

Critique

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**The Storyteller and the Afternoon Naps:
Reflecting on a *Nanpakal Nerathu Mayakkom***



What if death loses its enigma? Death becomes a seamless journey where your near ones partake as well; they watch you move in and out of the maze, stepping into the intimate spaces of families, stepping out into long corridors of loneliness, and watching helplessly and waiting. What if it was another journey, as you walk through mundane activities that belonged to someone, and then you are compelled to own it and then let go and move on? Nanpakal was anything but a dream; it was real and revealing. It was James, journeying into the life of Sundaram as he journeys into another life, slipping in smoothly. For the spirit, the journey was painless and easy.

But it was excruciatingly painful for others who had been given the gift of knowledge. Death, after all, is all about closures. The living lives on after having grieved enough, forgiven the dead, forgotten the angst and frustration and injustice and lived on.

Nanpakal does not permit this privilege of moving on because the dead return. The limitless atoms of energy connect randomly to manifest life as easily as a change of attire. The cow dung cakes and the black ravens remind us of the proximity of death. And along with the dead, the living waits and observes. They seek to pursue the dead at times, but the attempts remain absurd, forcing us to laugh at their meaninglessness; the futility of those attempts tires us, and we wait, sometimes angry, sometimes resigned to our fate.

Nanpakal Nerathu Mayakkom (2023) is a Malayalam film by Lijo Jose Pallisery. Much discussed and appreciated, this film is critically acclaimed as well. The amazing quality of the visuals and the ethereal beauty of the film adds to the enigmatic charm of the theme and the script. James and his group of pilgrims, including his family and

friends, on route to his native place, cross an idyllic village, and James wakes up from his sleep and demands the driver to stop the vehicle. He walks out as Sundaram, only to be rejected by Sundaram's family and villagers, except his blind mother. The film's soundscape, visual cues, and movement before his static camera are symbolically vibrant. The film has been interpreted in multifarious ways, and a consensus is that the film is a dream and nothing beyond. But the verse of *Thirukkural* at the beginning of the film – sleep is nothing but death – provides the clue to read the film as a narrative about an alternative deathscape and the possibilities it opens to the storyteller.

Death in the film is fluid and denies the existence of other worlds or a god that redeems existence in some ways. The protagonist moves seamlessly through life; death does not make him incapable in any way. *Nanpakal* is about an absurd journey that explores the dynamics between an individual and the society around him – there are three levels of communication- with oneself, his immediate family, and his larger social structure. The two sets of people are deeply disturbed as James flits into Sundaram and back. There is a man who disturbs the established patterns of behaviour around the concept of death. Social norms are too rigid to accommodate this anomaly where the dead person permits others to continue along with him. The sleep here is not the longer one we enjoy in the dark and mysterious night, it is one you take at noon, the shallow nap while the world is bright and awake.

For the protagonist, it is excruciatingly painful to acknowledge this fragmentation of identity. The mirror challenges him, and he accepts defeat as he sees the stranger's face staring back at it. The theatricality we see in the scenes with the larger groups of people is not seen in these moments of self-reflection. His limited field of comprehension makes him confused, and it torments him to live as

Sundaram while his body James stays on with him. James' corporeal self requires the viewer to comprehend this complex existence to highlight this duality of existence. At the second level is the family, the wives, and the children, who find it easier to accept the reality of his existence. The blind mother is the seer who senses her son's presence, acknowledges him and accepts him as Sundaram. She never doubts his identity and, with tears in her wise eyes, she acknowledges that he is gone at the end of the film. We see that the mystery of death simplifies the meaning of existence for regular mortals. The third dimension is the individual and the larger society, which the filmmaker finds amusing. The comical moments, the *mise-en-scene* often theatrically designed, and the visual aesthetics were almost surreal– the maker plays with his field in these scenes. The hostility of the villagers to reopen the folder of Sundaram and the unwillingness of James' people to let him go is established well.

Death is complete only with the rituals and ceremonies, and their sense of finality is crucial for the family and the society at large. The film does not leave the viewer dangling. As the film ends, James is alone on the bus. He is back alone, and the filmmaker establishes that death is a lonely process, a solo trip, and fellow passengers will have to abandon you as you surrender to this moment of finality. You carry your sensuous memories with you, but nothing more and nothing less!

As the film closes with the end titles, I feel a sense of relief as a viewer. I need closures, and I can imagine death as nothing but a closure. I want to leave my loved yet dead ones on the shores of forgetfulness and let them walk alone to any world, any dimension of life that leads them on, because they are free to wander, to explore. At the same time, I am bored by relations, social norms, etiquette, and the sensual world around me. *Nanpakal* cautions me to let go because it is too complicated!

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