

Mani Ratnam's Kaatru Veliyidai flies into turbulence

April 11
2017

10:16 PM



A scene from Kaatru Veliyidai.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Last week, Mani Ratnam's Kaatru Veliyidai opened. But it turned out to be a huge disappointment for me. Ratnam did not seem to be in his best elements. Otherwise, why would he present such a poor show with his latest outing?

Ratnam is one director whose movies promise above-average fare. Sometimes, he can be wonderful, like he was with the early-on-in-his-career, the Revathi-starrer Mouna Raagam, or the Kamal Haasan-portrayed Nayakan. I still feel that Ratnam's best till date was Nayakan, where Haasan plays a Mumbai don with a rarely-seen magnetic appeal. It was a fantastic effort, made possible by the nuanced performance of Haasan and the amazing helming ability of Ratnam.

While I quite enjoyed films like Alaipayuthey (about a couple's post-marital squabbles with Madhavan and Shalini) and O Kadhal Kanmani (beautifully played by Dulquer Salman and Nitya Menon, who decide to live in a relationship without tying the knot), I was not so impressed with Roja (though the songs by A R Rahman here were hauntingly melodious) or Bombay or even Agni Natchathiram.

While Ratnam can propel us to the skies, he can also dash us to the ground – as he did with his ambitious bi-lingual Raavan/Raavanan. This was awful, and I do not even know why someone with such impeccable cinematic taste and insight like Marco Mueller chose this work for his Venice Film Festival in 2010.

In all fairness to Ratnam, Kaatru Veliyidai is not as bad as Raavan/Raavanan. But then the story of Kaatru Veliyidai did not convince me. I could never fathom why a modern girl, a doctor by profession (Aditi Rao Hydari as Dr Leela Abraham), would behave like a character from Jane Austen's world of Victorian morals and compulsions. In England of those times, a woman's greatest obsession was marriage, and I have seen how Austen's young lasses latched on to men, who were brutish and disdainful – even positively cruel. I saw all these traits in Air Force Wing Commander Varun essayed by Karthi in Kaatru Veliyidai.

Varun or VC, as he called, is almost sadistic in the manner he treats his lover, Leela, in the way he humiliates her in the presence of his Air Force mates. His moments of caresses turn into seconds of violence at the drop of a hat. He kisses her, and soon loses his temper and twists her arm till she winces in pain. And this man in national uniform seemingly enjoys it, and Ratnam tries to explain this abnormal behaviour in just about a single short scene – where we see Varun's dysfunctional father who is known to have hurt his wife.

But notwithstanding Varun's frequent outbursts (followed by apologies), Miss Doctor much like Austen's heroines, keeps running back to her tormentor, as if he were the last man in Kashmir, where Ratnam sets his story in the midst of snow and scenic splendour.

Varun is really a callous cad, and we see this right at the start of the movie – when he treats one of his girlfriends with almost utter contempt. As the two quarrel on a lonely road, a truck bangs into their vehicle, and the grievously wounded pilot is wheeled into a hospital where Leela has just taken up an assignment.

Thereafter, Ratnam takes the boringly predictable path. Varun and Leela fall in love, despite the man's roguish behaviour. She weeps, but winks away her tears and tumbles back into his arms – till she gets pregnant. He is not ready to play father. Forget being a parent, he is not even willing to be a spouse, I would think.

Finally, Leela discovers that she has some dignity and self-respect left. She leaves, and he flies away to a heroic fall during the 1999 Kargil war with Pakistan.

Taken prisoner and beaten to pulp in a Rawalpindi prison, Varun finds himself stripped of all his arrogance, and realises how angelic Leela was, and the paradise he kicked away.

Kaatru Veliyidai – through a back and forth narrative style – shows us how Varun and two other jail inmates plot to flee. In what appears amateurish, Ratnam's escape drama is flat, sans any thrill and feels out-dated. Varun and his men drill a hole in the wall (yawn), and run away on a rain-drenched day. But they are caught. They make a second attempt (making Pakistani jailers look downright silly) and reach

home.

Several critics and bloggers have panned this part of Kaatru Veliyidai.

(Though, Ratnam is supposed to have based this escape sequence on a book, Four Miles To Freedom, written by Faith Johnston, who documented the actual story of three Indian prisoners who fled from Pakistan in 1972, the cinematic visualisation leaves much to be desired.)

Many years pass after Varun's escape, and he keeps searching for his beloved across horizons and in cold wildernesses. I would have stopped the story here. But Mr Ratnam being Mr Ratnam has to give us a fairytale end, which is most unconvincing. And it lacks that climatic punch.

An equally exasperating minus point is casting. Good actors like KPAC Lalitha (a favourite of the celebrated auteur, Adoor Gopalakrishnan) and Delhi Ganesh are wasted in innocuous roles, and Karthi, minus his moustache, has not really gone anywhere since his Paruthiveeran days. He still rolls his eyes, and retains the same old mannerisms which we saw in him years ago. And, he seems to be more in love with his sunglasses than the girl in his latest outing with Mani. After Madhavan and Dulquer, Karthi pales in contrast.

Yes, Hydari comes as somewhat of a salvation. A certain natural ease and flair help her to walk through a part which is not very well written. At least, her character does not fit into the mould of a modern woman, educated and sensitive to atrocity.

I was not impressed with Rahman's score either. For me, he has not been able to fly past his Roja numbers.

But, yes, Ravi Varman's cinematography is nothing short of divine, and visually as arresting as it is in most of Ratnam's earlier creations. However, photography is only one part of cinema that helps seduce us into the story. Kaatru Veliyidai did not captivate me here. I found the plot passe, performances perfunctory.

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