

Utharam (1989):

Intro :

Malayalam cinema in recent years has given us many strong psychological mystery thriller's . Movies like Iratta, Rorschach, Kishkindha Kaandam and others, which explored the human mind in different ways.

But long before this new wave, Malayalam cinema had already made a film that went deep into psychology and emotion. That film is Utharam, released in 1989, starring Mammooty, directed by V K Pavithran, with a screenplay by M T Vasudevan Nair. This film is one of the most underrated Malayalam movies and also one of the most underrated movies in Mammooty's filmography. In this video, we are going into a detailed analysis of Utharam.

This is an in-depth breakdown, so there will be major spoilers. Please watch the movie before continuing.

1. Why Utharam Was Special for Its Time:

Released in 1989, Utharam is directed by V K Pavithran in his third directorial work, with the screenplay written by M T Vasudevan Nair. The movie is inspired by the short story '*No Motive*' by Daphne du Maurier. At the time of its release, Utharam stood apart because of its storytelling approach. More than the mystery itself, a movie that went this deep into character exploration, guilt, memory and different emotional layers was rare in Malayalam cinema during that period.

The movie is about a journalist named Balachandran Nair, played by Mammooty, who tries to understand the reason behind the death of his close friend Selina. Selina is a well known writer who dies by shooting herself with her husband's gun. There is no clear reason behind her death. Her husband Mathew Joseph, played by Sukumaran, is unable to accept that Selina died without any reason and asks Balu to find out the truth. What follows is not a normal investigation but a slow uncovering of Selina's past life, her school days, her memories and the pain she carried deep inside.

What makes Utharam feel even more forward-thinking is its quiet focus on mental health. Instead of treating the story as a simple crime or revenge thriller, the film is deeply interested in a person's state of mind. The central question is not just what happened, but what was going on inside Selina's head. For a 1989 malayalam film, this kind of psychological focus feels surprisingly progressive.

At a time when most thrillers depended on clear good-and-bad divisions, revenge arcs, and dramatic confrontations, Utharam chose a more uncomfortable path. It explored emotional damage, suppressed trauma, and the slow mental collapse caused by guilt. This refusal to offer easy answers is what makes the film stand out even today.

2. Mammooty as the Investigative Journalist:

A year after Mammooty played Sethurama Iyer in Oru CBI Diary Kurippu, he took on another investigative role as a journalist in Utharam. Unlike Sethurama Iyer, Balu is not a police officer but a journalist who looks closely at people and emotions. Mammooty's performance is subtle throughout the movie. One of the most powerful scenes is the school sequence where Selina's

pregnancy is revealed to Balu. The shock and confusion on Mammooty's face clearly show the weight of that moment.

Balu starts this search only because his close friend asks him to. At first, it feels simple, but as he goes deeper, he begins to discover a side of Selina he never knew before. Each truth he uncovers changes the way he looks at her and slowly changes him too. By the time everything comes together, Balu is no longer the same person he was at the start. Mammooty shows this change beautifully through small moments, silence, and expressions, making the transformation feel real and natural throughout the film.

3. A Narrative That Feels Hitchcock-Inspired:

If one has watched Alfred Hitchcock's films, a familiar pattern can be felt in Utharam's narrative structure. This similarity may be felt because many of Daphne du Maurier's works were adapted by Hitchcock and Utharam, which is also based on her writing, follows a similar psychological way of storytelling. The suspense is built not through action or shock, but through information, memory and moral tension.

The film keeps the audience engaged by slowly revealing emotional truths rather than relying on dramatic twists.

4. Biblical Symbolism :

Biblical symbolism forms a significant layer in Utharam.

When Selina becomes pregnant during her school days, she firmly denies having any physical relationship and is shown to have no romantic involvement at that time. The idea of a young woman carrying a child without a visible father strongly recalls the biblical image of the Virgin Mary. This symbolism is visually shown in a scene where Selina is portrayed as the Virgin Mary.

The child is named Emmanuel, meaning "*God with us*", a name closely connected to Jesus Christ in Christian belief.

As the narrative progresses, this sacred imagery collapses. It is revealed that Selina was raped while she was drugged and unconscious. What once appeared as divine purity is exposed as the result of violence and trauma. The film turns religious symbolism into tragic irony, confronting the gap between faith, morality and human cruelty.

5. More Than a Thriller: A Story About Friendship:

The bond between Balu and Mathew is central. Mathew is not only a close friend but also a mentor who once gave Balu shelter, food, and a path into journalism when he was homeless. This emotional debt quietly shapes every decision Balu makes.

There is also a strong friendship between Selina and Balu, which is shown in the movie in flashback scenes and when Balu reads the letter sent to him by Selina.

Equally strong is Selina's bond with Shyamala (played by Parvathy), a friendship that began in school and endured despite years of separation. Even decades later, Shyamala's conversations with Balu reflect the lasting weight of Selina's absence.

6. The Real Villain Behind Her Death:

Even though Selina's death is a suicide, the real villain in the movie is memory.

After a car accident, Selina loses most of her memories about her school life and that she have gave birth to a child. She later builds a new life as a respected writer and a loving wife without knowing the truth about her past.

When a rag picker boy tells his name as Emmanuel Antony, all her lost memories come back at once. She remembers the child, the pain and the truth about her past.

The Selina who lived as a careless schoolgirl no longer exists. Now she is a married woman with respect in society. She cannot imagine telling the truth to Mathew and she also cannot live without accepting the child. Fear, guilt, and confusion take over her mind, which finally leads her to pull the trigger.

“Sometimes forgetting is a kind of mercy.”

8. MT Vasudevan Nair's Brilliance:

Even though Utharam is an adaptation, M T Vasudevan Nair's writing fits perfectly into the Kerala setting. The characters and situations feel real and believable. The movie is also remembered for its strong dialogues.

Some memorable lines from the movie are

“യന്ത്രതോക്കും ബോംബും ഉണ്ടാകാൻ കഴിയുന്ന ടെക്നോളജിക്ക് ഒരു പനിനീർ പൂവിനെ സൃഷ്ടിക്കാൻ ആവുമോ”

“പ്രകൃതി ദയപൂർവ്വം അടച്ചിട്ട ഓർമ്മയുടെ ഒരു അറ അപ്പോൾ തുറന്നിരിക്കണം”

“സൂക്ഷിക്കുക അകത്ത് തോക്കും കവിതയും ഉണ്ട്”

9. Utharam And its Narrative Parallel with other movies:

While watching Utharam, two films immediately come to mind. One is the 2023 Malayalam movie Iratta, and the other is the 2010 Canadian film Incendies. Though these films come from different cultures and time periods, they are connected by similar emotional themes.

In this section, we will briefly look at both films and how they connect with Utharam, while keeping spoilers to a minimum for those who have not seen Iratta and Incendies.

How Guilt connects Iratta and Utharam:

People who have watched both Utharam and the 2023 movie Iratta may notice many similarities. Both movies start with a death that looks like suicide. In Iratta, a brother tries to find the truth, while in Utharam, it is a close friend. In both movies, the ending is about a painful realization.

In Iratta, revealing the truth can destroy everything. In Utharam, Balu chooses not to reveal the truth to Mathew. He knows that telling the truth may break Mathew completely. This choice makes Utharam more than just a mystery movie.

In both Utharam and Iratta, guilt is the invisible force that pushes the characters toward self destruction. The slow and suffocating weight of guilt they carry within is the thing that breaks them. Though the characters exist in opposite moral and emotional spaces, guilt consumes them in strikingly similar ways.

Unraveling a Hidden Traumatic Past: The Connection Between Incendies and Utharam:

Incendies, directed by Denis Villeneuve, follows twin siblings Jeanne Marwan and Simon Marwan, who begin a journey to find their unknown father and brother, as instructed by their late mother Nawal Marwan. What starts as a simple search slowly turns into the uncovering of Nawal's deeply traumatic past, a truth that neither the twins nor the audience are prepared for.

As each layer of Nawal's life is revealed, the weight of violence, loss, and guilt becomes heavier. The truth, once fully exposed, leads to emotional and mental collapse, showing how devastating buried trauma can be when it finally comes to light.

A similar structure is seen in Utharam. As Balu searches for the reason behind Selina's death, he slowly unravels her past and uncovers a dark chapter of her life that had been completely buried under forgotten memories.

In Incendies, the characters are shattered by the reality of their mother's past. In Utharam, when Selina's suppressed memories suddenly return, the shock, guilt and trauma become unbearable. The truth she had unknowingly escaped from comes back all at once, leaving her with no emotional escape.

In both films, the past refuses to stay hidden and the truth, once revealed, becomes something the characters cannot survive.

Outro:

Utharam is not remembered for twists or shock value. It stays with us because it understands something deeply human, that sometimes the past is not buried, only waiting. It tells us that memory can be both mercy and punishment, and that truth, when revealed at the wrong moment, can be more destructive than silence.

Decades before Malayalam cinema began openly exploring psychological trauma, guilt, and moral ambiguity, Utharam was already asking those uncomfortable questions. It did not offer clear heroes or villains, only broken people carrying invisible wounds.

If you haven't watched Utharam, this is not just a recommendation, it's an invitation to revisit one of Malayalam cinema's most quietly devastating psychological thrillers in the 1980s.