

Meiyazhagan on Netflix underlines male bonding without usual melodrama



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Once Alfred Hitchcock, the master of the macabre, famously said that a movie should be only as long as one can hold one's bladder. True enough, his works kept to this length or just about, and they said everything that needed to be in those minutes. But Indian writers and directors have often stepped beyond this point, stretching their films beyond this mark. C Prem Kumar, who gave us that captivating 96 with Vijay Sethupathi and Trisha, has now dropped his latest, a pre-Diwali release, *Meiyazhagan*, now on Netflix.

While his 2018 96 was about unrequited love in the typically Romeo and Juliet fashion (I have been wondering why the director has not planned a sequel to that), his latest movie is about male bonding with Arvind Swamy (who shot to fame with Roja) and Karthi.

Swamy's Arulmozhi returns to Thanjavur after 22 years to attend his cousin Bhuvaneshwari's (Swathi) wedding. For him, it was a trip filled with nostalgia. The city holds bittersweet memories of his first love that ended with his family having to leave the city to relocate to Chennai. But the story is not about this couple, but the friendship that springs between Arulmozhi and Karthi's Meiyazhagan. Despite feeling irritated with Meiyazhagan's intrusive quality, the two men settle down to a fine bonding, which reminded me of Ang

Lee's 2005 *Brokeback Mountain* with Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal. Although there is no homosexual relationship between Meiyazhagan and Arulmozhi (like in *Brokeback Mountain*), the bond is strong here as well.

Prem Kumar keeps his film away from the usual melodramatic mishmash, and the narrative is sweetly poignant. But where he errs is the length. The movie need not have been 178 minutes long for a story that could have been narrated in just about 100 minutes and with far greater impact.

However, what keeps the movie moving is the humour hyphenated with sorrow of lost love and the angst that comes with displacement. And the cinematography is great, capturing the comforts of a small town where the Big Temple forms the centre of just about everything. Indeed, once temples provided the ideal place for lovers to meet and families to get together. They also served as a hotbed of gossip.

Finally, if one were to ask me which of the two I liked better—96 or *Meiyazhagan*—I would readily root for the first. There was something undeniably sweet and strong about it. Vijay Sethupathi's brilliant piece of performance and Trisha's ability to sink into the character enriched the work.

I really hope we will get to see what happens to them after they part at the airport. A sequel to 96 may be a great idea.

The writer is a senior movie critic