

# cinema



✱ A scene from *Nadunisi Naaygal* (Midnight Dogs), directed by Gautham Vasudev Menon.

## Scripts make the movie

The foundation of a film is grounded in its blueprint.

And as this movie shows, a shaky script creates

a weak edifice. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

A couple of years ago, I happened to observe an informal discussion on movie script. The location was the foyer of a cinema at the Venice Film Festival, and those in, what turned out to be, animated conversation were Nick James, editor of the scholarly *Sight & Sound*, and Derek Malcolm, once the celebrated movie critic of *The Guardian* in London and now with the *Evening Standard*. The debate, if I may call it so, was on the importance of a script for the success of a film. The men felt that a marvellous story or plot could be completely destroyed by a bad script.

Years ago, the late Ismail Merchant, who along with director James Ivory and scriptwriter Ruth Praver Jhabvala, had produced touching British period pieces, voiced the same opinion. He, of

course, placed a lot of significance on story. "Good cinema must ultimately tell a good story", he averred. But it must tell it realistically, and it is only a flawless script that can help a movie plot roll smoothly from one frame to another.

The master of the macabre, Alfred Hitchcock, stressed this repeatedly. He spent 90% of his time searching and locating good scripts. Mind you, he worked with one genre, crime, and crime alone, and if a filmmaker were to be interested in many genres, as is the case now, he needs to do much, much more work.

"The script is the blueprint or template of the movie. Like a blueprint for a physical construction, such as a house or multiple-level building, if it's faulty the building will fail", wrote Raul daSilva, director and author of

several books on cinema.

But, in India, nobody bothers about the script. There are authenticated reports of writers being hired and fired at will, and, worse, being asked to write scripts as the shooting progresses.

Scripts are tailored to satisfy the whims and fancies of producers, directors and actors. Each of them has his own axe to grind, his own image to promote and own ego to pamper.

"Failure is seen where the script was either incompetently written to begin with or had been a good or superior work by a sage writer, but went into stew as directors, producers, and studio executives with little or no true comprehension of script, story or scenario structure began to dip in their ego-tainted pens", DaSilva opined.

I saw a movie the other day, and

it suffered because of a rank bad script, full of howlers. Gautham Vasudev Menon's *Nadunisi Naaygal* (Midnight Dogs) in Tamil sees the helmer returning to crime after his unsuccessful tryst with mushy romance in *Vinnaithaandi Varuvaayaa* (Will You Cross The Skies?).

*Nadunisi Naaygal* is a deeply disturbing psychological thriller where the horrific consequences of child sexual abuse are laid bare. Motherless Samar is molested by his own father as a boy, scarring him for life and turning him into a hallucinating psychopath.

Although he is rescued from his Mumbai home by a kind woman, Meenakshi, and whisked away to Chennai (where most of the film unfolds), Samar remains in a state of severe psychological trauma.

Renamed by Meenakshi as Veera, the name along with his earlier one serves as a simile to the story of Jekyll and Hyde. Samar lives on, all knotted up, while Veera strives to escape from this suffocating web, and in the constant battle between the two personalities, the evil triumphs again and again. Fantasising and failing to distinguish between what is real and what is not, he kidnaps, rapes

and imprisons women at will. He has a free run in Chennai for a few years.

Performances are arresting. Veera Bahu as Veera in what is a career-making debut is terrifying as the raging man on the prowl, eyes eerily bloodshot and gestures wildly fearsome. He stalks his victims with cold-blooded determination, sometimes slitting their jugular, sometimes incarcerating them in an underground chamber, their hands and feet tied with iron chains. The sadism is nauseating.

Sameera Reddy (playing Sukanya) as one of Veera's hapless preys is perhaps at her career's best here. Hunted down by the murderer and roughed up, she comes across splendidly as a woman in absolute terror. And when she fights him, she is a wild cat springing to kill.

Despite incredible performances and a thought-provoking plot, *Nadunisi Naaygal* stumbles over its script. Now, Menon had a good storyline, but appears to have worked very little on his script. Here are the howlers. One, Meenakshi is a smart city-bred woman who does not even think that the boy of nine she rescued (and adopted) from such a debased life would require psychiatric counselling, or, at least, some sort of expert evaluation.

Two, a passing car driver on a lonely stretch of road in Chennai suspects something is amiss when he sees Veera taking an unconscious Sukanya in his SUV, follows them and plays the daredevil, only to come to grief. What was his motive?

Three, a similar action by a lone cop, who knows fully well that three of his colleagues have been shot dead by Veera just a while ago. Four, two policemen arrest Veera and handcuff him, but seconds before he is asked to get into their van, they free his hands with disastrous consequences. Why would they do that?

Five, Sukanya's boyfriend is kidnapped by Veera from the lobby of a popular multiplex cinema, bang in the middle of Chennai, that looks unusually deserted. (I go to this theatre every week, but have never found it so empty and lonely).

Surely, Menon could not have been so callous with his script, callous enough to turn blind to vital details.

What is equally annoying is that Menon's movie is so similar to several Hollywood blockbusters, including *American Psycho*, *Psycho*, *Eyes Wide Shut* and so on.

It is sad that *Nadunisi Naaygal* — with a plot powerful enough to deeply disturb a viewer and with characters so finely fleshed out — totters because of a shoddily penned script.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been suffering terribly scripted films for over three decades, but still gets into a cinema with hope.

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