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A Diasporic Study of the Tamil Movie - *Nala Damayanthi*

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Abstract: ***'Nala Damayanthi' is a Tamil movie, directed by Moulee which was released in the year 2003, starring R. Madhavan, Geetu Mohandas, Anu Hassan, Sriman, Moulee and many others. This movie projects the life and problems of an Indian immigrant who goes to Australia and almost loses everything including his own identity. The movie also represents and reflects some of the issues that an average immigrant would face in a foreign land. Alienation, racial discrimination, loss and lack of identity are some of the prominent issues that are addressed in the movie. Ramji, the protagonist faces quite a lot of differences in Australia yet, he tries hard to fit in and accommodate that culture. But, in spite of all his attempts to change his behaviour and manners, he ultimately remains as an Indian and therefore, he is eventually rejected. Thus, this movie handles diasporic issues of an Indian in Australia.***

Keywords: Alienation, Diaspora, Racial Discrimination, Lack of Identity, Indian Immigrant

I. INTRODUCTION

Nala Damayanthi is a 2003 Tamil film starring Madhavan, Geetu Mohandas, Mouli and many others directed by Mouli which was written and produced by Kamal Haasan. This movie tells the tale of Ramji, a Tamil village cook from Palakkad, goes to Australia to become a chef at a multi-millionaire Indian's home. Unfortunately, the millionaire dies of indigestion the day Ramji arrives, leaving him jobless and without his passport and visa, which had been stolen. Desperate to stay and earn, he starts working illegally as a cook in an Indian hotel owned by an NRI Badri, but to stay on, he needs to get a legal work permit as the immigration police are after him. A solution comes up when Damayanthi, a free-spirited Sri Lankan Tamilian, the fiancee of Badri's friend Ivan, agrees to marry the docile cook in order to settle her loans. Ramji converts himself to Christianity, becoming Robert, and then moves into Damayanthi's house. Constant stalking by the police forces the couple to stay together. However, when Ramji meets and begins to learn karate from Suguna, Ivan's ex-wife, whom he leaves after taking all her money and leaving her to be supported by her distant relatives, he tries to tell Damayanthi the truth and initiates a fight with Ivan. Damayanthi, though, does not believe what Ramji says and throws him out of the house in the middle of the night. (Pal)

The next morning, Ramji returns to the house and the couple forgive each other. Eventually Ramji invites Suguna to their house and Damayanthi learns the truth and realizes the love that Ramji has for her. She soon begins to fall in love with him and takes Ivan's car, which she previously buys for him, and withdraws all the money from the joint account to give to Bhagyam who has trouble with her in-laws back in India and needs money to marry her childhood friend, Kicha. Eventually, Ramji answers more than he is asked at the immigration office. Hence, he is forced to return to India. Damayanthi eventually comes along to Palakkad and the movie ends with a happy note where the couple starts off a restaurant. Actors Kamal Haasan and Jayaram arrive to inaugurate the restaurant and wish the couple good luck. (Pal)

II. DIASPORA

During his stay in Australia, Ramji faces racial discrimination, physical and cultural alienation. The themes of nostalgia, home coming and loss of identity are also a part of this movie. Diaspora has become one of the important concepts within postcolonial studies, especially in the contemporary times because of mass migration and movement in and out of any country due to various reasons.

Diaspora is a voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions. Diaspora is from a Greek word which means 'to disperse.' The forcible movement were of people who were taken as slaves and indentured labourers and the voluntary movement of people who were considered as colonizers and people who moved out of their land of origin for better prospects. (Ashcroft 61-62)

But, today people move in and out of a country for varied reason such as for education, marriage, employment opportunities etc. There are various problems that arise as a result of this movement. The question of identity, loss of sense of belonging, alienation, cultural clash, nostalgia are some of the issues.

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III. ALIENATION & MIGRATION

Alienation makes the characters feel physically displaced because they are from a different place and their new place of settlement makes them feel that they are distanced from their land of origin. Moreover, this feeling of displacement makes them to realize that they do not belong to the land in which they reside in currently. Hence, this theme is very important to analyse because with migration, a feeling of displacement is established which as a result makes the characters feel alien in the new land. Alienation refers to the separation or estrangement of an individual from the others (Encyclopaedia Britannica). This not only makes them feel alienated from others physically but it also makes them to feel culturally displaced. Some of the characters in the movie are physically displaced from their homeland which results in cultural displaced as well.

Migration has become one of the most important issues of the contemporary world. Travelling and adapting across cultures have turned into major issues. *Nala Damayanthi* portrays characters struggling to adapt a new culture. All the characters are defined by isolation of some form or another, immigrants are isolated from their parents, people are isolated from their communities. Ramji being displaced and isolated from his family and friends, finds life irritating and aggressive in Australia. Ramji's refusal in using the toilet paper in the plane projects that he carries his culture and tradition even while he is moving out of his country. Ramji associates paper with Goddess Saraswathi and that is why he refuses to use the toilet paper. This habit of using toilet paper instead of water shows that he is alien to such habits. Ramji also wishes to wear his traditional dhothi instead of a pant (*Nala Damayanthi*). These are some of the instances in the movie through which his original identity as a Tamilian is revealed.

There are certain other issues Ramji faces in Australia for example, financial and language problem. Upon his arrival in Australia, he speaks to the cab driver in broken English to which the latter questions;

"Can you speak English ? "(*Nala Damayanthi*)

Ramji replies that he has been speaking in English to him so far. This scene might seem comical to others, but it is definitely not so to Ramji because he is so serious about it. He feels that what he is speaking is the English language.

The Indian way of mourning over one's death is in direct contrast to the Australian one. When Ramji reaches Australia his supposed- to- be boss dies and he attends the funeral of Muthu Karuppan Chettiar. There, he cries aloud while the others are silent. People look at him strangely because he is different. (*Nala Damayanthi*)

IV. RACISM & CULTURAL ALIENATION

Ramji also faces the harsh reality of racism for the first time in Australia. The Australian gang bullies him constantly and they also call him "black." According to Ramji, he is not "black" he rather feels that he is "brown." It is the same group which troubles Ramji while he is paying the funeral rites and rituals on his dad's death anniversary. These people go over to Ramji and they stamp the rice balls that Ramji has kept to fulfill his duty as a son (*Nala Damayanthi*). This act of stamping the rice balls is symbolic of stamping one's culture. The Australians in the movie do not want the "other" to mix and blend with their culture.

Cultural alienation is clearly evident in this movie. The movie validates the need for traditional values in keeping the institution of marriage alive. The fake marriage which takes place initially turns out to be a true one in the end. Ramji, being a recent immigrant is deeply in touch with his roots and culture unlike his wife Damayanthi. The complications of a fake marriage and the adjustments that must be made to stay in Australia helps the couple to understand each other better. This also helps them to become man and wife towards the end. Damayanthi becomes an Indian wife who takes care of the extended family of Ramji unlike the others (*Nala Damayanthi*).

Ramji has to make and adapt certain changes in order to fit in Australia. Even his personal behaviour has to be altered and adapted. For example, he has to kiss his wife before leaving to work (*Nala Damayanthi*). These outward affections of a man to his wife are generally not expressed in India.

V. CONCLUSION

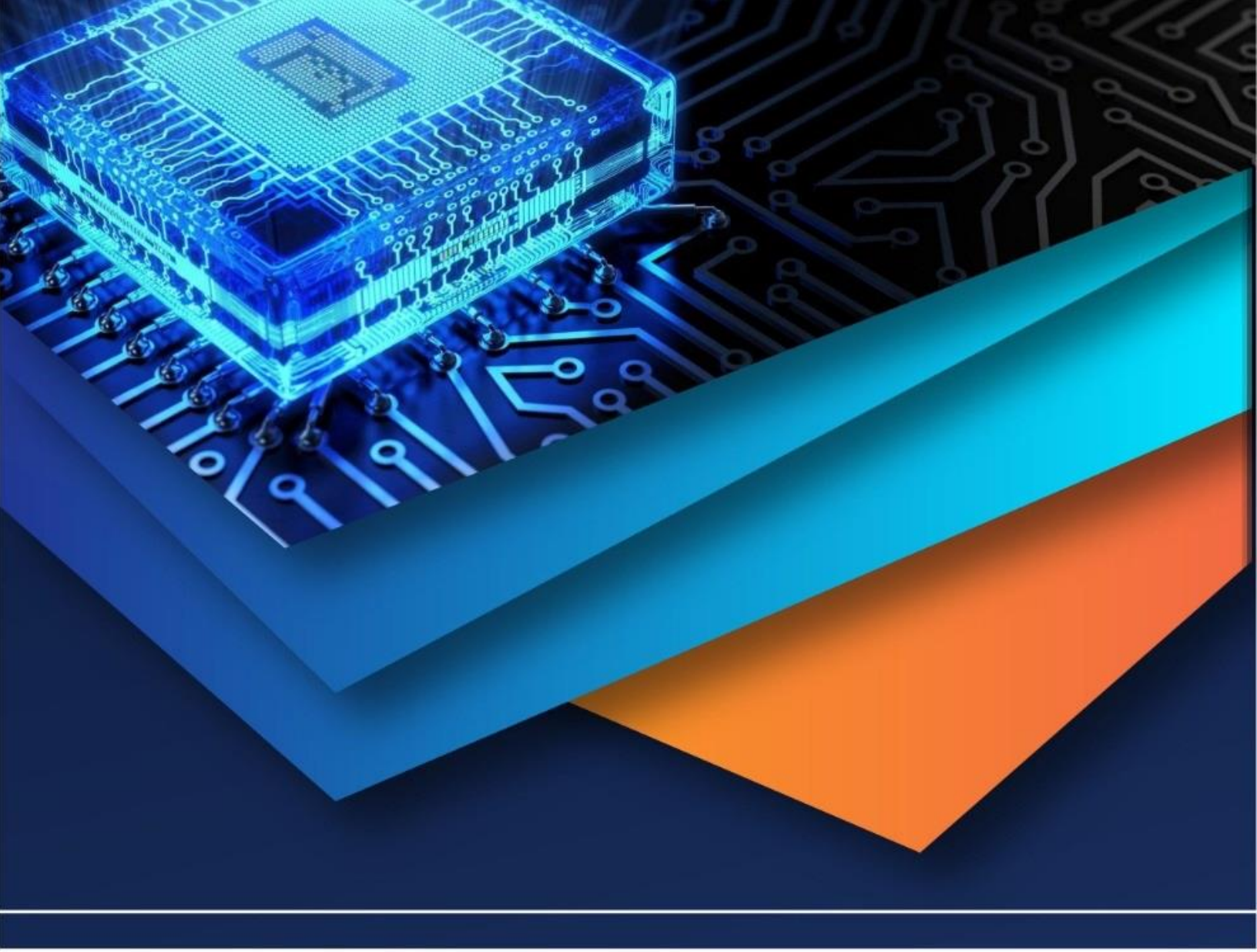
Ramji is a displaced person but he wants to save his original identity. It is because of this reason he takes his marriage seriously. Eating rice by hand and speaking Tamil are two important symbols in the movie which proves that the original identity is still important for the immigrant (*Nala Damayanthi*). His true identity as Ramji changes to a new one as Robert. He gets confused as to what is his name and from time to time, there is a conflict within him whether if he is Ramji or Robert. Eventually, he is and remains as Ramji even when he was supposed to stay as Robert. His decision of getting married is prompted partly by his feelings of loneliness and partly by his desperation to earn money to save his sister. He is an outsider in the beginning but slowly adjusts himself to the foreign culture. But, ironically he is rejected by the immigrant officer who happens to be a Sri Lankan Tamilian and because of him Ramji is rejected by the country –Australia.

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