CINEJ CINEMA JOURNAL
ISSN 2159-2411 (PRINT) ISSN 2158-8724 (ONLINE)

Decoding Persona, Shadow and Mise-en-Scène: A Jungian Analysis of Psychic Metamorphosis in Dileesh Pothan's *Joji* (2021)

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Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.746 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Abstract

Dileesh Pothan's Malayalam film *Joji* (2021) is a *Macbeth*-inspired psychological drama that examines complex human predicaments and relationships unfolding in a tense Christian household in rural Kottayam, Kerala. This paper critically examines the conflict between the projected image and the instinctual urges of the protagonist Joji and delineates it using Carl Jung's conceptualization of *persona* and *shadow*. The paper makes a nuanced reading of the physical and psychological landscapes of the film while analyzing the transformation of Joji from a lazy college dropout to a conniving killer. The paper further scrutinizes the visual grammar of the film through a detailed analysis of the mise-en-scène, which facilitates and orchestrates Joji's psychic metamorphosis on screen.

Keywords: Joji (2021); Dileesh Pothan; Malayalam cinema; Jungian film analysis; persona and shadow; mise-en-scène; Macbeth adaptation; psychological transformation; individuation

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Decoding Persona, Shadow and Mise-en-Scène: A Jungian Analysis of Psychic Metamorphosis in Dileesh Pothan's *Joji* (2021)

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This paper is an attempt to decipher the complex process of becoming and unbecoming of the hero Joji from the Malayalam film *Joji* (2021), directed by Dileesh Pothan. *Joji* is inspired by William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and is the first major Malayalam film of the COVID-19 period. Joji stands apart as a psychological thriller from the other post-2020 Malayalam films, as it offers a unique cinematic experience by taking the spectators from the external world of events to the internal complexities of the human psyche. This becomes a discernible factor in the choice of this film text, because popular cinema always thrives on spectacle; the interiority of the major characters hardly gets communicated to the audience.

Locating *Joji* in Post-COVID-19 Malayalam Cinema

COVID-19 redefined the aesthetics of cinema as an art form. As the production and consumption of cinema increasingly occurred in closed and intimate spaces, the thematic engagements shifted more strongly toward nuanced reflections of psychological interiority, avoiding a spectacle-driven approach. Malayalam cinema also witnessed a relevant shift in

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.746 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

focus in this context—a series of films exploring and problematizing the psychological dimensions of human experience were released after 2020. Notable post-2020 films include *Churuli, Irul, Nayattu, Kala in* 2021; *Puzhu, Saudi Vellakka, Bhoothakaalam*, *Nanpakal Nerathu Mayakkam, Nna Thaan Case Kodu, Rorschach, Malayankunju, and Kooman* in 2022; *Iratta* in 2023 and *Kishkindha Kaandam* in 2024. These films are significant for their engagement with the psychological reality of the protagonists. All of them are constantly in conflict with the external world/reality and they pursue different means to navigate the difficulties and challenges. *Churuli*'s characters are in a lawless, liminal, surreal world that dissolves normative social order. This creates chaos and conflict for the characters in unique ways (Varughese, 2023; Vidyasree & Madhavi, 2025). The crises in *Puzhu*, *Nna Thaan Case Kodu*, and *Malayankunju* operate in a caste-conscious, discriminatory society. The intricacies of male ego, aggression, and dominance are explored in *Kala* (Krishnan & K., 2023; Rajeev & Abi, 2021). In *Rorschach,* the hero is intentionally stuck in an illusory psychological world to disrupt the painful reality.

In contrast to the hypermasculine world, *Saudi Vellakka* and *Bhoothakaalam* portray the mental plane from a feminine perspective. While *Saudi Vellakka* examines the psyche of an elderly woman and her negotiation with the legal system, *Bhoothakaalam* explores distressed

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motherhood and the ways the tormented self finds expression in horror (Cris, 2022; Raj & Suresh, 2025). The psychological landscape is portrayed through sociopolitical engagement in *Nayattu*, which shows how caste identities can be weaponized to generate systemic pressure, escalating fear and psychological breakdown among a group of police officers caught between the status of the hunters and the hunted (Harinarayanan, 2022). Though less sociopolitical and more rooted in intimate personal and spatial registers, *Nanpakal Nerathu Mayakkam* shows how shifting spaces destabilize constructed realities, compelling an individual into an alternate life, language, and cultural belonging, with a tourist bus functioning as a suspended space of psychic transition (Gopakumar et al., 2025).

Cinema of this period further engages with psychological conditions rooted in the past, as seen in *Iratta* and *Kishkindha Kaandam*. In *Iratta*, the protagonist's fractured masculine identity is trapped within unresolved childhood trauma that he seeks to let go of, whereas in *Kishkindha Kaandam*, the fear and uncertainty of letting go of memory create constant psychological stress (Mathews, 2024; Praveen, 2023). Interestingly, the period also witnessed films such as *Irul* and *Kooman* that explored criminal psychology through conventional crime-thriller structures.

It is within this context that *Joji*, through an almost imperceptible, tightly controlled slow-

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burn cinematic process, becomes exceptionally significant. Despite the absence of explicit or overt exposition or exaggerated emotional expressions, the film facilitates our journey from the periphery of the events to the interiority of the mindscape, and the spectator is involved as much as the filmmaker in the process of tracing the protagonist's psyche. Existing scholarship on *Joji* situates the film within contemporary Malayalam cinema's engagement with family, masculinity, psychological realism, and post-pandemic subjectivity. Studies examine how *Joji* reconstructs familial space by departing from conventional representations as secure and harmonious, exposing oppression and inherited trauma embedded within an authoritarian and feudal family structure. Psychoanalytic and masculinity studies further argue that *Joji* destabilizes hegemonic masculine ideals and subverts conventional father–son dynamics through fractured, morally conflicted, and psychologically unstable subjectivities shaped by patriarchal authority. The film is also examined in relation to the psychological isolation and alienation associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the film's recontextualization of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* within the sociocultural realities of Kerala, and its similarities to the 1985 Malayalam film *Irakal*, have also been studied in detail (Bhalerao, 2021; Francis, 2024; Gupta et al., 2021; A. Mathew, 2021; R. G. Mathew, 2022; Mondal & Sen, 2024; Priya & Vishwanathan, 2024; Sooraj et al., 2023; T., 2024).

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Although the existing studies have widely examined the thematic and sociocultural dimensions of *Joji*, the role of cinematic form and language in constructing and communicating Joji's psychological fragmentation remains underexplored. Addressing this gap, this study details how the cinematic techniques of performative body, costumes, cinematography, space, dialogue, sound, and silence are effectively manipulated to create the conflict between the projected image (*persona*) and the instinctive urges (*shadow*) of the protagonist Joji. The study uses the Jungian theorization of *persona*, *shadow*, and *individuation* to examine how the protagonist's psychological disintegration defines the modalities of his performance.

Joji: The Landscape of Power and Fear

The plot of *Joji* revolves around the hypermasculine figure, the patriarch, Kuttappan P K of the Panachel House, his three sons—Jomon, Jaison, and Joji—his grandson Poppy (Jomon's son), and his daughter-in-law Bincy (Jaison's wife). The story unfolds in a tense Christian household, set against the backdrop of lush, expansive rubber plantations in rural Kottayam, Kerala. The power dynamics in the family are established from the very beginning of the film through the fear and hesitation of the family members to be at ease in the presence of Kuttappan. There is tension, emptiness, and angst in the physical as well as the psychological landscape.

Joji is the youngest of the three sons of Panachel Kuttappan; he is a college dropout and roams around aimlessly in the family's extensive plantations to pass the time. He has learned

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the trick of being invisible by locking himself up in his room, pretending to be preparing for IELTS. He avoids conversations with everybody at home and goes to the kitchen for food when nobody is around. But he is constantly alert and attentive: he knows Poppy, his nephew, is stealing money from Kuttappan and ordering things like pellet guns online; he knows that Bincy and her husband are unhappy in the household, as they want to move out; he knows that as long as Kuttappan is alive, nobody will have their way out of that house; and Kuttappan appears to be in great health and ever vigilant. Kuttappan has no regard for Joji and considers him hopeless. Joji internalizes the uselessness of his own insignificant existence by doing absolutely nothing.

The entire external and internal landscapes shift their dynamics when Kuttappan suffers a stroke while exerting great force to lift a submerged motor valve from the mud in their work yard. The accident is so sudden and unexpected that Joji takes some time to process the implications of the accident. Joji expects that his father would never regain his health and is elated by that fact. Contrary to his hopes, his father slowly starts recovering after surgery and regains his physical vigor and mental agility. Joji soon realizes the urgency to act on the opportunity. Once he understands that there is a possibility to break the seemingly never-ending loop of power manipulation in the family, obviously exercised by his father, he instantly becomes alert and attentive to that option. Joji's one-dimensional character slowly unfolds into

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a complex, vengeful, conniving man, as the narrative progresses. He chooses to destroy the ubiquitous power loop, dreaming of a financially independent and free future.

Once Kuttappan gets back home, immobile but agile, Joji executes his plan. He replaces his medicines with slow poisons to facilitate a seemingly natural death. Bincy is a silent witness to this act. She supports the cause through her silence. Things happen as he wishes, and Kuttappan dies. Events spiral out of control once Joji's brother Jomon insists on an autopsy, as he cannot believe that their father, who was recovering so well, died suddenly. Joji could evade an autopsy by speaking strategically but runs into trouble because of one of Kuttappan's loyal helpers. The helper, Thotta Sudhi, reports that he had seen Joji lethargically sauntering his way back to the house when Bincy was clamoring loudly while Kuttappan died. This seemingly insignificant detail becomes consequential when Jomon grows suspicious about Joji's actions. Joji shoots Jomon with the pellet gun when Jomon questions him about his muddled statements. Eventually, the secrets are revealed as people grow suspicious about him, including Bincy's husband Jaison. Joji tries to threaten Jaison, hinting at Bincy's silent involvement in the crime, but Jaison stays unaffected. Unwilling to confess, Joji shoots himself with the same pellet gun but survives. The last scene of the film shows Joji in a coma; he is aware of his surroundings but refuses to respond to the questions and stares aimlessly. His suicide note says, "The society has fucked me. The society has killed me. Arrest them" (Pothan, 2021, 01:46:16), shifting the

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entire weight of the plot onto our conscience, where the eternal conflict between power and resistance continues even after the film ends.

Joji's Persona

Jung defines persona as a façade through which an individual adapts to the world; it is "…a compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be" (Jung, 1928/1966, para. 246). It is a mask individuals wear for cultural acceptance and survival. Joji performs in different ways to maneuver diverse situations, revealing his persona as fluid and adaptive. This is a natural response to his stifling environment, which demands constant adherence. Joji appears to be uninterested in the happenings around him, but he is acutely alert and vigilant; this is exemplified by the way he monitors Kuttappan's daily routine meticulously (Pothan, 2021, 47:50, 49:30), to plan what could be done to get rid of him without arousing any doubts in the family. We constantly observe Joji suppressing his aggression and anger, especially when Kuttappan falsely accuses and thrashes him over the missing money and when Poppy (Joji's brother Jomon's son) updates him on Kuttappan's return from the hospital. In both instances his extreme disturbance is portrayed through his silent anguish when alone in his room, but he manages to keep a submissive and calm demeanor in front of others all the while.

Despite being ecstatic about Kuttappan's sudden hospitalization at the beginning, he expresses sentiments of mortality to Bincy (Joji's brother Jaison's wife), advocating prayer and

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hope (Pothan, 2021, 16:34). Moreover, the strategic expressions and actions he maintains while seeking permission to take the car key from Kuttappan, who is being carried by people, as he develops hemiparesis (Pothan, 2021, 15:44), underscore his calculated disguise of docility and compliance. His persona meticulously exudes an aura of servitude by means of two key elements: the Bible he often carries and the profound reverence he shows toward the priests who visit the house. Joji methodically and consciously performs and maintains a persona to preserve his peaceful existence in the presence of authority**.**

He manipulates Girish (the main servant of Kuttappan) by assigning him tasks and instructing him to keep the residual sum in order to appear kind and considerate (Pothan, 2021, 8:44); this is a calculated move to create an image of a generous master, who could replace the immobile Kuttappan in the future. He takes considerable effort to guide the discussion on property settlement as he wishes; he carefully chooses words and strategically engages everyone, particularly the resistant Jomon (Pothan, 2021, 1:03:56). Often, this strategic adoption of the face of compassion surprises and impresses Dr. Felix (the family doctor and a relative), who acknowledges that he did not anticipate such a sophisticated approach from Joji, highlighting Joji's ability to handle and understand situations (Pothan, 2021, 1:08:17). The performances are made in the most appropriate situations to gain the trust and goodwill of others. For Joji, the persona is a tool for deception, to mask his true intentions—his *shadow.*

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Into the Abyss: Exploring the Shadow in Joji

Jung defines shadow as the repressed, unconscious dimension of the conscious mind. It contradicts the socially accepted face of a human; it lurks beneath as instinctual sensations that seek expression in the external world. At any point in time, it may "…project itself unconsciously, seeping into our thoughts and actions without our knowledge" (Weaver, 2022). Joji—a neglected child who is anointed as a "second-rate loser by his father" (Bhalerao, 2021)—resolves to act on his intuitive desires, the moment he realizes that he has an opportunity. Joji skillfully sheds his persona and starts walking toward his raw self. Jung (1951/1968) considers the shadow as a moral challenge because it forces us to face parts of ourselves that we usually ignore or deny, but ultimately desire to achieve (para. 14). The path to accomplishing his individuality leads Joji to a string of unexpected events that delve into the depths of his unconscious.

The chaos starts when Dr. Felix calls Joji, "you millionaire" (Pothan, 2021, 27:46), referring to the substantial wealth that he will inherit after his father's death. This comment feeds Joji's greed and entitlement, reinforcing the idea that wealth is the primary benefit from his father's death, undermining the emotional significance of the situation. From then on, we witness Joji plotting to kill his father and then later inadvertently taking Jomon's life. The

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following section details the three pertinent character traits of Joji that facilitate the unveiling of his *shadow.* The dark triad of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism in Joji is illustrated here.

The Art of Manipulation: Deciphering Joji's Machiavellian Traits

Machiavellianism is the cunning and deceitful dimension of the human psyche, which is in pursuit of power or selfish gains. The scheming tactics and strategic conversations that Joji engages in substantiate his manipulative nature. One of the clearest demonstrations of his agenda is exposed through the way he manipulates Poppy to reveal details of the online transactions Poppy had made with Kuttappan's credentials. He wants to be in the know so that he can manipulate people later. In addition to this, his decision to engage with the intoxicated Dr. Felix conveys a strategic technique to elicit an honest response about his father's death while avoiding potential questions regarding it (Pothan, 2021, 27:18). Moreover, Joji skillfully steers the discussion toward Jomon's alcoholism during the dispute over the autopsy, exemplifying both manipulation and feigned compassion.

Joji's Psychopathic Dimensions: The Anatomy of a Villain

The psychosocial traits of defiance, impulsivity, and antisocial behavior are evident in Joji's character in the way he inflicts harm on himself and those around him. According to Gupta et al. (2021), Kuttappan significantly influences the young Joji's psychosocial

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development, leading to long-term consequences such as emotional struggles, behavioral issues, and social difficulties. Joji demonstrates a psychopathic lack of empathy, which is evident in how he casually mocks his father's paralyzed hands and proceeds to Kuttappan's balcony to assert his authority under the changed circumstances (Pothan, 2021, 28:30). His response to Kuttappan's question about who is there in the yard is "one of your subjects" (Pothan, 2021, 48:11), which exudes his newfound determination and lack of fear.

The compulsive fabrication of a falsehood about Jomon's death and his attempt to patronize Poppy further indicate his absolute lack of empathy. When his true essence surfaces toward the end, Joji shows absolute disregard for the emotions of others and firmly sticks to his lies. He inevitably becomes such a despicable and fearsome figure at the end that, even when the gunshot is heard from his locked room, instead of rushing to the room, Jaison says, "Let the police come" (Pothan, 2021, 01:46:43).

Joji's Narcissistic Realm: Exploring the Egoistic Depths

The narcissistic traits are often related to the shadow's pathological and inflated sense of self-importance and fragile ego, as seen in Joji's interaction with Jomon and his suicide note (Pothan, 2021, 1:18:30, 1:46:23). He ascribes his actions to societal pressure. The extreme prioritization of his own desires and comfort over the well-being and needs of others unveils the fact that regardless of how one performs *the persona*, *the shadow* constantly lingers beneath,

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triggering what one seeks.

Bincy: Reflection of Joji's Unconscious

This section identifies Bincy, the only female character in the film, as the projection of Joji's unconscious. She eases the tension and conflict between Joji's *persona* and *shadow*, which is a significant step in the process of *individuation*. Jung describes *individuation* as a transformative process of realization through integrating the unconscious traits into the conscious plane. This integration of the *persona* and *shadow* happens in the film through the placing and projection of the character of Bincy. The metamorphosis of Joji is effectively enabled by the increasing prominence of Bincy in the latter part of the film, where she is not only a character but a personified representation of Joji's innermost conscience, functioning primarily as a catalyst and an inner affirmation that breaks him free from his self-inflicted confusion and fear.

Bincy is the wife of his weak and indeterminate brother Jaison. She is smart, calm, and precise, and she shares similar living conditions with Joji but with more disadvantages, as an unrecognized housewife cum maid. The picture of Bincy, the sole female in the home, engrossed in endless household chores, prepares the audience for a possible alliance with her brother-in-law Joji. Like Joji, she is also intensely observant and watchful.

Indeed, the dependence between Joji and Bincy is thoroughly developed in the narrative,

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which extends from Joji getting water from her to making important decisions based on her encouraging advice. Here, Bincy functions as an alternate mother figure who fosters his *shadow*; she always watches Joji eating food, an act of nurturing, effectively portraying the mutual aspirations, objectives, and desires of both parties (Pothan, 2021, 17:34). Jung (1954/1969) noted the mother archetype as a crucial component of the individuation process, especially in the absence of a maternal or feminine presence (para. 158), which is particularly relevant in Joji's context.

Bincy functions as a counterpart to Joji. Bincy makes him aware of his potential to act on his thoughts and plans. She does this through subtle encouragement and scolding. Bincy chides him for asking permission from his brothers before doing everything (Pothan, 2021, 21:33) and she is angry when Joji enjoys his food elaborately and slowly. She reminds him that his fate would be to sit and eat on the slab throughout his life; she expresses her impatience and despair about the unchanging routine at the house. These subtle responses trigger Joji to question his own helplessness and insecurity. The director skillfully presents a clear visual of Bincy and Joji in the same frame, separated by a hallway wall (see Figure 1), which visually symbolizes the parallel occurrence of Joji's *persona* and *shadow*.

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Figure 1: Screenshot from *Joji.*

Despite Joji's own uncertainty, Bincy's implicit approval serves as an external validation, providing him the courage to go ahead with his business ideas. She can be considered as his companion, reiterating what he wants to hear, which precisely emphasizes and strengthens his conviction. Bincy gives Joji affirmation, acknowledgment, and validation which he secretly longs for.

Furthermore, Joji expresses his enthusiasm to have 'special' food, despite Kuttappan's sudden hospitalization. Noticing Joji's avoidance of the situation, Bincy inquires about the details of partition in Kuttappan's will; Joji deflects the question, saying it is not the right time. In response, Bincy remarks, "I thought this didn't affect you" (Pothan, 2021, 17:42), which can be interpreted as Joji's *shadow* challenging his own *persona*. Moreover, their brief eye contact (Pothan, 2021, 17:54) in this sequence establishes an instance of introspection, suggesting a direct interaction between the projected image and the actual desire. This underscores their

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shared interest and mutual dislike for Kuttappan. Hence, the discussions taking place in the kitchen offer a sense of reassurance about their complicity in crimes (Pothan, 2021, 42:30). Likewise, her presence during the drug refill (Pothan, 2021, 50:53) triggers an internal conflict in Joji, akin to a clash between the ego and the unconscious, leading him to feel anxious and question his inner conscience. In the ensuing scene, Bincy sits on the sofa, quietly watching, and aids Joji's attempt to kill his father. She acts as a silent accomplice, compliant with his crimes, demonstrating the state of 'being one with himself', establishing the absence of further conflict and confusion.

The rumbling sound of a washing machine in the film conveys the nonverbal communication between Bincy and Joji **(**Pothan, 2021, 51:28). Indeed, it is noteworthy that as the narrative progresses, there is an increase in his interactions with Bincy, when his *persona* prominently surfaces, and the combination scenes become less frequent when the *shadow* emerges. This suggests Joji's reduced reliance on external validation, signaling his journey toward self-reckoning and introspection. Similarly, prior to Kuttappan's collapse, Bincy's presence was very limited; and during his recovery, her presence becomes minimal—thus, the frequency of her presence on screen suggests and personifies Joji's psychological involvement in the plot. Soon after Kuttappan's death, we observe Bincy confidently regaining her presence

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in the house, much like Joji's *shadow*. Additionally, Bincy experiences a sense of freedom by transitioning from playing the role of a maid to having a maid of her own—an act of liberation for both Bincy and Joji in their physical world.

Mise-en-Scène: The Narrative Subtleties in Joji

Joji's psychic metamorphosis is enabled and expressed through the proficient manipulation of a string of cinematic techniques. The mise-en-scène elements are intricately woven into the narrative that *Joji* offers a complex riddle to decode. This section specifically focuses on seven key elements of *Joji*'s visual language, the performing body, costume, cinematography, space, dialogue, sound, and silence that consistently contribute to the metaphorical depiction of Joji's oscillation between *persona* and *shadow*.

Body

The 'body' in Joji is not merely a physical structure for performing but it signals, establishes, and negotiates one's position and power in the Panachel house. It serves as a tool that mirrors the characters' psychological changes and transgressions, as they navigate diverse circumstances. In the film, the theme of power is established in the first scene through a backshot, where Kuttappan is seen performing pull-ups (Pothan, 2021, 2:49). This action and the strong, muscular body of Kuttappan establish his physical strength and his undeniable and threatening presence even in old age. The man's firmness, sternness, and his meticulous ways

to exercise power over his grown-up sons are evident when he strangles and throttles Joji, both before and after his health crisis. In fact, no other man in the house has a particularly muscular build, and Joji is the leanest and the smallest among the three brothers; thus, the body becomes an instrument to establish the visible hierarchy of power. Once Kuttappan's bodily power deteriorates, it alters the power dynamics in the family. Bincy's body language becomes that of a confident woman by relaxing and adorning her nails.

According to Jung's exploration of the relationship between the body and psyche, as paraphrased by Hockley (2017, p. 170), the psyche is reflected and conveyed through our body, expressing unconscious psychological meanings. Analyzing the use of the body in *Joji* reflects Jung's concept of embodied imagery. Joji's persona often aims to project an image of innocence and naivety with a subtle slouch, relaxed demeanor, wide eyes, and a broad smile. This is visible when he takes slow, hesitant steps to Kuttappan's room with his shoulders hunched. But upon realizing his absence in the room, his mannerisms shift as his shoulders drop, his stance opens and his hands relax, moving freely as they unclench, reflecting a sense of ease. He maintains the same subtle posture in every other interaction to hide his authentic self and purpose. In contrast, when he is alone in his room, he expresses his pent-up emotions by clenching his jaw, tightening his lips, pacing restlessly, and slamming the door. Similarly, at the pond where he

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plots his father's death, we observe him sitting, leaning forward with minimal movement, lost in careful preparation. During Kuttappan's funeral, Joji savors the moment with a detached and emotionless pleasure, which is illustrated by his cold, sharp, and unblinking eyes with a sneering expression. The body is the locus of Joji's mind; it becomes a material site that consciously and unconsciously concretizes the character's psychological and emotional transformations.

Costume

From the beginning of the film to Kuttappan's fall, except for Kuttappan, everyone around him (from servants to children) is dressed in shades of green and blue, almost merging with the vast rubber plantation. They are present yet visually indistinct, invisible, signifying lives lived unnoticed. This code of dressing becomes more pronounced after Kuttappan's fall, except for Jomon, who retains the same colors, indicating his continued submission to Kuttappan's authority and paternal love. Jaison's positioning in the house, almost merging with the tones of the walls, reinforces his marginal presence.

The film begins with a series of scenes depicting a courier service man bringing a parcel through the winding roads of the rubber estate. Poppy, wearing a demon-faced mask, comes to receive the package, which is a pellet gun. According to Sulaiman (2021), "The pistol is a toy, like the children for the patriarch. But no toy is harmless to be kept aside." Here, the air gun

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transforms into a potent metaphor, symbolizing Joji's vengeance and rage.



Figure 2: Screenshot from *Joji.*

The mask is a powerful accessory used by many characters in the film to subtly proclaim the hidden motives that could not be expressed otherwise. In fact, the significance of the mask intensifies when Bincy tells Joji, "put on a mask and come" (Pothan, 2021, 55:17) to attend his father's funeral ceremony. Here, regardless of the COVID-19 backdrop, Bincy's suggestion to wear a mask goes beyond the literal act of wearing a mask to a metaphorical concealing of true emotions. Joji tries on a black mask in front of a blurred mirror, illustrating that the masking is not just physical but emotional and psychological. The characters reveal more about themselves and other characters through the costumes they choose to wear. It is significant that the white costume, earlier associated only with Kuttappan and visually dominant against the deep green

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surroundings, is disrupted after his fall when Joji appears in white and Poppy in red (Pothan, 2021, 21:06). This shift signals Joji's assertion of authority. At the same time, it functions as a foreshadowing cue, suggesting a potential re-enactment of Kuttappan's power structure between Joji and Poppy that fails to materialize.

Bincy and Joji wear clothing of similar hues and tints (see Figure 2). Specifically, this is evident when she advises and encourages Joji to stop seeking permission from his brothers and do what he wants to do. Additionally, when Bincy subtly guides and motivates him to go and talk to Kuttappan about the partition, both appear in the same color, which not only enhances the visual coherence but also indicates the similarity in their motives and intentions. Moreover, every time after replacing the medicines of Kuttappan with poison, he heads to the pond and seeks comfort, wearing a crimson outfit, symbolizing his darker ulterior motives.

Space

The space in *Joji* is not just a backdrop, but an active and contributory character in the film. The space defines the mood of the film, and it also intensifies the emotional struggles that each character goes through. The placement of the Panachel house, far removed from neighboring houses and amidst the dense rubber plantations, creates the film's pervasive atmosphere, signifying a family estranged and isolated. The initial wide-angle shots capturing the hallway and corridor represent the vast emptiness inside, serving as an analog for the family

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dynamics and the disconnection they experience. This spatial tension extends into the film's spatial logic of proximity, where distance itself structures psychological estrangement. Conversations are rarely staged in close physical proximity; instead, characters are consistently separated by visible distance.

Bincy's frustration is communicated to the audience, not through her words or the disinterested ways in which she does her household chores, but through the empty, quiet and vast space in the kitchen that she occupies, where the unquenchable fire mirrors her rage at a life unfulfilled, without children or a home. The shots depicting Bincy in the kitchen are always from a wide angle to intensify the feeling of loneliness or vacuum that she experiences inside and outside. Later, the power and freedom she gains after Kuttappan's death is reflected in her withdrawal from the kitchen and occupying other spaces, specifically the porch.

Joji often inhabits closed, empty spaces such as his room and the nearby pond, where his major transformations unfold. However, the first spark of hope for a better future comes with the relocation of the horse from the distant rubber woods to the courtyard, in the absence of Kuttappan. Even after Kuttappan's hospitalization, this spatial authority remains intact. Although physically incapable of exerting control, the insistence that his room remains upstairs continues to reinforce his dominance. The distinction between upstairs and downstairs thus

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becomes an architectural expression of power, presenting authority as embedded within the household's spatial hierarchy. Consequently, the upstairs functions not merely as a domestic space, but as a coded site of dominance.

We often see Joji gazing longingly at the balcony, and once he confirms that his father is paralyzed, he moves toward it without fear, asserting control over a space that was once off-limits. The final act of occupying the balcony comes after Kuttappan's death, when he not only occupies the balcony and room but also claims his bed. Thus, by crossing the limits and navigating through space, he empowers himself. Moreover, the progression of his cigarette smoking habit skillfully portrays the transition from the *persona* to his true self. Initially, he smokes at a considerable distance from the residence, but over time, he progressively reduces the distance until he eventually starts smoking within.

Jung (1935/1976) discusses the possibility of spaces to effect transformation in human nature, which he called *temenos*, "a taboo area where he [the man] will be able to meet the unconscious" and where a drama, a ceremonial takes place (para. 270). Analyzing the use of space in Joji resonates with Jung's concept of transitional spaces. In the film, the pond becomes a transitional space that nurtures his motives by connecting his internal and external realities.

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Moreover, the existence of the pond in a lowland (a subterranean pond) serves as a symbolic gateway to his subconscious, representing the depth of his inner self (the shadow) that he had not previously acknowledged—an alien space until Kuttappan's fall. Furthermore, his futile attempts at fishing in a barren pool extend metaphorically to the broader landscape, signifying the victims he has left in his wake. Even his room, 'Joji's Palace', symbolizes the power he yearns for, while 'Royal Business', set amidst the vast rubber woods, signifies his worldly ambition. Ultimately, the pond, the tall trees, the twisted labyrinthine plantation, the stream, and the thick, dark forest silently witness Joji's *shadow* and the tragedies that befall the Panachel family.

Cinematography

Cinematography in *Joji* creates a paradoxical sense of claustrophobic closeness and detachment through visual composition, framing, and camera movement. The visual cue for this psychological framework is established in the glitch-like form of the title *Joji*, with the strike through the "I" suggesting Joji's fractured subjectivity. The film posters extend this visual grammar through blurred imagery, fragmented faces, and obscured expressions, presenting identity as divided, unstable, and unresolved (Figures 3 and 4). The film's visual composition reinforces this alienation through stillness, spatial emptiness, and recurring divisions, with the camera observing the household from a detached distance, creating a surveillance-like effect.

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Within the shared domestic spaces, interactions between the characters are repeatedly separated by physical barriers such as handrails, windows, walls, and shadows, emphasizing isolation over intimacy.



Figure 3 - 4: Official Promotional Posters for *Joji*. (From *IMP Awards*, by D. Pothan (Director), 2021 (impawards.com). Copyright 2021 by Bhavana Studios.

The film embeds foreshadowing through symbolic visual motifs. In the opening sequence, Poppy's gunshot striking an ant-covered tree foreshadows Kuttappan's collapse, the ants reflecting the household's dependence on him. The image marks both the disruption of the Panachel order and the beginning of Joji's transformation. The visual contrasts in lighting and color further externalize Joji's inner transformation. During the drive home after dropping Dr.

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Felix, his face is split between light and shadow, suggesting the coexistence of his familiar self and the emerging new identity. This duality intensifies after Kuttappan's fall, as Joji's shadow falls over the bedridden patriarch, symbolically reversing the earlier hierarchy of fear and dominance. As Joji's psychological fragmentation deepens, he is increasingly shown in isolation within frames marked by beams of light, moonlit skies, and dark interior frames, reinforcing his descent into instability.

Similarly, the progression of color reflects Joji's psychic deterioration. While the film initially maintains muted tones, gradually, red appears in bedsheets, clothes, curtains, and interiors, signaling the emergence of his repressed desires. This culminates in the image of blood flowing from his room when he shoots himself, marking the eruption of his shadow self into material reality. Thus, cinematographer Shyju Khalid's approach of avoiding direct psychological exposition in favor of symbolic imagery becomes a defining feature of the film.

This visual logic extends into the film's wider use of framing and camera movement to depict psychological ascent and descent, reinforced through contrasting camera distances, angle-based composition, and shifting vertical hierarchies within the cinematic space. Within this system, expansive long shots diminish human presence within the vast rubber plantations and the household, transforming the setting into a psychological enclosure, an observational

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space that is visible yet emotionally inaccessible. In contrast, close-ups disrupt this spatial vastness by isolating Joji within the controlled frames, intensifying emotional claustrophobia, while slow zooms draw attention to moments of psychological realization, particularly through sustained focus on his eyes. These close-ups do not function as transparent windows into interiority; instead, they withhold more than they reveal, suggesting an ambiguity beneath the visible surface.

Dialogue

Dialogue is the next key element in effecting the transition in Joji. The tension and conflict among the characters are visible from the beginning of the film, through the casual exchange of humiliating and insulting words. They regularly swear at each other, as it is part of their everyday routine, and no one seems offended by this. This dialogue overtly reveals the deep-seated motives they carry. At the beginning of the film, Kuttappan's profane language establishes the relationship dynamics in the family. His keen sense of dominance is evident when he precisely states the amount of money he has in his purse, indicating his tight grip on financial matters in the household and**,** consequently, everything around him.

We often see Joji retreating to the pond to bait fish, every time after replacing Kuttappan's medicines; a passerby asks, "It's been two days, any luck?" to which Joji responds, "It will surely bite" (Pothan, 2021, 50:24, 50:33). The seemingly unconnected responses reflect his

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hope, patience, and convictions. In the climax, Joji's assertive and threatening statements, demanding that Jaison support him or face the consequences, represent the culmination of his character transformation, which no longer require indirect retorts. At this juncture, Joji dismisses Bincy's questions regarding Jomon's death and yells at her that he will slap her hard if she says nonsense (Pothan, 2021, 1:36:19).

On the other hand, Joji's two brothers' dialogue reveals their true essence. Jomon's deep love and respect for Kuttappan are evident in his conversations. He advocates for prayer meetings to improve Kuttappan's health; he initiates a risky and expensive surgery for his father. Though Kuttappan is immobile, Jomon asks his permission to take a bottle of alcohol from his cupboard. Moreover, his unwavering concern continues even after Kuttappan's death, exemplified by his bursting firecrackers, claiming Kuttappan would not have wanted a depressing funeral. The second son, Jaison, seldom speaks, and when he does, it is often about his need for money.

Like Jaison, Bincy, too, has limited dialogue; however, when she speaks, it often creates a strong impact on Joji, pushing him to the decision to kill his father. Thus, her words and her silences, both directly and indirectly, drive Joji's actions. Bincy predicts to Joji that Jomon will not cooperate in the partition discussion, knowing that his feelings toward Kuttappan will stop

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him from engaging in such a conversation, so soon after the loss—a prediction that proves to be true. Later, during the discussion on partition, as a dispute over opinions arises, Bincy remarks to Dr. Felix, who tries to control the arguing brothers, "let them speak, it's the first time they've had a chance to voice their opinion in this house" (Pothan, 2021, 1:05:27), while she also skillfully suggests avoiding a discussion of Kuttappan's autopsy. This highlights Bincy as a perceptive and strategic figure.

The significance of dialogue extends further, as it embodies one of the prominent themes of the film—power. This is evident when Panachel Kuttappan, who was once the sole authority of the household, becomes muted, while Bincy and Joji, who had previously restricted their opinions to the kitchen and bedroom, begin to speak.

Sound and Silence

In *Joji*, sound and silence often function as psychological tools that are filtered through Joji's internal perspective rather than external reality. In the first 27 minutes and 50 seconds of the film, the absence of expected sound forces the viewer to rely more on the intense silence to construct meanings. This silence persists within a household of six members and servants, displacing everyday sounds. This becomes the first key indication of Joji's environment—an alienated, disconnected, and lonely domestic space. The soundscape is further intensified through its contrast between silence and subtle ambient sounds of wind, breathing, footsteps,

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and the chirping of birds, beetles, and crickets. This magnifies Joji's isolation and withdrawal from the earthy atmosphere of Erumeli (Kottayam, Kerala). His silence is not empty but psychologically charged, revealing his repression and possible dissociation, defining his existence. This is exemplified through his 'silent' chuckles and unexpressed aggression. The intense silence every time after Joji slams his bedroom door underscores his suppressed anger. The silence here serves as a primer to his psyche, concealing his inner emotional state and thoughts. More than an atmospheric setting, silence functions as a mirror that reveals suppressed anguish in *Joji*.

However, the background music slowly sets in as Joji's transformation begins, suggesting the gradual collapse of his composed persona. The grand and tragic orchestral music by Justin Varghese externalizes a shift in subjectivity that cannot be visually shown or verbally expressed, making his psychological descent audible through music. The score mirrors Joji's confusion and emotional instability, heightening tension and underscoring his psychological unrest. Among the film's major musical tracks, this analysis focuses on four modes that reflect Joji's psychological transformation: "Prophecy," "He Is Back," "The Hook," and "Desperation" (Bhavana Studios, 2021).

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The first instance of a musical backdrop for Joji appears when Dr. Felix hints at the fortune Joji will inherit after his father's death. Delighted by the news, Joji is accompanied on his drive back by the track "Prophecy" (Bhavana Studios, 2021, 2:29), marking the moment not merely as a journey home but as a turning point in his psychological trajectory. This orchestral piece carries sudden excitement layered with an ominous undertone, marking Joji's shift from repression to self-assertion. As the music intensifies along the winding roads of Erumeli, the film immediately reveals a shift in Joji's character, through his newfound assertiveness following Kuttappan's paralysis. Moreover, the recurring use of the track "Prophecy" (Bhavana Studios, 2021, 2:29) appears to mark Joji's moments of satisfaction. "Prophecy" (Bhavana Studios, 2021, 2:29) does not merely signal changing family fortunes; it instead marks Joji's descent into his shadow self.

The track "He Is Back" (Bhavana Studios, 2021, 3:08) reinforces Joji's incomplete *individuation*. The haunting, minimal score, played during Kuttappan's return, blends sadness and tension to reflect Joji's fear rather than Kuttappan's resurgence. It conveys Joji's disappointment as his brief sense of freedom collapses and he is drawn back into the same oppressive structure, marking a return from the shadow self to the restrained persona.

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Additionally, “The Hook” (Bhavana Studios, 2021, 5:34) underscores the turning point at which Joji fully embraces his shadow self, culminating in the murder of Kuttappan. The track translates Joji’s intrusive thoughts and the pull of his unconscious desires. In its initial phase, the music is tense, mysterious, and anxious, with distorted ambient tones that evoke inner turmoil. As Joji’s actions become more certain, the score shifts in mood and pacing, becoming stronger and more assertive. Its later orchestral rise creates a sense of achievement and emotional resolution, reflecting his full alignment with his desires.

In fact, the elevated violin score during Joji’s morning run immediately after Kuttappan’s death reflects his elation. The grand, almost regal tone conveys his inner fantasy of power and superiority. As he looks down at the house from the hill, the triumphant orchestral rise sonically frames him as the new owner and conqueror of the Panachel household. But rumors about Kuttappan’s death and rising suspicion disrupt Joji’s fragile stability and sense of normalcy. As pressure builds, his inner unrest returns, marked by the track “Desperation” (Bhavana Studios, 2021, 14:18). Its ticking, repetitive rhythm reflects his obsessive thought processes. The track conveys his fear of exposure. As the narrative progresses, Jomon’s suspicion and scrutiny threaten Joji’s fragile control, reactivating the same psychological pattern with the recurring musical motif marking the repetitive cycle of calculation, repression, and action. The layered

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music replacing earlier silences marks Joji's psychological shift, rendering his inner unrest audible. Ultimately, sound becomes intensely subjective, reflecting his psyche rather than the external events.

Conclusion

Joji's story shows the total powerlessness of a human to see how much the tragedy of his life originates in himself and how he continuously and methodically feeds it and nurtures it to create the inevitable disaster. Jung (1951/1968) explains this blatant engagement of man with his own life and says that he may not be doing it consciously, "…for consciously he is engaged in bewailing and cursing a faithless world that recedes further and further into the distance" (para. 18). Rather, it is an unconscious factor that spins the illusions that veil his world. "And what is being spun is a cocoon, which in the end will completely envelop him" (para. 18). Joji's suicide note, putting the entire blame on the indifferent society, sums up this observation. Joji's inability to see the consequences of his own desires and actions eventually leads to the catastrophic collapse at the end. This film thus opens up the possibility of viewing human actions from a more informed perspective.

The paper makes a thorough attempt to decipher how Joji's contextual landscape collectively contributes to his journey toward *individuation* by examining the key transitional moments that facilitate his psychic metamorphosis. While analyzing the modalities of Joji's

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psychic disintegration, the paper argues and establishes that Bincy is the projection of Joji's *shadow* and a catalyst to the process of *individuation*. The major contribution of the paper is in its thorough examination of the mise-en-scène, which sketches the visual grammar of Joji's complex thought processes and criminal proclivity.

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