The Mortality Narratives in Cultural Representations: Themes and Tropes in Malayam Cinema

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Abstract

Malayalam cinema is a vibrant creative space that post 1990s, underwent a transformation, leading to a proliferation of films, uniquely experimental in nature. An interesting perspective explored in detail was that of mortality, analysis of death from a microcosmic perspective. Evaluating death as an event in Deleuzian framework enables us to gain interesting insights and the film used for study here is *Ee. Ma. Yau.* (2018) which has a funeral foregrounded in the narrative. The paper traces the encounter with death in popular films, over time, to comprehend social discourses built around mortality in India, specifically in the southern state of Kerala in India. Death and the social interventions in this context emerge as aspects significant for this study.

Keywords: Mortality narratives; Malayalam cinema; Deleuze and event; cultural practices; film studies

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Introduction

Malayalam films have been chroniclers of social history and have remained active cultural forms of social criticism since its beginnings. Though the shifting sensibilities have created innumerable changes in the manner in which cinema sees social interactions and individual subjectivities, the dialectics of this relationship between cinema and social reality still remains dynamic. Contemporary Indian society has evolved into an extremely vibrant space with neoliberal structures initiating paradigm shifts in the socio-political, economic and cultural milieu. This has also resulted in fascinating developments in the ways in which cultural practices have been re-shaping themselves. Malayalam cinema, with its experimentations with new technologies and sophisticated equipment has crossed thresholds and emerged as an engaging cultural space, with its viewers panning across transnational spaces. Though Malayalam cinema belongs to a state, namely Kerala, within India, in a language spoken by people belonging to that state, it has always been rich and varied, and has produced fascinating films that caught the attention of world-renowned film makers as well as critics across the world.

Malayalam cinema's growth across the decades has been interesting, with its presence in the context of world cinema as well as its delineation of popular cinema. The post-liberalization phase in India saw a spurt of growth in mass media and technology-driven media which also aided the growth if cinema into new directions. Malayalam cinema began exploring new forms and themes and in the new millennium these films are considered as new generation films. This trend to hunt for novelty was accompanied by the multiplexes and the urban middleclass audiences who

emerged as a significant force, with their presence on social media spaces as well. Though Malayalam cinema has moved past these trends, it has resulted in the emergence of a new crop of film makers who are eager to explore, experiment and be creative in the most fascinating manner. The themes they seek to present are diverse and death and mortality has emerged as a significant one.

Malayalam cinema and its critical readings within the context of social reality is mostly confined to gender and spatiality, along with studies built around the notion of nationhood and identities. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan's essay (2017) on migration, for example, looks at Gulf migration and its impact as represented in cinema. A larger body of work can be found in the studies of gender and representations. Meena T Pillai's work "The Many Misogynies of Malayalam cinema" (2017) is a significant text that explores the misogynous content in Malayalam cinema. Darsana Sreedhar Mini's work titled "The Rise of Soft Porn in Malayalam Cinema and the Precarious Stardom of Shakeela" (2019) studies soft pornography within the context of stardom and female stars. Swapna Gopinath and Sony Jalarajan Raj's essay 'Gender Construct as a Narrative and Text: The Female Protagonist in New Generation Malayalam Cinema'(2015) looks at the problematic representation of women in films that belong to the category of new generation cinema. Construction of Dalit identities in Malayalam cinema has also been an area of research. Sony Jalarajan Raj and Swapna Gopinath's essay (2016) traces the history of Dalit representation in Malayalam cinema. But cinematic representations of death have not yet been dealt with in critical writings that explore the frameworks of Malayalam cinema.

Mortality in the social context

Death has always been an enigma for mankind and philosophers since the beginnings of civilization have sought to explore and comprehend it. While the East and the West have their own

methods of combating with the concept of death, the fear of mortality has remained as a primordial one. Societies have designed various practices to address this fear, and cultural interventions to understand this phenomenon, have also been diverse in human societies. Death, therefore, becomes a social institution, a disruption, a crisis, that demands interventions from the society. Thus, funeral and its associated ceremonies are of prime importance in any society. Gennep described thresholds in an individual life as moments of crisis and he called them rites of passage. This involved three stages, separation, transition and incorporation (Gennep 1908: 26). Death is one of those phases of transition, since every death alters social relationships and individual identities. Later Turner (1974) added another category to these three stages, namely, communitas and for him every rite of passage also entails social actions, where community and cooperation ensures a smooth transition over thresholds. For him, it is a performance, a social action that requires the participation of everyone in the society. Numerous cultural practices define death as a rite of passage which is often subject to varied cultural interpretations. The depiction of death and its thematic significance attracts practitioners of cinematic art as well.

Cinematic narratives on mortality

Over decades, death as a ritual, has evolved radically, in the manner in which it is executed in society, and within varied communities. Responding to paradigm shifts in social discourses, death as an event, with all its possibilities for dynamic shifts in perceptions, subjectivities and relationships, has witnessed changes. The commoditisation of rituals and events in a consumerist society like Kerala has resulted in major changes in the dimensions of death as imagined by film makers. Death as an event thus becomes a moment of exposition, where man's priorities are evaluated and commented upon by the artist. There are innumerable films in Malayalam where

death offers a vital turning point for the narrative or when it becomes the crucial moment of resolution. These films may use corpses or death in furthering the narrative, especially in genres like the murder mysteries. Such films are not discussed in this context as they are merely moments to advance the narrative and reach a resolution. There are films that belong to the New Wave of 70s, which addressed death in multifarious ways. They negotiated with the event, philosophically, often depicting the multidimensionality of death as an event. But these films remained as arthouse movies and this paper seeks to comprehend popular, mainstream films that confront the theme of death. The attempt is to read films that foreground death, sometimes as a force looming in the lives of the protagonists or is present as a corpse that helps in a social commentary of the times. Such films offer insights into the social discourses that shape the identity of the community.

Ara Nazhika Neram (Half an Hour Only 1970) is one of the earliest films in Malayalam that addresses death in a striking manner. It is a film that negotiates with death and funerals. Death, and discourses around death, surfaces repeatedly, in fact, the film begins with an old man, the protagonist, dreaming of a divine presence beckoning him, informing him that it is time for him to pass over. Death is established as the theme with the accompaniment of ominous music. The death bed of the protagonist provides the setting for the story to further unfold, where other characters narrate their dilemmas and sorrows, and it is this death bed that emerges as the pivotal point for the story to unravel and reveal the strong bond that humans have with their social roles and societal conventions. Even when the story is a progressive one, where the 90-year old man is rational and compassionate, the narrative never strays away from social commitments and evolves into a tale of human-society bondage. The old man speaks of having a tomb and mentions the money that he has kept aside for this purpose. Even as he wanders through the maze of his memories, he remains steadfast within the confines of social institutions, especially his religious identity that define him as an individual facing imminent death.

Later films have used death and dead bodies for various purposes, especially in creating humorous situations. In several films, dead bodies are used as props and a film that exploits this aspect is *Chandamama* (The moon 1999). A dead body, enacted by Jagathy Sreekumar, a well renowned actor and comedian, plays a crucial role in this film and episodes featuring this corpse evinces humor in the film. Though several films have scenes with corpses either for comic relief or to create an element of horror, few of them use the presence of corpses extensively as in the case of *Chandamama*. *Pappan Priyapetta Pappan* (Pappan Dear Pappan 1986) directed by Sathyan Anthikad, is another film that dealt with death from another perspective and employed comedy to combat the fear of death. Pappan is a young man whose life is cut short accidentally by the god of death. As a compensation, he is allowed to return to earth, provided he uses the dead body of other people for his soul to reside. The duality of body and soul is treated in a trifling manner in the film, yet death and dead bodies form vital elements in this narrative. But death is not pondered upon, nor is the theme of mortality expanded in this film.

Murder mysteries are aplenty with corpses, and films of this genre employ gory images to heighten the feeling of horror. *Drishyam* (The Visual 2015) and *Yavanika* (The Curtain 1982) fall under the category of murder mystery and ought to be mentioned in this context. Though these films belong to two different times in the history of Malayalam cinema, both films focus on death's presence throughout the film and they both have the abuser being murdered by the abused. While *Yavanika* was a realistic rendering where the murderer is identified and caught, *Drishyam*'s maker permitted the murderer to escape with a sense of finality. Both films had the murdered villains present as an absent presence; while one was present through flashbacks, the other was present through repeated references to his dead body that is never retrieved in the film. Both films treated

the murder as an event that disturbs the community as well as the familial and individual lives of the protagonists.

Apart from comedies and murder mysteries, there have been films where death is an absent presence. One such poignant representation is in the film *Moonnam Pakkom*[1] (The Third Day 1988) where death is present as a possibility and the fear of annihilation, the dread of losing the grandson, the presence of the sea signifying the mortality of mankind creates a sense of loss and pathos throughout the film. The old grandfather in the film remains a desolate figure who refuses to come to terms with destiny and embraces death by drowning. Another film that builds the narrative around death is the film *Bharatham* (1991). This film explores the consequences of death and the intense emotional angst of two persons caught trapped in a complex situation. The death of a brother remains the moment of crisis throughout the film and the web of lies and trauma thus created becomes the plot. Death in the film is the moment of crisis, the moment which has the potential to alter the lives of all the characters in the film.

Contemporary cinema

Malayalam cinema, in the new millennium has seen interesting shifts in perspectives. Film makers of the new age engage in a deeper analysis into the nuances of social relationships. Contemporary Malayalam cinema does not shy away from death and treats it with greater aesthetic sensibility. Travelling beyond the melodrama, sensitive portrayals of death are strikingly present, be it as a theme or a motif. Deaths and funerals appear frequently and are structured into the narrative with ease and a sense of harmony. The past couple of years have seen a handful of films that approach death in various ways and the presence of dead bodies in these films are conspicuous for the manner of treatment given by the film makers. While death and every other event, that signifies human existence in a social system, has evolved as spectacles and events of celebration, these films

seek to generate alternative perspectives. Several films in the past couple of years can be mentioned in this context.

Bataille in his work *The Accursed Share* (1991) observes that an individual's existence revolves around this fear of death. A fascination and a revulsion from death is what defines human existence. He speaks about a 'repugnance for death' (Bataille 1991: 63) which is translated into an intense exploration into mortality, and it can be traced in several Malayalam films that got released in the past two years. *Luca* (2019) is a noteworthy film that falls into this category. The film begins with the death of the protagonist Luca. There is a mention of a postmortem in the film, to suggest suspicious murder. Even before the film crosses the first half an hour, the protagonists, both Luca and Niharika, are dead. Luca is diagnosed with necrophobia and thanatophobia. His experience with death from his infancy, makes him sensitive to death, and even a dead ant terrifies him. His girlfriend Niharika commits suicide and death continues to be an ominous presence in his life, be it in the form of murder, suicide, or death due to terminal illness. Even the cat named Kitty is killed and the film repeatedly speaks about death, accompanied by the falling rain, lending a tone of darkness and nothingness. While the film touches sensitively on issues like pedophilia, it still revolves around death as a finality, that spurs re-visiting, re-evaluating and demanding closures. This film, interestingly, speaks not for the living, but for the dead. Similarly, *Joseph* (2018) also begins with the dead protagonist and his attempts at unravelling the mystery of several corpses. Another noteworthy film to be mentioned is the film *Aedan* (Garden of Desire 2017). In this film, death haunts the narrative, right from the beginning, with the scene where puppies are buried alive. According to the film maker Sanju Surendran, 'the idea that if you want to say something you explain it by picking up a concept that is the exact opposite of it' (Nathan 2017). So he speaks of death in order to address the concerns and desires of the living. 'Considering the overall macabre

universe of the film, where death or a reference to death is present in every frame, the game fits in' as Hari and Peter play 'the game of death spotting' (Nathan 2017: n.p.). Different dimensions of death and their social contexts are repeatedly brought out. There is 'the cinematic form of repetition and doubling', creating 'a sense of unease and rupture' where images and narratives of death recur throughout the film (Nathan 2017: n.p.).

There are several Malayalam films in the new millennium that seek to explore death in its various dimensions. Deaths and funerals happen, as a motif, or to support the narrative and they are treated in varied and fascinating ways. Unlike the earlier films of the popular kind, these films employ various techniques, some create surrealistic images, or fantasies as in the case of the film *Koode* (Together 2018), and some employ realistic devices to capture the event of death. As in the case of *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (Mahesh's Revenge 2016) directed by Dileesh Pothan, which has a funeral, realistically captured, and it becomes a crucial scene in the narrative. Several important developments in the story as well as character exposition happens in the scene, along with some humor credibly blended into it.

Death as an event

Filiz Peach quotes Jaspers and says, man is always trapped in situations and it is an essential condition of human existence. There are 'four boundary situations' which 'threaten our sense of security and the foundation of our existence' and death is one of those situations that alters conditions of existence significantly. Death affects not just individuals but relationships, and the rhizomatic structures of social discourses are altered through ritualistic events like death. Commenting on death in *The Space of Literature* (1982), Blanchot writes, 'I have no relationship with it, it is that toward which I cannot go, for in it *I* do not die, I have fallen from the power to die. In it *they* die; they do not cease, and they do not finish dying' (155). Death does not happen to

the person who has died, but rather to the living beings and the collective to which the person belongs. 'Death remains a radically indeterminable, or volatile, concept' and every social system finds that death "poses not only a challenge to systemic coherency, but also to definitive closure" (Kuzma n.d: n.p..). Hence our understanding of the concept of death is also a complex and multifarious one, and Deleuze's concept of event is one framework that helps us envision death within societies and its cultural representations.

Contemplating death as a Deleuzian event provides interesting insights, into the diverse ways in which the chaos accompanying death leads to shifts in subjectivities. Event is not a linear, incident, a moment that defines life, but it is a complex set of processes – involving every component that forms the societies and their relations to one another. According to Beck and Gleyson, 'event is part of and arises from a multiplicity' and is 'part of a process of becoming and differentiation' (2016: 331). It is 'rhizomatic and is part of an ever-changing, ongoing process' (Beck and Gleyson, 2016, p. 331)" They call them 'micro-Events' that 'occur within individuals or groups' and 'spur change; they reshape the conceptual and material fabric of connectivity, relationships, pathways and institutions' (Beck and Gleyson 2016: 332). Beck and Gleyson elaborates further: 'Events begin from the domain of affect and the virtual; but are only actualized in space' and events 'reshape the very fabric of our spatial interaction' (2016: 332). When events are studied, it leads to a 'better comprehension of newly formed relationships between institutions, communities and individuals' especially when people are 'bound with advancing technologies and neoliberal globalization' (Beck and Gleyson 2016: 332).

According to Deleuze, an event 'is an incorporeal, complex and irreducible entity, at the surface of things a pure event which inheres or subsist in the proposition' (Deleuze 1990: 19). It

belongs to the present, that micro-moment that alters social discourses. 'Events are produced in a chaos, in a chaotic multiplicity, but only under the condition that a sort of screen intervenes' (Deleuze 1992: 86). He explains further in a later work that 'underneath the large noisy events lie the small events of silence' (Deleuze 1995: 141). Alain Badiou (2009) elaborated upon the concept of event in Deleuze in his essay 'Event in Deleuze' and then went on to present his conception of Event. He discussed Deleuzian event by listing out the axioms that have been used to structure the concept of event. He explained that to Deleuze, the 'unlimited becoming becomes the event itself' and that it is 'that which has happened, that which is about to happen but never that which is happening' (Badiou 2009:155). To Deleuze, 'the event is of a different regime than the actions and passions of the body even if it results from them' (Badiou 2009: 155). Badiou further defined his concept of the Event. Though Alain Badiou and Deleuze analyzed and described Event, they approached it differently. For Badiou it demands a bigger framework spatially and temporally, it is more dramatic, ruptural in the larger context, while Deleuze defined the event as microcosmic and constantly enabling a re-moulding and re-shaping of social structures (2007).

Reading the complex nature of event in the works of Deleuze, Bowden explained event in his work *The Priority of Events: Deleuze's Logic of Sense* (2011). According to him, events affect the corporeal selves as well as the social apparatuses that define the identity of any collective. They are 'constantly happening' (2011: 271) and have a framework of 'shared language and culture' (2011: 271). According to Bowden, human societies function through an 'ongoing process of the reciprocal, complete and progressive determination of events' and 'it is the event which we human beings collectively bring about in discourse, the event which ultimately determines us as the corporeal, social, speaking and knowing 'things' we are' (2011: 271-72).

For Deleuze, death as an event is a unique and special one. In *Logic of Sense* (1990), he says: 'Death has an extreme and definite relation to me and my body and is grounded in me, but also has no relation to me at all—it is incorporeal and infinitive, impersonal, grounded only in itself' (152). On one side, there is the part of the event which is realized and accomplished; on the other, there is that 'part of the event which cannot realize its accomplishment'. There are thus two accomplishments, which are like actualization and counter-actualization. It is in this way that death and its wound are not simply events among other events' (152). With every event, there is an actuality and a virtuality, and it opens the possibilities for multiple potentialities. Death, as an event, establishes the presence of life in all its actualities and potentialities, it affirms the imminence of life. With death, the 'individuality (of the person) fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other' (Rajchman 1990: 29).

When we conceptualise death as a Deleuzian event, it calls for re-visiting and re-evaluating the social structures that define death through rituals and rites. 'Death is an event actualized in a present but every present is infinitely divided by its becoming a past event and its becoming a future… . Death or rather 'to die', is the Event par excellence, an incorporeal an infinitive impossible to actualize, real but not possible, always virtual' (Colombat 1996: 241). Death is therefore an event that remains a continuous and ominous presence in life, as virtualities, as intensities and becomes the moment, the event as it becomes the actuality of the moment, which is immediately shifted to the past and the future, through a multi-linear series of processes. Death as a Deleuzian event, becomes a series of events where chaos results in shifts in subjectivities. It involves individuals and their relations to one another as well as to the community, in all its dimensions. Death thus becomes a disruption, a line of flight that alters the assemblage

significantly. The rhizomatic structures of the individual subjectivities, the familial relationships, and the society in its various dimensions are altered and new assemblages are formed. The death of a member of the society, who is a father, a citizen, and a husband, alters the systems that structure human discourses. While the dead person is ignorant of these shifts, the multiplicities that emerge out of these new formations demand adjustments at the micro and macro levels.

Ee Ma Yao: A death and an event

Deleuze's delineation of death as an event, imagines a world that responds to death in a complex manner. The multidimensional nature of interventions from the society, the ritualistic nature of ceremonies intended for the dead and the living are vital factors following a death and a subsequent funeral. This event is a singularity, a process, a becoming that alters the multiplicities that define existence in a society. *Ee. Ma. Yau*[2] (2018), directed by Lijo Jose Pellisery has a narrative built around a death in the family. This film was widely appreciated and won critical acclaim where reviewers called it 'a cinematic experience extraordinaire' (Sudhish 2018: n.p.). The film invites the audience to a coastal village in Kerala, Chellanam, a rustic place with the presence of sea, the winds and the rain established repeatedly. Vavachan, a nomad returns home, the wife chides him while his son welcomes him. We witness his death that same night, a calm and quiet death, and the narrative picks pace while his son Eeshi, prepares to make arrangements for his funeral.

Since *Ee. Ma. Yau* 'tries to chronicle human behavior around death,' 'subtext and layering is a natural outcome' (Varma 2018: n.p.). This aspect makes this film an interesting study of the representation of death as an event and its implications in the wider social structures. 'The politics of death is an ugly business where closure only seems plausible after treading a … strenuous path' (Varma 2018: n.p.). Eashi, the protagonist, the son who has lost his father, has to travel a long and

arduous road before he can grapple with the reality of this event and his evolution as an individual will happen only through this event, that of his father's death and the subsequent funeral.

Death is a constant presence in the film and the characters 'don't just think about death- they also chide, express solidarity, threaten and flirt with one another in deathly terms' (Nair, 2018). Nisa, Vavachan's daughter flirts with her boyfriend and tells him playfully to go and die. Vavachan narrates the rituals of death and funeral in a matter-of-fact tone. Eeshi promises that his father will get a grand funeral. The film keeps the theme of death constantly alive. Finding the best coffin possible, getting the bishop for the funeral mass, and every other ritual that is part of a grand funeral is mentioned. Vavachan also gives money to his son for the ceremony but the money is worthless since it is the currency that has long been withdrawn by the government. Vavachan again discusses about death and it remains an integral part of the casual conversation that he has with his son.

The character of Vavachan is cleverly established in the opening scenes. Before he dies, we get accustomed to his persona, as one who has experiences and memories and as a person who has led a wholesome life. Vavachan has the habit of talking to himself, constantly mumbling, and, although not religious in a conventional sense, he is deeply spiritual and the film maker hints at his heightened awareness of a spiritual existence. Unlike Vavachan, his son Eeshi lives a dull and uneventful life, riding his two-wheeler to work and looking after his family, that includes his wife, mother and younger sister. The bond between the son and the father is depicted in the scene where they share drinks. The dead do not disappear, they continue to remain embedded in relationships, in people like Eeshi and shape their identities. Eashi is transformed, the bond between the father and the son is established firmly by the end of the film. Eeshi realizes, that two figures of

hegemonic power, who are capable of establishing their authority over the people, the doctor and the police officer, cannot ensure that Vavachan is given a ceremonious funeral. At this moment of crisis, he throws away his mobile phone, a symbolic gesture that opens his inner self, and he begins to see things with clarity. The following scene has the camera following him and among heightened drama, he emerges as his father's son. He begins to mumble like his father, a gesture signifying the transformation in Eeshi. He now has the ability to hear the voices in his head and evolves as his father's true successor. Eeshi can now hear his thoughts that are synchronized with nature and it enables him to connect with his father at a deeper level. The father-son bond is stronger than the strongest opposition that society puts forth.

Events 'affect other events, such as the responses and actions of agents' (Patton 1991: n.p.) and radically alters social reality. Death as an event is not about the dead person, Vavachan, but it is about everyone living around him, be it Eashi, or Eeshi's mother Pennamma, his wife, Zabeth, his sister, Nisa or even his friend Ayyappan. Dead do not just disappear, they continue to remain embedded in relationships, in people like Eeshi and re-mould their identities. Eeshi succeeds in breaking conventions and empowering himself through the heartbreaking experience of his father's death and the subsequent crisis. Though it is an act of desperation, when he buries his father in the courtyard of the house, it is still an act of defiance, where he challenges the establishment and emerges strong-willed and determined.

Death, as an event, is a concept that works around a great deal of ignorance and a sense of emptiness, and grief and loss is often foregrounded in narratives about death. It is 'an expression of a becoming that escapes the present moment in time as well as the corporeal content of the subject' (Lundborg 2009: n.p.). *Ee. Ma Yau* traces this journey of an event while it shifts from virtualities to the moment which gets assimilated into the past and future, thereby creating new

assemblages within the individual, as well as in the social structures that shape the subjectivities and the collectives that foreground human experiences as 'real' and 'definite'.

Death began to be viewed from a fresh perspective with the advent of Christianity, while pre-Semitic religions incorporated death into social structures in unique ways. In the Indian context, ancient texts including Buddhist texts, and the early texts like the Vedas, have markedly unique ways of dealing with mortality. While the four *ashramas* suggested *vanaprasta* for the old, where they left the worldly life for a life of meditation and a quiet acceptance of death. But irrespective of religious identities, in the modern world, death has become institutionalized, thereby distancing it from the lives of the people. Hospitals and care homes have become spaces for encountering death. (Alichniewicz 2002: 320) But the death of Vavachan is not one we witness frequently in modern India. He dies an uneventful death at his own home, and he dies even before the doctor could be summoned. It is also not one where the dead person lives through online pages or social media accounts. Vavachan dies without any hospice care or similar interventions. He dwells in the realm of reality, virtual spaces are unknown to him, therefore his death is also closer to nature. This fact is emphasized by the film maker when a funeral announcement in the form of a printed letter is mentioned repeatedly. But Eeshi is not able to provide the time for the funeral and gets enraged when the person at the printing press keeps calling him.

The film seeks to reject institutions and social structures that reduce human life into a meaningless and farcical experience. The film begins with the visuals of a funeral in all its glory, with all the paraphernalia that accompanies a funeral conducted with a huge fanfare. But it ends with the visual of dead souls, irrespective of their identities as man or dog or duck, irrespective of the grandeur of the funeral given to the dead men, they walk by in unison.   Nature is captured in

all its indifference, as an impartial observer, as death disrupts the social life of human beings. Death becomes the moment, the moment of epiphany for the son when he decides to bury his father, in defiance, in a moment of helplessness, the moment when he begins to hear voices and communicates, inheriting the ability from his father. The event becomes the moment when he emerges as a true successor to his father, when he becomes enabled to hear the silent voice of the elements of nature, above the cacophony of human absurdity. 'The event, no doubt, has the potential for change and transformation' (Lundborg 2009: n.p.).

Even as the film dismisses social structures, they are a pervasive presence throughout the film. One aspect of social existence that emerges as a compelling one is the religious identity of the dead person. The film *Ee. Ma. Yau.* employs numerous tropes from Christianity in delineating the life and death of Vavachan. Although there are references to Vavachan being a nomad, of being irregular as a church goer, we are also told of the woodwork he did for the church which gives him respectability in the parish. Religious framework is consistently present in the film while the characters connect with the natural forces and the film maker visualizes a world that dismisses the binaries of human and animal and life and death. The funeral music, the clarinet, the grand funeral used for the opening scene, the symbol of the Christian cross conspicuously visible in several scenes throughout the film – are all motifs that guide the viewer towards the religious identity that defines the death and funeral of Vavachan.

Death in this film is an event, that is multidimensional. The layers of meaning embedded in the relationships, between people, between the individuals and the social structures and the individuals themselves, are to be mentioned here. One aspect of this event is the social interventions that shape the particulars as soon as Vavachan breathes his last. 'We rob ourselves ,… of the sense of death's reality by making of it a public event, something that happens to

everybody indiscriminately and hence to no one in particular' (Heidegger as cited in Glenn Gray 1951: 120). The funeral in this film is a well-choreographed event, where society and its members create a sense of order over an event that is chaotic and disruptive. When death happens in a family, society quietly intervenes and takes control. *Ee Ma Yao* becomes a unique cinematic narrative in this context. The film becomes a refusal, an act of resistance against this act of hegemony. Vavachan had lived a life where he defied social conventions and his death and funeral therefore cannot be a tame event.

Death is a celebration in Chellanam, the coastal village, largely populated by poor fisherfolk. The script writer has closely observed the lives of the people living in the coastal areas and he says: 'There is wailing, *kannokku*[3] recital, drama just before the funeral, even a tussle for the corpse. An entire night of wake is observed. The mourners keep wailing, and then after the funeral they take a short rest. They wake up later and the customary rice gruel (*pashni kanji*) is served' (Sharika 2018: n.p.). In *Ee. Ma. Yau.*, once death is announced, the family has little control over the situation. Eeshi feels helpless and is surrounded by people from the village who express varied concerns. Ayyappan, a local leader who is characterized as a humane and compassionate individual is the only sane voice amidst all the cacophony. The state and the religious institution soon claim control, through the presence of the doctor, the police official and the priest. The machinery of social institutions is set in motion. In the age of commoditization, these institutions also bring along with them, the funeral industry which demands huge expenses in the form of coffin and funeral band and so on. The insensitive and callous features of a commodified system suffocate Vavachan's cash-strapped family, and this aspect is highlighted in the scenes where Eeshi goes to buy the coffin and later when the coffin rips open and the corpse falls through creating an emotionally disturbing yet pathetically comic scene. Eeshi is duped by the coffin maker and he

had paid an insane amount for the coffin. The coffin maker had proffered discounts and had even offered the services of a beautician. Since Eeshi has very little money, the band hired is that of Alby who confesses that his clarinet is broken. Death is no longer a moment of personal grief and bereavement, it is an event, a significant ritual that demands social interactions and are constantly shaped by the socio-political and economic discourses that define the identity of the nation. Even the presence of the Bengali laborer, the migrant laborers that are assigned to do menial, yet hard labor in Kerala, is a glaring incident that highlights the shifting paradigms.

Vavachan's death is an event and the various dimensions of this moment is explored in this film. Here death is a spectacle, an event captured in detail, and analyzed minutely to unravel the emotional, psychological and sociological dimensions involved in it. This spectacle of death and lament is tinted with dark humor and pathos that is embedded in the scenes where sorrow is often drowned in the absurdity of social conventions. To add to the chaos, Vavachan's second wife arrives amidst heightened emotional display, with hysteric shrieks and screams, resulting in a scuffle. The morbidity of death and the absurdity of human existence is heightened through this instance that evince humor of a dark kind. The sepia tone used throughout the film adds a distinct flavor to this film.

This film explores the components of death as an event where the performative aspect is also accentuated. Pennamma 'cries by practice and cries by memory' and "sketches out her life's greatest performance" (Nair 2018: n.p.). Lamentations of the widow is in a musical tone and is performative in a conspicuous manner. Eeshi's wife borrows a gold chain from her neighbor, since she will be in the front row during the funeral and people will notice her, rather than the neighbor. Vavachan's daughter, Nisa, too wails loudly when she sees her boyfriend by the window and the film maker foregrounds this moment by focusing on Zabeth who glares at the weeping Nisa. This

performative aspect of social behavior is shed by the protagonist in the final scene, when death is encountered in the form of the dead body of the father, Eashi emerges as a human being beyond the structural frameworks of religion, state and other social institutions.

Ee. Ma.Yau does not merely narrate the event in all its complexities but the film also seeks to transcend the social dimensions and probes the possibilities of death from other dimensions. This is done through visuals which are surrealistic in nature and by creating binaries that are symbolic of a transcendental journey into the mysteries of human existence. The film seeks to explore death from two perspectives, life and death and the visuals speak the language of a spiritual connection between man and nature, dead and the living. Binaries are built carefully and cleverly throughout the film, the police man and the vicar, the god and the devil playing cards defining the destiny of man, nature as the observer and society as the participant, the brutal and callous dimension of social structures as against nature that treats life in multifarious forms, with equanimity, to mention a few. The scene with the two men playing chess by the sea side reminds one of *The Seventh Seal* (1957) where the protagonist engages in a game of chess with death.

Conclusion

Contemporary Malayalam cinema has grown beyond the confines of thematic and structural stereotypes since the new millennium. The new-age films speak about the challenging possibilities that film makers have been exploring and the films I have been discussing in this context prove this point. *Ee. Ma. Yau* in the context of narratives on mortality is a striking example of the craftsmanship of these film makers and the commitment they display in their works. Depicting death as an event, and the aesthetics of cultural representations of death and dying is a challenging prospect and demands an exhaustive understanding of the social and cultural negotiations that

define this event. Though death is a biological process, in human societies it achieves a social dimension, through the rituals of funeral and subsequent ceremonies. This social nature of the event is what characterises it as a Deleuzian event and *Ee. Ma.Yau* captures it in all its various aspects of social, and to a large extent existential existence.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] The phrase captures the belief that the body of a person drowned at sea will resurface on the third day.

[2] Ee. Ma. Yao is the shortened version of Eesho Mariyam Yauseppu, which is the first words of a prayer recited during funerals. It can be translated as Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

[3] It is the mourning done at funerals in certain parts of Kerala, in a wailing musical tone.