OF HUMAN BONDAGE

NAMRATA JOSHI

CINEMA WITHOUT BORDERS

In this column, the writer introduces you to powerful cinema from across the world

Film: Mongrel

MONGREL is a film that is not for the faint-hearted. Not that it is an actioner that wallows in unbearable, excessive violence or a horror flick that scares its audiences to death. The brutal and horrid elements are of the metaphorical kind, and deep-seated at that, in this Taiwan-Singapore-France co-production, about Vietnamese, Filipino, Indonesian and Thai workers in the interiors of Taiwan. Co-directed by Chiang Wei Liang and You Qiao Lin, it had its world premiere at Quinzaine des Cineastes, and makes for a rough and tough viewing. Moreso for its crawling pace that often feels stagnant, like the lives it is about.

Right from the first scene, which I thought was a distressing obverse of the alluring opening shot of Lost in Translation, *Mongrel* shows the miserable, bleak lives of its indigent characters in verite mode, with all the unpalatable details spread over more than two hours of its duration. However, despite being a disquieting story, there's also something inherently humane and uplifting about it.

Much of the positivity emanates from the protagonist Oom. In the clutches of Boss (Hong Yu-Hong), who has helped him, and others migrate to and work in Taiwan, Oom is called upon to do the dirty jobs that he can't say no to. Even as guilt for the misdemeanours hangs heavy, Oom's salvation lies in the selflessness with which he works as a caregiver at the home of a sick old woman Mei (Lu Yi-ching) and her mentally challenged son Hui (Kuo Shu-wei, who is afflicted with cerebral palsy for real).

While Mei asks Oom to euthanize Hui, he keeps tending to all his needs. Whether he is washing Hui, giving him his meals or helping to gratify his baser, intimate needs, Oom is a picture of stoicism, patience and compassion. Will he sin by helping him let go of life or will he help in relieving him of his miseries? Caught in the eternal moral conundrum, it is Wanlop Rungkumjad's (who plays Oom) inscrutable face and calm and collected presence that stays in the mind's eye long after the film is over. He is trapped, vulnerable and lacking in human dignity just like those he looks after.

Oom's fellow undocumented workers, who he must keep in check, are also in a similar abject state as Oom, dehumanised in the factories where they work and invisibilized in the shabby dormitories that they share with hundreds of others. They are taken advantage of for their work but not paid by the boss. They have even surrendered their passports and are denied proper meals. Each one of them is replaceable, be it in illness or death with the workspace like a revolving door, for every exit there is someone around to make an entry. All they can do against the blatant exploitation is resist and rebel and demand their due wages, but the unrest also appears to achieve little.

Mongrel shows the mechanics of illegal immigration—how the passage is managed surreptitiously in the garb of tourism. But more than that it shines a light on what happens afterwards. Be it the black and grey palette, the dystopic milieu, the tough mountainous topography, the eternally wet and wintry, cold and rainy weather or the constricted spaces—the home, factory, dormitory or healthcare facility—all are marked by the persistence of gloom and doom, the hallmark of the lives of the migrant workers. Michael Capron's camera heightens the sense of suffocation and claustrophobia.

Desperation and desolation creep up even in a place of succour like the church. As a character puts it, it might be a place where people find remedies for diseases but what is truly needed is for the souls to be healed of their sins so that hope can bloom in the hopelessness of daily struggles for survival. *Mongrel* leaves one with a sombre, sobering, ambiguous feeling—of rare grace amid utter despair.

'ODIYAN WAS PROFITABLE MAJORLY BECAUSE OF AGGRESSIVE MARKETING'

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Vivek Ramadevan, talent manager

Could you elaborate on how Dulquer Salmaan was launched in *Second Show*?

It demanded huge effort with a whole lot of strategies and planning involved. Even now when I think about it, I get tense. We decided not to expose Dulquer before we reached the launch phase. The entire shoot happened without any media being allowed. At that time, location coverage by film magazines was a big deal and I still remember getting a lot of hate for not putting out Mammootty's son to the public. But we wanted the world to see Dulquer only when we wanted him to be seen.

So, whose decision was it to have a low-key launch for Dulquer?

It was our strategy, which Mammooka and Dulquer were comfortable with. Hypothetically, if we had launched Dulquer before the movie as Mammooty's son, people would have started developing negativity. By not spotlighting Dulquer before release, we maintained a positive talk around it. We balanced the visibility by promoting Sunny Wayne equally. This approach lifted the pressure off Dulquer, allowing him to perform on his own terms. At the end of the day, people flocked to the theatre not due to marketing but because of their love for Mammookka. While we didn't achieve something extraordinary, we certainly didn't ruin it either. I've seen star kids' launches falter in various markets.

With the rise of social media, do you think such a launch would be possible now, especially for a star kid?

If you have a will, you can still do it. Content will go out only when you decide it. For example, filmmakers like Rajamouli and Mani Ratnam keep details under wraps until they choose to release them. See, it is not like for *Second Show*, people didn't know there was Dulquer, they were aware that a film of Mammooka's son was happening. But nobody had seen Dulquer. There was even an instance where someone approached Dulquer, unaware of who he was, and asked if Mammootty's son was indeed acting in a film. His photos were not available anywhere and we wanted this advantage to be converted to tickets.

One of the popular marketing techniques employed today is to see the lead actors give a slew of pre-release interviews. But is there such a thing as overpromotion?

Interviews only click if done with the right media and with discussions about the film. About 80 per cent of the time, interviews today have nothing to do with films and we are unable to control it here. In Mumbai, PR folks clearly put their foot down and the media follows it. I think the organised media in Kerala follows the same to some extent, but there's so much unorganised media here and they opt for such interviews for their own sustenance. At best, they are a necessary evil.

Also, there's no such thing as overmarketing. There's only marketing. But undermarketing is a thing. I know directors who do this either because they are not confident about the product or they don't want the audience to expect too much. Undermarketing is fine if your movie is not having much competition on weekends. But if you try this ploy when there are other movies in the mix, your movie will tank.

Ideally, small films should have a higher percentage of cost devoted to marketing. They are the ones which could benefit from more visibility. But here, what happens often is the smaller the film, the smaller the advertising/marketing budget. Also, marketing is not just limited to digital media or putting up film hoardings. It needs to be thought out well.

Outdoor promotions are also important, right?

Indeed, but it is your last medium. It was always the case in advertising. It was the 'reminder' medium. Nobody goes to a film after seeing a hoarding. But the decision to go happens elsewhere. Maybe a trailer or teaser. People here ignore this. If you ask me, a theatrical teaser or trailer is a must. This is where you get the biggest impact. It's also the most cost-effective as you're reaching an audience who already enjoy watching films in theatres.

These days, we see the involvement of social media influencers to promote films. Is it a new strategy?

Yes, and it would be ideal if the film has a younger target audience, like *Thallumaala*. For *Palthu Janwar*, a promo song was made particularly to attract kids and it worked. But was the film appealing to children is an entirely different question. We released a similar promo song for *Oru Thekkan Thallu Case* as well, but it didn't click. So marketing is never a one-size-fits-all concept.

What are some interesting marketing strategies you devised?

For *Ezra*, I had hooked the whole thing on *Bhayam* (Fear). First, we came up with a poster which just had the word '*Bhayam*', which set off the process. Then, there was a campaign with a radio channel—a treasure hunt. Then for *Godha*, we used the wrestling theme. A video of Tovino wrestling Basil became viral. For *Guruvayoor Ambalanadayil*, we had Prithviraj and Basil interacting with select couples from all over the state, which helped the movie reach all these houses. These are some innovative things we did. But you cannot do that for every film, and not every project will facilitate that. You can come up with such ideas only if you have been part of the process right from the script reading time or at least for six months. But usually, people think of marketing after the film is made. So it's better if you hand it to someone who will only think about the marketing process without other responsibilities. If I'm part of it, understand that I'm the marketing expert and you're the filmmaking expert, and give me space to work. A bad marketing job will affect my brand also.

Could you give examples of some recent films that were effectively marketed?

I liked how *Thallumala* was marketed by targeting the young audience. They also released the songs in advance rather than doing all of it at the last moment. There are some movies like *Palthu Janwar,* which had good marketing efforts, but failed to work commercially. Recently, I liked *Mandakini*'s marketing as they created a noise, not common for a film with that kind of a cast.

Also, I feel *Aadujeevitham* was well marketed. Of course, the film had its own hype, but we also positioned it well. Many said that the film would be a huge success as people are already familiar with the book, but I always believed that if those readers are our only audience, then the film would tank. For any film, the core audience is the youngsters aged between 18-25. That's why we called the film a 'survival adventure' and 'visual spectacle', and designed the teaser with a lot of action and energy. People used to question how it's an 'adventure' and not 'drama', but we stuck to our beliefs. Otherwise, people would have stayed away because of its heavy, affecting content and the film would not have made such numbers.

The bigger challenge was marketing *Guruvayoorambala Nadayil. Aadujeeviutham* and Prithvi were still in the limelight and suddenly we had the task of introducing him in a comic caper space. Thankfully, Basil and a bunch of talents who rose to fame through social media were there, and we could play around with them for marketing.

During *Mamangam*, you invited journalists from across the country to visit the sets, a first such arrangement in Malayalam cinema...

Yes, it was because we believed the film had a pan-India content. The fact that it didn't yield the desired results is different, but it helped us set up the movie in the Northern markets. And many journalists were in awe of what they saw, because it was about true history, unlike *Baahubali*. We also used Mammukka's feminine avatar in the film as *Vanitha*'s cover. We could roll out such ideas thanks to the backing of Venu (Kunnappilly) sir. These things can happen only if you travel together with a film. That's also a reason why I don't take up a lot of films.

***Bramayugam* and *Gaganachari* were two unconventional films that found their target audience. What's your take on the marketing strategies of these films?**

Bramayugam had excellent marketing and PR. With the black-and-white format and Mammookka's look, there was already a certain interest around it, but the film was still in the arthouse space. They marketed it so well that you could hardly see a negative talk about it, even after release. But *Gaganachari*, I feel, missed the trick. If they had spent a bit more on marketing, it had the potential to earn more.

Mumbai has a paparazzi culture, which has been used for marketing too. Is it happening in Kerala as well?

I don't think it helps. It's happening because the particular media is doing it for its survival. It also helps the celebrity a bit to gain visibility when they are on an upward graph. However, too much visibility can rob the charm, aura and mystery around a celebrity. The star aura remains when they are not easily accessible to you. So, I think this culture will soon become stagnant.

Do you think the hype generated by excessive marketing can be a double-edged sword, like what happened with *Odiyan*?

It is debatable if *Odiyan*'s failure is because of its marketing or the film's overall quality. My ex-boss Shrikumar directed and marketed that film and it still remains the biggest opener in Malayalam cinema. There are many who still like that film, but had the response been unanimously positive, it would have scaled new heights. The film also endured a lot of dirty behind-the-scene issues, which affected its run. Despite all that, it was still a profitable venture and that's majorly because of the aggressive marketing.

Are you wary of making tall claims during pre-release promotions?

Definitely, it's important to tone down your claims because they can backfire badly. Given a second chance, Shrikumar also wouldn't do that. We were conscious of it while promoting *Aadujeevitham*, but it doesn't apply to all films. For example, a film like *Gaganachari* would need maximum hype to get a good opening.

Before *Odiyan*, there was *Pulimurugan*, which exceeded all expectations and became a massive money spinner...

Pulimurugan had absolutely zero marketing. I knew about the film much before its shoot started as both Kamalinee (Mukherjee) and director Vysakh were managed by us. From the script, I knew it had the potential to attract the kids. The only concern was about how the tiger's portions would shape up, and they eventually aced it. It was also after a while that Lalettan was doing a typical mass role. All these factors came together wonderfully for that film. So the success was solely because of the product and not marketing. Even today, most Malayalam films don't have any marketing, apart from the usual posters, teasers and trailer cuts. We have films with horrible creatives clicking because of the quality of the product.

Do you do post mortems for failed films?

Yes, I do. *Pada* is a classic marketing blunder. It's a good film with an interesting star cast, but I think it was ruined by a few things done by us. Instead of promoting it as an activist film, we could have easily misled it as just another action film and more people would have come in. Post-release analysis applies only for failures. Dileep *ettan* once told me not to do post mortems for successful films and I still follow that.

Vignesh Madhu, Mahima Anna Jacob, Vivek Santhosh, A Sanesh (photos), Pranav V P (video)

Scan the QR code to watch the video

Manju Warrier-starrer *Footage* postponed

EXPRESS FEATURES

THE RELEASE of Manju Warrier's *Footage* has been postponed due to torrential rains affecting various parts of Kerala, which have also led to multiple landslides in the district of Wayanad causing massive damage and loss of lives. As the state of Kerala is in mourning, the announcement was made via the makers' social media handles stating that a new release date will be confirmed soon. Initially slated to hit theatres on August 2, the film marks the directorial debut of Saiju Sreedharan, best known as an editor.

Billed as Malayalam cinema's first found-footage film, *Footage* also features Vishak Nair and Gayathri Ashok in the lead roles alongside Manju. In addition to directing and editing, Saiju Sreedharan has co-written the film with Shabna Mohammed. Its technical crew includes cinematographer Shinoz and the post-rock band aswekeepsearching, who have composed the original motion picture soundtrack.

Presented by prominent Bollywood filmmaker Anurag Kashyap, Footage has been certified with an A certificate. The film is bankrolled by Bineesh Chandran and Saiju Sreedharan, with Rahul Rajeev and Suraj Menon acting as co-producers.

Saiju is best known for editing films like *Maheshinte Prathikaram, Mayaanadhi, Kumbalangi Nights, Virus* and *Anjaam Pathiraa*, among others. Meanwhile, he is also gearing up for his sophomore directorial titled *Munpe*, a fantasy love story headlined by Tovino Thomas.

Sharvari starts shooting for Alia Bhatt's spy-thriller *Alpha*

EXPRESS FEATURES

SHARVARI has started shooting for the spy-thriller *Alpha*, headlined by Alia Bhatt. Both actors will reportedly play secret agents in the forthcoming YRF Spy Universe film, helmed by *The Railway Men* director Shiv Rawail.

Sharvari put up a picture of herself on social media with director Shiv from the sets of the film and captioned the post, "It doesn't get bigger than this! Super stoked to start my Alpha journey today! Trust me... I have manifested this moment super prepped but can feel the butterflies in my tummy... Thank you Adi sir for your faith and Shiv Rawail for your belief in me!"

Sharvari was last seen in the horror-comedy *Munjya*. Her next is *Vedaa*, alongside John Abraham, slated to release on August 15.

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