

Review
Premchand

The *Run* and Rise of *Kalyani* and J.Geetha



Run Kalyani Poster

Run Kalyani, India, Malayalam, 2019, 100 M. Directed by J. Geetha

A relentless run from one kitchen to another. That is the story of all Kalyanis who work as maids or cooks. But J.Geetha's *Kalyani* runs and leaps into the history of Malayalam Cinema. And thus, the Creation creates the Creator! For *Kalyani* the character, that jump is a decision made in the moment. But for the director J.Geetha, this comes out of a life-long struggle and waiting. *Run Kalyani* has yet to be seen and appreciated. I do not want to write and lessen its beauty. But we must mark the struggle to reach this film as a significant point in her-history.

Selections:

Run Kalyani garnered national attention when it won the Special Jury Award at the Kolkata

International Film Festival, Nov 2019. But we have to note that this film was not selected at IFFK or IFFI. Then it won the FIPRESCI (International Film Critics Association) award for best Indian film in the recently concluded Thrissur International Film Festival (Mar 2020). No other film posed a challenge to the Jury, comprising of Premendra Mazumder, the secretary of FIPRESCI-India as jury chairman, Madhu Eravankara and myself. *Run Kalyani* was valued above all the other Indian films including the Gujarati film *Hellaro* by Abhishek Shah that won the National Award for Best Film last year. We had not discussed our response to the films till the last meeting for which the three of us had a list of three films and our rationale for it. All the three of us had *Run Kalyani* as our first film and so the discussion required only a few minutes for a

decision.



J Geetha receiving FIPRESCI-India Award at Thrissur

I am writing about this process because the fact that *Run Kalyani* was rejected by both IFFK and IFFI became and is controversial. Choosing films for a festival is a complex process wherein sensibilities are tested. One can only look on in amazement at the infinite possibilities. Possibilities are opened up and shut down too. The result is totally dependent on the Jury. But even that happens according to majority opinion. So the possibility is always there that the best will be kept out following a majority decision. That is the severe reality. And that happens often. And again and again. The Jury chairman of IFFK and IFFI were T.V.Chandran in Thiruvananthapuram and Priyadarshan in Goa respectively. I have only this much to say: It is clear that J.Geetha's film can be kept out even if a person who has argued for and made women-oriented films like *Hema's Lovers*, *The Search of Alice*, *Mankamma*, *Susanna*, *Lesson One: a Wail*, *Beyond the Wail*, *Malayalam-Earth*, is the Jury chairman! Known in Kerala as a founding member of the first feminist organization and one who heralded feminist film criticism, J.Geetha's first film ends up not being selected either for Pan-

orama or for IFFK! Here during selections, notwithstanding the significance of sensibilities, it is the politics of the Unconscious that is working! My reading is that the Unconscious is very powerful.

The emergence of Kalyani:

Run Kalyani is not incidental to Malayalam Cinema. It is a beautiful creation by J.Geetha who has been running and rooting for Women's Cinema for decades. The signs of the dreams of women to go forward is set in Kalyani's untiring struggle for survival. Each day after all her cooking and cleaning work, Kalyani returns to her small confined attic where a dream of a film from the very depths of her soul lulls her to sleep. But we see her lover. Lover in the attic! One who is constantly writing and rewriting in the attic as she returns tired after her day's work as a cook.

The director deftly threads the various shades of male oppression, conjugal silences, extra-marital love, kindness, women's sisterhood, fantasies and changing socio-political images. Thus when a feminist film is made, its theory is not imposed on you through its images or words. Instead when the theoretical understandings are revealed in the lived reality of the characters, it becomes a different aesthetic experience.

It is this praxis that she is engaged in that has allowed J.Geetha to capably plough a new path with her very first film. This makes her stand apart from other women filmmakers in Malayalam. It is the male-ness of the gaze that she demolishes with her female-look.

We now know from films made by women that just because a woman is directing a film that film will not become *sthree-cinema* (*penn-cinema*) or l'cinéma feminine. It is this challenge that J.Geetha overcomes with her *Run Kalyani*.

The three women of *Run Kalyani* – Garggi Ananthan as Kalyani, Meera Nair as Nirmala, the silenced wife in the house, Sathi Premji (the great actor Premji's daughter) as Rukmini, the 'big-mother' of Kalyani – deserve special mention. It is the visualization of their existential-experiences and not a declaration of theoretical statements that reveals the aesthetic beauty of the film.

J.Geetha's life-partner Ian McDonald is a producer of the film. Whether the ideological constraints of Film can be overthrown depends on who puts money into the film. Even as Malayalam Cinema reaches 90 years, the fact that it still does not have a women's cinema is because of the patriarchal values of Capital. There will be no change just because the producer's name is that of a woman. Fundamentally, the producer is the ultimate editor! In that sense, *Run Kalyani* owes its realization to Ian McDonald. Also, it had a team of people who are renowned names in Indian Cinema. Madhu Neelakandan, B Ajithkumar, Sreevalsan J Menon team handled the camera, editing and music respectively. They emboldened Geetha to overcome budgetary constraints by their backing and creative investment. Moreover, the legendary actor Madhu by enacting a small but beautiful role bestowed a star-feel

to *Run Kalyani*. Two other participants who supported from mainstream cinema are Tara Kalyan and Nandu.



J Geetha

Forward l'cinema feminine!

Run Kalyani is the realization of the journey undertaken by Geetha from the mid 80s as a student, research-scholar and feminist-activist. She was a founding-member of Kerala's first feminist organisation Prachodana. When the first feminist group Bodhana began in Kozhikode, Geetha was a fellow-traveller. Her interrogation and un-picking of every field from a woman's perspective in those times culminated in a feminist reading of cinema. This led her to go forward with short films like *Woman with a Video Camera* in 2005 and *Akam* in 2007. In 2008, she received the Goteburg Film Festival's Development Fund for her first feature script but she could not find a producer for the film. And, ten years later, she made *Run Kalyani*. Many producers may have heard her stories in the last ten years. But the fact that Capital is male is the basic prob-

lem with Malayalam cinema and that is why it does not have a 'sthree-cinema'. The masculine space of Malayalam cinema is hardly a slanting tree that one can run up to and reach the top. Maybe, one needs more courage and daring to attempt it than for climbing the Hi-

malayas. That they did it is the achievement of Geetha and *Run Kalyani*. That the director can reach further heights is evident from this creation from the soil, with deep and definite roots. Run, Geetha, run!

Mr. Premchand is a Member of FIPRESCI-India.