

Achamillai, Achamillai

(I Do Not Fear) Tamil Film

Over the last decade and a half, K. Balachander's work has emerged as distinctive, when compared to the majority of Indian films, even though it is sometimes marred by bad taste and concessions to the box office. The best thing in his cinema has been the depiction of women. Invariably, women are the central figures, independent and even aggressive, with a passionate underlay to their character.

The heroine of *Thaneer, Thaneer*, the national award winner, was such a woman who has the strength to survive in very adverse circumstances and to defy her policeman husband when he acts as an instrument of repressive forces against her people. *Natpathezhay Natkal* (47 days) is based on a story that is all too familiar these days. When the heroine reaches France with her new husband, she finds that he is already married to a Frenchwoman. She is helped in her escape by another Indian woman and her story is narrated to a sympathetic woman film director who hopes to make a movie of her story. In an early and extremely controversial movie, *Arangetram*, Balachander took on the brahman community when he portrayed a young brahman woman becoming a callgirl in order to support her family.

Achamillai, Achamillai too dwells on the theme of the woman who has the courage to confront a husband when she feels he is on the wrong path, and of the solidarity of women. Thenmozhi, the daughter of an ex freedom fighter, falls in love with, unabashedly courts, and finally marries an idealistic young schoolmaster who has great good influence over the villagers. Local politicians quickly exploit his popularity and he is wooed first by one party and then another to become an elected representative. He grows rich quickly but has to compromise more and more deeply to keep himself in power.

As she grows progressively disillusioned by her husband's political compromises, Thenmozhi tries to regain her influence over him by using an age old tactic. She withholds her sexual favours even though this tests her resolve to the utmost because she is still in love with him. But the tactic must fail because her husband, with typical male aplomb, takes a mistress to cater to his sexual needs. Thenmozhi loses but she fights every inch of the way. When she decides to leave him, she loses the support of everyone, including her brother and father, as they also become indebted to her husband for various favours.

Though she does not find it easy to survive on her own, slowly, her strength and compassion, make her a confidante of the women in the village. She learns of the rape of one woman by her husband's henchman, of the murder of another by the same henchman and his gang, and of the terrorisation and ultimate killing of her husband's mistress and her rival when the woman finds out about the earlier murder.

Thenmozhi could have been built up into an influential village figure, a political rival to her husband. Instead, the director turns her into an avenging agent. As her husband's crimes grow blacker and more numerous, and when all her remonstrations fail, she decides to kill him publicly at an independence day meeting. She is arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment.

This killing, it might be argued, is a futile act, and hence a deeply despairing, pessimistic one. Its import is not even symbolic since the police attribute it to the anger of the woman scorned. No one sees it for what it is—an assassination. As straightforward political satire, as a morality play on the corruptions of power, the film has a cynical cast to it that is dispiriting.

But so profound is actress Sarita's interpretation of Thenmozhi's state of mind that we are able to see this action as in one sense a triumph. The conclusion of the story—Thenmozhi in jail, still defiant—conflicts with but might be said finally to subsume the pessimistic implication that political power is an irresistible evil. Thenmozhi's act is, for instance, much more intelligent and purposeful and therefore less hopeless than the killing by the poor prisoner, Lahaniya, of his sister in *Akrosh*. The title can therefore be seen as the defiant Thenmozhi as well as a mocking reference to the contrast between a glorious past and a wretched present political situation, since the phrase is taken from a song by Subramania Bharati, whose songs were the battlecries of the freedom struggle in the south.

The portrayal of Thenmozhi is a significant exploration of the theme of the strong woman who first, simply survives, and then, survives uncorrupted. I felt that Balachander is tapping some deep unconscious need in our society for strong women. Throughout the screening of the film, I found that the audience was responding very enthusiastically to Thenmozhi. The question calls for further study.

—Rajeswari Sunder Rajan