



The Embodiment of the Post-human Child in Malayalam Films

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Abstract

The adult-child binary positions the child in a developmental process toward rationality attained through becoming an adult. The child is not considered a 'whole human' or given the status of an 'individual' in a social context, as seen in the representations of child and childhood in Malayalam films. This study aims to analyze the post-human identity of children in films focusing on how social and cultural systems are portrayed in the selected films titled *Manjadikuru* (2008), *Keshu* (2009), and Philips and the *Monkey Pen* (2013). The article intends to problematize the inequalities, biases, and lack of agency experienced by the post-human child and argues against awarding humanist identity to the child and childhood(s).

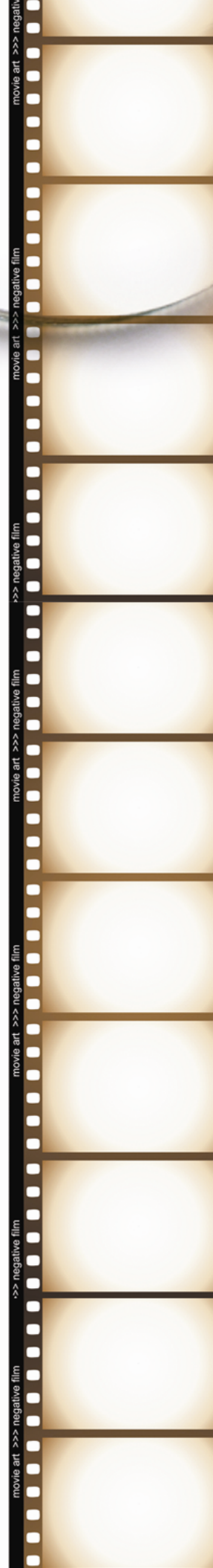
Keywords: child; post-human; trauma; films; childhood; Kerala



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The Embodiment of the Post-human Child in Malayalam Films

Rona Reesa Kurian and Preeti Navaneeth

Introduction

Different societies and traditions institutionalize and regulate childhood, and each child experiences it differently (Cunningham, 1991; Hendrick, 1997). As Kehily (2015) points out, childhood is dubbed as “an apprenticeship that can be charted through stages relating to age, physical development, and cognitive ability [and the] progression from child to adult involves children in a developmental process wherein they embark upon a path to rational subjectivity” (p. 6) and hence children are vulnerable, and their actions/choices gain value through adult intervention.

Such interventions might occur in the form of children’s stories, which theoretically serve to develop the imagination and creativity of young children, but often assist indoctrination of societal stereotypes and cultural dogmas (Gooden & Gooden, 2001, p. 89). Sometimes, a virtuous story could establish and maintain unfair ideologies. The arguments that this paper raises attempt to problematize Malayalam cinema that uses the ‘child body’ but fails to discuss/treat ‘childhood’ adequately, with child characters that recount adult reconstructions of childhood. It analyzes the post-human identity of children in Malayalam films like *Manjadikuru* (2008), *Keshu* (2009), and *Philips and the Monkey Pen* (2013) and demystifies the inequalities, biases, and lack of agency experienced by the post-human child under the patriarchy and cultural hegemony that attaches humanist parameters to the child and childhood(s). The study at no point considers the post-human secondary to the human, but it addresses the need to critically engage with representations of childhood in films, conventionally reflected from societal understandings of roles associated with children.

The category of children's films is broad and ambiguous (Kummerling- Meibauer, 2013) as they could include films made by adults for children, films that talk about childhood, films that have children as the protagonists, and films that children watch regardless of the genre or content (Wojcik- Andrews, 2002). A major drawback is that the definitions and interpretations of what constitutes a children's film are formulated by adults from an adult perspective, and the distinction is often based on the film's content. Bazalgate and Staples (1995) state that what is determined as a children's film is based on the criteria of deletion of "violence, sex, and bad language" (p. 108), and this approach invariably affects the quality of the film. Even so, childhood is a theme depicted in the media universally.

Taking the readers through the history of moving images, Lebeau (2008) reveals that the photographed faces of children have been a sight of fascination and provides an insightful look into the child as a 'spectacle' by denuding the complex link between the (Victorian) notion of childhood and representations of children in the films during this period. However, except for a few films, child-based narratives in Indian films have not received much attention or popularity. Children's perspectives get sidelined both visually and ideologically in films made from a dominant adult gaze (Buckingham, 1995, p. 47). Pondering the downstate of the government's nodal organization- Children's Film Society of India (CFSI), which did not produce any commercial children's film in its 47 years of existence, Nandita Das, during her tenure as the chairperson of CFSI, expressed doubts about "the same film appeal[ing] to a six-year-old, a 16 and a 60-year-old? I think it is important that children should get a chance to see such films. They will only get a chance when these films are made and released" (Firstpost, 2012). The production of children's films in India is not sustained primarily as it does not generate profit compared to mainstream cinema. In the 1980s, CFSI productions were screened through India's national

channel Doordarshan. It was the only Television channel until the 1990s and had huge viewership. The popularity of Doordarshan declined with the arrival of private and foreign satellite broadcasters who started channels like STAR TV, Zee TV, Sun TV, CNN, and Asianet. In recent times, the advancement of Digital media and OTT platforms has also challenged the traditional ways of viewing content. CFSI's productions failed to keep pace with the advancements in digital filmmaking and film viewing. Also, animation, a highly popular filmmaking technique, is not efficiently explored in Indian cinema.

Although Kerala Children's Film Society was established in 1976, and from 1978 onwards State award was assigned for the category of 'Best Children's Film', these films are not reaching their 'intended' audience. Presently, films are produced exclusively for the state award category, with prizes worth 100000 to 300000, which are not screened commercially to the public nor shown for educational purposes at schools. The article examines three films (*Manjadikuru*, *Keshu*, and *Philips and the Monkey Pen*), that are carefully chosen. These films have lead child characters between the age group of eight to twelve years, who have significant screen space for depicting their childhood experiences, and these films are available for public viewing. All these films deal with childhood trauma, issues of inclusivity and gender perceptions, and intensify the clash of interests between adults and children.

Manjadikuru (Lucky Red Seeds), written and directed by Anjali Menon, has won FIPRESCI Award for Best Malayalam Film and five Grand Jury awards at the South Asian International Film Festival (SAIFF) in New York. The story, set in the 1980s, unfolds from the perspective of a 10-year-old boy named Vicky, who comes to his maternal house to attend his grandfather's funeral. *Keshu*, directed by Sivan, is a Malayalam children's film produced by CFSI. The film shared the Best Children's Film award at the 57th National Film Awards with *Putarani Party* and won the Kerala State Film Award for Best Children's Film. *Keshu* is a noteworthy

attempt in Malayalam films as it represents the life of a deaf boy and engages in disability discourse. *Philips and the Monkey Pen*, directed by Rojin Thomas and Shanil Muhammed, won Kerala's State Film Award for Best Children's Film. The film takes up the narrative style of coming-of-age stories and revolves around a ten-year-old boy Ryan Philip who comes into possession of a talisman- the monkey pen. The film *Keshu* is the story of a child who struggles to be emotionally understood; in *Manjadikuru*, Vicky, Kannan, and Manikutty and their experiences and view(s) of the world are a strong contrast to the adults, while Roja is abused and traumatized by the adults around her, and further, Ryan is portrayed as a vexing child in *Philips and the Monkey Pen*.

Academic discourse on Indian children's films and their impact as an artistic medium has opened up new avenues to be explored. Rajagopalan (2013) states that although many Indian children's films have carved out an eminent space for themselves, this domain does not receive the attention given to mainstream Indian films. Noel Brown (2015) traces the evolution of Indian children's films and talks about the lack of a genre-wise classification of films in India and that most films are identified as family films. The article also critiques the notion that "a film about children axiomatically is a children's film" (p. 193), even though the content might be intended for adults. Sharma (2021) claims that the inadequacies of children's films in India also lead to the anomaly of the construction of childhood in media and further adds that power dynamics between children and adults reflect significantly on the films through child characters. Banaji (2016) states that economically weaker sections of children have almost negligible access to child roles in cinema. Sreedevi and Ravi (2021) talk about real-life vulnerabilities and mistreatment of children being less discussed in cinema. Galian (2020) asserts that despite being one of the world's largest annual producers of films, child-centric films are relatively limited.

Presently, the scholarship available on Indian children's films is scarce; regional children's films remain mostly under-explored, while most studies focus on popular Bollywood productions. These studies do not critically engage child representations or contributions to children's films. The objectification, disengagement, and invalidation of child(ren) in Malayalam films define 'child' as a post-human. Hence a posthuman reading of Malayalam films will reveal a discourse on the semiotic relationship between the roles of the children and the conventionally established social structures and their meaning(s). It will enable a 'child-centered' discourse and an alternative to the 'humanist' interests that are served through Malayalam films.

Posthumanism has multiple meanings from disciplines such as "philosophy, science and technology studies, literary studies, critical theory, theoretical sociology, and communication studies" (Bolter, 2016, p. 1). Philosophically, it focuses on the claims of altering the concept of humanity and transgressing human/non-human boundaries. The 'adult-child' binary has created differences that establish the notion that the child is 'less human' or not 'fully human' like the adult and hence is a post-human. A posthumanist perspective challenges all forms of such dualisms and critically examines the possibility of a mutually oriented 'child-adult' alliance. Posthumanism combines post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism and "is "post" to the concept of the human and to the historical occurrence of humanism, both based on hierarchical social constructs and humancentric assumptions" (Ferrando, 2013, p. 29). Most of these hierarchical structures are transgenerationally passed down through social orders related to cultural practices unless challenged or questioned.

The films discussed here reveal many naturalized occasions and situations where adults with authority exert oppressive measures to regulate or deprive the child of agency. *Keshu* narrates the transformation of a 'mischievous' boy who is deaf into an 'artistic and compliant' child under the patronage of Shalini, a teacher who stays at his *tharavadu*¹ for a short period. *Manjadikuru* is

also set in a *nair* (a Hindu caste group in Kerala) *tharavadu* (named Kausthubham), where the entire family has gathered for the funeral of the family patriarch. Unlike in *Keshu*, here, the *tharavadu* seems like a physical embodiment that sees and understands the acquisitive aspirations of the family members and reveals all their inner secrets, weaknesses, insecurities, and emotional turmoil. In the film, one can see an assortment of child characters, from the ‘NRI’ Vicky, his village cousins Kannan and Manikutty, to the Tamil servant girl Roja. Using the setting of the *tharavadu*, the film uses various forms of childhood, and each childhood is treated differently based on the resources available and accessible to them, the social and filial status of their parents, and the past trauma. With his socks, shoes, and a red toy car, Vicky is contrasted with Kannan and Manikutty, who are shown barefoot in most scenes, and Roja, who wears tattered clothes. Unlike the adult characters, the children are shown as fostering a strong bond despite the obvious materialistic and cultural inequality. Later in the film, the reminiscence of the past for these children in their adult days is braided with childhood trauma and pining for affection.

Philips and the Monkey Pen focuses on the issues that Ryan Philip encounters during his fifth grade. While Ryan is at his estranged grandfather’s place, he finds a talisman. Since it was shaped like a monkey, it is called a ‘Monkey pen’. After returning home, he realizes that the pen is still with him. He is scared to tell his grandfather or father about this and decides to keep it a secret. The next morning, he realizes that someone has done his homework. He assumes that the monkey pen did his homework. In this film, most scenes are shot in Ryan’s school premises, classroom, and his home on a cliff adjacent to a beach. The film begins with an aerial view of six children with hooded raincoats on their bicycles horizontally lined up, and then the camera pans down and gets placed behind the children showing that they are standing facing the school building. These scenes use the BGM and slow-motion shots, befitting the introduction of the hero

typically shown in the mass films. The visual and aural richness is typical of a commercial Malayalam film which makes this film distinct from other Malayalam children's films. In this film, the popular Malayalam comic actor Innocent plays God, and the subsequent scenes between him and Ryan reveal Ryan's emotional troubles light-heartedly and also function as a moral voice that guides him. Likewise, in *Manjadikuru*, the story is narrated by celebrated actor Prithviraj, who recounts the adult Vicky's memories of his family's reunion during his grandfather's funeral. The 'aural stardom' works towards heightening the impact of the visual elements (Majumdar, 2001, p. 164). In the context of the existing 'adult versus child' binary, the child artists in these films are foreshadowed by the 'larger-than-life' presence of these "superstars".

Performing the Role of a Child

In *Keshu*, the introductory scenes show Keshu attacking fishes in the pond with his catapult, annoying the milkman, and attacking other children on their way to school. He is tantalized by the *Velichappadu*² as *pottan*³ *cherukkan*⁴ (imbecile) for drawing on the temple wall with coal. Later, Keshu attacks the *Velichapaadu* with his catapult, which results in the *Velichapaadu* complaining to his maternal uncle, who thrashes Keshu. His uncle says he is tired of "this" notorious boy who will bring dishonor to the *tharavadu* just like his mother, who conceived him out of wedlock.



Fig 1: Keshu painting on the facade of the house in the absence of his family, *Keshu*

He is portrayed as a restless boy who needs to be ‘tamed.’ In another scene where the adults of the household are absent, he is shown drawing and painting the entire facade with the wall paints bought for renovation (Fig 1). This scene establishes Keshu as a natural artist experiencing the magic of colors for the first time. The next day, the school headmaster visits the *tharavadu* along with the newly appointed drawing teacher, Shalini, who will reside with Keshu’s family, and her father. The adults ridicule Keshu and blame him for the “unusual appearance” of the house (Fig 2). Later, the male adults discuss the conduct of Keshu over tea and snacks, and the patriarch of the household shares his anxiety with Shalini’s father about Keshu’s ‘savage’ behavior and his uncertainties regarding allowing ‘outsiders’ in the household (Fig 3). The film underlines that a child is a savage unless the adults intervene and direct the children toward rationality. Although the film is considered a children’s film, it mainly instructs the adults about how to approach a child, how to cope with disabled children, and the significance of channelizing a child's innate talents. It reveals the subjectivity of the male gaze as a benchmark for upright behavior in children. This underscores a humanist approach to childhood. The problems of coping with the child are often “presented in adult terms and in ways that are inaccessible to children,” as reflected in the script, plot content, mise-en-scene, and editing (Bazelgette & Staples, 1995, p. 95).



Fig 2: When Shalini comes to stay at Keshu’s house, *Keshu*

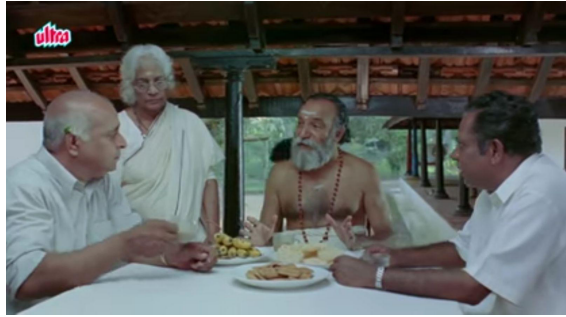


Fig 3: Keshu’s uncle talking about the mischievous nature of Keshu to Shalini’s father, *Keshu*

Similar to *Keshu*, *Philips and the Monkey Pen* narrates Ryan’s transformation from a ‘problematic’ child to a ‘mature’ child by navigating through several personal crises with the help of the monkey pen, which personifies the pervasive adult figure usually present in children’s films that teaches him “correct ways of developing, performing and being a child” (Malone et al., 2020, p. 21). The several classroom scenes reveal the typical structure of a traditional classroom in Kerala. Ryan faces corporal punishments, scolding, and insults quotidianly from his Mathematics teacher for failing to do his homework. These scenes show the teacher in the center standing in front of the blackboard, and the camera is placed behind the students seated in rows (Fig 4).

Generally, in the Indian education system, the ‘passive’ child-learner experiences ‘rote learning’, ‘instruction-based pedagogy’, and ‘textbook-focused lessons’ in a closed environment, and the teacher makes decisions and controls the class. However, this may cause a conflict of interest between teachers and students by giving rise to behavioral problems in students. Formal education and the schooling system conform to the conventional notion of childhood and result in children's conditioning. It is based on a patriarchal humanist worldview which is a structured hierarchy always oriented towards establishing power in favor of the adults, which includes the principal, teachers, and parents, and is therefore oriented against children, as can be seen in the film.



Fig 4: Ryan and his friends facing punishment from Pappan sir, *Philips and the Monkey Pen*

A balance between teacher-centered and student-centered approaches in teaching takes place in the film only after Pappan sir's transformation after Ryan impersonates Pappan and makes a fake death threat to the state's chief minister over a mobile call. Pappan avoids an arrest and undergoes a transformation after the principal advises him to adopt a student-friendly approach. The film advocates for a (human) child-friendly classroom environment which is again a humanist approach to education. After following the principal's advice, Pappan's students begin to appreciate him and come together to work for the Inter-school Mathematics Exhibition. Ryan's pen does his homework regularly and helps him generate an idea for the exhibition. This is followed by multiple shots of children preparing for the exhibition accompanied by fast BGM, which demonstrate the efforts of the students for the exhibition. Later when they lose, he asks them not to be disappointed but rather says, "we should celebrate our failures. Failures are the stepping stones to success." In a competitive scenario, it is significant for the students to accept their failures and move ahead. Although Ryan's change in attitude influences the entire school, and he bags the title Student of the Year, it seems too little for the earlier trauma. Like other films, the focus on the success of the main characters and justifying their hardships in the process is unlikely in life. In both *Keshu* and *Philips and the Monkey Pen*, the 'reasonable' adult figures bring about positive

changes in the ‘unruly’ child characters through compassion but take away the child’s agency and nullify their traumatic experiences.

Contrastingly, in *Manchadikuru*, the child characters are depicted as morally superior to the adult characters by being more sensitive and understanding. The family members are introduced by Ammu, the eldest daughter of the deceased Apputtan Nair, while conversing with the village women. In this scene, it is through Vicky’s eyes that the audience sees the characters as he explores the portraits of the couples hung on the wall, and Ammu’s explanation about ‘who-is-who’ is heard in the background. In this scene, Vicky appears standing on the bench, contrasting his morally elevated position with the gossip-enjoying adults. The film assigns a moral voice to Vicky and juxtaposes the simple and incorruptible children’s lives through their pranks, tricks, games, and their friendship with the complexities of adult relationships.

In the scene where Vicky introduces the *tharavadu* as “a grandiose house”, the camera is placed behind Vicky and moves to an aerial shot giving the spectators a view of the house’s enormosity. In the film scenes, the children are ubiquitous, suggesting a child’s view of the adult world (Fig 5). It is through their perspective that the spectators understand family feuds, the underlying and explicit tensions, and the depth of the characters. The severe/comic aspects of adult jealousies, ego clashes, guilt, disputes, and greed are portrayed explicitly and implicitly in various scenes.

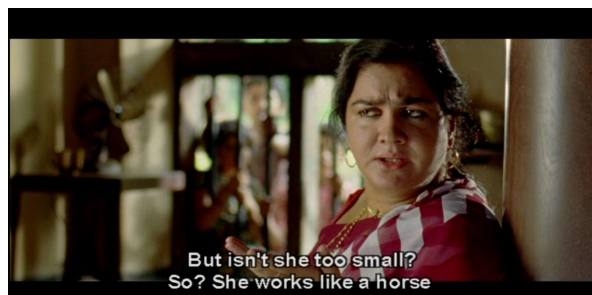


Fig 5: Children in the background while adults converse about Roja, *Manjadikuru*

To justify the adult characters, the image of child figures in the scenes lends the spectators the objective vision of the child in observing the complex dynamics amongst the siblings, married couples, children, and their parents, exploring the themes of belongingness, familial attachment and the ephemeral nature of happiness and sadness. As Lebeau (2008) states, “cinema can appear to offer unprecedented access to [child as spectacle, child as subject], its impression of reality combined with its capacity to deliver the points of view that help to put the (adult) audience back in the place of the child” (p. 40). The film, *Manjadikuru*, with its complex narrative, shows the adults their follies, self-centredness, and the troubles of adulthood. Also, it uses the child characters to actuate nostalgia for the adult audiences by placing the story in the 1980s through the reminiscence of old games with lucky red seeds (*Manjadikuru*) and catapult, the ‘imported’ KitKat, the ancestral home, and the bonding between cousins.

The Problem of Othering

The terms *other*, *othering*, and *otherness* imply different concepts within philosophy and the social sciences (Jones, 2008). These terms can refer to social and political exclusions, non-conformity to social norms, and reductive societal practices. Braidotti (2009) explains otherness as being deviant from ‘morphological normativity’, which is “modeled on ideals of whiteness, masculinity, normality, youth, and health” and that it has been viewed as “anomalous, deviant, and monstrous” (p. 526). She adds that posthumanism can engender possible futures by constructing sustainable interconnections and entering affirmative ethical relations (p. 531). The nationalist, educational, religious, and consumerist capitalist accounts have influenced the stories of childhood told by the adult societies by “trying to write (right) childhood into one form of space or other” (Jones, 2008, p.196). Thus, the child is ‘othered’ in the non-representational context. Also, the child is subjected to multiple forms of ‘othering’ - “dialectical otherness (nonwhite, nonmasculine,

nonnormal, nonyoung, nonhealthy) and categorical otherness (zoomorphic, disabled, or malformed)” (Braidotti, 2009, p. 526) that is practiced within and outside the society further displacing them to the margins.

Placing the mute child as the central figure, *Keshu* opposes the popular representations of disability in Malayalam films as the result of sin or a characteristic of the wicked villain, unlike the virtuous ‘able-bodied’ hero or for sentimental ‘fool’ or comic. Representations of disabled people are often stereotyped and stigmatized, and they largely shape the general public’s perceptions. Furthermore, these children and their bodies are also usually objectified by other people’s curiosity and are reviled or sympathized with. Retief and Letšosa (2018) talk about the Social Model of Disability in which disability is seen as a socially constructed phenomenon from the 1960s where society disables people with impairments through the physical and social environment, which imposes limitations upon disabled communities. Even while attempting to capture the issues of lack of sensitivity in understanding disability, it adheres to the popular stereotype that heroic attributes in a ‘specially-abled’ child make that child’s existence more reasonable to people without disabilities. Keshu earns acceptance from society only when he wins an international drawing competition which publishes his drawing of ‘The Elephant and The Mascot’ in the newspaper. This quickly transforms his image in his society, and the people consider him the pride of their village. The disabled child has to prove his/her/their excellence at some skill to gain social approval than a non-disabled child. Malayalam cinema does not seem to have evolved much in its narratives concerning people with disabilities. In another recent film, *Kaduva* (2022), a reference to a child’s disability being a result of his father’s corrupt deeds was later retracted from the film following mass criticism and social media backlash.

Keshu conveys a feudal sensibility using the setting of a *tharavadu*, showing elements such as *thooku vilakku*⁵, *vazhipadu*⁶, and the temple and its vicinity. Arunima (2003) states that

belonging to a *tharavadu* meant possessing “wealth, status, power, and privilege” (p. 11). Despite being a Children’s Film Society of India production, it fails to be inclusive in its representations and upholds the ‘values’ of the upper-caste practices.

On the other hand, *Manjadikuru* carves out a significant space for the child characters; this film reveals many instances where the child is exposed to manipulations, selfishness, cruelty, and acts of brutality. Vicky’s mother warns him about engaging with Kannan, Manikutty, or Roja because they are a “useless bunch,” unlike the “city-bred” Vicky. When Roja steps into their room to give towels and glances over their luggage bag, she asks Vicky to close the bag, which has Kit Kat, Horlicks, Axe oil and other novelties from Dubai as she could be a “robber”. Vicky instantly realizes Roja’s subaltern position in the household. Roja is merely 12 years old and is made to do all the household chores, including taking care of the grandmother. The adults around her hardly seem to acknowledge her as a child, and they expect her to perform all menial tasks in the house but chastise her when she is found playing with Vicky, Kannan, and Manikutty. This underscores that enjoying the period of childhood is a privilege that children like Roja are denied. Only the children recognize Roja as a simple, ingenuous child and empathize with her.

Roja is prevented from playing and associating with the children of Kausthubham due to her social status as a ‘Tamil’ domestic help which enhances her marginalized position. When she is found lying on the bed while the other kids engage in pillow fights, it further aggravates her crime of getting involved with the *tharavaadi*⁷ children from the adult’s viewpoint. In the social order of post-colonial India, untouchability⁸ has been reformulated where an individual from a ‘lower- caste’ can be employed as a menial laborer of the house where they assist in preparing meals, cleaning, and laundry but is restricted from attaining dignity in labor assigned to them. Also, several trafficking rackets involve young children for bonded labor as domestic help, shop

or factory workers; they are at risk of sexual and other forms of exploitation, including the production of child pornography (UNICEF, n.d).

Taking pity on Roja's condition, the children plan to help her flee from the *tharavadu* upon overhearing their aunt Ammu's plan to take her to Delhi as their servant. Roja's predicament is beyond the children's understanding. As the sole earning member of her family, Roja provides for her mother and siblings; fleeing is not an option for Roja. She wants her siblings to be educated, which is possibly the only means of escaping the social disparity. Although, presently, subsidized elementary education in India is compulsory, it is difficult to realize it when children face such dire poverty. In fact, Vyjayanthi's (who plays the character of Roja in *Manjadikuru*) real-life predicaments were similar to her reel character. Before working in the film, she was employed in a matchbox cottage industry till completing her school education and later had to discontinue her education to work in a photo studio to support her family (Janardhanan, 2012).

In the film, Roja's deprived position makes her vulnerable and fearful of the adults. She says that she is scared of everyone - her uncle and the inmates of the *tharavadu*. She is brutally awakened to her post-human status after being viciously beaten and scolded when the infant of one of the family members goes missing; after this episode, she decides to escape from the household. The family is convinced that she assisted her uncle in abducting the infant, while only the children think of the possibility of the child being with the *Sanyaasi Maman* (the Sage uncle). After the infant is returned by the *Sanyasi Maman*, the adults are unapologetic about their mistreatment, and only the children empathize with Roja and understand the torture she underwent. In the scene when Roja tries to escape with the children's help, the grandmother notices them but does not stop them or inform the others. Grandmother's inaction complies with her passive character, and the empathy she may have is ineffective.

Later, Roja is forcibly brought back to Kausthubham by her uncle, who has evidently assaulted Roja; this can be understood by her tattered clothes, disheveled demeanor, and her gestures (crossing one arm around her body and the other arm over her stomach like a protective barrier). In the scene (Fig 6), the children are appalled to see Roja, and the sudden rain violently obstructs the sympathetic look on their faces. The sequence of shots that cuts to show the children's faces zooming further to Vicky's perplexed face and moving back to Roja freezing the camera still for a few seconds showing her desperate eyes and the silent sobs, captures the emotional distress and helplessness of the children. As Vicky says in the close-up shot revealing a distressed and humiliated Roja, "in her eyes, I saw the end of her childhood, her eyes seemed to say that I was responsible for it," directs to a trauma the hapless child has to come to terms with. This scene emphasizes the vulnerability of children and their lack of significance in a world created and managed by adults.



Fig 6: Roja, when brought back to Kausthubham by her uncle, *Manjadikuru*

In another scene, we learn that Raghu decides to move to Madras with the family; the children -Kannan and Manikutty, are not asked for their opinion, neither can they participate in discussions pertaining to the shift, nor are included in the parents' final decision 'to move'. In families, children are not asked for their opinion on matters and are not considered when making

major decisions; this underscores that parents assume that they have the privilege to decide for “their children”, and that the parents own them. The child is not allowed to vocalize their anxieties about such decisions, even if it requires them to accommodate drastic changes in their lives. Generally, children are expected to adapt to the changes imposed on them without preparing or sharing why those changes must occur.

Another form of exclusion experienced by children is when they belong to non-confirmative families, as shown in *Philips and the Monkey Pen*. Ryan’s parents belong to different religious communities – the father is a Christian, and the mother is a Muslim; both face unacceptance from their conventional families. In India, such interfaith or intercaste couples and their children are seldom included in mainstream society, where such marriages are taboo even now. This is evident from the social media-led boycott of the jewelry brand Tanishq’s advertisement showing the marriage ceremony of an interfaith couple which led the brand to withdraw the advertisement. In one scene, Ryan is teased by his classmates for his orientation to a diverse religious environment at home or, rather, the lack of a singular religious identity. This leads to self-doubt and a lack of social skills in Ryan, and we see him committing some detrimental acts in fits of turbulent anger. His grandfather, too, finds fault with him and assumes that Ryan will be no good because he will have inherited his father’s values and will not ‘respect’ elders. Ryan desperately longs for acceptance from his fraternity, and when he receives it, we observe a drastic change in his conduct and attitude.

Perceptions of Gender Performance

Stereotypical representations of gender roles in media can have an enduring impact on young spectators as it influences their understanding of gender identity development (Aley & Hahn, 2020). In the films discussed here, child and female characters largely align themselves with the patriarchal view of the world. Keshu (a boy) is presented as a troublemaker who harms

others, and his nature can be corrected only through care and affection from a teacher (a woman) who is the epitome of the celebrated 'femininity'. The narrative suggests that a child who experiences internal conflicts and has no interaction with children of his age can undergo metamorphosis and change from an 'undisciplined' child to a 'good-natured' child by an 'adult' woman through relentless affection. Moreover, he is shown to be cared for by another woman (a friend of his mother) whom he considers *amma* (mother) who cared for him until he was six; he misses and yearns for her maternal affection. He occasionally visits her at her home, where she lives alone, but after Shalini's arrival, her significance to the plot is reduced drastically. The film does not attempt to develop the relationship between these two characters, possibly because of their social class differences. The teacher is an upper-caste young woman who wears sarees and obeys her parents' decision to fix her marriage without seeking her consent. Her choices- both sartorial and life decisions align with the upper caste notion of a '*Malayalee Manga*' (the idealized Malayalee cis-gender woman), unlike the unnamed '*amma*' dressed in her attire of *mundu* (a rectangular cloth tied around the waist) and blouse who stays alone in her small house and looked after the orphaned child Keshu. Instead of questioning and condemning the traditional concept of arranged- marriage, this film attempts to reinforce heteronormative practices where the woman should be married off at the 'right' age and at the 'right' time even if she has not met her proposed husband or is not prepared to be married. As Gopinath and Raj (2015) state, "in Malayalam cinema, female prototypes have been created with the utmost care taken in reinforcing the hegemonic patriarchal stereotypes" (p. 5).

Manjadikuru shows that children observe and imitate adults and accept the norms that are culturally practiced. When the tadpoles die, they follow the funeral ritual where only the boys must carry the body on a bed made of sticks. In another scene, upon their visit to the pond, Kannan

teases Vicky when he chooses to climb down the steps to enter the pond, as according to what he has seen, steps are taken only by women and asks him to dive into the water like men. Gender roles and practices are also imbibed through their observations of the adults. The female characters in this film are denied any personal agency to fight against the discrimination that they are forced to endure, and any change in their fortune and status is possible only through marriage. Suja, Vicky's mother, is the only woman in that family who decides the course of her life, a life of material comfort, but only through her marriage to a Dubai-based man. Notably, the film uses grey characters who are manipulative and scheming but are also undergoing personal emotional conflicts.

Furthering on the idea of man-woman relationship, in *Philips and the Monkey Pen*, Ryan's friend Juggru shares that he is considering marrying, after which his wife will do his homework for him. By doing so, he will reduce his mother's troubles, who is currently doing it for him, fearing that his mathematics teacher will beat him up. We see that Ryan is considering a casual relationship over marriage because they cannot marry at this young age. He later proposes the academically brilliant student, Joan, for this. So, the social order within the household projects the idea that females are designed to work for men and enable them continuously. The sole fulfillment for women is enshrined in the role of an 'enabler' who does not need personal fulfillment and enrichment. We see the same underscored in the other women characters, the mother(s); we do not see women performing other characters in the film; the teachers, the school principal, the grandparent, and even God are all male.

Joan's character is defined through her interventions in bringing affirmative changes in the lives of the male figures in her life- her father and Ryan. She influences her father to quit smoking and to follow the traffic rules; she convinces Ryan that he must start doing his homework if she should keep his secret of trapping Pappan by means of a fake call. This reinforces the "positioning

of women as the face of Indian middle-class [reifying] societal perspectives that women are responsible for maintaining moralities, therefore, suggesting that men can transcend and indulge in ‘practices’ that are immoral” (Sreekumar, 2019, p. 2). His love letter to Joan is modeled on a highly misogynistic dialogue by a male lead to his love interest in a highly celebrated mass movie *Narasimham*. The children absorb the set standards dictated by society through their surroundings, stories, and films, and these factors influence their ideological stance. Often in popular children’s literature such as *Cinderella*, *Rapunzel*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, etc., we encounter women trapped in a castle or mistreated by others (the damsel in distress) who are often rescued by mighty brave men. Thus, from childhood through various narratives, societal norms determine our desires, interests, profession, and identity. Society controls and grooms the toys children play with, clothing, and expressions of emotions.

The role of Ryan’s mother, Sameera, stays symbolic, she represents elements of food and adheres to the idea of gendered spaces - both physical and emotional, allocated for women. The stereotypical image of a Muslim woman who finds fulfillment in cooking is reinforced in this film. She is able to generate income only through her cookery show, and her roles as a lover, wife, and mother are all confined to scenes involving the aroma of food, cooking, or feeding the food items. Ryan is shown as inconsiderately pouring salt into the dish she was preparing for the show, and when she gets angry at him, her husband intervenes to ‘protect’ Ryan, and both start making fun of her in her absence, undermining her work. The script fails to develop this character as what we see of her is through the eyes of her husband or through his description of her. Most popular films also adhere to these oppressive notions of gender identity. In a largely patriarchal country like India, where the majority of the people belonging to other genders are still struggling for basic rights, such narratives will only reaffirm the existing sexism in the nation. The developmental

success story of Kerala is based on the better status of women when compared to other states relying on the evidence of “feminine sex ratio, high female literacy, and a history of communally practiced matrilineal and sexual autonomy” (Gopinath & Raj, 2015, p. 69). However, these factors have not been able to alter the “mindset of people towards womanhood” (Gopinath & Raj, 2015, p. 69). In a patriarchal society, gender characteristics are fixed, giving more advantages to one gender and often discriminating against the other genders, which influences the child’s attitude toward performing the gender.

Judith Butler (2002) asserted that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (p. 25). When a child is repeatedly made to see or listen to stories of men being pictured as the 'rescuers' while women are depicted as 'damsels in distress', it is likely that these concepts are embedded in the child’s mind too. Moreover, parents belonging to non-heteronormative communities are not yet visible in Malayalam children’s films. The film is one significant factor that could implant stereotypical notions about gender, its performativity and passivity within children. Through narratives such as these, children are framed to include feminine and masculine qualities if they really have to assert the accepted gender roles which are unfair to all genders. In the present scenario, when there are constructive discussions and collaborations on gender inequality and gender diversity, this study proposes posthumanism as an onto-epistemological aid in understanding the consequences of a gendered way of thinking and its limitations.

Conclusion

Cinema places the “child in the landscape of vision, and it can be a powerful instrument to reflect and know the child (Bushati, 2018, p. 34)”. Thus, films can be an operative medium in portraying childhood experiences from the perspectives of children from different regions if used

effectively. The two categories - films about children and films for children, although often treated separately, share the intimacy of relating to childhood and, at times, obliterates the contiguity that separates them.

The films discussed here reveal the view of Malayalam films towards the child(hood). When a young child is indoctrinated with the 'human' adult values of casteism, classism, sexism, and gender supremacy, the 'post-human' child is denied developing its own identity and ability to question the injustices and lack of power perpetrated by 'human' society and authorities. Exploring intersections of caste and class in determining the childhood(s) can open up possibilities of recasting the much-required sociological transformations. A safe childhood with access to quality education must not be an exclusive privilege. Also, new philosophies and measures are needed to understand children and childhood from marginalized intersections. Moving beyond the humanist worldview, a posthumanist framework can help to understand multiple childhoods, child's agency, and existence in the shifting terrain. By understanding the implications of gender representation in films and questioning the normative gender constructs, comprehensive, harmonious, and balanced gender relations can be promoted. When cultural practices, religions, and rituals, dominating ideologies within the institution of family, and societal notions have encoded and permeated gender binary, caste dominance, and social inequality, film as a medium could encourage children to unlearn, relearn and be more receptive. Moving beyond the boundaries of anthropocentrism and humanist supremacies through representations of childhood(s) and children from all communities, disabled children from marginalized backgrounds, characters belonging to LGBTQIA+ communities, child-robot interactions, and child-animal relationships, Malayalam children's films must be inclusive and address the concerns of children and their post-human status. Through a critical posthumanist approach, it is significant to critically analyze the

films made for the child audience and identify ways to make those relevant to the current period by discarding regressive and patriarchal ideas on caste, religion, gender, and the power dynamics between the child and the adult.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Tharavadu- the ancestral home of Nair families in Kerala.
- ² Velichappadu- the oracle or mediator between a deity and devotees at a Hindu Temple in Kerala.
- ³ Pottan - a term used to describe a person who is deaf and mute; can be considered derogatory, also a derogatory way of referring to someone as foolish or silly.
- ⁴ Cherukkan- a colloquial way of referring to a boy.
- ⁵ Thooku vilakku- the traditional hanging lamp used in temples and aristocratic Hindu homes in Kerala and Tamilnadu.
- ⁶ Vazhipadu- religious offerings.
- ⁷ Tharavaadi- a mark of 'nobility' by being born into a 'noble' family.
- ⁸ Untouchability- A form of institutionalized exclusion upheld by the caste system adhering to the notion of 'purity' where the privileged caste groups do not touch or be in the presence of people belonging to caste groups considered 'lower' to theirs to avoid 'pollution'.