

Article

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Anthologies in Malayalam Cinema



Naalu Pennungal (2007) by Adoor Gopalakrishnan

As a noun, an Anthology is defined as a collection of artistic works with a similar form or subject, often considered the best. In literary terms, it is a compilation of scholarly works, including poems, plays, short stories, and excerpts, as well as television programs, dramas, movies, and songs. The etymology of the term “anthology” can be traced to the Greek word “anthologia,” meaning a “collection of flowers.” An anthology is a compilation of literary works, including poems, plays, short stories, excerpts, television programs, dramas, movies, and songs. There are various categories of anthologies, including comic anthologies, essay collections, fiction anthologies, poetry anthologies, and anthologies of films and

television programs. Its most common category is literary, which editors compile from different sources and publish in book forms.

As against literature, in movies, an Anthology film, otherwise known as an Omnibus film, package film, or Portmanteau film, is a single film consisting of several shorter films, each complete in itself and distinguished from the other, though frequently tied together by a single theme, premise, or author.

An anthology film is a single movie comprised of several shorter, distinct stories often linked by a common theme. At the same time, a television series is a collection of episodes that follow a continuing narrative

with consistent characters across multiple seasons, with each episode usually building on the previous one; in an anthology series, each episode features a new story and set of characters, similar to an anthology film but spread across multiple episodes. All TV show episodes can be considered films because they are. However, anthologies are films or TV episodes that are combined to form their own distinct stories. In this sense, the best example of an Anthology film or series would be Decalogue (Dekalog), a ten-episode movie series directed by the Polish legend Krzysztof Kieślowski.

This study primarily focuses on the Anthology movies made in Malayalam, a South Indian language in which significant cinema has been produced over the years in the State of Kerala.

It should be noted that Anthology movies are specially categorised, as they are such a rare phenomenon. It's so uncommon in World Cinema, though. The first-ever production by the Lumiere Brothers was a collection of short films, which could be considered an Anthology in a broader sense. In this context, it is surprising that a handful of Anthology movies have been released in Malayalam that have caught the attention of film lovers.

The history of anthology movies in Malayalam cinema is quite rich and intriguing, dating back to the 1960s. The first movie that comes to mind is *Chitramela* (1965), Directed by actor-turned-director T.S. Muthiah. This groundbreaking film comprised multiple short stories, each directed by a different filmmaker. It set a precedent for the anthology format in the

industry, showcasing diverse narratives and innovative storytelling techniques.



Chitramela is a Malayalam film produced by T.S. Muthiah for Sree Movies. Distributed by Central Pictures Release on September 29, 1967, the film was notable for being the first to experiment with presenting three different stories in a single movie. They were *Apaswarangal*, written by Sreekumaran Thampi; *Nagarathinte Mukhangal*, written by M. K. Mani; and *Penninte Prabhancham*, written by Bhavani Kutty. Among these, the most significant and longest segment was *Apaswarangal*, which marked Lyricist and poet Sreekumaran Thampi's debut as a screenwriter. He also penned all the eight songs in the film. Although the Director's credit was given to Muthaih, the film was directed by him along with M. Krishnan Nair. Music was by G. Devarajan, and G. Venkitaraman was the film editor, whereas N.S. Mani was the cinematographer. The film was featured in the Tashkent Film Festival.

Nagarathinte Mukhangal featured a cast comprised of Sheela, K.P. Ummer, Kottayam Chellappan, Baby Rajan, and Baby Usha. In contrast, *Penninte Prabhancham* included veterans like S.P. Pillai, Adoor Bhasi, Bahadur, Manavalan Joseph, Kaduvakkulam Antony, J.A.R. Anand,

Meena, Khadeeja, C.R. Lakshmi, etc. Apaswarangal had in it stalwarts like Prem Nazir, Thikkurissi Sukumaran Nair, G.K. Pillai. Sharada, T.R. Omana, Sukumari, Nellikode Bhaskaran, Sreenarayan Pillai, Master Sridhar etc

It was in 1984 that the film *Kudumbam Oru Swargam* and *Bharya Oru Devatha* was released. It was a collection of two different movies packaged together and produced by P Subrahmaniam Kumar under the banner of Sastha Productions. Both films were written and directed by N Sankaran Nair. The Films featured actors like Sukumaran, Jalaja, Jagathi Sreekumar, Thikkurissi Sukumaran Nair, and Janardhanan, among others. However, many would not consider it an anthology movie, as it was two separate movies bundled together and released as a single unit. Again, both films had strong family stories that bind them together. Yet, this endeavour is not considered an anthology movie, as it doesn't follow the general characteristics of the genre. The same applies to the clubbed release of two Malayalam movies, *Youvanam* and *Vandikkari*, which were released in 1974. Babu Nanthancode directed both movies, but they were entirely different in style.

Naalu Pennungal: A Master's Tribute to a Master

It was after forty years that the master filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan created a genuine anthology film titled *Naalu Pennungal* (Four Women) in 2007. It was produced jointly by Adoor and Benzy Martin and funded by *Doordarshan*. Four distinct short stories, *Oru Niyamalankanathinte Kadha* (*Story of a Law Violation*), *Kanyaka*

(*Virgin*), *Chinnu Amma* and *Nithyakanyaka* (*The Virgin Forever*), written by Jnanpith winning Malayali writer the late Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai were visually compiled together in this anthology with a total duration of 105 minutes.

The first story in *Naalu Pennungal* is *Oru Niyamalanganathinte Katha*, which has a street prostitute named Kunjipennu as the pivotal character. The story, set in 1940, recounts the moment when Kunjipennu finally finds someone who loves her dearly and wants to share a life with her as her husband. How society reacts to this is narrated subtly and forms the rest of the plot. Padmapriya portrayed the central character, while Sreejith Ravi enacted Papukkutty, her husband, and Manoj K. Jayan appeared as Ouseppu. Sona Nair, P Sreekumar and Aliyar were also in the cast.

The second story, *Kanyaka*, is about a very bold and industrious peasant girl, Kumari, who enters into wedlock with a man named Narayanan. Narayanan runs a shop and has been praised by all as someone who has no vice. Whether or not the marriage with Narayanan works out for Kumari forms the rest of the story. Geethu Mohandas, Nandu, M R Gopakumar, Roslin, Sethulekshmi Amma and VK Sreekala too were in the cast. This episode of *Naalu Pennungal* garnered great critical acclaim and was frequently referenced in various cinematic studies and research.

The third story, *Chinnu Amma*, tells the story of a middle-aged homemaker named Chinnu, who is childless and as sad as her husband, Raman Pillai, about this. Then there is Nara Pillai (Mukesh), who visits his native place after being in Tamil Nadu for a long

time and visits Chinnu frequently with lecherous intentions. Manju Pillai was Chinnu Amma, whereas Murali portrayed Raman Pillai. Her husband, Babu Namboothiri, and Cherthala Lalitha were also in the cast.

In *Nithyakanyaka*, the plight of Kamakshi, how society perceives her, and her reactions to the responses of those around her form the plot. The helplessness and vulnerability of the fairer sex, the inherent strength they have, and the vicissitudes of fate to which women often fall prey in a male-dominated society are some of the issues that are discussed in *Naalu Pennungal*. A very important aspect of the film is that even seemingly minor characters are portrayed with the due importance they deserve. Nandita Das enacted Kamakshi, while KPAC Lalitha, Ashokan, Kavya Madhavan, Remya Nambeesan, G K Pillai, Ravi Vallathol and Krishnaprasad too were in the star-studded cast.

In a Reflections of Passion Blog review, an anonymous reviewer wrote: “Performance-wise, everyone has done a good job.” The technical features, including the brilliant cinematography by MJ Radhakrishnan, were much appreciated. The film stands out in editing, art direction, sound recording, costume design, and background score. *Naalu Pennungal* may be a letdown to those who venture out to compare it with Adoor Gopalakrishnan's masterpieces, such as *Elipathayam*, *Swayamvaram*, or *Kodiyettam*. View this film as an independent work, setting aside all prejudices and intellectual presumptions, and you will likely enjoy it. A film by Adoor Gopalakrishnan is always a fascinating experience to watch.

Naalu Pennungal differs from the previous Adoor films mainly because it narrates four distinct stories, each separate from the others, with no apparent attempt to link them together.

For *Naalu Pennungal*, Adoor Gopalakrishnan was honoured with the Best Director award, while B. Ajithkumar received the Best Editor award at the 55th National Film Awards. The film also won the Kerala State Film Award for Best Art Director (Marthandam Rajasekhar) and Best Costume Designer (S. B. Satheesh). It premiered in the Masters of Cinema section of the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival.



Taking the lead from the success of this anthology, Adoor came up with another anthology movie the very next year titled *Oru Pennum Randaanum* (A Woman and Two Men), again produced by Adoor, Benzy Martin, based on four other short stories written by the same novelist-Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai. *Kallante Makan*, *Niyamavum Neethiyum*, *Oru Koottukaran*, and *Pankiyamma* visually compiled in *Oru Pennum Randaanum*. The movie, with a total duration of 115 minutes, is set in the 1940s. M J Radhakrishnan did the camera for all four short feature films, while B. Ajithkumar did the Film editing. Isaac Thomas Kottukappalli handled the re-recording, while T.

Krishnanunni and N. Harikumar oversaw the sound design.

The theme of *Kallante Makan (The son of the thief)* is the suffering of a child who must endure the hardships of being the son of a robber set in a central Travancore village—the schoolboy Kunjunni quarrels with Kurien, a classmate, about his father's line of work. Neelantan, the robber, approaches Mathai, Kurien's father, and begs him to prevent the kids from having such biases. In response to the offence, Mathai petitions the police chief to place Neelantan under preventive detention. After getting arrested, Kunjunni persuades his mother to urge Neelantan to stop his job. After two years, Kunjunni tells her family that Kurien's home has been broken into. When he learns the truth about the break-in and finds a full meal and new clothes at home, his heartbreak grows. The film featured M.R. Gopakumar, Indrans, Gopan, Seema G. Nair, KPAC Leela, Arya Alphonse, and Master Amal in its star cast.

Niyamavum Neeyathium (Law and Justice) centres on an old police station where a new, trustworthy inspector investigates an unsolved theft at a merchant's store. Rumours suggest that Head Constable Pillai shared the stolen goods with the thief. Pillai and his colleague, Constable Mathu, begin working on the case after receiving instructions from the inspector. Despite Mathu's suggestion, Pillai is hesitant to re-arrest the offender. When Mathu notices a rickshaw puller with an envelope of cash at a bar, he takes advantage of the situation, arresting the victim before realising what is happening. The victim is then warned that any attempt to appeal will result in losing his savings as the two dishonest constables find ways to exploit

the situation. The film stars Nedumudi Venu, Jagannathan, Krishna Kumar, Aliyar, P Sreekumar, Ambootty, Priyanka, and others.

Oru Koottukaran (One Male Friend) follows college student Krishnankutty, who has an affair with the lodge servant girl. When she shows signs of pregnancy, their relationship changes. Devastated and conflicted about being forced to marry his uncle's daughter, Krishnankutty seeks help from his lawyer friend to decide between abortion and suicide. They find a quack to perform the abortion, but Krishnankutty's encounter with the quack leads to new emotions, and he prepares to face the challenges ahead. The cast includes Jagadeesh, Sudheesh, P. C. Soman, Annop, and Nandan.

In *Pankiyamma*, middle-aged Rama Kurup sacrifices everything to marry the village beauty, Panki. His suspicions are confirmed when he catches her with a lover and stabs the younger man during an altercation. Fleeing after being accused of attempted murder, Kurup faces humiliation and is later released on bail. As the case progresses, clashes erupt between the supporters of both men. Both men urge Panki to take a side, but she remains neutral. Ultimately, both men are convicted of inciting violence and given three years in prison. While incarcerated, they reconcile and decide to face Panki together upon their release. The film earned Praveena the state award for Second-best Actress for her role as Panki. The cast includes Manoj K. Jayan, Babu Namboothiri, Ravi Vallathol, G K Pillai, Subair, Krishnaprasad, and Sukumari.

The film garnered significant attention nationwide. It premiered at the IFFI 2008 and

won the Kerala State Film Award for Best Movie, Director, Scriptwriter, and Sound Recordist. It was also featured in several international film festivals, including Rotterdam, Rome, and Washington.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan ventured into anthology filmmaking for television when Doordarshan commissioned him to create a visual tribute to Jnanpith winners. He adapted works by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, resulting in *Naalu Pennungal* and *Oru Pennum Randaanum*. From his experience, Adoor chose short films over full-length features for television, as episode-like formats fit better with the medium. Both anthologies reflect offbeat, independent sensibilities and focus on feminist themes, making them enduringly relevant.

Kerala Café: Knitted around a Railway Canteen

Anthology movies have played a significant role in Malayalam cinema, allowing filmmakers to experiment with different storytelling techniques and genres. These films have provided a platform for new directors and actors to showcase their talents and explore diverse themes. The anthology format allows for a rich tapestry of narratives, reflecting the complexities and nuances of human life. Perhaps it was due to this seamless scope for creativity that compelled mainstream filmmakers too to do anthologies later. Thus, after one year, *Naalu Pennungal* gave way to the much-acclaimed *Kerala Café*. With ace director Ranjith as its showrunner-producer, it was released in 2009. Directed by ten different directors, *Kerala Café* is a landmark anthology film that brings together ten short stories exploring

various facets of life in Kerala. The film was a significant milestone in Malayalam cinema, showcasing the collaborative efforts of various filmmakers and their unique perspectives.



In contrast to the previously mentioned film packages, *Kerala Café* was distinct because all ten movies featured an entirely different cast and crew. The stories spanned different thematic genres, ranging from rom-coms to suspense thrillers and murder investigations to horror. However, thematically, all ten different movies were intertwined or interconnected, rather than using the time-space concept of a railway station refreshment room. This railway canteen is the common place where the characters and incidents of all the different movies will somehow intersect. Scripts are written by different screenwriters with this common element in mind, which made the narrative of this anthology something unique and different.

The short film segments of *Kerala Café* were directed by Ranjith, M. Padmakumar, Shankar Ramakrishnan, Shaji Kailas, Uday Ananthan, Anjali Menon, B. Unnikrishnan, Shyamaprasad, Anwar Rasheed, Revathy, and Lal Jose. The first segment, *Nostalgia*, written and directed by M. Padmakumar, is an adaptation of Venugopal's poem *Naatuvazhikal*. It follows Johnykutty, a man working in the Middle East who longs to

return to Kerala. During his vacation in India, he becomes disillusioned with the government, pothole-filled roads, bureaucracy, and people. He decides to sell his ancestral mansion, send his children to boarding school, and make empty promises to an old friend before returning to Dubai, where he continues complaining about missing Kerala. Dileep stars as Johny, with Navya Nair as his wife Sheela. The cast includes Sudheesh, Suresh Krishna, Babu Namboothiri, Sreelatha Namboothiri, Ambika Mohan, and Anil Murali. The film's cinematography was handled by Manoj Pillai, and V.T. Sreejith did the editing.

Island Express, written and directed by Sankar Ramakrishnan and cinematographed by Vijay Ulaganath, stars Prithviraj Sukumaran, Sukumari, Rahman, Jayasurya, Maniyanpilla Raju, Kani Kusruti, Shelly Kishore, Sreejith Ravi, and Geethu Christie. The film opens with the protagonist reflecting on three idols that shaped his life: Jesus, Frankenstein, and Mangalassery Neelakantan. As he travels to Kerala with his editor-publisher, he promises to conceal her identity with traditional attire. Meanwhile, disparate characters—an elderly woman at a bus station, an army officer napping on her shoulder, and a man rejecting a teenager's advances—are all brought together by the narrative.

Lalitham Hiranmayam, written by Rajesh Jayaraman and directed by Shaji Kailas, follows Ramesh's internal conflict between his wife, Lalitha, and his mistress, Mayi. Before his death, Ramesh admits his affair to Lalitha, who then embraces Mayi and her child. The film stars Suresh Gopi as Ramesh, Jyothirmayi as Lalitha, Dhanya

Mary Varghese as Mayi, and Jayan Cherthala as Ramesh's friend, with cinematography by Sujith Vasudev.

Mrityunjayam (Overcoming Death), written by Ahmed Siddique and directed by Uday Ananthan in the horror genre, follows a journalist investigating the mysterious Vanneri Mana in Kerala. After falling in love with the owner's granddaughter, he discovers the Mana's secrets despite warnings. He soon becomes a victim of its mystery and is found dead, with his ghost appearing to the girl. The film stars Fahadh Faasil as the journalist and spirit, with Thilakan, Rima Kallingal, Anoop Menon, and Meera Nandan in supporting roles. The cinematography is by Hari Nair.

Happy Journey, a comedy thriller scripted and directed by Anjali Menon, follows a middle-aged man who flirts with a young woman on a bus ride from Ernakulam to Kozhikode. What begins as a light conversation becomes a psychological battle when the girl confidently turns the tables on him. The film stars Jagathy Sreekumar as the man and Nithya Menon as the woman, with Mukundan, Mythili, Kottayam Pradeep, and Bindu Panicker providing voice-over support. The cinematography is by M. J. Radhakrishnan, and the background score is by Ishaan Dev.

Aviramam (Never-Ending), scripted and directed by B Unnikrishnan, follows Devi and her husband, Ravi, as they face life's challenges. After discussing the recession's impact on Ravi's business, he contemplates ending his life but is saved by Devi's love. They choose to live in the moment. The film stars Siddique as Ravi, Shweta Menon as Devi, and Sudheesh as Jose. The

cinematography is done by Shamdatt, and the editing is done by Manoj.

Offseason, directed by Shyamaprasad and scripted by Joshua Newton, is a unique narrative set at Kovalam Beach. The film centred around Kunjappai (Suraj Venjaramood), a tour guide, follows his interaction with a foreign couple stranded in India after travelling from Lisbon in search of work. Initially disappointed by their financial situation, Kunjappai bonds with the couple, leading to a heartwarming conclusion. The film captures the essence of a short story, with Suraj Venjaramood delivering a solo performance.

Bridge, directed by Anwar Rasheed and written by Unni R., is the most emotionally charged short in the anthology. Cinematographed by Suresh Rajan, it stars Kozhikode Shantha Devi, Salim Kumar, Jinu Joseph, and Molly Kannamali. The film explores themes of loss and despair through two parallel stories: a father's search for his son's discarded kitten and a son abandoning his ill mother. Ultimately, the old woman and the kitten reunite at the Kerala Cafe.

The next one in the anthology was "*Makal (Daughter)*," which revealed the darker side of the flesh trade, happening under the guise of adoption. The film was scripted by Deedi Damodaran and directed by actor-turned-director Revathy. Sona Nair and Sreenath performed the lead roles, along with Augustine and Sashi Kalinga. The brilliant work of ace filmmaker and cinematographer Madhu Ambatt turned the short film into a film to be remembered forever.

Puramkazhchakal (Outside Scenes), directed by Lal Jose and based on a short story by C.V. Sreeraman, features Mammootty and

Sreenivasan in key roles. The film also stars Sshivada as the writer's former lover, Manikandan Pattambi as the bus conductor, and Shalu Kurian as a passenger. It follows an anonymous man on a bus navigating a hilly landscape, frustrated with the slow journey, while a fellow passenger reflects on his memories.

Five Beauties: Breaking narrative barriers

Several anthology films exploring distinct themes and narratives were released in the ensuing years. 2013 marked a landmark in the history of anthology movies in Malayalam. Three anthology movies were released in 2013. But it doesn't mean all the films were adequately planned and released that year. Many of the anthologies happened to be in that format as the original full-length format failed to take off due to budget constraints and other marketing hazards. But *5 Sundarikal* and *D Company* was planned and executed as an anthology movie. But *D Company* failed to feature all the directors, including Joshy, who had previously announced to be on their bandwagon.



Five Sundarikal (Five Beauties) was released in 2013. It consists of five short stories about women and the theme of love. The films were directed by Shyju Khalid, Sameer Thahir, Aashiq Abu, Amal Neerad, and Anwar Rasheed. The film's varied

storytelling and nuanced depiction of women's lives won it praise from critics.

Sethulakshmi, the lead film in this anthology, directed by Shyju Khalid and based on M. Mukundan's story, features standout performances by Baby Anikha and Chethan Jayalal. Scripted by Shyam Pushkaran and Muneer Ali, it follows Sethulakshmi, a young girl with a peculiar habit of collecting couples' photos, and her friend visiting a photographer. Guru Somasundaram gives a memorable performance as the photographer. The film, with its bittersweet tone, is enhanced by Alby's cinematography and Yakzan Gary Pereira's music.

Isha opens with a somewhat artificial story, courtesy of Sijoy Varghese, which is a bit far-fetched. Isha Sharvani's performance reminds of her role in some of previous films. While Sameer Thahir's directorial brilliance keeps the story engaging up to the climax, the twist diminishes its impact. However, Sameer, as the cinematographer, indeed plays a commendable role in making the movie feel visually rich. Nivin Pauly shines as a hesitant lover boy, his blushes capable of making any girl swoon. Siddharth Bharathan and Sijoy Varghese are also in the cast.

Gauri, directed by Aashiq Abu and developed from a plot by Amal Neerad, explores the sadness and hesitance in daily life. However, Abhilash Kumar's script doesn't entirely do justice to the premise. Kavya Madhavan and Biju Menon play the couple, Gauri and Jonathan Antony, who live idyllic lives despite their parents' opposition. Shine Tom Chacko plays an odd servant whose actions remain unclear. While the film feels too ostentatious and underwhelming,

Rajeev Ravi's cinematography and Bijibal's music make it somewhat watchable.

Kullante Bharya (Wife of the Dwarf), directed by Amal Neerad and adapted from Feng Jicai's story, pays tribute to Rear Window. Dulquer Salman plays an unnamed character with no dialogue, relying on narration to keep the audience engaged. While the film evokes *In the Mood for Love* with Gopi Sundar's music, it ultimately fails to resonate emotionally. Though Jinu Ben and Reenu Mathews performed their characters exceptionally well, the melodramatic ending feels abrupt and unnecessary.

This segment, *Aami*, penned by Hashir Muhammad and directed by Anwar Rasheed, features an overdone story pivoted on Fahadh Faasil, making it a one-person show. His portrayal of a typical psychopath character, though different in appearance, seems stereotypical. While the visual narrative, crafted by cinematographer Amal Neerad, avoids a moralistic tone, it ultimately feels artificial. Despite attempts to deliver a punch, the execution falls flat.

D Company: Anthology of Action



D Company, the next anthology movie released in 2013, was envisaged as an action anthology in Indian cinema, as claimed by its producers. Directed by Diphan, M. Padmakumar, and Vinod Vijayan, the film comprises three interconnected stories of

crime and revenge, offering a fresh take on the anthology format by incorporating elements of the action genre.

Oru Bolivian Diary 1995, written by G.S. Anil and directed by M. Padmakumar, stars Asif Ali, Samuthirakani, Ananya, Naren, and Gayathri. Set in a tribal jungle, it follows Maoist leader Chaukidar in Wayanad, spreading his doctrines while a tribal youth, Chinnan, tries to protect him from the police. Despite Chinnan's death, Chaukidar continues to influence. Fifteen years later, police inspector Narain reveals the events to reporter Indumathi, who shares Chaukidar's Maoist beliefs. Cinematography by Bharani K Dharan and music by Rahulraj add depth to the narrative, but the film struggles to leave a strong emotional impact.

Gangs of Vadakkumnathan, directed by Diphan and scripted by Anoop Menon, is a gripping gangster film set in Thrissur, focused on black money and gang wars. After industrialist Ajay Mallya's murder, corrupt officer Akbar investigates with a promise of a share of the money. Akbar manipulates the situation, eliminating gangs, but the twist reveals he orchestrated the murder. The film stars Anoop Menon, Jayasurya, Unni Mukundan, Joju George, Rajeev Pillai, Irshad, Parvathy, and others. The cinematography is by Vinod Illampally, and the background score is by Gopi Sunder.

Directed by Vinod Vijayan and scripted by Rajesh Ravi, *The Day of Judgement* follows Dr. Sunil Mathew (Fahadh Faasil), who is haunted by his wife Jeena's death after a fall from their balcony. The police suspect him, and things take a strange turn when another body, a nurse named Maya, is found at his villa. As

evidence mounts and his friend Vishnu (Jinu Joseph) implicates him, Sunil escapes custody, realising he's being framed for his wife's murder—a crime he committed out of frustration with her mental illness. Instead of confronting Vishnu, he chooses to flee. The film also stars Bhama, Tanushree Ghosh, and Pooja.



In 2013, Sohanlal directed *Kathaveedu* (*House of Stories*), another anthology comprised of independent adaptations of three short stories written by Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer, Madhavikutty, and M. T. Vasudevan Nair. The film featured Kunchacko Boban, Rituparna Sengupta, Mallika, Bhama, Manoj K. Jayan, Lal, Biju Menon and Kalabhavan Shajon in its star cast. The narrative format was in such a way that the hero Raj Karthi, a filmmaker who is about to direct three tales, and through these tales, the three different narratives are evolving out.

Oru Yathrayil (In a Travel) (2013), directed by Rajesh Amanakara, Mathew Scaria, Priyanandan, and Major Ravi, is an anthology that tells the stories of different individuals on a journey, exploring the complexities of relationships and human emotions. The film comprises four 30-minute shorts: *Honeymoon*, *I Love My Appa*, *Marichavarude Kadal*, and *Amma*.

Kannan Pattambi, Pooja, Kulappulli Leela and Rani Larius were in the lead of *Honeymoon*, directed by Rajesh Amanakara,

which dealt with the life of a newlywed couple from a slum. *I love My Appa*, a family drama set in the Kalpathy Brahmin street Palakkad, written by Major Ravi and directed by Mathew Scaria had Jayan Cherthala, Lekshmi Gopaldaswami and Subbalekshmi in its cast. *Marichavarude Kadal (Sea of Dead)* was written by Venugopal and directed by National Award-winning Priyanandan, with Vineeth Kumar and Remya Nambeesan as the heroine. It narrated the story of an elderly Gandhian couple amidst a seashore. *Amma*, the tale of an elderly housewife yearning for love and affection from her family members, was written and directed by Major Ravi and had Jayakrishnan, Manikatan Pattambi, Janardanan and Valsala Menon in its star cast. Anoop Chandran, Bineesh Kodiyeri, Rajeev Pillai, etc too, were there as supporting cast, while Sanjeev Sankar, Pratap Nair and Vel Raj did the camera.



Aana Mayil Ottakam is an Indian Malayalam anthology film released in November 2015, featuring three stories directed by Jayakrishnan and Anil Sign. The film stars Balu Varghese, Mithun Murali, and Sharran in prominent roles, with Anees Babu Abbas as its cinematographer. The first story, *Aa Aaa E Ee*, directed by Jayakrishnan, follows the life journey of a schoolboy from a low-income family in 1980, progressing to 2015. Mithun Murali leads this segment,

which is supported by an ensemble cast that includes Netra, Chembil Ashokan, and Sunil Sukhada. The second story, *12 out of 15*, co-directed by Jayakrishnan and Anil Sign, focuses on life within a multinational company. The plot unfolds in two rooms, with Balu Varghese playing the lead role. Lastly, *Fill In The Blanks*, directed by Anil Sign, stars Sharran as Gireesh and is an independent narrative from the other two. The film features an extensive cast, including Seema G Nair, Gourav Menon, Shivan, Indrans, Kalabhavan Haneef, and Vishnu Unnikrishnan.

The Solo Stories: Experimenting the Elements

In recent years, the trend of anthology films has continued to grow, with films like *Solo* (2017) and *Crossroad* (2017) gaining critical acclaim. It was in 2017 October, *Solo* another experimental anthology film co-written, co-produced, and directed by Bejoy Nambiar, starring Dulquer Salmaan in a quadruple role as Shekhar, Trilok, Siva, and Rudra, was released. Shot simultaneously in Malayalam and Tamil, It was later dubbed in Telugu as *Athade* and Hindi as *Tatva*. The film is structured around four independent stories, each representing one of the four elements- Water, Wind, Fire, and Earth-reflecting the multifaceted nature of Lord Shiva.

The first story, *World of Shekhar (Blind Love)*, explores the love between Shekhar, a stammering young man, and Radhika, a blind dancer. Their relationship faces various challenges, including disapproval from their families, but they eventually marry. Tragedy strikes when Radhika dies during childbirth,

leaving Shekhar to fulfil a promise to her by taking their daughter to the beach.

World of Trilok (The Cyclist), based on the element of Wind, tells the story of a man, Justin, who discovers his connection to the mysterious Dr. Trilok Menon after a tragic accident. Trilok reveals his role in a past killing and orchestrates Justin's demise, showcasing a dark cycle of revenge and deceit. In *World of Shiva (Ties of Blood)*, based on Fire, Shiva is a gangster seeking revenge for his father's death. His journey to Mumbai to confront the killer leads to betrayal and a tragic revelation about his family's dark past. Finally, *World of Rudra (Everything is Fair in Love and War)*, based on Earth, follows Rudra, an army trainee whose love for Akshara is hindered by family secrets. He later learns that Akshara is his half-sister, the result of an affair his father had years ago, leading to a heartbreaking conclusion. The film features a strong supporting cast, including *Soubin Shahir*, *Rohini*, *Sreejith Ravi*, and *Sai Pallavi* in key roles. *Solo* received positive reviews for its unique narrative structure and Dulquer Salmaan's exceptional performances across four distinct characters. Anjali Nair, Kartik R. Iyer, and Sreedevi Krishnan provided additional scripting support to the writer. Dhanya Suresh wrote the Malayalam dialogues. Girish Gangadharan, Madhu Neelakandan, and Sejal Shah teamed up for the cinematography, while Sreekar Prasad edited it.



In 2017, the next anthology movie released was *Crossroad* (2017), which weaves together 10 compelling stories, each focusing on the diverse experiences of women. The film, a portmanteau project, is a celebration of womanhood and provides a deep exploration of the varied roles, struggles, and emotions that women experience. The movie is divided into ten featurettes: *Oru Raathriyude Kooli (Remuneration for a night)*, *Kaaval (Surveillance)*, *Pakshikalude Maanam (Smell of the birds)*, *Mounam (Silence)*, *Badar*, *Mudra (Sing)*, *Lake House*, *Kodeshyan*, *Chrerivu (The Slant)*, and *Pinpe Nadappaval (One who walks behind)*, each running for approximately 15 minutes.

The directors behind this anthology include Lenin Rajendran, Madhupal, Nemom Pushparaj, Pradeep Nair, Babu Thiruvalla, Ashok R. Nath, Sashi Paravur, Avira Rebecca, Nayana Suryan, and Albertr Antoni. The script was penned by an impressive lineup of writers: Jayaraj, Lenin Rajendran, Sashi Paravoor, Babu Thiruvalla, and Nelson Alex. Produced by Baby Mathew, Anil Ambalakkara, Udayakumar, Parthan Mohan, Chandramohan, Bobin Karimkutty, and Nas Nazar, *Crossroad* boasts a remarkable ensemble of talents both in front of and behind the camera. The cinematography, which plays a significant role in establishing the mood of each segment, was handled by

Madhu Ambat, M. J. Radhakrishnan, Azhagappan, K. G. Jayan, Prathap P. Nair, Sunil Prem, Nikhil S. Praveen, and Gowtham Lenin. Mahesh Narayan, Raja Mohammed, Pradeep Shankar, Jith Joshie, Karthik Jogesh, C.R. Sreejith, Abhilash Viswanath, Sandeep Nandhakumar, and Sujesh S. did the editing.

Released on June 17, 2021, *Cheraathukal (Mud Lamps)* is an anthology film featuring six stories that explore different shades of love. It was made available on seven OTT platforms. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the film was shot with around 100 technicians following strict COVID-19 protocols. The six segments include *Veyil Veezhave (When the Sunlight Falls)*, which tells the story of a young home nurse forming a bond with the senior citizen she cares for; *Narthaki (Dancer)*, about a dancer pursuing her passion with the support of love; *Diwa*, where a woman escapes danger by trusting her instincts; *Clara*, a tale of everlasting love and waiting a lifetime for a soulmate; *Puzha (River)*, about a nun's love for the marginalised and the cost of her selfless acts; and *Saamoohya Paadam (Social Studies)*, which focuses on a young man's love for his community and his desire to help.

Directed by Shanoob Karuvath, Sreejith Chandran, Anu Kurisinkal, Jayesh Mohan, Shajan S. Kallai, and Fawaz Mohamed, *Cheraathukal* showcases the writing talents of Shanoob Karuvath, Sreejith Chandran, Jebin James, Jayesh Mohan, C. V. Balakrishnan, and Sarath Sasi. The cast includes Mareena Michael Kurisinkal, Manohari Joy, Maala Parvathy, Adil Ibrahim, Parvathy Arun, Shivaji Guruvayoor, and Dr. Mathew Mampra. Produced by Dr Mathew Mampra, the film beautifully portrays love's

vast and diverse nature through captivating performances and storytelling.



The year 2021 witnessed two anthology films being released exclusively in the OTT, *Freedom Fight* and *Aanum Pennum (Man and Woman)* were the two. *Freedom Fight*, directed by Jeo Baby, Kunjila Mascillamani, Jithin Issac Thomas, Akhil Anilkumar, and Francies Louis, was released on SonyLIV on February 11, 2022. The film explores sexism, inequality, neglect, and casteism through five distinct stories. The narratives range from light-hearted to intense, depicting the societal conditioning that women face across generations. The first segment, *Geethu Unchained*, directed by Akhil Anilkumar, follows Geethu (Rajisha Vijayan) as she navigates pressures around marriage and personal freedom. *Unorganised*, directed by Kunjila Mascillamani, is set in Kozhikode's market streets, using humour and satire to highlight the struggles of working women, such as access to basic sanitation. He combines reality and imagination in this segment by featuring living people, such as Ajitha, and sharing a true-life story. In *Ration*, directed by Francies Louis, two homemakers from different backgrounds reveal the subtle inequality in their friendship, using food as a metaphor for class disparity. *Old Age Home*, directed by Jeo Baby, focuses on an elderly couple, played by Joju George and Rohini,

who seek personal freedom and fulfilment in their later years. The final short, *Pra. Thoo. Mu*, directed by Jithin Issac Thomas, addresses the issue of manual scavenging, portraying the fight against oppressive societal structures with raw intensity.

Starring Rajisha Vijayan, Joju George, Rohini, and Srindha, *Freedom Fight* combines diverse voices and narratives to critique societal injustices. Each segment contributes to a unified message about empowerment and equality. The film, presented by Jeo Baby, director of *The Great Indian Kitchen* and *Kaathal*, offers a powerful and thought-provoking experience.

The second one, *Aanum Pennum*, explores the complexities of man-woman relationships through three distinct segments. Directed by Venu, Aashiq Abu, and Jay K. and narrated by Sathi Premji, the film explores themes of romance, betrayal, and lust, with each story unfolding in a different timeline, adding depth to its portrayal of relationships. The anthology features a cast that includes Parvathy Thiruvothu, Asif Ali, Joju George, Samyuktha Menon, Roshan Mathew, Darshana Rajendran, Indrajith Sukumaran, Nedumudi Venu, Kaviyoor Ponnamma, and Basil Joseph, bringing the varied characters to life with powerful performances.

The screenplay for different segments was written by Venu, Unni R., and Santhosh Echikkanam, each contributing to the film's exploration of the emotional and psychological facets of its characters. The cinematography was handled by Venu, Shyju Khalid, and Suresh Rajan, whose visuals complement the thematic richness of the stories. The music, composed by Bijibal and

Dawn Vincent, enhances the mood of each segment with original songs and a background score that adds to the emotional experience. Presented by Rajeev Ravi, *Aanum Pennum* is produced by C. K. Padma Kumar and M. Dileep Kumar for Prime Production. Among the three segments, *Savithri*, *Rachiyamma*, and *Rani*, *Rachiyamma* was an adaptation of the story by the same name, written by the legendary writer Uroob. The story had already been visualised as a short telefilm by Doordarshan before.

From B 32 to 44...

Structurally speaking, the movies *B 32 Muthal 44 Vare* (2023), scripted and directed by Sruthi Saranyam, and *Her* (2024) written by Archana Vasudev and directed by Lijin Jose, cannot be categorised as Anthology, as they follow a non-parallel narrative similar to K G George's classic *Adaaminte Variyellu* (*The spine of Adam*) released long back in 1983, the segmentation, separated with titles and characters, yet intertwined with a thematic link should be mentioned in such an evaluation. Both movies resonate with feminist perceptions in the new generation's social order.

Sruthi's movie is a compelling exploration of body positivity and sisterhood. Separated by segmentations like *Ziya 36 DD*, *32 AA*, *Rachel 34 DD*, *Jaya 36B*, *Malini 38 AA*, etc., the film follows six female protagonists from diverse backgrounds, each grappling with body image issues. Through their interconnected stories, the movie explores the emotional, physical, and psychological challenges they face, highlighting the pervasive nature of body shaming and societal expectations. The

narrative is both a satire and an emotional drama, shedding light on how women navigate their insecurities and find strength in solidarity.

The film stands out for its bold take on gender and body politics, addressing issues faced by women and the queer community. The authentic portrayal of the characters makes the story relatable and impactful. By focusing on the intimate and often overlooked aspects of women's lives, the movie fosters a sense of empathy and understanding, urging viewers to reflect on their perceptions and biases. Overall, *B 32 Muthal 44 Vare* is a powerful testament to the resilience and unity of women in the face of societal pressures. The film features Anarkali Marikar, Aswathy B, Harish Uthaman, Krisha Kurup, Raina Radhakrishnan, Eemya Nambeesan, Zarin Shihab, Sajin Cherukayil, and Sajitha Madathil in its star cast. Cinematographed by Sudheep Elamon and edited by Rahul Radhakrishnan, the film produced by the Kerala State Film Development Corporation grabbed the Padmarajan Award for best screenwriter, Kerala Film Critics Award for the best film and script and the special award for category for women and transgender in Kerala State Film Award.

Like Sruthi's narrative, *She* too weaves together the stories of five women from diverse backgrounds in Thiruvananthapuram. Each segment explores different facets of their lives, addressing societal norms and personal struggles. The film portrays complex female characters, showcasing their vulnerabilities and strengths. With stellar performances by Urvashi, Parvathy Thiruvothu, Remya Nambeesan, Aishwarya Rajesh, and Lijo Mol Jose, *She* offers a

poignant reflection on the challenges and triumphs of women in contemporary society.

***Manorathangal* and thereafter**



Although not branded as an anthology movie and marketed as a web series, MT Vasudevan Nair's scripted *Manorathangal* (2024), streamed on Zee5, was a mega project that fulfilled all the characteristics of a Portmanteau Movie. Hence, it won't be unwise to categorise it as an anthology and evaluate its content. *Manorathangal*, with Priyadarshan as its showrunner, presented nine short stories by the Jnanpith winner writer. Directed by a team of eight prominent directors, including Priyadarshan, Santhosh Sivan, Ranjith, Jayaraj, Shyamaprasad, Mahesh Narayanan, Ratheesh Ambat, and MT's daughter the debutant Aswathy V. Nair, the series features an impressive ensemble cast including Mohanlal, Mammooty, Fahadh Faasil, Biju Menon, Nedumudi Venu, Siddique, Indrajith Sukumaran, Asif Ali, and many more¹. Narrated by Kamal Haasan, who debuted as a teenage hero through MT's script, the series explores themes such as love, betrayal, societal norms, and personal choices, each segment offering a unique glimpse into human emotions and relationships. The series has been praised for its faithful adaptation of MT's evocative storytelling and stellar performances.

Themes and Innovation in Malayalam Anthologies

Anthology movies in Malayalam cinema have provided a platform for directors to experiment with storytelling and narrative structures, often resulting in innovative and thought-provoking films. This trend reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of Malayalam cinema, which continues to push the boundaries of conventional filmmaking. Filmmakers like Shyamaprasad, Renjith, Shyju Khalid, Priyadarshan, M Padmakumar, Ashique Abu, Amal Neerad and Major Ravi have the credit of directing multiple episodes in an anthology movie or associating with more than one anthology project. However, the record for directing more than one anthology movie and the maximum number of episodes rests with the master craftsman Adoor Gopalakrishnan, who has directed two anthologies and eight episodes. Regarding formatting, anthology movies are typically presented by the showrunner, as seen in the case of *Kerala Café*, or with a celebrity anchor, as in the case of *Manorathangal*, where Kamal Hassan anchored and presented the episodes. Dulquer Salman holds the record for enacting five different roles in a single anthology, as seen in *Solo*. Anthologies with a maximum number of movies bundled together included *Kerala Café* and *Cross Road*, which featured 10 short films directed by different filmmakers.

Perhaps the greatest function of an anthology in literature is to give readers a look into places, experiences, and people they would not otherwise experience. This is achieved by linking stories, poems, and plays based on their themes, characters, and settings. The successful editor assembles

pieces to create coherence – not merely as individual works but as a unified whole, with a sense that might otherwise be overlooked. Readers can simply pull an anthology from the shelf and get lost in a story or poem that resonates with their feelings. Another essential function of an anthology is to prevent readers from getting bored or being tied to a specific theme or element. Instead, they explore different worlds and feelings in various stories and poems – all of which are linked by a single theme. Another function of anthologies is to enable students to quickly find the best pieces, which are put together according to time, reviews, critical theories, settings, and plots. All these observations also apply to Anthology movies. However, cinema allows the filmmaker to revisit or redo a film to his taste or pay tribute to another through his visualisation. As in the case of scripting, something extraordinarily significant and outstanding could be cited from *Manorathangal*. M T Vasudevan Nair has re-written one of his early scripts, *Olavum Theeravum*, which had been filmed by P N Menon in 1970, for one of the episodes in the anthology which got picturised by Priyadarshan with Mohanlal in the lead. Although the new version wasn't as appealing as the original, it is interesting to see the original writer rewrite the same script to suit the anthology format. This was a completely different visual experience compared to *Rachiyamma*, which was a remake of a literary work by another writer.

One of the most striking characteristics of Malayalam anthology films is their thematic diversity. These films often explore human emotions, relationships, societal issues, and political themes with a fresh

perspective. For instance, *Kerala Cafe* used a variety of stories to delve into Kerala's socio-political landscape, offering viewers insights into the struggles, complexities, and contradictions within the state. *5 Sundarikal* and *Solo* have paved the way for more filmmakers to embrace this format. These films have not only entertained audiences but also sparked conversations about societal issues, personal struggles, and the human condition. Anthology movies provide filmmakers with an opportunity to showcase their talents through compelling narratives without compromising the quality of the content or format. The short film format provides them with a golden opportunity to explore their bigger talents and utilise the services of expert technicians without much concern about the budget.

Challenges and the Future of Anthology Films

Despite their growing popularity, Malayalam anthology films face certain challenges. The varying narrative structures, sometimes marked by abrupt transitions, can affect the overall flow of the film. While some viewers appreciate the unique storytelling style, others may find the format difficult to connect with, as it can occasionally disrupt the immersion created by a single narrative. Furthermore, the short-story format requires a careful balance between character development and plot structure, a challenge that filmmakers must

overcome to create a cohesive and engaging experience. Duration, indeed, is the major challenge. If it's a 10-episode anthology, the duration of each episode will be less than 10 minutes, whereas it will be longer in the case of a 4-episode series.

Nonetheless, the future of Malayalam anthology films seems promising. With streaming platforms such as *Netflix*, *Amazon Prime Video*, and *Disney+ Hotstar* gaining significant traction in Kerala, anthology films have found a new space for showcasing their stories. These platforms offer filmmakers greater freedom to experiment with diverse formats, reach broader audiences, and explore content that may not have been viable for traditional theatrical releases. Moreover, the rising interest in digital media and web series has paved the way for even more innovative and niche storytelling. Filmmakers are experimenting with formats that blend short films and anthologies, allowing for deeper character exploration and thematic depth. As audiences become more accustomed to nonlinear storytelling, the appeal of anthology films is likely to continue growing.

In conclusion, anthology movies have enriched Malayalam cinema by introducing innovative narratives, diverse perspectives, and thought-provoking themes. They remain an essential part of the cinematic landscape, reflecting the ever-evolving nature of storytelling in Malayalam cinema.

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