

Mudal Mariyadhai

This award winning Tamil film, directed by Bharatiraja and recently telecast by Doordarshan, centres around Sivaji Ganesan, acting Manickkam, a landlord who wins the respect of all the villagers for his honesty and dignity. But, unfortunately, his virtue is established too easily, at the expense of his wife, a shrew, whom he married at the request of her father, his uncle, in order to give her illegitimate child a father. He himself has no marital relations with her. This behaviour is evaluated as heroism, even sublimity, but there is not an iota of understanding for the wife. It turns out, however, that the hero was compensated for his sacrifice by being left all of his father-in law's property, and his wife punished by being left none of it.

Having made a scapegoat of the wife to establish the hero's virtue, the film proceeds to offer up the mistress in the same cause. She is a poor and beautiful migrant worker, Kuyili, who develops an attachment for the middle aged hero, arising from respect and pity. He turns to her for sympathy, but is careful to specify that he regards her as a child. The relationship remains nonsexual, but his wife as well as the village *panchayat* construe it as an affair and condemn him.

Enraged, Manickkam decides to defy society by living with Kuyili, but she has already flown. On her way out of the village, she meets his wife's ex-lover, and kills him to safeguard the hero's honour. After spending many years

in jail, she returns to Manickkam dying in her hut, where he had lived all this time, and she dies immediately afterwards, presumably of heartbreak.

One has been noticing a tendency in some Indian films to justify bigamy and extramarital liaisons for men, on the grounds that a man finds only partial fulfilment of his needs for intellectual companionship, sympathy or spiritual camaraderie, in monogamy. Rarely is sexuality acknowledged as a major factor.

In this movie, Manickkam's ambivalence towards Kuyili seems inexplicable. Women's sexuality, when acknowledged, as in Manickkam's wife, is illicit. It is one of the movie's strengths that Kuyili does proclaim her adult sexual love for Manickkam, but this proclamation is frittered away in a song.

The rarefication of the relationship also evades the implications of Manickkam's being a landlord and Kuyili a poor woman who plies a ferry for a living. She languishes in jail for a feudally motivated action inspired by loyalty to the master, which is presented as an act of sublime love. Like so many heroines of myth and literature, she asserts her courage only on behalf of the hero. Finally, it is hard to accede to the movie's demand that we bestow supreme respect (*mudal mariyadhai*) on the hero. A man who kicks his wife and lets the woman who loves him go to jail for him falls short even of decency.

— Rajeshwari Sundarajan