

Article

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A New-Old Connection: The Intermedial Literary Re-turn in Malayalam Cinema



Ee Ma Yau (2018) by Lijo Jose Pelissery

Introduction

Malayalam cinema, since the 1950s, has always had a close connection with “progressive” Malayalam literature (akin to the vernacular cinema of Bombay (IPTA), West Bengal, etc.). Malayalam cinema history is rooted in the plays of the Kerala People’s Arts Club, the Left’s theatre company, known to have played a significant role in mobilising support to get the first Communist government of Kerala elected to power, and “progressive” Malayalam literature. Many melodrama socials were adapted from plays and novels; playwrights like Thoppil Bhasi and S L Puram, poets of KPAC like ONV, Vayalar, and P Bhaskaran, and musicians like G. Devarajan all came into cinema. This long-standing connection with

literature that the vernacular cinema of Kerala shared, which persisted till the ‘80s, seems to have been ‘lost’ post the 1980s, with the coming in of new genres and types of cinemas in the 1990s, correlated with changing sensibilities, transformative economic and political changes at those times.

In writing about popular culture in Kerala, the superior or “progressive” nature of cinema in the region has always been a cornerstone for judging the merits of Malayalam cinema. This kind of writing/scholarship discursively produced the category of “progressive cinema” as the ideal in the history of Malayalam cinema, with an investment in “realism” and “progressive” modernity, even while melodramatic conventions largely govern the narrative.¹ It is

¹ Ratheesh Radhakrishnan has argued that the history of Malayalam cinema has been written through this category of “progressive cinema”, “middlebrow cinema”, and has pointed towards the exclusion of excesses, both in writings of the cinematic narratives and processes of

viewing cinema in Kerala. It is a category that was first used by critics, scholars, and writers to talk about a certain kind of Malayalam cinema from the 1950s to the 1970s, when a lot of “progressive literature” was made into films, and writers, directors, screenplay writers,

a category that critics, scholars, and writers first used to talk about a certain kind of Malayalam cinema from the 1950s to the 1970s, when a lot of “progressive literature” was made into films, and writers, directors, screenplay writers, lyricists, and music directors either belonged to the Communist Party or had affiliations with its cultural movements like the Kerala People’s Arts Club (KPAC). Various critics have analysed these films to beckon towards the progressive nature of the movie by talking about the narrativisation of class/caste inequalities, like in *Neelakuyil* and other such films of that particular period.²

The Literary Re-turn and Intermediality in New Malayalam Cinema

In the last 5 years, we have seen a ‘re-turn’ to literature and literary figures in Malayalam cinema, be it S Hareesh, P F Mathews or even Shakespeare. Simultaneous to this, there is also burgeoning usage of the term ‘cinematic’ in the Kerala public sphere, especially within social media discussion forums (like Facebook, Instagram communities Cinema Paradiso Club, Movie

lyricists, and music directors either belonged to the Communist Party or had affiliations with its cultural movements like the KPAC (Kerala People’s Arts Club, the Left theatre group in Kerala that produced a number of popular plays with Communist themes like *Ningal Enne Communistaakki*).

² In my previously published paper “Looking into the Progressive: Yakshi’s Undoing” (*SUB\Versions A Journal of Emerging Research in Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2015) I tried to locate “progressive” Malayalam cinema of the 50s and 70s as an archive; as a historical method, that helps us write histories of the disaggregate experience of modernity that gets constituted in the Kerala public sphere through different socio-cultural formations. Feminist and anti-caste scholars like J Devika, Praveena Kodoth, Sharmila

Street, M3DB- Malayalam Movie Data Base) and writings in online publications about some quality in cinema that makes it better cinema, deployed as ‘cinematic’. How do we make sense of the ‘literary return’ in Malayalam cinema when the digital ecology of content has been read as ‘anti-literary’? What does the literary necessitate in the cinematic form? My paper aims to look into this phenomenon and throw open the field to investigate this new but old connection. I would like to examine the connections that inter-mediality forges in cinema, especially concerning adaptation and literature.

In his “Introduction” to Andre Bazin on Adaptation, Dudley Andrew writes, “Bazin treated cinema’s rapport with literature, what I call its ‘literary imagination’, as the necessary complement to its rapport with reality.” This paper will examine this *literary imagination*, cinematic aesthetics, and its relation to reality and truth. What does Malayalam cinema perhaps aspire to do to renew these relationships? I would also like to propose a more nuanced way of reading cinema (with notions of ‘reality’ and ‘realism’ often expressed in muddled ways in reading

Sreekumar, Jenny Rowena, Carmel Christy K J etc have written about the way in which gender comes to be coded within this experience of the ‘model’.

One key site of analysis is the melodramatic form of this cinema which is in tension with the ideological programme of rationality, which is privileged in the narratives. That paper looked at *Yakshi*, which to my mind best captured these two trajectories of enquiry.

The paper on *Yakshi*, a film based on Malayattoor Ramakrishnan’s novel of the same title, tried to extract the variable and contradictory meanings of the filmic text which emerges from the elements in the screen itself. The film came out in 1968 and was directed by K S Sethumadhavan. The script and dialogues are written by Thoppil Bhasi, an important Left activist/cultural figure in Kerala then.

and criticism of cinema in the Kerala public sphere) through ideas of adaptation, intermediality and referentiality in cinema.



Joji (2021) by Dileesh Pothan

Andre Bazin, like Dudley Andrew has highlighted in the “Introduction” to the book *Andre Bazin on Adaptation*, has spoken about two different tangents of inquiry that need to populate the reading of cinema: “One is the semiotics of it, “the media specificity (including media overlap), narratology, comparative stylistics, registers of equivalence, and degrees of fidelity and second is sociology, “periods and movements in multiple arts; the varied incarnations and remediations of overriding themes, situations, and characters; the national promotion or censorship of topics; comparative reception and the fluctuating force of fandom...” Quite often in India and specifically in the Kerala quasi-academic and academic spheres, this gets reduced to the latter, where only questions of representation get formulated as questions about reality, truth and meaning-making (Ravi Vasudevan, “Introduction”, *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema*). Perhaps the phenomenon of literary adaptation will throw open questions on mediums and forge new

pathways to look at cinema’s rapport with reality, truth and affect.

‘Intermediality’ is also a term often used in popular imagination and otherwise as cinema being constitutive or an amalgamation of ‘all’ art forms. But ‘intermediality’ continues to be a theoretical concern in contemporary cinema precisely because there is acknowledgement of the changes and formation that moving images are coagulating with the rapid change in technology and an expanding history of the medium itself. Agnes Petho writes insightfully in her book *Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-Between*: “Although the idea that film has indissoluble ties with other media and arts is one of the oldest concerns of theorising about the movies, it is the theory of intermediality that has brought into the spotlight the intricate interactions of different media manifest in the cinema, emphasising how the moving pictures can incorporate forms of all other media, and can initiate fusions and “dialogues” between the distinct arts.” (P 1) She in that sense sees it as a methodology of looking at the cinema “not only in a more flexible way of looking at the changes occurring within the mediality of cinema but also – more importantly from the perspective employed by this book – in the way in which the poetics of cinema and specific stylistic effects can be described.” (P 2) This intermedial reading of cinema holds promise to bring about a more nuanced and phenomenological reading of cinema.³ Since ‘adaptation’ is often a site where ‘authenticity’, ‘fidelity’ and ‘specificity’ of

³ Akin to Vivian Sobchack’s call in *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Drawing from Ponty, she looks at how cinema as a form of

communication and a structured language becomes an *expression of experience of the experience*.

Literature furnishes the reader with access to the truth and dramatic reality of the premise. Bazin beckons to precisely this when he talks about choosing a literary imagination that is thrown open to cinema with adaptation. We could read the return to adaptation as a return to intermediality and literary imagination. In a certain way, the tendency to rely on the novel or the play goes back to the roots of cinema. Adaptation is not merely about themes, plots, or characters; a fine adaptation goes deeper than that, making a road possible to the 'cinematic', arguably in a more effective way.

Joji is a narrative that unfolds primarily within a wealthy South Kerala Christian household, with the large house situated typically within large acres of rubber plantations. Kuttappan, the head of the family, has complete control over every aspect of the house, particularly regarding finances. It is as if the members of the house, comprising his three sons, a daughter-in-law, and a grandson, are mute spectators to the master's doings.

In *Joji's* adaptation of *Macbeth*, there are many ways in which the makers of the film have attempted to foreground the Shakespearean tragedy, not just in terms of themes but also in the medium of drama. Some may have been effective; some may not. Still, we must look at what these modes of address are to indeed render the possibility of a 'cinematic' reading of the film and the process of adaptation and intermediality in general.

In the film's *mise-en-scene*, especially consistently through the first half, the shots and scenes are explicitly designed in two ways: somebody is always watching what is

unfolding on screen, primarily the character's actions. Each frame or shot is a stage where a character might be on the stage or frame, or one character enters while another exits. The film's sequences populate the idea of 'looking' and 'being looked at'.

Right from the beginning, where Poppy is watching his grandfather exercise to sneak out and use his credit card, to him watching the exterior of their large house waiting for the courier person, this is present throughout the film, be it the extreme wide shots in a kitchen like every frame is a stage when Bincy and Joji are plotting, or in the hospital, the two sons discussing the condition of their father with their cousin Felix, or even bedroom sequences, Kuttappan who returns from hospital, and when Gireesh, the worker shows his reflection to Kuttappan in the mirror, Kuttappan on the wheelchair in the balcony, spotting Joji amidst trees.

A perfect example of this would be the pond, which, as a trope, stands for the stage, inviting performers into it while viewers are on the sides. P. K. Kuttapan or Appan enters the pond—the central act or event of the film—and he falls; this fall is shown through a drone shot or shot from a Jimmy Jib, again staging it to perfection, like we are invited to watch this significant event. It also calls for our attention as viewers to the centrality of the event and the subsequent events that are bound to unravel next in the 'house'. The house stands in for the Macbethian palace, with its 'royal roads' that lead into it, established at the beginning of the film itself, and is the central setting of the drama that unfolds. Also, the pond as a proscenium theatre bears further significance because that is where Joji goes in the guise of fishing to

exchange medicines to poison his father and hides them in the rocks; also, when he tries to burn some evidence, a big fire catches up like a spectacle on stage. This also comes back, even when he thought he was alone and was not seen, in the form of rumours that his elder brother questions him about—that people saw him near the pond doing odd things.

Another scene that isn't so emphatic in its staging but is still crucial in the second act is when Joji enters the frame near the canal where Bincy is cutting up fish. He is smoking on the land beside it while she is in the water. She shares his problem of having to sell his horse but cannot because he hasn't been able to take a good picture of it to put up online since Appan has banned it from the house's premises. Bincy casually remarks that he needs anyone's permission; it is his house, too. Again, the performative nature of the composition is to be noted here. A stage where Bincy and Joji's interiorities manifest themselves into the exterior, onto the stage, for us to watch.

Space and its scenography play a pivotal role in bringing the intermediality of the adaptation to the foreground. The geography and setting of the house, how the house is shot with an interplay of natural light and shadows with eerie silence lurking around every corner, sets it up like a large stage standing for King Duncan's palace, but with naturalistic undertones of a well-to-do South Kerala Christian household. The dining room and dining table, which we see only as background detail when characters pass that room in the first half, become a stage in themselves for the first time after Appan's demise to settle property disputes. This becomes a central stage in the second half,

where Joji temporarily gains power and outshines himself before insanity grasps him. This, in turn, also forges a new connection between space and human beings, which has been more or less absent in mainstream Malayalam cinema for a long time.

Kenzi Mizugochi, in *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemums*, has made use of Japanese traditional theatre, kabuki, to bring about an intermediality where, in the last sequences, cinema and kabuki meet, cinematic time and space traverse into other dimensions. (Nagib, *Realist Cinema as World Cinema*, 2018, P 127- 135). Ghatak's *Subarnarekha* is a classic example of how geography is used as a site of citing history and trauma affectively, of the Partition, of caste-ridden oppressive topography, where forbidden or inter-caste love tries to break out (this is from my paper, *Ghatak's Subarnarekha: A Melodramatic Topography of History, Memory, and Affect*, which is currently in the process of publication). Ashish Rajadhyaksha has also commented on the 'epic nature' of Ghatak's films and how he uses Indian art forms, both folk and classical, to evoke novel modes of sensory-perception within a movie (*Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic*, 1982).

Similarly, cinema's intermediality is not limited to other mediums but to the region's film history. K. G. George's 1982 *Yavanika* must be discussed here, as it is one of the most important films set within amateur or professional Malayalam theatre. *Yavanika* follows a theatre troupe, Urvashi Theatres, whose rehearsal space for all the crew and cast is picked up in their van on their way to the performance. Right from the beginning, it is noted that the tabla played by Ayyappan

is missing. Each character subtly unfolds their dynamics in the space of performance and rehearsal. But the film takes a turn to be a police investigative thriller when Ayyappan's body is found in the field in the village. A police investigator played by Mammoth interviews each of the crew and cast members, and it is through this trope of the thriller genre that we get to see the backstories, aspirations, and sufferings of the characters, in contrast to those they play on stages and even in the film, in public spaces. This double staging is stripped through the police procedural, which usually is a cold, rational investigation into the truth of the crime. Still, with that very own trope, subjective truths and biographies emerge in this masterly work of K. G. George. The medium and its Hitchcockian play reveal *Yavanika* in one sense.

Another film by K. G. George was brought up in discussions surrounding *Joji*. There were many conversations on social media by Malayalee viewers—Irakal- which came out in 1985. George's *Irakal* came to the mind of anyone familiar with Malayalam cinema's history. The scenography of the rubber plantation, the oppressive power of the church and the family, and the individual's desires and secrets, all repressed to make him violent, are so familiar to viewers of Malayalam cinema through *Irakal*. Though not an adaptation, this film's atmospheric chills and the mise-en-scene, which portrays the interior scape of the decadent and repressed Baby and the eerie exterior of the house located in a rubber plantation, all inform *Joji* to a large extent. In one sense, adaptation and references draw attention to the cinematic form itself in *Joji*.

The idea of 'staging' we just explored is enhanced with music, a grand Western symphony that underlines the concept of the screen as a stage with its operatic notes in *Joji*. Also, a particular theme music plays as an interlude at the end of each sequence, reminding one of a rearrangement of characters or setting on stage, giving it an episodic quality while still being able to emulate the seamless of cinema. The sudden ceasing of sound also creates horror or chills in the film, negating the drama unfolding in sound and making the moment more dramatic on screen. One moment is when P. K. Kuttappan is ill on his bed, and Poppy is spying on him. When Kuttappan catches sight of him, the music and sound stop, and Poppy walks away fearfully.

Another emphatic moment of sound design is when Bincy, frustrated by Appan's refusal to give anything to her, and Jaison, on receiving the news, walk to the kitchen after a breakdown. At that moment, *Joji*, eating on the kitchen slab, asks for cold water. Bincy lashes out at him and asks him to take the water alone. Music accompanies Bincy's breakdown of the bad news until her angry conversation with *Joji*, and then she bangs the fridge door when the music fades out.

Examining how *Joji* sets up a sequence for Bincy to break down and leave is crucial. Though each person's experience of the oppressive household and the surveillant society that they live in is different, there is a way in which the film shows a 'childless' Bincy struggling to meet all the household needs of the men living there on her own, lacking a sense of home with her husband. Bincy is not Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* per se, but the film tries to understand a rigid and

cold Bincy for sharing Joji's desire to see his father dead. This rereading of Lady Macbeth through Bincy is also populated by the public and critical feminist discourse that has been mainstreamed in Kerala over the last 10 years.

The second half of the film and significantly the end sequences of the film make a complete shift, where the movie tries to atmospherically embody Joji's guilt and rage that is slowly making him insane, that he is on the verge of a breakdown, culminating in his attempt at suicide. The idea of society itself being a performative space where 'losers' or 'non-adherents' are closely watched is put forth in this mode of address in the film.

This is more overtly shown when Appan's funeral occurs, and Joji is lying on his bed in his bedroom. Bincy asks him to come out, hinting that he should not invite any doubts. She dramatically adds that he had better wear a mask to hide the jubilation she sees on his face. Again, society and people are marked as viewers who always watch 'others' perform. This finally appears in Joji's 'marana mozhi' (death note or suicide note), saying that 'society has fucked him up.'

So, in one sense, a literary adaptation or an intermedial adaptation is also one mode in which cinema tries to explore its possibilities within the medium in a region. When Lijo Jose Pelliserry's first half of *Ee Ma You* ends in 45 minutes, it is, of course, drawing from world cinema but also equally from the writing of P. F. Mathews. A classic 3-act-structure screenplay with an inciting incident is then given way to topography, i.e., the sea and the land and its people, and an attempt to understand better the human condition, quite different from his film that

preceded it, *Angamaly Diaries*, which ends with a long take in a church festival procession as if there were to showcase itself.

Ee ma Yau also brings an intermediality to the screen by indexing staging through the Latin Catholic folk theatre form of *chavittunadakam*, while at the same time employing methods of *cinema verite* 'to bring to the screen a naturalism and realism of intimacy with people and an event. The event or play that is being staged here is death. After the first sequence or act in the film, all scenes are such that people are preparing for a play to unravel on stage; furniture is being arranged; and missing persons needed for the event to go on are being summoned, like the priest, the doctor, and the head nurse. The Panchayat Member invites the community through the phone; another person fetches the 'decor'—candles and crosses from the church, digging the hole at the cemetery. There are also judgements being passed on the stage, which is being prepped up for the event to unfold.

There is also the irony of literary imagination at play here: the Catholic priest who reads detective novels late into the night and thinks like a police investigator; a native man named Lazar who is there only to spread gossip and lies about everyone; his rumour becomes the source of doubt about Vavachan Ashan's death; another neighbour who resists Lazar's gossip and lies and warns him but is in his loop when the head nurse rejects his request to ride the bike along with him and instead rides it on her own with her husband as the pillion rider, making him claim Lazar is right about her illicit affair with the doctor. While they both scramble to make arrangements, the kind and responsible

Panchayath Member Ayyappan takes Eesy for additional arrangements. They encounter a Shakespearean 'Jew' like a moneylender at midnight when they approach him for some money, pawning Sabeth's gold chain. Meanwhile in the house, Sabeth's wife Pennamma is singing her woes, like is the case with the community; all of them switch from genuine grief to 'performances'; for instance, Sabeth cries for her father-in-law genuinely, but then is also bothered by the lack of a gold chain on her neck and takes it off one of her neighbours; Pennamma makes digs at Sabeth's parents when they arrive; Nisa, Easy's sister, who is romantically involved with a local guy named Shivan, is shocked by his sexual behaviour towards her while she is mourning her father's loss. Pennamma's dialogue on stage is not just to other characters; the dead body is a character to whom things to be spoken to other people are being spoken.

Many of the framings in the film have classical 'tableaux'-like frontal framing with multiple characters arranged on stage in compositions. Ayyappan, who runs around to get the burial done as soon as rumours about foul play are spreading, goes to the police station while there is a retirement party happening at the station. He is invited to speak about the retiring officer on the stage', even when he doesn't want to; he eventually agrees to get things done. There, Ayyappan gives a heartbreaking speech on farewell and death; he breaks down while saying, "Everyone has to leave one day; it is us who are alive who have to give them a good send-off.". This scene, this 'performance', hits us as the core of the film, Ayyappan being the selfless moral compass of the film itself. All

this 'blame game', 'performances', society playing up to be a stage, constantly monitoring each other and judging, the priest is no different, crescendoes into sheer chaos with the arrival of Vaavachan's second family from Pattani truth. Eesy, who has been in shock with his father's loss right from the moment of death, accentuated by the sound design on the screen, where his inner voices collapse into each other, eventually almost descends into 'insanity'. This happens when the church refuses to bury his father in the cemetery, accusing him of dying from 'unnatural causes', digs a hole in his frontward in heavy rain, and the 'band melam' (local music, also playing a big role in *chavittunadakam*) takes the grief of not just death but the human condition to tragic proportions. Meanwhile, two card players are gambling and playing with Fate under a boat near the sea, with an obvious reference to the chess game in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*.

The madness into which Eesy and, in one sense, the film descends or emerges breaks the 'Verite' style of the film to bring forth chaos in a moralistic and hierarchical society. Joji's descent into madness is strikingly similar. However, Joji is one of the old rich who desperately tries to thrive in new ways. In contrast, in Eesy, it is that of a lower-caste, lower-class man stuck in a society that is becoming increasingly middle-class in its value systems, both economically and socially. Madness or insanity has been a conventional literary trope to signify non-conformism to conventional norms or mores both in world literature and local literature (the mad woman in women's literature is a classic example) to cinemas of the world and vernacular Malayalam cinema, especially that

of K. G. George's (*Adaminte Variyellu, Irakal, Swapnaadanam*, etc.), A K Lohitadas's screenplays (*Thaniyavarthanam, Bhoothakannadi*) etc.

I would then like to argue that this literary re-turn in Malayalam cinema is a humanistic turn, but not necessarily the one that is understood in terms of Enlightenment or humanism. It deviates from the idea of repetition within mainstream cinema, centred on the capital, to bring about new iterations, foregrounding the medium and its form, especially when encountering another medium like literature. In one sense, this re-turn enables a certain self-referentiality in

cinema but also goes beyond that artistic exercise. Not that the postmodern current has ceased to exist or that any of these practitioners or writers make only one kind of cinema, but what the literary imagination in these texts facilitated was to think and express more cinematically about 'the human condition'. I argue that this also entails new relationships between aesthetics, truth, and reality. There is also the phenomenon of more and more adaptations of 'real-life stories' or films being made 'based on real events'. This could also be read in proximity to the return to literary adaptations, and further inquiries are needed in that direction.

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Subarnarekha. Directed by Ritwik Ghatak, Theatrical Release, 1965.

Zangiku Monogatari (The Story of the Last Chrysanthemums). Directed by Kenji Mizugochi, Theatrical Release, 1939.

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