

The Politics of Conjugal Love: The Couple and the Modern Nation-state in *Alaipayuthey*

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Abstract:

The paper delves into the portrayal of romantic relationships in cinema, particularly focusing on the depiction of heterosexual couples and its implications for modernity and the nation-state. It contrasts Western cinematic traditions, which often prioritize the independent couple as a symbol of modernity, with Indian cinema, where until the nineties, the autonomous couple was not recognized. Drawing on the works of various philosophers and scholars, the paper analyzes the conjugal relationship depicted in the Tamil movie "Alaipayuthey" (2000) directed by Mani Ratnam. Unlike many other films of its time, "Alaipayuthey" presents a modern conjugal relationship where the couple asserts autonomy from parental authority, despite facing challenges. The paper also explores the role of the state in legitimizing and preserving the couple's relationship, highlighting a decisive shift from traditional family dynamics. Through detailed analysis, the paper sheds light on broader societal constructs and their reflection in cinematic narratives.

Keywords —family dynamics, independent couple, modernity, nation-state, romantic relationships

I. INTRODUCTION

Romantic love of the heterosexual couple has been a staple theme in cinema all over the world. These cinematic depictions of romance often culminating in marriage have in turn proven to be inexhaustible sources for critical examinations of configurations of modernity. Philosophers like Rousseau, Diderot and Hegel constructed the independent couple as a prerequisite for the existence of a modern nation-state. Consequently, cinema, Raymond Bellour points out, being a modern art form, has been committed to the endless reproduction of the independent couple, at least in the West. However, Madhava Prasad has pointed out that this did not apply to Indian cinema, which until the nineties, did not recognise the couple as an autonomous unit. As Prasad puts it, the couple is "repeatedly reabsorbed into the parental patriarchal family and is committed to its maintenance" [3]. He says that the informal ban on scenes of intimacy between the members of the couple in Indian

cinema—a phenomenon that he refers to as "prohibition of the private"—indicated the affirmation of parental patriarchal authority that monitored the conjugal lives of their children and denied them a private space of their own. However, Prasad also adds that the primary aim of cinema is not upholding moral conservatism, but propagating commodity culture, as a consequence of which cinema also sometimes appears to present a "utopian transformation of the social" or transformations of social relations which are required for the consolidation of capitalism and the modern nation-state [3]. Another illuminating work on the implications of conjugality for the modern nation-state is Carol Pateman's *The Sexual Contract*, in which she points out that the couple is not a union of free and equal individuals, but, a micro-despotic unit since the phallic authority, which in the earlier regime was concentrated in the despotic king, is distributed among the male members of the society in the modern nation-state

who “recognise one another’s right to a space of (despotic) sovereignty: the family, and the woman, who, within it, becomes the man’s property” [3]. This despotic control that a man exercises over a woman in a conjugal relationship also allows the former to impose more traditional roles on the latter. Tejaswini Niranjana, in her analysis of South Indian cinema of the Mandal-Masjid era, points to these gendered subjectivities that formed the basis of middle-class neo-nationalism of the 1990s. While the male member of the couple depicted in these movies appears as the naturalised modern citizen, the woman’s claims to modernity and nation appear “incomplete” [2]. Drawing on these insights of Prasad, Pateman and Niranjana, my paper will analyse the conjugal relation between the central characters in the Tamil movie *Alaipayuthey* (2000) directed by Mani Ratnam in order to gain insight into the social relations desirable in a modern nation-state.

II. THE COUPLE AND THE MODERN NATION-STATE

Alaipayuthey stands out from those cinematic narratives of the period 1991-2004, which, according to Anustup Basu, had replaced the aspiration for a real Indian modernity with a kind of compensatory, virtual modernity characterised by an intensified ‘geo-televisuality’. The geo-televisual aesthetic detaches “desiring bodies, vectorized time–space modules and lifestyle ideas” from their geographies and temporalities and splice them together to give rise to “pure spectacle” [2]. The contradictions between tradition and modernity in such global assemblages are thus “not historically resolved, [only] indeterminately synchronized” [2]. While the movies that Basu analyses present modernity only as utopian or unreal visions, *Alaipayuthey* resolves the tussle between tradition and modernity within the localised milieu of the realist narrative, thus presenting modernity as a real possibility.

Alaipayuthey narrates the romance of Karthik, software engineering graduate and Shalini, a student of medicine who fall in love and marry against the wishes of their parents. Although, the couple initially enjoy the bliss of marital life, things

go awry when differences of opinion between them emerge. However, the couple finally rediscover their lost love after Shakti meets with a fatal accident and Karthik is shown the nature of true love by Ram IAS who chooses to take responsibility for his wife’s mistake.

Alaipayuthey presents a distinctly modern conjugal relationship since unlike the romantic cinema of the period dating from the sixties to the nineties in which the romantic love of individuals could materialise only under the aegis of the feudal patriarchy, the couple in this movie claim complete autonomy from their parents and set up a home of their own. Although they try to pursue their desire to marry each other with the consent of their families, the plan is foiled when their parents’ rendezvous ends in a bitter fallout. However, this hostility between their families does not prevent them from getting married as the couple discover that their love for each other had not attenuated even after a brief period of separation. When the two finally leave their homes, Shakti categorically states, “If our parents don’t need us, we don’t need them either”. The emergence of this autonomous couple, the ‘new family’ is also accompanied by the dissolution of the ‘old family’ or the parental family—soon after the couple get married, Shakti’s father passes away. According to Hegel, this dissolution of the old family is a pre-requisite for the modern nation-state since the dissolution would prevent parents from exercising undue authority over their children who, “[having] been educated to freedom of personality, and [having] come of age, ...become recognised as persons in the eyes of the law and as capable of holding free property of their own and founding families of their own, the sons as heads of new families, the daughters as wives” [1]. To prevent them from pursuing their own substantive destiny is to undermine the ethical life that characterises a modern nation-state.

Niranjana has pointed out that the male and female protagonists in South Indian cinema of the Mandal-Masjid era are not equally citizens of the modern nation-state since while both men and women may be shown to be modern, the woman is often less modern in comparison to men. Often these premodern attributes are not natural to women,

but enforced on them by men, owing to what Pateman refers to as the ‘micro-despotic’ character of the relationship between the members of the couple. *Alaipayuthey* is set in the turn of the century when the nation identified itself as an emerging techno-financial global power. Consequently, nationalist aspiration can no longer be articulated by a government employee like Rishi Kumar in Roja whose patriotism lay in convincing separatist elements out of their agenda. In contrast, the new nationalist is Karthik, a software engineering graduate who establishes a startup company with his friends. Always clad in Western clothes, listening to techno-rhythms of a transnational music, seeking world news, desiring to expand his company from the local to the world market, Karthik, is the natural citizen of the of the new nation-state characterised by its cosmopolitan and consumerist culture. Shakti too is modern as she is a working professional and does not shy away from expressing her desire to Karthik when the two first meet at the village wedding. However, as the two grow closer, Karthik schools her into more traditional expectations of women. When Karthik invites Shakti to a family gathering at his home, he asks her not to wear salwars—her go-to choice—since they befitted ‘circus women’ and insists that she wear a silk saree like a ‘good’ woman. He also mockingly chides her when she loses her mangalsutra which he had in fact hid from her. Thus, Shakti is actively discouraged from adopting any of the markers of modernity, such as wearing a salwar or casting aside the mangalsutra, even if inadvertently. After marriage, Karthik expects her to perform all household chores including fixing him his morning tea “like a good wife” or shopping for domestic requirements, although she too has a job like him. Thus, the gendered subjectivities of the modern nation-state, which Niranjana points to, often arise from the despotic relation between the members of a couple.

Alaipayuthey presents the social relations characteristic of a modern milieu not only by presenting the couple as an autonomous, micro-despotic unit, but also by activating a scopic regime that reminds spectators of their atomised existence in a capitalist society. Prasad has pointed out that,

unlike cinema in the West, Indian popular cinema acknowledges the presence of the audience and sometimes even seeks their participation. One of the ways in which this is achieved is by seeking the audience’s complicity in monitoring the intimacy between the members of the couple—a scopic regime characteristic of feudal family romance—which in turn creates the illusion of a community. An instance of this scopic regime that creates an imaginary unity between the viewing subject and the object of its gaze can be discerned in the song Yaaro...yaarodi. For most part of the song, the camera directs a godly gaze from above at the proceedings of the traditional wedding ceremony unfolding below, giving the spectator the illusion that s/he is an overseeing authority. Further, besides those present onscreen, the unseen spectator, whose gaze coincides with that of the camera’s, also tosses flowers on the couple as they tie the knot. But this imaginary unity is dissolved when the couple turn to each other for, say a kiss, with the result that the camera becomes an unauthorised voyeur. This secession of the spectator from the proceedings onscreen, Prasad writes, “acts as a reminder of the subject’s solitude, the condition of individuals in a capitalist society” [3]. This kind of scopic regime is activated in *Alaipayuthey* when the camera tries to obtain surreptitious glimpses into the life of Karthik and Shakti in the initial days following their moving in together. The couple, who declare their autonomy from the feudal patriarchal authority when they decide to move in together, also deny its scopic authority. The camera is no more the overseeing authority, but an unauthorised voyeur, as it pries on their private moments in the song, ‘Kadhal Sadugudu’, from hidden spots like a corner in the elevator and a crevice in the wall. The denial of the audience’s presence is especially evident in the last scene of the song when the spectator, despite gazing directly (via the camera) at a mirror is not ‘reflected’ on it. At the same time, the mirror reflects the couple who are seen sharing a kiss. The mirror therefore ‘reflects’ the truth that the viewing subject and the object of its gaze are part of disjunctive spaces and that the former is therefore inconsequential to the progression of the narrative. The spectator who is thus shut out is reminded of

her/his isolation, an attribute characteristic of capitalist societies.

Prasad has pointed out that the 'modern' family romance in the Hindi film is characterised by two resolutions—the first, enforced by the feudal authority, the other, following immediately after, enforced by the modern state. Here, the acknowledgement of the authority of the modern state is only formal, not real, since the modern state is only a supplement to the traditional authority in resolving the narrative crisis. However, in *Alaipayuthey*, the narrative crisis is resolved solely by the representative of the modern state. Although the couple enjoy a brief period of conjugal bliss after they set up their own home, this phase is soon disrupted when petty conflicts emerge, that acquire mammoth proportions. When the possibility of reconciliation eventually arises, Shakti meets with an accident and falls into a coma, thus threatening to rip the couple apart forever. At this juncture, Ram IAS, a state official, steps into the scene (since it was his wife who caused the accident), directing the police to reunite Karthik with Shakti at the hospital, and even signing the hospital paperwork in her husband's absence so that her surgery is not delayed. Further, in taking over the responsibility of the accident from his wife, Ram illustrates the nature of true love before Karthik, and even assures Karthik that the power of true love will bring his wife back to life. Once Karthik is thus enlightened, Shakti awakens and the conjugal relation of the couple is restored. Thus, the state, in the form of

Ram IAS, plays a crucial role in reuniting the couple and restoring their conjugal bliss.

The pre-eminence accorded by the narrative to the State can also be discerned when the latter is recognised throughout the narrative as the unquestionable guarantor of the legitimacy of the couple's relationship. Although Varadarajan, Madhavan's father, is a strong patriarch, he concedes that he cannot oppose his son even if the latter decides to marry 'a street woman' since Karthik has the right to pursue his wishes under the law. Shakti too echoes this sentiment when she tells Karthik that if they do a register marriage, their parents would be unable to separate them.

III. CONCLUSIONS

In recognising the couple as an independent unit and the state as the pre-eminent guarantor of the legitimacy of their relationship, *Alaipayuthey* marks a decisive shift from the modern family romance in which the subsumption of the feudal family romance in the modern is only formal, not real.

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