

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Award 2021: Certificate of Merit

Anik Sarkar

*Ee.Ma.Yau* and the “Other than Death”



**Title: Ee.Ma.Yau, Year: 2018 ; Language: Malayalam: Director: Lijo Jose Pellissery**

In the opening of Lijo Jose Pellissery’s film, a funeral procession in full pomp and show passes in a still beach with still waters in the backdrop. The body of the dead is being carried away to be cremated somewhere. A single, naked pole protrudes from the dry ground—like a leafless, sterile tree standing dead in its place. Death and the afterlife affect everyone differently. The person in the beginning has the privilege of a grand, opulent farewell (often interpreted as an ideal dream of Vavachan). The character Vavachan, whose funeral is the nucleus of *Ee.Ma.Yau* has a difficult time getting a proper burial. While a gravedigger is cremated in the grave, he dug for someone else.

Death seems to be the core thematic element of this film. It appears everywhere, be it literal or symbolical. In Christian communities, “Ee Ma Yau”

or “Eeso Mariyam Ouseppe,” translated as (Jesus Mary Joseph) is whispered in the ears of a person in death bed, while the alternate title of *Ee.Ma.Yau* is “R.I.P”. (*M., Athira. (2017, November 30). 'Ee.Ma.Yau' preview: A death and the following events. The Hindu. Retrieved September 30, 2021, from*

*[https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/lijo-jose-pellissery-about-his-new-movie-eemayau/article21210194.ece.](https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/lijo-jose-pellissery-about-his-new-movie-eemayau/article21210194.ece)*)

Death and funeral are also the topic of discourse among the characters: Vavachan and his son Eesie; death is physical deaths witnessed.

Through the characters, including a duck and a dog, the dialogues hint at death and the feelings accompanying death: anxiety, despair, discomfort, sorrow, lamentation, loss, and misery also weave in

and out of the film naturally. In terms of atmosphere, the sky is gloomy throughout, the wind fierce and unforgiving, the sea stormy, while the spaces are dark and cramped: how does one set the tone and mood of a film that looks to center on death, otherwise? However, a further probe into its symbolic framework unravels other elements besides death that lurks in its labyrinths, channelling the powers over life and death, the prevalence of enforced sophistication and social inequality.

For the German thinker Martin Heidegger, death and thinking of death opened a philosophical horizon for life's more profound revelations. With each passing moment in life, as we are aware of our presence in time, we also experience in the back of our minds a 'being towards death, in the sense that we aren't capable of awareness toward an infinite idea of time, so our time is that of a limited kind. We are temporal beings with a constant feeling of death approaching from an assumed timeline in the future. However uncertain death is, we have a probable deadline set for ourselves—the 'somewhere in-between,' as much as we keep a count on our approaching retirement. Death, the most certain and obvious possibility, sets this timeline for us. Thinking about death makes one consider an authentic living because time is short and wasting it on inauthenticity does more harm. Moments before his demise, Vavachan gleefully announces how he had set a benchmark for his father's funeral ceremony. He had set a record that hadn't been surpassed and wonders if his son will be able to replicate that feat. Eeshi, too, charged up by his father's words, bristles with an ambition to aggrandize his funeral, vouching to make it worthwhile. The usual disquiet seen in anticipation of death is transformed into a wishful celebratory dream both for the father and son. The being-toward-death in this manner is twisted from authenticity and self-improvement to competitiveness and rivalry. In other words, Eeshi and Vavachan do not embrace authenticity while contemplating death; the dominant thinking around them has molded them to consider funeral, not as a final gesture of remembrance and honor but a glamorous show that must pull crowds and break records. The competitiveness and status quo that has engrossed all economic sections of

society is made blaringly visible through satiric jabs such as Vavachan producing banned notes for his funeral and Eeshi's hard determination to make his father's funeral look as flashy and expensive as possible.

Despite being broke, Vavachan sells off a gold chain belonging to his wife, seals a deal of interest with the moneylender, and purchases a stupendously expensive coffin even after repeated warnings from Ayyappan, who glimmers as a figure of reason. Persuaded by the coffin maker, who is an intelligent marketer but turns out to be a terrible craftsman, the coffin's sum inflicts holes in the total budget of the funeral, having to make do with a below-par band.

The exposition of social inequality is also showcased through contraries and contradictions that follow one after the other. When left alone, Vavachan starts to talk about 'then and now: "The duck was five before, and now it was two fifty! Fish then were plenty; the seas have gone dry now.'" While, as the daughter coerces him to stop the replacement of his grapevine carvings with modern art, he replies that they have grown old, and the change should be allowed. The chaos that snowballs in the latter half of the film exposes the fractures and hollowness of enforced sophistication. The dream of a grand funeral collapses like the coffin, slamming the body of Vavachan to the ground as Eeshi returns a look of dejection. The blessings from the Priest as promised are ruined by the same person who makes the promise. At the same time, constantly, the Priest acts as a policeman, gathering evidence and investigating through inquiries, as the police take on the role of the Priest by being forgiving and compassionate.



The film is also rife with moments of comic relief, which fittingly serves as a dark comedy. As the often-drunk gravedigger enquires about the

subsequent death for which he is tasked, he gets the reply as “I will tell you when I return,” paving the way for a situational irony as only later in the film do we find that it is the gravedigger himself who is buried in that grave. In case of the promise of the pompous musical band that must play in the ceremony, the clarinet that Vavachan broke malfunctions in his funeral, producing a constant distaste towards the musical arrangement. The person with a blood-soaked face, whom Vavachan injures at the beginning of the film, is the one who gets to wash his body and in the manner his blood while singing “Happiness is a guest who comes in a while, But grief is a relative who never parts with you.”



As the calls from the press keep interfering with Eeshi, who is unable to give them a fixed time, the ‘promised’ funeral keeps getting deferred toward an unforeseen time in the future. The makeshift roof

collapses on Vavachan. The people surrounding him symbolically bring down the roof that held their family: Vavachan’s other wife arrives for his funeral, who had been kept a secret. Eeshi, too, loses the roof of composure on his head as he slaps the Church Priest, further complicating things. The camera follows Eeshi through his room, as voices that hum in his head feed him with calculative memos such as payments done and made, the arrangements with the Church for the ceremony, and the spectral thoughts on an unfulfilled funeral possession. The guilt of this unfulfillment drives him to till the land on his backyard in the rain, to bury his father under the spell of a psychotic frenzy, repeating, “I’ll give him a grand funeral.”

As Eeshi buries his father in their yard, people-watch in disbelief, aware that he couldn’t fulfil his promise. In a chilling climax shot at dusk, two boats arrive from alternate directions to take the deceased to their afterlives. They are accompanied by the two men dressed in black and white (who keep playing cards as the main narrative flows), which could be a possible tribute to Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*. Above all, Pellissery’s social satire is a fascinating exploration of death, unfulfilled promises, and its entanglement with human misery.

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