

FILM

Naalu Pennungal

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Adoor Gopalakrishnan constructs an ensemble of four stories like a mosaic, in 'Naalu Pennungal-Four Women' (Malayalam, colour, 105 mins). From the backdrop of a running stream, the camera shifts to two hookers, accosting away, in "The Prostitute". A decent working class man, Pappu (Sreejith Ravi) proposes to hooker Kunju (Padma Priya), sometime in 1946. As husband and wife, the couple sleep on a roadside varandah. Pappu is a labourer, who carries loads of gravel on his head, for road building. Kunju also joins the labourers on road construction. It is all gravel and dust, and other labourers splash water on their faces. At the end of the day, Kunju also splashes water. The labour contractor assures to remit money. Kunju drinks tea with other labourers. When another hooker enquires, Kunju discloses that the remuneration is less.

One day, a ruffian Damodaran (Manoj Kayan) blocks Kunju's path on the road, and abuses her. Later in the evening Pappu visits a cheap hotel, where Damodaran is drinking, and falls over his food. Heated exchanges lead to a brawl, and Pappu beats up Damodaran, for misbehaving with his wife. At night two police inspectors arrest Kunju and Pappu, from the footpath. Pappu is beaten up in Alapuzha police station. Kunju and Pappu are unable to state their fathers' names and villages, nor residential addresses, before a police magistrate. They explain that they were husband and wife, and toiled as load carriers. The police charge them for being in a compromising position, before wholesale dealer, Damodaran's shop. They have no proof of marriage. The police magistrate sentences the couple to fourteen days' custody, for illegal sex, assault on a policeman and obstruction of duty of a policeman.

In "The Virgin", an old man and his wife are worried that proposals for marriage of their daughter, Eidy are fizzling out. Their only son is running a shop at the boat jetty. Pursuing a proposal from a relative, the parents marry off Eidy (Geethu Mohan Das) to a middle aged man. After marriage, the couple travel in a boat with garlands. At the husband's (Nandu Lal) house, Eidy steps in with a lamp, right foot first. There is nobody else in the house. The husband leaves for work in the morning. He does not smoke, nor drink, but always returns home late. Eidy lies on the floor dejected, with a lamp burning. She wakes up when the husband returns home, but the marriage remains unconsummated. Soon the couple visit Eidy's parents. The newly weds dine together, served by Eidy's mother. The groom eats silently, but voraciously, even enquires of more butter milk dessert. Friends and other family members host feasts for the couple.

At night the groom sleeps with his back to Eidy, and puts away her hands from his shoulders. The husband leaves after four days at the in-laws. Eidy works in a paddy field with other women. She hands over her earnings to her father, for purchase of his medicines. Other women are curious, and village people and relatives gossip. The husband has not returned for over a month. The girl's father is ready to grant a divorce, but the dowry will have to be returned. There are quarrels between the two families over divorce, and the girl confesses of still being a virgin.

Old reminiscens and present problems merge in "The Housewife". Naroa Pillai (Mukesh) from Tamil Nadu, visits his old village, where his mother resides. He drops in at a childhood friend, Chinnu's (Manju Pillai) residence. Pillai had left the village under compulsions, having failed at the Class IV level, four times. Pillai and Chinnu recall old rendezvous. Chinnu is without any children. A child was born, who lived only six weeks. Pillai relates a story of a childless couple, who invite a sturdy carriage driver, to their home. He suggests a medical examination of Chinnu and her husband. At night she watches her husband eating. When she refers to a medical examination, the husband replies that there were many pujas to be performed.

On a subsequent meeting, Pillai suggests to Chinnu, for floating arati and oil lamps in the Ganga. He enlightens that there were many heritages in Haridwar and Rishikesh. The husband returns home early, greets his wife, and embraces her. Later Chinnu tells Pillai, that the state could forfeit property, if there were no heirs. Marital honour and virtue remain intact for the wife.

At night a man keeps knocking at Kamakshi's (Nandita Das) door, in "The Spinster". She tells him to go out. There are political discussions at home-after the Britishers left India, there was inept leadership. Kamakshi has a younger brother and two younger sisters. When sister Subhadra (Kavia Madhavan) gets married, Kamakshi peels coconut kenels at the ceremonies. She cries in her chosed room. Next morning, the groom and Subhadra leave in a boat. After prayers in a temple, when Kamakshi is returning home, a stranger whistles to her. Her brother decides to get married, only after Kamakshi settles down. But Kamakshi is thirty years old, and family elders feel that she is destined to remain unmarried. A marriage proposal arrives for the brother. Kamakshi's mother fall ill, and Kamakshi gets busy in kitchen chores. She prepares tea for visitors. While the sick mother worries about her elder daughter, the camera tracks the faces of the sisters and brother. A prospective groom for Kamakshi decides to marry the youngest sister, Sarojam (Ramya Nambisan). As time progresses, Kamakshi plays with her nieces. When sister Subhadra is with another child, the nieces ask Kamakshi as to why she does not have any children. The second sister's husband confesses his unpardonable act of letting down Kamakshi.

There is dissent in the family, when Kamakshi resides at Subhadra's marital home. Rumours float about two sisters enjoying one husband. Subhadra quarrels with her husband, and feels that since their mother has gifted the ancestral house to Kamakshi, the elder sister has enough to live with. Kamakshi leaves by boat the next morning, for her mother's house. Her silhoette is in black, as she prepares food in the kitchen. She prefers to live alone, when the younger sister's husband comes to take Kamakshi to live with them. At night when Kesavan knocks at Kamakshi's door, she does not open. She feels it was not impossible for a single woman to make life.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan's camera placements ensure a world, complete with all details. The protagonists of the four stories are all women. The particular tragedies of emotions emerge, along with the conflicts, without being sentimental. Perfor-mances are poignant. M J Radhakrishnan's camera illustrates with lucidity and speed the different destinies of the four women. Realism in "Four Women" is never sensational, nor a sociological tract. □□□