

Critique

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Navarasa: Emotions That Embody Us



‘If it cannot hold and protect the trees the soil is useless; If it cannot empathise and care for others the heart is useless’-Thirukkal 576. This comes before the opening episode of the Netflix show *Navarasa* which released in August. The show talks about the main nine emotions we feel and express.

Since the beginning of time humans have tried to find purpose of their life on this beautiful Earth and the emotions they feel are many with most not having the right name to them. As the debate of whether language is sufficient to describe emotions go the artists of the world have been trying to figure it out through music, paint, writing and other forms of art. Bharatamuni developed the different emotions which

he called ‘*rasa*’ in the Indian performing arts during the 1200s. It has been used in all forms of art in India like acting, dance, music etc. *Navarasa* is one such attempt created by Mani Ratnam as he enters the OTT platform for the first time in an effort to support the employees of Tamil film industry during the pandemic.

Divided into nine parts with portraying a different *rasa*, the show caught the attention of the Indian audience sans the language barrier as it brought together the best cast, directors, and technical crew of Tamil film industry all in one show. The trailer which was the title theme song induced much anticipation as it was beautifully done.

The first tale *Edhiri* which talks about *Karuna* or compassion is one where the murderer of a government official seeks forgiveness from the official's wife portrayed by Revathi. She tells him that she is in no place to forgive him for the murder as she herself is trying to forgive herself for all the mistakes and all the 'what if's' of their life. She shows compassion not by forgiving him but by admitting that she is at fault too, while Dheena may have killed her husband physically, she killed him years ago over a silly quarrel by not talking to him. What or rather who makes Dheena to take this step of seeking forgiveness is ghost of the official played by Prakash Raj as he tells Dheena that this act will keep haunting him until he finds redemption for his actions. He highlights a running theme of the next eight stories to come. That there are always consequences for our actions and we must find a way to balance our past and present to prevent a havoc of the present and future. The future of not just us but those around us, family or friends.

The next story *Summer of 92* expressing *Hasya* or laughter garnered a mixed response from the audience the incident narrated by the actor in the school function about his years as a teen and the events that changed his life in the summer of 92'. While the audience of today might be ridiculing as to why there were casteist undertones and overtones which ended up showing more of the emotion of disgust, one must also consider the other side and the reason why this story might have been chosen. The story shows the stronghold and prevalence of caste over the lives of people. Velusamy himself admits that fate had an important role to play in his life, but underneath that there was a huge role played by the upper caste school, teachers and villagers as they kept failing him and taunting him with lower caste slurs and giving him the task of hiding the dog so it doesn't interfere with the upper caste teacher's marriage alliance. These incidents are looked at in a positive way by the school only because he succeeded in his life and came back as a chief guest. The fact that it was inspired by a real-life incident shows that even though we might want to deny the presence and role of caste in our lives, especially those of the lower castes in the so called modern 21st century, it does

play a significant role. This story can be seen as mocking and laughing at the audience rather than the other way around.

In the story depicting *Veera* or valour, *Thunintha Pinn* it is a Naxalite, or the ones who are breaks the law who teaches a young military officer about courage whilst being captured by him. What he mutters in pain and highlights the audience about the struggles of the voiceless people in the forest with their land claimed as government property. A crucial scene is when he gives advice to the soldier as the gun is pointed to him about having courage to shoot. We see the courage of Muthulakshmi, his wife as she becomes the soldier of their home while carrying a baby. It shows that courage comes in many forms, and not just the armed forces as we all tend to think and asks us to question the true meaning of the emotion called courage.

Arvind Swami's directorial debut through the story of anger *Roudhram* shows how one incident has two completely different reactions depicting the same emotion of *Raudra* or anger. After Arul realises his mother had to resort to prostitution with the owner of the house in order to fulfil their basic needs, he kills the man. The same situation brings out an IPS officer with anger issues of torturing those in custody, later revealed as Anbu, his sister. She gets so consumed with anger that she isn't able to visit their mother on her deathbed and tells her brother that she is dying everyday with the anger eating her from the inside. Her brother ends up justifying their mother's actions as he understands the grey area between right and wrong of prostitution being labelled as wrong whereas his sister becomes part of the institution where the wrong is punished with no place for the shades of grey. The choices that the three characters make end up defining their futures and their perceptions of the world.

One story that stood out and kept the audience on grip throughout was *Inmai* expressing the emotion *Bhayanaka* with the title ironically meaning the absence of fear. The director uses skeletons of the past in the lives of the characters rather than using horror which is the mainstream option. The fear and dread that the past brings to the present is more real in our lives than the possibility of supernatural

elements. No matter how many good deeds done in trying to redeem herself of the lying and casting a spell on her old husband leading to his death, the djinn comes back in the form of Siddarth as he seeks to avenge his father's death. The song has strong lyrics as it tells the audience ethics will eventually come to destroy us for the evil done in the past. Here the reference is taken from the Islam but each religion of the world has their own version of the same concept of what goes around comes around and *Karma*.

Another story and emotion that runs in the concept of the past affecting the future but with a twist of science fiction is 'Project Agni' depicting *adbhuta* where Vishnu (Arvind Swami), a scientist talks about a theory of future controlling our lives like a computer simulated program controlled by the Annunaki, a supremely intelligent alien species. By inventing a machine called the drifter he believes that he can access the laid out maps of our lives in our subconscious and even the 'Creator'. And if one tries to meddle with the links created between the past, present and future the consequences could be fatal and superpowers actually come into existence. He ends up facing the consequences as he wakes up and realises he changed something in his past and does not have wife and child anymore. This episode brings several questions to the audience about our lives and how they have turned out to be and if everything is already mapped out for us, what is the point of doing anything, or what is the point of having choices in life?

The story *Shanta* behind the emotion of peace is set in the backdrop of the LTTE struggle in Sri Lanka as the soldiers struggle for peace within themselves and for their nation while on a rescue

mission of a puppy. Nilavan ends up finding peace within himself as he dies while thanking them for not shooting in the rescue of the puppy.

The story of *Payasam* depicting *Bibhasta* or disgust is brought out through a common occurring of everyday households. The story of jealousy in every family where one member achieves and succeeds more than the others ends up overshadowing everyone else, sans bar of age or relationship. Here is a person of seventy odd years jealous of his nephew for succeeding in life and getting his daughters married whereas his daughter's marriage failed. The look of pure disgust on his daughter's face as he spills the wedding payasam out of jealousy captures the emotion aptly.

The last story depicting love, *Guitar Kambi Mele Nindru* ends the series on a light-hearted and beautiful love story filled with songs. With the usual tale of girl inspiring the musician destined for greatness. Considering the show was filled with offbeat stories, maybe this could have been one too and help break a few stereotypes of love stories that hasn't been told.

The show brings to light many questions and statements that we have taken for granted. The show takes several stories that the audience can relate to in their lives and brings out the rasas through them. But the series got a wide range of responses and emotions with few stories hitting the mark of expressing the rasa aptly and few others not so much.

The title song by A.R. Rahaman and the video captures many emotions and the attention of the audience. The show is a mixture of offbeat and usual stories combined to form an engaging watch through which many lessons can be learned.

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