



F I L M

## *Aan Poove* (Male Flower)

*Alternative Network of Media People, 20 minutes*

**Director : P. Balan**

**Review : Sevanti Ninan**

**M**ALE Flower is a short, taut film, shot in the Kerala countryside whose extraordinary lushness and beauty makes the deprivation of the people seem especially paradoxical. It chronicles a single family's desperate struggle to survive. It has an unusual dimension: the protagonist in whose words the film is narrated is a girl who becomes a boy. And through the experiences that accompany this transformation emerges a telling portrait of the status of the female in what is believed to be India's most socially progressive state.

The film was screened in February in Delhi as part of Travelling Film South Asia, a selection of fifteen films that will be screened across the world. The films have been chosen from the fifty-five which were shown as part of the first festival of sub-continental documentary titled Film South Asia, held in Kathmandu in October 1997.

This is a film without frills. It opens silently with a terse statement: Sreedharan lived a life as a girl till the age of 18 and as a boy thereafter. It is narrated through his experiences. There is no background music. Instead, the director uses natural sounds. And it is narrated in a laconic monotone by the young man.

He was born a girl to an uprooted tribal family nestled on the banks of

the river Bharatapuzha in North Kerala, and named Seethalakshmi. The family had eight girls and an indifferent breadwinner in the father, who much preferred drinking to working. The children worked in a match factory and handed over their earnings to their mother. As the daughters grew old enough to marry, the family sank into debt.

Seethalakshmi attributes at least some of the family's travails to the fact that the children were all girls. One daughter is married off, but the family later realises that what the groom put around her neck is a thread without a *thali*. The girl is repeatedly sent back home for each pregnancy and then finally dumped by the "husband". Says Sreedharan,



the narrator, "In this family of all girls there was no one to question him." There is also the feeling that a son would have been a more effective breadwinner for the rest of the family. He would have been able to go further afield to look for work. Meanwhile, the second daughter gets married in borrowed jewellery, the father gets deeper into debt, and the mother toils away in the paddy fields, even when it is raining.

Depression, anxiety, and a feeling of hopelessness leads Seethalakshmi to contemplate suicide. She spends sleepless nights worrying, and then she decides to go away and return only when she has become a boy. There are hints off and on through the film that she was undergoing a transformation in her sexuality. While working at the match factory she had confided in a friend that her body felt strange: the friend had advised her to see a doctor. The narrator says the doctor was the first person to call him Sreedharan. The abiding mystery of the film is how a total change in sex actually occurs. It is just not explained. She goes away, and returns a male. This reviewer was unable to make contact with the film maker in Kerala to try to get some explanation.

Until she became a boy Seethalakshmi did household chores like her sisters: she washed her own clothes, cleaned the compound, and helped in the house. But when she became the only son in the family her life changed in big and small ways. "Now I leave my clothes," says Sreedharan, "and let my sisters wash them." When he visits his sisters regularly his brothers-in-law are happy to see him. When he speaks, his father and mother give weight to what he has to say. Says one of the sisters in the film, "Our children now have someone they can call uncle."

When he was a girl he couldn't walk about freely, he couldn't swim in

the stream, and he got a scolding if he came home late after a bath. Girls are such a burden, comments one of the sisters during the film. You can't let them go out after sundown and after they are married they come home for their confinement.

While he was a girl Sreedharan could not take a job away from home. After the sex change his first job was at a construction site. Then he took a job at a hotel, and subsequently he travelled all over the state selling TV and fridge covers. "I could travel freely at any time of day or night. I saw many places." He buys small gifts for his family. His mother and sisters turn to him for support. The film does not convey enough about how Sreedha-

ran's mother and sisters have adjusted to his becoming a son. It is also silent on how their neighbours and community reacted to his change of sex, and whether the attitude of the local elders and his peers towards him, changed.

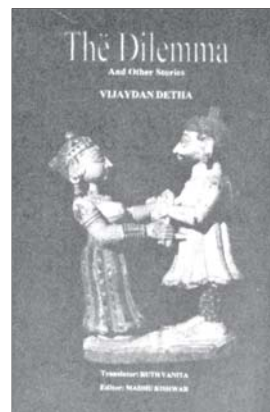
The story of the transformation unfolds against a visual narration of everyday life in rural Kerala. The camera work is very evocative and frequently dwells on the river banks near his home where clothes are put out to dry, and where Sreedharan walks alone, or lies on the sand and watches trains go by. It is an unusual, tightly edited, tautly narrated film, and it makes a statement that you remember long after. □

## The Dilemma and Other Stories

By Vijaydan Detha

Translator: Ruth Vanita

Editor: Madhu Kishwar



Vijaydan Detha's stories provide a scintillating glimpse of the rich repertoire of folk tales of Rajasthan — stories in which women challenge and subvert male defined institutions and norms without losing their dignity and femininity. This collection stands out for affirming the joy of living and its vision of a more egalitarian and mutually satisfying man-woman relationship.

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