

Paper

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**Murder, Mystery, and Margins:
The Diagnostic Lens of *Ee Kanni Koodi* by K G George**



Abstract:

This paper studies *Ee Kanni Koodi* (1990) as a significant entry in the police procedural genre within Malayalam regional cinema that simultaneously operates as a critique of the societal, and particularly the organized civil system. Through its investigative framework, the film provides a diagnostic lens to explore Kerala's psycho-social and economic conditions during the late 1980s. The study employs Carlo Ginzburg's concept of the conjectural paradigm, examining how the narrative uses clues and fragmented testimonies not only to unravel a mystery but to diagnose broader social ills. The paper also engages with Walter Benjamin's theory of the interplay between interior and exterior spaces, exploring how the disruption of private domestic spaces in the film reflects the socio-economic instability of the time. Furthermore, *Ee Kanni Koodi* is situated within George's larger body of work, highlighting his recurring engagement in the oppressive power structures, gendered violence and institutional fissures. The film's relevance as a cinematic archive is also examined, with a note on the shifting spectatorship. By situating *Ee Kanni Koodi* at the intersection of genre and socio-political critique, this paper seeks to demonstrate how regional cinema can innovate upon genre conventions to reflect and interrogate complex social realities. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to critical conversations on police procedurals, Malayalam cinema, and the role of film as a cultural and historical text.

[Key Words: Malayalam Cinema, K G George, Police Procedural, Spectatorship, Middle-Brow Cinema, Historiography, Regional Cinema]

K.G. George's filmmaking journey is marked by explorations of human relationships, often marred by oppression and violence. Inspired by Neo-Realist filmmakers such as Fellini, he was a prominent director of the 70s-80s in Malayalam Cinema. *'Ee Kanni Koodi (And this link)'* [1], made in 1990, fits seamlessly into the overarching theme in George's work. George's films often centered on the man-woman relationship, exploring it against various backdrops and power structures. In the broader context of George's filmography, *'Ee Kanni Koodi'* represents a culmination of themes he explored throughout his career – the societal oppression of women, the complexity of human relationships, the moral ambiguities that permeate everyday life, working of political and social institutions, marginalization, among others. Like others in his oeuvre, this film also depicts the darker aspects of society, inviting the audience to reflect on the societal structures and personal choices that culminate in painful catastrophes. *'Ee Kanni Koodi'* is essentially the tragic tale of its protagonist, a woman, the discovery of whose body in Alappuzha catalyses a complex police investigation. This narrative serves as a vehicle for a deeper exploration of themes such as societal ostracization, the fragility of human psyche, and the inexorable descent into personal despair. The film skillfully unravels the complexities of the character's life and societal hypocrisies. Through its portrayal of various characters linked to the woman, the film exposes the duality of ostensibly respectable individuals and their concealed transgressions.

The film begins with Thomas (played by Shivaji) discovering his friend dead in her house and notifying the police. This sets off a

complex investigation led by Circle Inspector Raveendran (Sai Kumar), aided by Sub Inspector Abbas and Constable Pillai (Rajan P Dev). The initial clues—a pack of unopened food, an opened bottle of rum and glass, a shattered glass, and a broken vase—point to a violent struggle in the victim's living-cum-dining room. The bedroom, where the body is found, presents a more disturbing scene: the victim, with strangulation marks and an open bottle of poison spilled on the floor.

As the investigation deepens, the victim is identified as Kumudam (played by Ashwini), a sex-worker with a hidden past. The police learn of her connection to various individuals in her life, including Mani, a pimp (Jagadish); Simon (Thilakan), a timber merchant and her regular client; and Charlie (Suresh), a private finance company owner. Each of these characters reveals different facets of Kumudam's life, leading to the discovery of her real identity as Susan Phillip.

The narrative unfolds with the revelation of Susan's past—a tragic story of love, loss, and societal rejection. Once a student, Susan's life takes a dark turn after she becomes pregnant with her lover Harshan's (Shyam Mohan) child and is rejected by her Christian family for wanting to marry out of the community. Her journey leads her into a world of exploitation, deceit, and eventual prostitution.

Susan's transformation into Kumudam, a sex worker, is the result of a series of misfortunes and manipulations by people like Charlie. Harshan, who was grappling with alcohol abuse and whom Susan believed to be dead, is revealed to be alive but confined in a mental asylum in Mysore. He later attempts to reunite with her, but is confronted with her

position. The narrative employs fragmented retelling by the various people, and a difference in empathy with the deceased is made evident with each.

The film portrays the individual tragedies of both Susan and Harshan. Susan, engulfed in a life of exploitation and societal rejection, finds herself trapped in the realm of commercial sex-work. Harshan, on the other hand, loses his sanity and is disconnected from reality. His narrative arc, culminating in the inadvertent causation of Susan's death, underscores the film's exploration of the human condition, marred by mental disintegration under tragic circumstances.

The film concludes by pointing towards Susan's motherhood. Susan had placed her son in a convent, a decision reflecting her desire to protect him from her tumultuous life. In the end, Harshan, under a guise, attempts to reunite with his son but is intercepted by the police. The film closes with a poignant moment between Harshan and his son, symbolizing the tragic culmination of Susan's dual life as both Susan and Kumudam. Harshan's encounter with his son, in the shadow of his arrest, is laden with symbolic significance, encapsulating the themes of loss, redemption, and the enduring impact of civil strictures.

With a screenplay by S Bhasuchandran, and cinematography by George's long-time collaborator Ramachandra Babu, *Ee Kanni Koode* strictly adheres to the grammar of the police procedural and employs specific narratorial devices to emerge as a cultural artifact.

Diagnostic Narratives in 'Ee Kanni Koodi': Dissecting Societal Ills through the Police Procedural Lens

The genre of the police procedure is known to operate teleologically to bring 'truth' to the table. Here, the narrative adheres strictly to the generic grammar, with the intention of foregrounding the 'problem'. If the problem is looked at as a 'sickness' in the society, the method employed by the narrative can be looked at as diagnostic, adhering to the nature of symptomatology as referring to the parallels drawn between methods by Carlo Ginzburg in his essay [2]. The death of the woman is investigated based on the primary clues found at the crime scene. Despite the quantifiable or factual knowledge available from the material evidence, the police must turn towards and follow intuition to keep the investigation going, and to finally arrive at the 'truth'. The initial sign which points toward something marked is the interrogation of Thomas (Shivaji), who mentions that the woman was stubborn, dealt by her own terms, and was interested in talking about art and worldly matters. This slight push of focus toward the living individual and away from her corpse, supplements the ambiguity over the cause of death as being suicide or homicide, and fuels the narrative. The application of the conjectural paradigm in the narrative can be said to be in line with Hippocrates' Aphorisms, wherein symptoms or clues are analyzed to form opinions about man and society [2]. Here, the symptom is all that lead to and add up to the death of the woman, and the society in crisis is the modernizing society of Kerala of the late 1980s, where the dehumanization of the

woman revealed by the procedural forms (a part of) the sickness.

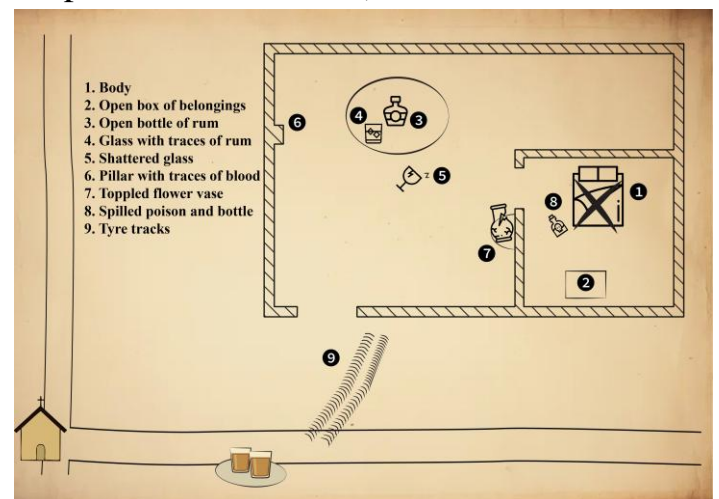
Here, the knowledge about the whole that is to be built is the persona and life of the character of Susan, and the primary source material for the same are verbal recollections of her from the memory of others to which documents such as her university certificate, bill receipts, and personal belongings become supplementary materials. By focusing on the person, the narrative raises the question of the neglected individual at the margins of society who had until death gone unattended to. At the core of the detective story is the use of the informal and the cognitive model to pay attention to detail, and hence to the individual. By removing the emotional distance, the narrative becomes successful in bringing the individual of Susan close to and hence, gripping the spectator. Thus, it is this narratorial zoom-in on the particularities of this character that becomes the opening for the viewer to enter the diegesis.

Kerala of the '80s, where the narrative is set, circumstances the simultaneous presence of an educated class, a rising business class, and a salaried class in society. There is clear stratification and separation of the working class from the bourgeoisie. Institutional set-ups of the family, the church and the university are in operation. Relations of power exist among all the aforementioned, and are interspersed with the interventions of state apparatus such as the police and the political. All is tight, and the woman becomes the transgressive figure which ultimately opens the cracks in the diegetic world. The duality of her persona, wherein she is simultaneously Susan Philip, an educated woman hailing from a bourgeois family, and

Kumudam, a sex-worker belonging to the working class, places her in a particular position in the film world as a site where the violence of the world is unleashed. This thus forms the meta-narrative of the film. The location of the death, the house in which Kumudam (or Susan) was living, becomes a metaphorical one and the most 'real' one (the tragedy, the 'effect'). This is also reinforced by the specificity ascertained to the location of the house, making it the only location that is grounded locally. References to all other places of dwellings (locations of the 'cause') are rough, made with respect to the larger district to which it belongs.

A Cinematic Exploration of Space, Perspective and Society:

At the heart of it one can observe the problematic of the interior and the exterior. Plainly, if one were to trace a map of the crime scene, it would look as follows. (Figure 1: Map of the crime scene)



Walter Benjamin's analysis of the 19th century bourgeois society suggests that the effort to create a distinct and protected interior space is both a physical and psychological endeavour, marked by contradictions, defences, and the inevitable

interplay with the external world. Benjamin highlights the merging of exterior (public) and interior (private) spaces in bourgeois society. This interpenetration is ambiguous, reflecting the complexities of social and personal spaces during the 19th century. For the bourgeois class, the creation of the interior space (their homes) was an effort to radically separate their private lives from the public exterior world. The home was seen as a sanctuary where the bourgeois could retreat and be insulated from the external chaos of the streets, which represented the masses and industrial production. The bourgeois interior is described as a cocoon, a space of consumption where the individual is shielded from the external world. This concept is likened to the development of modern shock-absorbing upholstered furniture, designed to provide comfort and protection, much like the bourgeois interior. Benjamin notes that the creation of this protected interior was not without its violence or struggle. The effort to demarcate and claim these privileged spaces left its mark. He observes that pieces of bourgeois furniture retained characteristics of fortifications, symbolizing the defensive posture of the bourgeois class against the external world. Benjamin uses the metaphor of a ringing doorbell to illustrate that, despite attempts to fashion a cloistered, impermeable space, the outside world invariably intrudes. This intrusion is unavoidable and serves as a reminder that the division between the interior and the exterior is, ultimately, permeable. [3]

If this position is leveraged to explain the functioning of the society in the cinematic world of '*Kanni Koodi*', one can note how the narrative is propelled by these intrusions into the private space which was meant to

provide a shelter. Harshan was an orphan and never conformed to the bourgeois familial order. He can also be thought of as the Modern element, personified. Whereas Susan, who is affected by the exterior despite the cocooning of the pious family household, breaks away from the order and enters a liminal space. Post Harshan's supposed death, she remains confined to that no-man's-land where the standards of the bourgeoisie don't completely apply.

Moreover, every account of the events that ensued inside the house the night of Susan's death involves the element of sight. Each suspect brings their own point-of-view of the same space into their account. The account of Mani is about staying at the door and having a particular restrained view of the living room. The next suspect, Simon, can move around the living room, but is strongly restricted from entering the bedroom, where Harshan was hiding (away from view). Only the final retelling by Harshan takes the spectator into the bedroom, the most intimate and private space. Here, the filmographic plays a key role in bringing all different perspectives together. In the final retelling, the viewer comes to know of the oppositional point-of-view of Harshan who is not able to engage with the others directly but is able to perceive their actions through partial and hindered sight, or through sound. This is in line with Benjamin's dialectical interpretation of 'panopticon', wherein he extends the concept beyond Bentham's and Foucault's ideas of surveillance, suggesting that it involves seeing everything from all possible perspectives. [3] The 19th century detective is portrayed as someone who not only observes and investigates but also contemplates his or

her viewpoint. This implies self-awareness and a critical examination of how one perceives and interprets the world. Using these certain characters which represent the exterior, and employing the apparatus of the camera and editing, the film mega-narrator¹ is able to achieve a critical engagement of the audience with the problems of the film world which mirrors the real world. The viewer is hence able to enter the subjectivity of each of the characters, and hence their respective realities, subjective point-of-view or worldview. This is particularly noticeable with the character of the maid, who identifies Susan's body and further reveals the woman's past. Here again, the complete abandoning of extra optical devices which are common among cinema of this genre (such as mirrors or binoculars) only reinforces the realism.

'Reality is opaque; but there are certain points -signs or clues- which allow us to decipher it' Carlo Ginzburg [2].

By giving up the idea that the real world is transparent, the filmic text stays within the limits of the genre of police procedurals to uncover the problem that is buried within, but just below the surface.

When breaking up the narrative into two in accordance with Todorov's dual structure model of the detective fiction, it can be noted that the story of the investigation is of little significance. [4] The death itself was not a criminal act per say. The crime is ambiguous - evident is the failure or inefficiency of social institutions to have

prevented the tragedy. As the narrative progresses, it becomes certain that there can be no justice in the true sense. The opening shot is that of a chapel next to the victim's house (Figure 2), and the climax takes place inside a convent, symbolising the Church as the prime witness to the actuality. What then is the purpose of the procedural?



Figure 2 Establishing shot showing a Chapel along with the title of the film

Looking at the filmic text as an archive:

Writing on the possibilities of Cinema as a source material for history, S Theodore Bhaskaran suggests that like its foreign counterparts, the Indian film material, especially the commercial feature film, serves as a valuable archival source for historiography, an (indirect) 'evidence' of psycho-social-historical zones. [5] Although Bhaskaran focuses on films that won commercial success, the same method can be extended to analyse films that went less noticed at the time, as pointed out by Sajid A Latheef as being applicable with these less talked about films of George. [6] The

¹ The Mega Narrator as the concept developed by Andre Gaudreault in 'Plato to Lumiere: Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema' [15]

investigative procedural format of '*Ee Kanni Koodi*' can then be looked at as aiding this purpose, leading the viewer, the scholar, or the historian, to this very psycho-social condition of society that George wanted foregrounded.

Throughout his filmmaking career, George sought to divulge into the psychological impacts of structural violence, and he sought different narratorial methods to do so. Among these, '*Yavanika*' (1982) [16] and '*Ee Kanni Koodi*' (1990) belong to the investigative thriller genre, the former being one of George's most critically acclaimed films. The conventions of the police procedural sets '*Ee Kanni Koodi*' apart, making audience engagement with the subject inevitable, which could also point towards the cause of disregard for the film - in turn symptomatic of the problem the text highlights, that the contemporary film-going public was not yet ready to confront.

Robert C Allen discusses the four components comprising (filmic) Reception-Exhibition, Audience, Performance, and Activation. [7] I would like to dwell on the last component, Activation, where Allen focuses on 'generative mechanisms' which are responsible for producing the multitude of readings a text receives over time. He discusses 'inter-textuality', emphasising an approach that examines the cultural and social context of viewing, which changes with time. Here, Metz's analysis of the spectatorial relationship with fiction film is also noteworthy. Metz uses a Freudian lens to describe 'fiction-effect' of narrative films, wherein the audience in a hybrid-consciousness experiences a 'pseudo-real'. [8] The author discusses the possible reason

for liking or not liking a film, as being correlated to its alignment with the viewer's phantasies. If the elements of a film invokes the super-ego of the viewer, it results in displeasure with it. However, let's note that both pleasure and displeasure denote marked reactions, which arise from activation of the viewer's phantasy. With the above in context, it can be said that '*Ee Kanni Koodi*' is representative of a juncture in Malayalam film history, where the projected figure of the modern Malayali-Citizen-Spectator which arose from the middlebrow period of 1980-90s [9], ruptures – giving way to the popular commercial cinema and audience of the millennium. This becomes more evident if it is noted as being an early production by Ouseppachan Valakuzhy, who was at the around the same time producing films such as *Ramji Rao Speaking* [10].

The late 80s is a noteworthy time in the history of Kerala when the economy was changing. Even if the Kerala Model was still being celebrated, the economy was understood to be in crisis. The disproportionate growth in the service sector has been noted as owing to the great financial investment in education by organized communities [11]. Meanwhile migration to the Persian Gulf had reached a high point. The early 80s saw the emergence of high-interest private finance companies or 'blade' companies coming up, which continued as a parallel banking system unregulated. By the mid 80s there were around 12000 of these in the state [12]. These attracted the newly emergent middle-class depositors with their high-interest schemes. The specific case of Sajan Varghese can be traced as initiating the domino effect leading to the employment of

regulation laws and the subsequent crackdown on these companies. [13] The character of Charlie can be understood to be based around that of Sajan Varghese, whose conviction was news at that point of time in Kerala. While analysing the film text, it can be noted that in addition to being a critique on the patriarchal social order, endogamy and institutions such as the nuclear family and the Church, it also acts as an archive of the economic situation of the time.

By using a particular socio-political location of the character of Susan, the narrative also introduces the viewer to economies of the private sector in tourism, hospitality, banking, as well as to the industry. The generic use of dates and newspapers are not only employed as trope for developing clarity on the trajectory of Susan, but also to ground the filmic text in that specific era. Socially, it functions as an archive of the repressiveness prevalent in and the violence unleashed by the economically, socially and culturally privileged class of the period.

Deleuze's concept of the Crystal Image, where the real and the imaginary intertwine, is evident in the film's narrative structure [4]. The story of Susan and Harshan is not just their individual saga but becomes a representation of the cultural psyche of Kerala society. The film blurs the lines between their personal tragedies and the collective experience of a society grappling with economic and moral crises. The film's non-linear storytelling, moving between past and present, can be read in accordance with the

crystalline nature of time as posited by Deleuze. It showcases how past events (like the involvement with Eastern Finances) continue to impact present realities (the unfolding tragedies of Susan and Harshan), symbolizing the cyclical and layered nature of time and experience. The film also uses the crystal image to reflect on existing norms and prejudices. The characters' struggles and choices are a mirror to the attitudes of the time, depicting how deep-seated socio-economic structures dictate individual destinies.

Distinguishable as belonging to the middle-brow-cinema of the period, the film employs realism tinted with melodrama to map a tumultuous time in modernising Kerala. Film production was undergoing changes, with difficulties arising due to the Gulf war and production shifting from Madras to Kerala [9]. Being among the last of K G George's filmographic work, '*Ee Kanni Koodi*' thus becomes a testament to the changing form of cinema itself in Kerala. He not only narrates a compelling story but also captures the essence of a society in transition. The title plays with emotions, suggesting hope but simultaneously hinting at an end. As one of George's last works, it holds a special place in the evolution of regional filmmaking. As George wanted reflexivity, the film becomes more relevant now, when the Malayalam industry is looking at the Hema Committee Report [14] and contemplating structural reorganization.

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