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

# Reading the Representations of Children and Childhood(s) in Malayalam Films

Rona Reesa Kurian, National Institute of Technology Calicut, rona_p190128ms@nitc.ac.in
Preeti Navaneeth, National Institute of Technology Calicut, preetinavaneeth@nitc.ac.in

Volume 13.1 (2025) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2025.655 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

**Abstract**
This article examines the representation of childhood(s) and child characters in Malayalam cinema. Child characters have been constantly used since the beginning of Malayalam cinema to fit into the specific normative roles that are largely inconsequential to the plot. Juxtaposing the evolution of the Malayalam film industry with representations of child roles and child-based films through the decades, this article explores the hegemonic adult gaze that conceptualizes such functions to childhood. The dominant adult gaze structures the film to be a medium for adult consumption, where the child's body becomes a device, and its 'intellect' is largely discredited in films. This indicates the social indifference towards 'children and childhood(s)', which equates the child as a belonging/property of the parent (adult) and rejects the child's ability as a creative individual with an ability to think and perform. The paper argues for a space to explore complex child characters in Malayalam films, but in doing so, it does not support the 'Child's' conception as an 'Adult'. It urges the need for better understanding from the creators of films, who must be creative, rational, and inclusive in fashioning their child characters.

**Keywords:** Child characters; Representation; Adult gaze; Malayalam films; Childhood

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# Reading the Representations of Children and Childhood(s) in Malayalam Films

Rona Reesa Kurian

Preeti Navaneeth

## Introduction

Despite being lauded for its diversity of subjects and real-life characters and being celebrated for its cinematography and plot, Malayalam cinema is just another object of mass consumption that favors adult sensibilities. It has developed into a commercial enterprise guided by "superstructural expression of a reified capitalist patriarchy" (Pillai, 2017, p. 52). In the creative scope of Malayalam cinema, adult characters are vibrant, with distinct personas, as opposed to the child characters, who lack agency and are neither stakeholders nor do they influence the creative process of a film. Barring a few noteworthy films, child characters have limited purpose and scope in Malayalam films. The larger portrayal of the 'child' is often in alignment with the social construct of the Malayalee society. In these films, the child can be seen as a body with a definitive purpose assigned by the adult who perceives the film and actively consumes it. The child's body thus becomes a device, and its 'intellect' is discredited in such films.

Several facets of modern life and development, like the social, cultural, economic, and technological changes, have influenced the trajectories of childhood (Marsh 2014; Banaji 2017), and cinema has attempted to caricature such changes superficially. Often, in the larger oeuvre of the films in India, children are underrepresented and equally neglected as active agents or consumers of films (Ghalian, 2020). The auteur filmmaker Satyajit Ray, used a child's perspective to convey both innocent wonder and a detached emotional understanding of the



Volume 13.1 (2025) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2025.655 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

world in his *Pather Panchali* (1955), which gained global recognition for its nuanced plot and filmmaking style (Paganopoulos, 2013). Though such early Indian films experimented with child-centric narratives, such representations have become comparatively less in contemporary cinema. The inadequacy of child-centric films can result in misconceptions about childhood (Sharma, 2021). Likewise, in Malayalam films, child characters primarily engage in performing certain normative functions. By engaging in the question of whether the child is marginalized in the 'screen space', this study aims to establish how representation of children and childhood(s) is stereotyped across various genres of Malayalam films. Also, this article attempts to distinguish and establish Malayalam films produced 'for children' or/and 'about children' as an ambit within the history of Malayalam cinema.

This study engages with the concept of the 'adult gaze', which is developed from Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze' (Kaziaj, 2016). Male gaze, a crucial concept in feminist theory, refers to the objectification of the female body in films for visual pleasure (Mulvey, 1975). In this context, 'adult gaze' refers to the objectified position of the child with respect to the dualism of adult/child functioning on power disparity (Kaziaj, 2016). It has a significant impact on the adult perception of the child, the child's perception of the self, and the child's perception of the others around him/her, which includes other children and adults. Through the critical discourse analysis of selected Malayalam films that portray child characters, the authors argue that the representation of child characters in films is impacted by the adult's interests.

Academic studies on children's films and representations of childhood(s) in films are limited; however, works on films and their impact as an artistic medium have opened up new avenues to be explored. A broad spectrum of scholarship available on Indian films discusses subjects such as socio-historical transformations, popular trends, cultural concerns, and fandom (Thomas, 2014; Ganti, 2013). A majority of the earlier studies focused on Bollywood (Dickey

and Dudrah, 2010), but now regional films also feature in academic discussions (Murthy, 2020). Defining and categorizing 'Indian films' as a single entity is contentious due to the extensiveness of regional languages and multiple demographics it caters to. On a Pan-India scale, films produced in Hindi, popularly known as Bollywood films, adorn the title of 'national films', while films made in other languages are diminished as 'regional films' (Dickey and Dudrah, 2010). Some films have surpassed these regional boundaries and have received prominence in India and abroad. The rise of the OTT culture, advancement in film technology, and viability of producing big-budget films that are released simultaneously in multiple languages have also made the concept of pan-Indian films popular. Apart from the uniqueness of languages and dialects, the diversity of themes and cultures, versatile locations, narrative style, and budget are factors that should also be taken into consideration in discourses on Indian films. Despite the many dissimilarities among Indian films, there are certain recurrent patterns and themes that offer a distinctive flavor to the majority of these films (Lutgendorf, 2006).

Most of the films made in India are family dramas, often termed 'masala' films, with a formulaic equation of humor, romance, fight scenes, excessive emotions, and a few songs in between (Brown, 2015, p. 186), choreographed dances, lavish sets, and colorful costumes (Banaji, 2017). Although Malayalam films are perceived as more radical and intellectually driven (Gopinath and Raj, 2015) with limited scope for 'masala formula films', they still reserve select traits of family dramas that are targeted toward families—the grandparents, parents, and children. Although family films are still a dominant genre, blending discourse on taboos and contemporary socio-political concerns in films can be observed, but only if such inclusions appeal to and entertain the adult audience.

In India, genre-wise categorization of films is not explicit like in the West, and they often intersect (Ghalian, 2020, p. 142). The resultant chaos makes the Central Board of Film Certification the primary regulatory body that limits the viewership of the films in India. The Board, governed by the Cinematograph Act of 1952, has been amended from time to time. It issues four certificates: U (unrestricted public exhibition), A (restricted to adult audiences), U/A (unrestricted public exhibition with parental guidance for children under 12 years of age), and S (restricted to specialized audiences). The reason behind the certification of films was to ensure that the "impressionable minds of the children" are not "exposed to psychologically damaging matter" (CBFC, n.d.). However, due to the lack of established methodologies that lead to clear and logical categories of viewers based on their age and psychological health, significant ambiguity is observed in the categories of certification for films. On several occasions, children watch family films, typically with U or U/A certification, that have content that is inappropriate for them.

## The Construction of Childhood

This study is developed from the theoretical outlooks on the construction of childhood. Over the centuries, the concept of childhood has evolved in all regions of the world. Phillippe Aries, in his work *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1962), argues that in European society, the concept of childhood as a distinct stage of life emerged between the 15$^{th}$ and 17$^{th}$ centuries, shifting from viewing children as miniature adults to recognizing their unique needs and vulnerabilities. Aries states that this transformation stemmed from evolving family dynamics, moral discourses emphasizing the need to discipline and train children, and the rise of age-graded schooling, and this gradually permeated to all social strata (Prout, 2005). There are numerous criticisms of Aries' argument that the concept of childhood came into existence in the modern period (Orme, 200; Šaḥar, 1990; Pollock, 1983), but still his work is highly influential

and is considered one of the foundational texts in the discourse on childhood. Hugh Cunningham (2014) states that the 18th century witnessed a shift in the conceptualization of childhood, moving away from a solely religious focus toward a more secular view influenced by thinkers like Locke and Rousseau and the romantic poets. This period saw the rise of contrasting ideas about child care, ranging from strict discipline to allowing for natural development. While these ideas initially impacted the upper classes, the Industrial Revolution brought the plight of working-class children to the forefront, prompting social reforms and legislation aimed at protecting children from exploitative labor (Cunningham, 2014). Child rights and their safeguarding gained momentum during the 20th century.

In the 20th century, known as the "century of the child", children gained emotional, legal, and economic power, leading to their increased social recognition, reducing the gap with the adults rather than separating the two groups (Cunningham, 2014). However, adult perceptions of childhood are characterized by strong, conflicting emotions, with children serving as instruments for societal hopes, desires, and anxieties, leading to often irrational debates about their treatment and status (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 1995). Alan Prout and Allison James (2003) outline an emergent paradigm in childhood sociology, emphasizing childhood as a social construct intertwined with other social variables like class and gender, worthy of study in its own right, and recognizing children as active agents in shaping their lives and society, thereby contributing to the reconstruction of childhood. Prout (2005) asserts that childhood is "heterogeneous, complex and emergent" (p. 2) and requires an interdisciplinary approach moving beyond the dualistic oppositions viewing childhood as a biological/natural or cultural/social construct, as these are "mutually implicated with each other at every level" (p. 4). Contemporary mass media presents a range of childhood images, such as active, competent, and vulnerable, etc., and these


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align with the idealized discourses of childhood. But these images cater differently in different regions of the world, as the consumers of images of child victims or suffering children in Africa, Asia, or South America are located in wealthy western nations (Prout, 2005).

Sarada Balagopalan (2002) argues that while James and Prout's social construct of childhood allows for diverse understandings of childhood beyond a Western ideal, their culturalist approach neglects the impact of colonialism and modernization on non-Western cultures, ultimately reinforcing a Western bourgeois model of childhood as the standard. Furthermore, the article critiques their paradigm for overlooking power dynamics and the historical construction of the "other," leading to an essentialist view of non-Western cultures. Colonialism had a significant impact on the perception and treatment of childhood in various societies. The colonial powers imposed social policies that were based on their own values, which included racial and scientific justifications for their governance (Plange & Alam, 2023). As Divya Kannan (2024) states, European accounts of 19th-century India, including children's literature, often depicted colonized children as ‘objects’ to be shaped, and this was particularly evident in educational and religious practices, where missionaries wielded significant power over children. She adds that these portrayals often disregarded the cultural and intellectual agency of Indian children, assuming their minds were blank slates and overlooking their historical agency and ability to actively shape their own lives.

The colonial powers implemented vocational education to train poor children and transform them into a modern workforce, thereby reinforcing the pre-colonial caste hierarchies rather than dismantling them (Balagopalan, 2002). Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan (2011) states that during India's nationalist movement and nation-building, childhood and children's rights were not contested spaces between colonial rulers and nationalists, nor were diverse visions of childhood presented. Balakrishnan also highlights that consequently, the post-(Indian) independence


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understanding of children's rights and the corresponding role of family, community, society, and state remained largely unexamined and potentially ambiguous, lacking debate on how to articulate these rights and address failures in fulfilling them. However, the colonial policies changed the educational and social structures in the colonies, creating a lasting impact that influenced the treatment of children long after the end of colonial rule. J. Devika (2024) argues that 19th-century colonial discourse, influenced by European ideas of civilization and British liberalism, emphasized the reform of family life and childcare in Malayali society, promoting "correct" parenting by biological parents as essential for child development and societal advancement. She extended four regimes of childhood- 'responsible childhood', 'romantic childhood', 'the aspirational childhood', and 'child governance'—that are relevant to the Malayalee society from the mid-19th century.

Media function as effective agents "in the display, dissemination, and discussions of childhood" (Drotner, 2022, p. 19). Media depictions of childhood both mirror and shape societal views but are often selectively constructed from producers' biases, leading to inaccurate and stereotypical portrayals (Lemish, 2020, p. 339). Vicky Lebeau (2008) explores the image of the child as a 'spectacle' meant for the "coercive 'look' of camera" (p. 154), where the child is employed to "make the familiar strange, the domestic uncanny, in a way that also draws on that attachment to the image of the child as an incitement to compassion, pity, feeling—above all to the future" (p. 176). The child figure, a favored subject throughout film history, is often represented in extremes, as "innocent or menacing, victim or villain" (p. 780), thus functioning as both a cherished ideal and a source of social anxiety (Wojcik, 2020). The child character, previously marginalized in film studies, is now emerging as a crucial analytical tool, revealing formerly unseen aspects of cinematic structure and function (Lury, 2022). Recent technological


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advancements have contributed to representing globalized images of childhood, blurring Western dominance and reflecting evolving cultural attitudes, though often revealing adult anxieties about youth. Despite this diversification, the core discourse of childhood—encompassing innocence, imagination, and hope—persists, even as its representation adapts to new media landscapes and cultural contexts (Olson & Rampaul, 2022).

In the post-independence era in India, as geopolitical borders became more fluid and symbolic, film emerged as a powerful tool for shaping national consciousness and collective identity, influencing notions of belonging and fantasy and their symbolic representation, all of which became intrinsically linked to representations of nation and childhood (Deb, 2018). While early Indian films used child characters as symbolic figures of national ideals, since the 1990s, particularly in Hindi films, this representation shifted to emphasizing their precociousness, cuteness, and a prolonged, consumer-driven adolescence, while still utilizing them to reflect adult desires and traumas (Banaji, 2017). Nevertheless, despite the potential for child-centered films within the Indian audience (Brown, 2017, p. 100), post-liberalization trends in Hindi cinema reveal a decline in such narratives, with children increasingly relegated to intermittent, dramatic devices within commercial films (Ghalian, 2020). In commercial Malayalam films too, child-centric narratives are limited, and child figures are often mere reflections of the social perceptions of childhood.

Childhood is a dynamic concept that continues to evolve with the changing social structures, economic conditions, political ideologies, and religious notions. It is significant to perceive and build broader understandings of multiple childhoods as opposed to a singular, essentializing, westernized idea of childhood. The diverse array of factors, including domestic, environmental, social, and political forces, that influence perceptions of childhood underscores the critical importance of periodic interventions within the field of childhood studies. Cinema


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plays a crucial role in constructing and historicizing childhoods; therefore, moving beyond stereotypical representations to incorporate micro-cultural perspectives and subjectivities is essential for developing a critical discourse within childhood studies.

## An Account of Malayalam Cinema

Kerala was included in the Indian federation in 1956 and comprised Malabar, Travancore, and Cochin (Hari, 2021, p. 12). The history of Malayalam cinema precedes the formation of Kerala, with the first silent feature film, *Vigathakumaran* (1928), produced by J. C. Daniel. The film portrays the struggles of a child who gets abducted by a goon and is employed on a plantation. J. C. Daniel was inspired by the first Indian feature film, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), by Dadasaheb Phalke, and also by R. Nataraja Mudaliar's *Keechaka Vadham* (1917). Early cinematic experiments in colonial India, particularly Phalke's use of mythology, have been interpreted as both a strategic subversion of colonial censorship and a reinforcement of Hindu-nationalist ideologies (Gopalan, 2022, p. 158). Despite the influence of Phalke and Mudaliar and the popularity of mythological Tamil talkies in Kerala (Joseph, 2013, p. 35), J. C. Daniel swayed from the tradition of using devotional themes in his film and ventured to introduce the family drama with *Vigathakumaran,* which marked the onset of socially relevant cinema in Kerala (Hari, 2021, p. 13). Other early films such as *Balan* (1938), *Gnanambika* (1940), *Nirmala* (1948), and *Jeevithanouka* (1951) also followed social drama. Malayalam cinema, similar to Bengali cinema, since its inception, has employed social realism when juxtaposed with other Indian films (Nair et al., 2000, p. 32). Also, interestingly, the first commercially successful Malayalam talkie was *Balan* (1938), a film based on childhood that portrayed the dehumanizing experiences of two orphaned children. The economic instability due to the Great Depression and

the Second World War, coupled with the barriers of language, were the factors that impeded the beginning of the Malayalam talkie era (Joseph, 2013, p. 36).

Since its beginning, cinema in Kerala had a significant impact from the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) led theatrical productions. Although casteism and inequality within Kerala society had shunned the first Malayalam film, *Vigathakumaran*, its female lead, P. K. Rosie, and J. C. Daniel; in its latter years, Malayalam cinema became a medium to evoke anti-hegemonic spirits among the audience. As left-wing politics spread in Kerala between the 1950s and 1960s, films were used as political and pedagogical tools to discuss land ownership, casteism, degeneration of the feudal class, changing family and economic structures, educational reforms, native lifestyle, and employment issues. It was also a period of adaptation from the already radicalized Malayalam literary domain. *Neelakuyil* (1954), a film based on writer Uroob's novel, jointly directed by Ramu Kariat and P. Bhaskaran, received the President's Silver Medal award, gaining national recognition for Malayalam cinema (keralaculture.org n.d.). The first neorealist Malayalam film, *Newspaper Boy* (1955)—executed by students and dedicated to the student community (as stated in the opening and end credits section of the film)—was influenced by Italian neorealist films which prominently used child characters. With a notable emphasis on child protagonists, many of whom are orphans, Italian Neorealist films, including those by De Sica and Rossellini, crafted narratives that explored the complexities of post-war society through the unfiltered perspectives of children (Borgotallo, 2017). This influence is evident in the poignant depiction of the harsh realities of poverty through the experiences of young Appu in the film. *Rarichan Enna Pauran* (1956), *Randidangazhi* (1958), *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (1961), *Odayil Ninnum* (1965), *Chemmeen* (1965), *Mooladhanam* (1969), and *Ningalenne Communistaaki* (1970) are some of the other significant films of this period.


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*Rarichan Enna Pauran* and *Odayil Ninnum* also discuss the impact of poverty on childhood and the complexities of child-adult relationships.

The establishment of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in 1960 heralded a golden epoch in the history of Malayalam cinema. Institute-trained filmmakers such as Adoor Gopalakrishnan, John Abraham, and K. G. George entered the film industry with their exposure to international films and filmmaking techniques. Simultaneously, the emergence of newer film societies in Kerala during the 60s and 70s facilitated the engagement of the masses with world-renowned cinema and the integration of significant discussions on cinema as a critical art form. In the 1970s, a new consciousness of cinema dawned upon the Malayalam film industry with the films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Aravindan, Backer, and John Abraham. These films had a narrative style similar to the Bengali films of the 1950s and were categorized as "new wave" or "parallel" or "art cinema". Such films relied more on the element of realism, adopted a hyper-realistic approach to filmmaking, and deterred melodramatic depictions. Adoor Gopalakrishnan's film *Swayamvaram* (1972) is generally considered to have marked this transition to parallel cinema, which was distinct from mainstream cinema. *Nirmalyam* (1973), *Uttarayanam* (1974), *Swapnadanam* (1976), and *Kanchana Seetha* (1977) are some of the arthouse films from this period. Vijaya Nirmala's *Kavitha* (1973) is the first Malayalam film directed by a woman; however, the credit for it is associated with I. V. Sasi, who is a prominent film director, delegitimizing the female agency in a male-dominated industry (Pillai, 2020). *Poombatta* released in 1971 is considered the first Malayalam children's film and it narrates the story of Sarada, a young girl tortured by her stepmother. The State Award for 'Best Children's Film' was institutionalized in 1978, and *Ammuvinte Attinkutty* (1978) and *Kummaty* (1979) were prominent earlier films to win this award.


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Towards the end of this decade, the Malayalam film industry witnessed the birth of 'middle-brow films', which combined the vigor of commercial cinema with the spirit of parallel cinema. These were 'in-between films' blending the elements of realism and humor, through which Malayalam cinema had developed an "engaging cinematic language that conversed with the social and aesthetical imagination of the masses" (Hari, 2021, p. 15). K. G. George, P. Padmarajan, and Bharathan were the main exponents of such films. These films are often criticized for equating the 'Malayalee culture' with the 'upper-caste' representations, majoritarian values, and undermining the treacherous inequality and injustice imposed on the 'lower castes' (Gopinathan, 1997). Caste, class, and patriarchy were ubiquitously present in these films, and they contributed to writing a "neo-feudal, hegemonic and hypermasculine" (Hari, 2021, p. 15) Malayalee sensibility.


Fig 1: The poster of *My Dear Kuttichathan*. Copyright: Navodaya.

The Gulf migration of Keralites in the 70s and 80s contributed to a relatively stable economy back home, which facilitated more commercial interest in films. The first 3D film of

India, *My Dear Kuttichathan* (1984), released during this period, provided a technological interlude. This fantasy film was a huge commercial success, and it depicted the adventures of three children who befriended a friendly demigod who takes the form of a *Kuttichathan* (child spirit). The early 1980s also witnessed the predominance of family films (mainly dealing with concerns of nuclear families), which also led to an increase in the onscreen presence of child characters (Raveendran, 1990, p. 7). Child artists Baby Anju and Baby Shalini had successful careers during this period. *Ente Mammattukuttiyammakku* (1983) had created an enormous trend and established the 'cute and innocent' child image (played by Shalini), which recurred in many films that followed. Critiquing the representation of '*Mammattukuttiyammas*' in the films of the 1980s, Raveendran (1990) states that such representations diverted the attention of people from 'actual' concerns that existed, like the harsh and poverty-stricken childhood(s) of that period (p. 8).

Fig 2: Baby Shalini in *Ente Mammattukuttyammakku*. Copyright: Navodaya.

The decline in Gulf migrations in the late 1980s affected the investments in films and gave room for low-budget comic films, which became a popular genre among the Malayalee audience



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(Kumar, 2008, p. 17). Until this, comic roles were reprised by 'comedy' actors, while heroes always had roles that demanded a serious demeanor. But with films like *Boeing Boeing* (1985), *Ramji Rao Speaking* (1989), and *Godfather* (1991), this distinction was obliterated. Most of these films humorously showcased the educated, unemployed male characters who struggled to make their livelihood. Interestingly, no film was awarded the 'Best Children's Film' between the years 1985 and 1990, a possible impact of the economic crisis during this period. However, *Manu Uncle* received the National Award for the category of Best Children's Film in 1988.

The 1990s saw the rise of the child actor Baby Shamlee, who became a household name through *Malootty* (1990), *Pookkalam Varavayi* (1991), *Nirnayam* (1995), *Lalanam* (1996), and *Harikrishnans* (1998). The films in the 1990s and 2000s, *Paithrukam* (1993), *Druvam* (1993), *Devasuram* (1993), *The King* (1995), *Aaraam Thamburan* (1997), *Valyettan* (2000), *Narasimham* (2000), *Ravanaprabhu* (2001), and *Praja* (2001), followed the neo-feudal patriarchal narratives aligning with the 'super-hero' trope found in films in other Indian languages. Contrastingly, this period also witnessed the flourishing of comedy films (mostly slapstick comedies) due to their close association with mimicry (Vipin, 2008), with actors such as Mukesh, Dileep, Siddique, Indrans, Salim Kumar, Jagadeesh, Innocent, and Mamukkoya identified as indispensable for the success of any film (Rowena, 2002, p. 5). These films gave less space for child representations, and when they got screen space, they were assigned typified roles. The animated live-action film *O'Faby* (1993) and *Ayyappante Amma Neyyappam Chuttu* (2000) are the commendable children's films released during this period.

From the late 1990s till the mid-2000s, the Malayalam industry also witnessed the burgeoning of soft-porn films, which fizzled out by the end of the decade (Mini, 2017). The production of children's films decreased in the 2000s, and resultantly, between 2003 and 2006, no films received the state award in the 'Best Children's Film' category. *Ente Veedu*


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*Appuvinteyum* (2003), *Kazhcha* (2004), and *Karutha Pakshikal* (2006) are the few films from this period that showcase child characters in significant roles.

The recent new-gen Malayalam films sway from the conventional formula of family films; many directors venture into relevant themes, retreat from superstardom, wield complex characters, choose unconventional filmmaking techniques, harbor inclusivity, and follow realistic narrative styles. Films such as *Cocktail* (2010), *Salt N' Pepper* (2011), *Traffic* (2011), and *Chappa Kurishu* (2011) set the trend for this new-age cinema. This period is identified as a resurgence in Malayalam cinema, with filmmakers engaging in experimental films (Shafeeq and Kunhi 2022), motivated to exceed or challenge based on immediate concerns by means of deconstruction of gender identities, gender rights, redefining morality, exploration of metaphysical and psychological dimensions, ostracization of the subaltern, and functioning of hegemonic structures. Amidst this, child characters in *101 Chodyanghal* (2013), *Philips and the Monkey Pen* (2013), *Annmariya Kalippilanu* (2016), *Parava* (2017), *Thottappan* (2019), and *Moothon* (2019) draw significant attention.

Despite its regional origins, Malayalam cinema has achieved increasing transnational recognition and critical acclaim, demonstrating a rich and varied cinematic history marked by technological advancements and a compelling presence within both world and popular cinema contexts (Gopinath, 2022). The introduction of OTT platforms has widened the reach of Malayalam films, and due to the unique content quality, it is garnering a significant position among other Indian film industries. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic situation led to more innovative and technological experiments in filmmaking, as can be seen in *C U Soon* (2020), *Joji* (2021), *Aarkkariyam* (2021), *Santhoshathinte Onnam Rahasyam* (2021), and *Minnal Murali* (2021). But post COVID-19 pandemic, the theaters and large-scale screenings of films seem to

have lost a foothold while the audiences get to watch the films on OTT platforms. Also, many films that fail at the box office are difficult to market to prominent OTT platforms. While the majority of the earlier films adhered to non-adult content, prioritizing family audiences**,** the new-gen films have such content included in their plots. This further advocates the need for films in the present era that can engage exclusively with the child audience.

## The Tropes of Child Representations in Malayalam Films

Child as a deity/pious character**—** In most of the earlier Indian films, such as *Shree Krishna Janma* (1918), *Kaliya Mardan* (1919), etc., child characters were deified and exalted. The purity associated with divinity was paramount when a child was depicted as a god. The cathartic implication aimed for by these films was supplemented by the 'innocence' linked to childhood.

Although there was a strong presence of social realism and contemporary problems in Malayalam films, yet the trend established by the devotional films in other languages and the Parsi theatre productions did make an influence on Malayalam films too. While the first celluloid film in Malayalam was released in 1928, it took more than a decade for the release of the first Malayalam mythological film, *Prahlada* (1941). It was followed by films such as *Sabarimala Sree Ayyappan* (1961), *Kumara Sambhavam* (1969), *Jesus* (1973), and *Krishna Guruvayoorappa* (1984), where child actors played religious and mythological roles. In *My Dear Kuttichathan* (1984), the character of *Kuttichathan*, loosely based on the Malabari folklore that can be appeased by offering food, is an elfish demigod. This mythological representation aligns with the stereotypical notion of a child as someone who is mischievous but also innocent and one who cannot cause serious harm to others. This film uses the character of *Kuttichathan* for comic purposes and also to bring hope into the lives of other child characters in the film. *Yoddha* (1992), a film based on the Buddhist religion and its rituals, also adopts the theme of a mystical child, Rimpoche, who can also be naughty and innocent. This trend reappears in *Malikappuram*


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(2022), which uses an eight-year-old girl's devotion to the deity *Ayappan* that suggests a furthering of religious indoctrination among young children.

The burden of childhood— A trope that has been widely predominant in Malayalam films concerning the role of children is the use of childhood traumas to justify the disturbed or mentally unstable adulthood of the characters. Most films begin with a brief narration of a traumatic incident in the life of such characters (often before the title song), and later the plot takes a temporal leap to present the adult who struggles to come to terms with the trauma. This genre shows the struggles of a man and ignores the endurance of a woman who also gets sidelined in these stories as mere romantic interests of these 'hero-worship-worthy' men. Ghalian (2020) propounds that the approach of "representing the attainment of masculinity" through the "quick and abrupt transition to adulthood" is illustrated by "the figure of the frustrated and rebellious male" in the Hindi cinema of the 1970s (p. 147). This trend is also reflected in Malayalam cinema. *Spadikam* (1995), *Azhakiya Ravanam* (1996), *Thenkasipattanam* (2000), *Rajaminkyam* (2005), *and Pulimurugan* (2016) are some of the popular films in this genre. *Spadikam,* a popular film that attained a 'cult status' among the Malayalee audience, relies heavily on childhood scenes of the hero Aadu Thoma depicting the estranged relationship of the father and son to establish the relatable gangster image of the character. Films such as *Manathe Vellitheru* (1994), *Manichitrathazhu* (1993), *Anchaam Pathiraa* (2020), *Antakshari* (2022), and *Iratta* (2023) depict childhood trauma that paves the path for a psychological thriller where repressed memories resurface in the adult, controlling their actions perniciously. It is equally problematic and limiting to substitute the entire period of childhood with a mere song, often in the form of a lullaby, as can be seen in *Santhwanam* (1991), *Manathe Vellitheru* (1994), *Pingami* (1994), and *Usthaad* (1999).


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Child as a troublemaker—The binary of adult/child has shaped "boundaries with the intention of positioning children from a deficit perspective, as in the process of becoming (something of value), becoming adult, becoming more than child, rather being viewed as legitimate "humans" as a child" (Malone, Tesar, and Arndt, 2020, p. 30). So, childhood is considered to be a period where children are 'irrational', 'immature', and 'mischievous' as per adult standards. Films also reflect this ideation by caricaturing child characters, as shown in *Pappayude Swantham Appus* (1992), *Minnaram* (1994), *Olympian Anthony Adam* (1999), and *Keshu* (2008), where such scenes involving children as comic interludes in films add visual pleasure to the adult audience. Films generally show that alteration of this trait in a child is possible only through the intervention of an adult. In the Children's Film Society of India (CFSI) produced film *Keshu*, the titular character, Keshu, is a deaf-mute child with an artistic temperament, but yet he is a 'troublesome' boy. It is the influence of the Shalini teacher who comes to reside at Keshu's house that contributes to his positive transformation and subsequent acceptance (Brown, 2017, p. 73). Although a few films do attempt to draw a rationale for the child's behavior, the narrative still remains biased in favor of the adult sensibilities.

Child in horror and thriller films— Manifestations of 'child' in horror and thriller films and the use of child characters to intensify psychological tension in the audience is a popular technique in cinema. De Rijke (2018) says that "the child, once absent from the gothic genre (in the Western context), is now indispensable to it, as a kind of replacement figure for God" (p. 514). This pattern is seen more often in post-2000 Malayalam films, and the 'unchildlikeness' of these characters is intriguing and abnormal from the adult perception. This trend seems to be modelled on the Hollywood films that are obsessed with the 'possessed' child, as seen in *The Exorcist*, *The Omen* and *Conjuring-Universe*. Balanzategui (2018) states that the proliferation of


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supernatural horror films in the early 2000s, exhibited a clear cross-cultural dialogue, particularly in their depiction of temporal distortions and uncanny child figures to convey trauma (222).

The presence of a child around the archetypal image of the Yakshi is the hallmark of recent Malayalam horror films. Child characters in horror and thriller films accelerate the Gothic aspect of the story and intensify the thrill experienced in such films. The child is either 'possessed' or seems to be traumatized by the phantasm or the predator, as seen in *Vellinakshathram* (2004), *Kana Kanmani* (2009), *Oppam* (2016), *Adam Joan* (2017), *Forensic* (2020), *Nizhal* (2021), and *Bhoothakalam* (2022). These portrayals reinforce the 'child' as someone who is vulnerable, needs protection, and lacks persona and agency. From adult sensibilities, it is unthinkable that the child challenges or encounters the 'horrifying' without the intervention of an adult. Also, the representation of the child(ren)'s encounter with the 'horrifying entities' intensifies the impact on the audience, possibly because of the parental impulse to protect and nurture.

Visuals of violence against children also amplify emotional responses from the audience. The film *RDX* (2023) utilizes the child's presence when the goons attack the hero and his family at their home to heighten the scene's emotional intensity. In a two-shot scene, the visual juxtaposition of the child's vulnerability against the helpless father beaten down by the goons, amplifies the audience's sense of horror and outrage. The scene in *Marco* (2024) depicting the murder of a child, rendered in graphic detail, adds to the narrative's overall sense of brutality.

Child as an interlude— Using child characters for comic relief is also a pattern that functions to provide visual pleasure as it intensifies 'fun' in those circumstances, as shown in *Sreedharante Onnam Thirumurivu* (1987), *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* (1998), *Chronic Bachelor* (2003), *Chanthupottu* (2005), and *Minnal Murali* (2021). *Minnal Murali* is the Malayalee superhuman character quite like Superman or Flash, and the child character in this


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film, Josemon, performs the role of the 'sidekick companion' of the hero. However, Josemon's character is not limited to inducing humor; he is a voice of reason and guidance to his uncle, who harnessed superpowers following the hit by lightning. Nevertheless, Josemon extends the typified 'nerd image' in his appearance and mannerism.

Child characters are also used to tease people (or groups) who are exempted from mainstream society based on their physical appearance and disabilities, as showcased in *Uncle Bun* (1991), *Soorya Manasam* (1992), and *Karumadikkuttan* (2001). This promotes a toxic nature where children are tools to verbally extend the belligerent judgments of the adult audience, as often these disparaging comments are passed on to the children through adults, as in *Harikrishnans* (1998) and *T. D. Dasan, Std. VI B* (2010). Unlike most films, the key child characters in these films are able to comprehend that people can get misjudged by their appearances and adults can form wrong assumptions too.

Child as an emotional 'bait'— Child characters are sometimes used as a prop to serve a larger purpose of influencing the spectators' viewpoints in the visualization of the hero figure. The film aligns with the societal beliefs delineated by a majoritarian adult sensibility, and the child's individuality becomes visually insignificant. The child character can aid in showing the goodness, vulnerability, sacrificial, and avuncular nature of the protagonist and influence the spectatorial response in favor of adults, despite their minor inherent weaknesses. In such films, the child can be integral to the story but gives limited scope to be a participant in the story. In *Unnikale Oru Kadha Parayam* (1987), the actor Mohanlal performs the role of an orphan named Aby who adopts a few homeless children, and his relationship with the children mirrors the biblical analogy of the Good Shepherd and his flock. *Kuberan* (2002) and *Lucifer* (2019) also further a similar purpose. Similarly, the presence of child characters along with the female lead

in films directs the perception of 'child-like innocence' in them, as shown in *Aniyathipraavu* (1997), *Chandranudikkunna Dikkil* (1999), *Thenkasipattanam* (2000), and *Pattalam* (2003).

Child as victim/ innocent- The conceptualization of an 'innocent' child asserts that "children cannot be naturally evil" (Bushati, 2018, p. 35). In most films, adults approve of children because of their apparent 'innocence'. The 'innocent' child can be naive, bringing together broken families, transforming adults, and giving hope for a better future, even if the child itself is in a bleak and hopeless situation. In situations where the child deviates from this innocence, the child is othered and often abused/violated. Their innocence also makes them victims of social injustice, often saved by the sympathetic adult. *Ente Mamattukuttiyammakku* (1983), *Malootty* (1990), *Akashadoothu* (1993), *Lalanam* (1996), *Palunku* (2006), *Bhramaram* (2009), and *Malayankunju* (2022) are some of the films that portray this 'innocent and victimized' child. In *Lalanam*, the child Ammu is conceived through artificial insemination and is tortured for her 'unnatural' birth. Ammu is later rejected by her biological parents, alienated by her surrogate family, abhorred by her grandparents, forced to do household chores to compensate for her very existence, and kidnapped by goons (later saved by someone who is the only character who shows genuine affection to Ammu as he identifies her as his sister due to her uncanny resemblance to his dead sister), tossed by the many adults in her life, accidentally pushed down the stairs by her biological father, and reluctantly united with her biological parents in the resolution of the film. This pandemonium of random events where the child passively participates limits the development of her character, and hence the audience has no better alternative but to settle for the simplest explanation of an 'innocent and gullible' child. She quickly trusts the adults in her life and immediately forgets all her traumatic experiences. This film attempts to appeal to human sentiments through child character's mishaps that give cathartic


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pleasure to the adult spectators, and the child here is incapable of any individual thought, choice or characterization.

Rendering childhood(s) - Childhood is an acutely personal experience (Bartos, 2012), and it has many shades that regulate one's life. It is also an overtly political issue (Bartos, 2012), as each child has no equal access to resources, opportunities, and other provisions. When the child character's experience is represented only through a few identities in films, it compresses the possibility of an indexical representation through visual medium. In the Malayalam industry, *Onnu Muthal Poojyam Vare* (1986), *Abhayam* (1991), *Ente Veedu Appuvinteyum* (2003), *Kazhcha* (2004), *Manjadikuru* (2008), *101 Chodyangal* (2013), *Ottaal* (2014), *Kunju Daivam* (2018), *Moothon* (2019), *Pyali* (2022), and *Puzhu* (2022) are some of the films that attempt to engage with the theme of child and childhoods more profoundly. *Ente Veedu Appuvinteyum* portrays a child character, Vasudev, who does not stick to stereotypical tropes associated with childhood. This complexity of Vasu or Vasudev's character demonstrates that a child can possess both the capacity for malice and harm and the potential for goodness, challenging the typical portrayal of childhood innocence. *Moothon* is the story of a child's journey from Lakshadweep to Mumbai in search of the elder brother, and it discusses gender identity outside the heteronormative conceptualizations and explores homosexual relationships, gender fluidity, transgender identity, and masculinities and femininities. *Puzhu* delves deep into the suffocation experienced by children subjected to toxic parenting. Studies have proved that early toxic experiences can be a vulnerable factor for psychopathology (Lim and Barlas, 2019, p. 2). Although the child characters in these films contribute substantially to their narrative, these films also have been categorized as family films, and these stories are presented from an adult's perspective that primarily conceives the adult audience.

## Conclusion

This study indicates that children and childhood in Malayalam cinema are still underrepresented and are often shaped to suit the adult gaze, which is centered on patriarchy. Comparing the evolution of the Malayalam film industry with representations of child roles and child-based films through the decades aids in delving deeper into understanding this hegemonic adult gaze. The evolution of themes and advancement of techniques in filmmaking have had no significant impact on the caricaturing of child characters in Malayalam cinema. In fact, child characters that were usually predominant in mainstream films in the 1970s and 1980s are less represented in the new-gen cinema with few exceptions. The agency of the child is often ignored in these films, and 'they' are typified to serve the adult notions of childhood. Depictions of child characters in Malayalam films follow certain tropes (mis)associated with the idea of childhood, such as being vulnerable, innocent, naughty, or comical. Malayalam cinema has been rich and vibrant with experimenting with subjects, plots, characters, and themes in the context of films made for an adult audience. It has dared to discuss social and cultural taboos and used cinema as a platform to critique the political power establishments too. However, the desire to do so in case of child characters and content for children in Malayalam cinema is neither strong nor considered urgent.

Children must be regarded in their entirety as 'human beings' with agency in their social, political, civil, cultural, and economic dimensions. There is a need to represent multiplicities of childhood in cinema, which can result in mitigating the barriers in understanding the perspectives of child figures, expanding discourses, and reflecting critically on policies for children, as films can influence public disposition. While making content that is child-friendly, creators must sensibly and creatively respond to 'children's worldview' instead of 'adult(parent) sensibilities'



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and in doing so, efforts must be directed to ensure that the child characters are complex and not hackneyed or trite.

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Kailas, S. (1995). *The King.* MAK Productions.
Bhadran. (1995). *Spadikam*. Goodknight Films.
Kamal. (1996). *Azhakiya Ravanam.* Murali Films.
Chandrasekharan. (1996). *Lalanam.* Thandu Films.
Kailas, S. (1997). *Aaraam Thamburan.* Revathy Kalamandhir.
Fazil. (1997). *Aniyathipraavu*. Swargachitra.
Sreenivasan. (1998). *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala*. Carlton Films.
Fazil. (1998). *Harikrishnans*. Pranavam Arts International.
Jose, L. (1999). *Chandranudikkunna Dikkil*. Moon Star Creations.
Malayil, S. (1999). *Usthaad.* Country Talkies.
Bhadran. (1999). *Olympian Anthony Adam.* Pranavam Arts.
Mecartin, R. (2000). *Thenkasipattanam.* Lal Creations.
Kailas, S. (2000). *Valyettan.* Ambalakkara Films.
Mecartin, R. (2000). *Thenkasipattanam.* Lal Creations.
Paul, M. (2000). *Ayyappante Amma Neyyappam Chuttu.* Mathew Paul Production.
Kailas, S. (2000). *Narasimham.* Aashirvad Cinemas.
Ranjith. (2001). *Ravanaprabhu.* Aashirvad Cinemas.
Vinayan. (2001). *Karumadikkuttan.* Surabhi Cinema.
Joshiy. (2001). *Praja.* Mukyadhara.
Das, S. (2002). *Kuberan.* Revathy Kalamandhir.
Siddique. (2003). *Chronic Bachelor.* Ammu International.
Jose, L. (2003). *Pattalam*. Movie Temple.
Sibi Malayil, S. (2003). *Ente Veedu Appuvinteyum.* Prakash Movietone.
Blessy. (2004). *Kazhcha.* NX Visual Entertainment.

Vinayan. (2004). *Vellinakshathram.* Devipriya Creations.
Jose, L. (2005). *Chaanthupottu.* Lal Creations.
Rasheed, A. (2005). *Rajaminkyam.* Valiyaveettil Movie International.
Kamal. (2006). *Karutha Pakshikal.* GV Productions.
Blessy. (2006). *Palunku.* Dream Team Productions.
Menon, A. (2008). *Manjadikuru.* Little Films.
Blessy. (2009). *Bhramaram*. Yavonne Entertainment Company.
Sivan. (2009). *Keshu.* CFSI.
Akbar, A. (2009). *Kana Kanmani.* Ann Media.
Aravind, A. K. (2010). *Cocktail*. Galaxy Films.
Raghavan, M. (2010). *T. D Dasan, Std. VI B.* Chithranjali.
Mohanan, M. (2011). *Manikyakkallu.* Gouri Meenakshi Movies.
Abu, A. (2011). *Salt N' Pepper.* Lucsam Creations.
Pillai, R. (2011). *Traffic*. Magic Frames.
Thahir, S. (2011). *Chappa Kurishu.* Magic Frames.
Siva, S. (2013). *101 Chodyangal.* Seventh Paradise.
Thomas, R. & Muhammed, S. (2013). *Philips and the Monkey Pen.* Friday Film House.
Jayaraj. (2014). *Ottaal.* Director Cutz Film Company Ltd.
Vysakh. (2016). *Pulimurugan.* Mulakuppadam Films.
Priyadarshan. (2016). *Oppam.* Aashirvad Cinemas.
Thomas, M. M. (2016). *Annmariya Kalippilanu.* Goodwill Entertainments.
Shahir, S. (2017). *Parava.* Anwar Rasheed Entertainments and The Movie Club.
Abraham, J. V. (2017). *Adam Joan.* Jairaj Motion Pictures and B Cinemas.
Baby, J. (2018). *Kunju Daivam.* Ocean Pictures.
Mohandas, G. (2019). *Moothon.* JAR Pictures, Good Bad Films, and Mini Studio.
Bavakutty, S. K. (2019). *Thottappan*. Pattam Cinema Company.
Sukumaran, P. (2019). *Lucifer.* Aashirvad Cinemas.
Paul, A. & Khan, A. (2020). *Forensic.* Juvis Production.
Thomas, M. M. (2020). *Anchaam Pathiraa.* Ashiq Usman Productions and Manuel Movie Makers.
Narayanan, M. (2020). *C U Soon.* Fahadh Faasil & Friends.
Pothan, D. (2021). *Joji.* Bhavana Studios, Working Class Hero and Fahadh Faasil & Friends.
Varghese, S. J. (2021). *Aarkkariyam.* OPM Cinemas and Moonshot Entertainments.
Palathara, D. (2021). *Santhoshathinte Onnam Rahasyam*. Bee Cave Movies Pvt Ltd.
Bhattathiri, A. N. (2021). *Nizhal.* Anto Joseph Film Company.
Joseph, B. (2021). *Minnal Murali.* Weekend Blockbusters.

Sadasivan, R. (2022). *Bhoothakalam.* Plan T Films.
Das, V. (2022). *Antakshari.* Sultan Brothers Entertainment.
Babitha, & Rinn. (2022). *Pyali.* NF Varghese Pictures and Wayfarer Films.
Ratheena. (2022). *Puzhu.* Wayfarer Films and Cyn-Cyl Celluloid.
Prabhakar, S. (2022). *Malayankunju.* Fahadh Faasil & Friends.
Shankar, V.S. (2022). *Malikappuram*. Kavya Film Company and Aan Mega Media.
Hidayath, N. (2023). *RDX.* Weekend Blockbusters.
Krishnan, R. M. G. (2023). *Iratta*. Appu Pathu Pappu Production House.
Adeni, H. (2024). *Marco*. Cubes Entertainment and Unni Mukundan Films.