location and give the story a universal appeal. The films seem to be real life happenings where the audience can relate to the happenings and characters in the film. Simplicity in theme, costumes, settings and characters help in conferring the films with rationality. The *Namboothiri* family, the *illam* and the characters appear to be real life characters in the 1940s. The setting, costumes and characters in *Akale* look as if the story is happening in an Anglo-Indian family in the 1970s. The audience can relate to the fights and commotions going on in a house run by a mother. The handicapped woman's plea is relatable to anyone with inferiority complex. Extra-marital affairs are common in the society and it has been portrayed without a pinch of pomp in *Ore Kadal*. Ditching in love is not novel in the society and this happens in *Arike* where Kalpana leaves her lover who trusted and loved her deeply.

The films of Shyamaprasad do not cater to the general audience but to a group of people who is ready to accept the change and thought.

6. Climax

The climaxes of all the films leave the audience in a state of confusion and make them feel that there is more to happen. In *Agnisakshi*, Devaki goes to her spiritual life after giving relief to Thankam from her pricking conscience. *Akale* leaves the audience in a state of loss. One would definitely feel for Rose's fate and Neil's guilty feeling. *Ore Kadal* would definitely rage the audience. One would never want Deepthi to go with Dr. Nathan leaving her loving, innocent husband. *Arike* does not arrive at a perfect conclusion. The climax is a foregone conclusion, but how the director reaches there is the interesting aspect of this film.

All the films do not have a fairy-tale ending. Hence it may upset the audience who expects a happy ending. The climaxes

of the films leave the audience with a lot of unanswered questions. It is left to the audience's intuition to decide the future.

IV. CONCLUSION

According to the Auteur theory film-makers are considered to be the controlling creative forces behind the films. It chooses the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference and assumes that it continues or progresses from one film to the next. The best films will bear the maker's 'signature' and it stamps the personality of the individual. It also focuses on recurring themes in the body of work.

The Mise-en-scene analysis of the films of Shyamaprasad authenticates that the Director has a distinctive mastery of setting the film, selecting the actors and executing the cinematography. The locale of the story is unspecified anywhere in any of his films. This qualifies his films to transcend place and location and bestows a reasonable universality to his films. Simplicity in costumes and editing are accomplished throughout in every bit of his films. Low key lighting and natural lighting has been employed in all the films.

The Content Analysis of the films ascertains that the Director exploits peculiar themes ubiquitously in his film. Abandonment, quest for love, broken promises and defeat in love are explicit in every film. His films bear the signature of being Shyamaprasad's films by being easily identifiable as his work. In all the films, women are enduring nevertheless they covet for love. Scrutinizing his films reveals that Shyamaprasad makes films that have an undercurrent of commotion and turmoil occurring primarily in the minds of characters. Darkness in themes is prevalent in his films. Human fragility is also dealt meticulously in the films of Shyamaprasad. The protagonists of Shyamaprasad's films are simple individuals with fragile hearts. Female characters are given added prominence as compared with male characters. Love is handled differently in the films. The love in Shyamaprasad's films is not the 'puppy love' which is usually dealt with in conventional films. Love is deep, multifaceted and discontented in his films. All his films also deal with the quest for love.

Shyamaprasad's films are works of art in terms of the way it has been taken. Rather than taking larger than life and artistic films, the Director makes films that are realistic with which the audience can empathize. The recurrence in themes and realism has evolved to become his signature style in all his films and makes them easily identifiable as his work. For this reason, the study finds that Director Shyamaprasad fulfils the three basic criteria for being termed an 'Auteur':

- The consistency with which the director expresses a uniquely personal point of view in his films through the use of recurring themes, characters and situations.
- The Director's personal vision or signature should be imprinted on the films.
- The Director should have conceived the film right from its creative conception to execution rather than merely executing another's ideas.

The paper concludes by proving that Director Shyamaprasad can be termed an 'Auteur' on the grounds of the above criteria. His films transcend the individual and become universal with the distinctive imprint of the unconventional director. Shyamaprasad can be appraised as one of the accomplished 'Auteurs' in Malayalam cinema.

V. SCOPE

This research focuses on Auteur theory and a mise-en-scene analysis and content analysis to prove it. The director has given much importance to women in all his movies. Hence a study focusing on the portrayal of women in Shyamaparasad's movies can be done. And also the research can be broadened to include audience research to perform a deep study. It would help to find whether the themes are identifiable to the target audience.

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