Postmodern Undercurrents in New Generation Malayalam Cinema: A Postmodern Reading of the Films of Lijo Jose Pellissery

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Introduction

Cinematic revolution is an integral feature of all film industries. Malayalam film industry has also witnessed sweeping transformations from its early years. The popularity of Malayalam cinema is ascribed to realistic storylines and compelling cinematography. Experimentations in narration techniques have also contributed to the rising standards of the industry. Themes extracted from everyday life and relevant social issues interwoven with elements from literature, drama, and politics defined the industry since time immemorial.

New generation cinema is a contemporary movement the industry underwent with the turn of a decade in the twenty-first century. Experimentations with unusual themes and new narrative techniques resulted in a revival of the industry in the early 2010s. The era marked a drastic shift from the conventional modes of film-making of the 2000s. Some of the directors accredited for upgrading the quality of Malayalam cinema on par with world cinema include Amal Neerad, Ashiq Abu, Rajeev Ravi, Anwar Rasheed, Dileesh Pothan, Rajesh Pillai, and Lijo Jose Pellissery.

The acceptance of postmodern tendencies is evident in New-wave cinema. Drawing inspiration from global cinema, the Malayalam film industry introduced an array of new trends. Fragmented storylines, multi-linear narrative style, absence of superstars, and the rise of metro-centric themes are the core features of new generation films. The screenplay is rooted in reality, and the leading characters are closer to life who resemble ordinary men and women. The cinematic language has become highly polyphonic, and
each character speaks from their cultural and social background. Hyper-reality and references to popular culture were largely welcomed by viewers. The blending of fact and fiction, temporal distortions, and rootless identities are the philosophical strategies applied to the new generation cinema.

The movies of Lijo Jose Pellissery are a celebration of the chaos in the postmodern world. Localization of a universal theme and narration of the story against the backdrop of a suburban culture render a signature style to his art of film making. The rawness of the plot and the uncanny movements of the camera characterize his unconventional approach to cinema. Breaking with the traditional styles of film-making, Pellissery blurs the distinction between art-house and mainstream cinema. With a perfect mix of dark humour, sense of gloom, and turbulence; his films are replete with allusions and tributes. Inclination towards genres like Crime thriller, Film noir, and Black comedy is evident in his films. An admirer of directors such as K.G. George, Padmarajan, Quentin Tarantino, and Francis Ford Coppola; Pellissery employs their unconventional narrative techniques in his cinema. The directorial ventures of Pellissery are Nayakan (2010), City of God (2011), Amen (2013), Double Barrel (2015), Angamaly Diaries (2017), Ea. Ma. Yau. (2018), and Jallikattu (2019). The award-winning director has received several honours on national and international levels. This article attempts to make a postmodern reading of his films against the comprehensive background of Indian cinema.

Postmodernist Cinema

The cinematic medium has been a reflection of social realities. The dissemination of postmodern ideas thus gave rise to the postmodernist cinema. As a rebellion against dominant expressions and movements, Postmodernism embraced the difference in culture and values of the society. Fredric Jameson (1997) has opined that important cinemas of the twentieth century are characteristically different where there is a visible fusion of multiple styles. In the words of Sibel Çelik Norman, “Postmodernism in film should be approached neither as a discourse, an aesthetic, a theory, a style or a
conceptual grid but as a genre” (Norman, 2011, p. 73). The central features of the postmodernist film are intertextuality, pastiche, parody; episodic, interrupted, or digressive narrative structure; a concern with hybrid identities; radical juxtapositions reflecting an unconcern with cinematic convention.

The films that appeared in the last quarter of the twentieth century are mostly postmodern in nature. The exploration of hybrid identity was a thematic concern commonly exhibited by such films. Desperately Seeking Susan (Seidelman, 1985), My Beautiful Laundrette (Frears, 1985), and Zelig (Allen, 1983) earned recognition for their depiction of multiple identities. Films such as Something Wild (Demme, 1986) and Blue Velvet (Lynch, 1986) were remarked for their nostalgic attitude towards the past. On the other hand, Blade Runner (Scott, 1982) was centered on an apocalyptic vision of the future. The juxtaposition of opposites giving rise to heterogeneity in style defined postmodernist films in stylistic aspects. While Star Wars (Lucas, 1977), Grease (Kleiser, 1978), and Pulp Fiction (Tarantino, 1994) made use of pastiche; Memento (Nolan, 2000) explored the dimensions of time and perception. The French Lieutenant’s Woman (Reisz, 1981) was noted for its uniqueness in narrative structure. A challenge to high arts and mass culture is another distinguishing feature of postmodernist films. Natural Born Killers (Stone, 1994) is one such film that blurred the distinction between crime and celebrity. It has also made use of objective violence. Prefabrication, bricolage, and self-reflexivity are some other narrative strategies viewers confront in postmodernist films.

Films that adopted any one of these features belong to this genre.

Although Norman (2011) discusses postmodernist film as a cinematic genre, critics have raised serious concerns about this categorization. More often than not, such films have employed a kind of subversion and intermingling of multiple generic characteristics of commercial films, accounting for the treatment of Postmodernism as a critical category rather than a commercial catchphrase. According to M. Keith Booker (2007), postmodernist cannons do not contain any element of “newness” in it. He also argues
that Postmodernism in US films goes way back to the sci-fi films of the 1950s. Nevertheless, Postmodernism in cinema played a pivotal role in breaking the codes of classical narratives by offering an interdisciplinary reading.

**Postmodern Analysis of the Films of Lijo Jose Pellissery**

**Nayakan**

Lijo Jose Pellissery marked his entry into Malayalam cinema with an unconventional revenge-drama, *Nayakan* in 2010. The film oft-quoted as a Black thriller, sketches the transformation of a docile Kathakali artiste, Varadanunni, into an underworld gangster. Despite its failure at the box-office, the film was recognized for its distinct narrative structure. A marked change from the conventional narrative strategy was the beginning of postmodernism in cinema. The story is unravelled through the five stages of Kathakali performance, offering a complicated watching experience to the spectator. A neo-perfectionist film, *Nayakan* is the first non-linear narrative in Malayalam cinema. The film is often considered a forerunner of the new generation Malayalam cinema.

A combination of genres like Crime thriller and Film noir, the film contains extensive references to Francis Ford Coppola’s crime film *The Godfather*. It has also utilized the concept of twin-villains, a strategy experimented with many a time in Hollywood. The violence depicted in the film is highly intense and long, probably an attempt to recapture the ideology of cathartic violence usually depicted in postmodernist films. Surrealism is another postmodern tool, incorporated by the director to represent the narrative of the magician-villains; Shankardas and Ramdas. The mystery surrounding the villains pervades throughout the film with the emphasized use of dark frames and pessimistic background music. Another postmodern character in the movie is Vincent Karanavar, an underworld kingpin who is often remarked as a gangster spoof by critics. With the blending of magic, mystery, and Kathakali against the backdrop of Cochin underworld, Pellissery collapses the difference between high culture and mass culture. The parallel representation of high culture and mass culture offers an eclectic point of
view to the audience, which allows them to discuss both the concepts within the patchwork mechanism. In the words of the Turkish film scholar, Berceste Gülçin Özdemir, "Postmodern cinema, which can melt popular culture and high culture elements in the same film narrative, increases the curiosity of the spectator and at the same time exposes the spectator to the questioning narrative language of the contemporary narrative structure" (Özdemir, 2019, p. 250).

City of God

Pellissery pays immense attention to his characters and their idiosyncrasies. By introducing a range of unknown characters, he unfolds the film through their stories. This is evident in his next venture City of God (2011). The Crime-Action drama revolves around the life of some random characters settled in the suburbs of Cochin. The film moves forward with multiple plots in a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards using various angles to offer different perspectives of the characters. Temporal distortion, an integral feature of postmodernist films, has been effectively applied in the film. City of God is the first Malayalam film to use the hyperlink narrative format, a technique first used by Satyajit Ray in Kanchenjunga (1962).

As in Pulp Fiction, the film begins at the end and keeps recycling the crime scene clichés throughout the plot. Opening with a road accident, the narrative progresses in an abrupt fashion tracing the lives of three families associated with the accident. Instead of focusing on a central character, the film offers multiple narratives through a bunch of characters to portray the tale of a growing city. In the article Postmodernism and Cinema, Özdemir claims that in the postmodernist film "the focus of the stories became more individualized, the characters became more diversified, the straight line of the plot became inclined, camera angles were presented as angles used by contemporary narrative conventions" (Özdemir, 2019, p. 250).

Of the many narratives delineated in the film, first is the story of a migrant-labourer couple, Swarnavel and Marathakam. The director has skillfully crafted the endless
struggles faced by couples with hybrid identities in a postmodern society. The next story is about a henchman Jyotilal, and his boss, Sony who pursues Suryaprabha, an upcoming actress. The last story deals with an NRI businesswoman, Vijipunnoose who seeks to avenge the murder of her husband. While the former narrative represents a developing city packed with people ranging from labourers to business tycoons, the later narratives expose the darker side of the city that is reeling under land mafia and drug business. The excessive use of sexuality, violence, and drugs rightly places the film in the postmodern context.

The film explores how the characters exposed to popular culture lose the essence of their everyday life in a postmodern society. The conversations about Tamil cinema, the frequent crooning of Tamil songs by the migrant-labourers are intertextual references to contemporary cinema culture. The depiction of a film within a film, where Suryaprabha dons the role of Marathakam in the climax is a perfect example of meta-narrative. Thus, Pellissery usurps the conventions of mainstream cinema through a change in narrative strategies.

**Amen**

*Amen* released in 2013 is a rustic musical film by Lijo Jose Pellissery. According to Pellissery, the film is a fantasy narrative revolving around a utopian world. The film, a combination of diverse genres like Satire, Romance, Musical and Black comedy is set against the backdrop of Kumarankari, a Syrian-Christian village. As far as Fredric Jameson is concerned, in postmodern cinema "the styles of different authors and different times are amalgamated as colourful and historic examples of pastiche" (Jameson, 1991, p. 47).

The multilayered plot focuses on the love story of Solomon, a timid clarinet player, and Shoshanna, a headstrong daughter of a wealthy contractor. The film also traces the transformation of a diffident protagonist into a flamboyant clarinet player. The revival of the Church band and the unethical practices of the Church-vicar are other subplots
discussed in the narrative. Set in an ancient time where the villagers are garbed in olden fashion, the film can be treated as a romantic ode to the ancient Christian culture. A retro narrative, evoking nostalgic emotions, was a postmodern tool experimented by Pellissery. Although the time is not specified, the lifestyle of the village folks, their blind faith in religion, and a lush green backdrop render an archaic mood to the film. The postmodernist film, according to Hasan Gürkan (2012), dissolves the borders between past and present. Thus, the desire to abandon the constraints of temporal, stylistic, and historical continuity validates the postmodern quality of Amen.

The unconventional camera techniques, incorporating numerous wide-angle shots, zooming in and zooming out of the camera, and a fair share of aerial shots have profoundly woven a fantasy narrative. The employment of surrealism and absurdism hints at the Latin making-style of the director. Magical realism that lends a superior quality to the film is an unprecedented style used in Malayalam cinema. The young pastor, Vincent Vattoli who turns out to be the Saint in the end was an unanticipated twist. The film, studded with numerous symbolic references, dark comedy, and dreamy sequences bear testimony to the surrealist comic touch of the plot.

The identity crisis of the protagonist, subversion of gender stereotypes, songs parodying pop-culture, intertextual references to Christian band music, use of slapstick comedies and montage also reveal the postmodern contour of the film. Amen was highly praised for its brilliant cinematography and music.

Double Barrel

Double Barrel (2015), a Gangster comedy written and directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery, is styled like a spaghetti western movie. The film is considered the first Gangster spoof in Indian cinema (Balasubramanian, 2018). A genre-bender, the film failed to garner the
attention of the audience. It depicts the maniacal chase for a pair of precious stones, Laila and Majnu, each worthless without the other. Heavily parodying the Hollywood gangster flicks, the movie advances with a series of crisscrossed narratives about gangsters, dealers, and schemers. Double Barrel is acclaimed as a pastiche of comic stories.

Vincy and Pancho are two fraudsters who meet with many goons and run into fights in their pursuit of diamonds. The hallucinatory tale of Laila, Majnu, and Diesel wandering around, is another track that is running parallel. There is Simon, a sniper who is always engaged in the shooting business. And, a postmodern couple who repeatedly end up in the middle of violence. A multi-linear narrative fraught with exotic backgrounds, absurd conversations, exaggerated actions, obsessive laughter, and brutality the film renders a retro feel of Hollywood of the 1970s.

Double Barrel is almost a mixture of Satire, Film Noir, and Comedy. Intensive use of fights and gun explosion mirrors the postmodern characteristic of the movie. The explicit portrayal of ultra-violence in the postmodernist film is labelled by Paul Gormley (2005) as "the new brutality film". The realistic mode of narration is dropped in favour of a seemingly nonsensical plot. Humour in the backdrop of violence is a postmodern technique that has been mastered by Pellissery.

The use of Cuban cigars, dapper suits, bright-coloured outfits, sexy cars, and killing machines offers intertextual references to Hollywood cult movies like Pulp Fiction and Fight Club. Heterogeneity of style and allusion, casual approach towards violence and drug abuse, and an episodic narrative style validate the freedom from cinematic convention. Double Barrel is assumed to be a comedy modelled in the Guy Ritchie or Tarantino-esque type of films. Nevertheless, the film was criticized for its insane content despite its technical brilliance and excellent cinematography.

Angamali Diaries
Angamali Diaries (2017), the most popular film of Pellissery is a milestone in the Indian film industry, for its cast of 86 debutants and a much acclaimed 11-minute single shot in the climax. The film demonstrates the story of a small town, Angamali in Ernakulam, and the life of the people living on the outskirts of the town. The film has been celebrated for its raw treatment of characters, heterogeneous music, and magnificent cinematography.

The movie delineates the story of Vincent Pepe, an energetic young man; and his gang of unruly friends who venture into the pork business. As the narrative progresses, gang wars, fights, and explosions erupt as they lock horns with the rival business gang. The unending aggression in the movie is filled with jet-black humour and disturbing music. The juxtaposition of the comic and the catastrophic is a typical feature of postmodernist films. Songs in the film, a stylistic mixture of rustic local music and brass band are examples of cultural pastiche.

Pellissery often weaves his narratives out of the culture, language, and food of people around him. Localization of the theme is an integral feature of his films. Angamali Diaries subverts the hitherto conventions of Malayalam cinema by giving an extra-ordinary treatment to a very ordinary narrative. The film underscores the essence of postmodern culture characterized by valuing activities, events, and perspectives that focus the particular over the global and the fragment over the whole.

The postmodern elements in the film include the circular narrative structure, plot replete with graphic violence, pop-cultural references, dark humour, and wild choreography. Cinematic self-references are also used in the film, thus validating the spectators' knowingness of precedent films. As far as R. Philips (1996), the author of 'Genre, Star and Auteur: An Approach to Hollywood Cinema' is concerned, the complicity between filmmaker and spectator is the hallmark of the postmodernist film. The film also marks a break from the superstar system that has been the predominant feature in Malayalam cinema since its inception.

Pellissery was elevated to the status of the master of orchestrated chaos with the release of *Ea. Ma. Yau.* in 2018. Lijo Jose Pellissery won the Best Director Award at the 48th Kerala State Film Awards for *Ea. Ma. Yau.* The film also won the Best Director and Best Actor awards at the 49th International film festival of India. A dark comedy based on a funeral premise, the movie is embedded with a slew of metaphoric images, montage sequences, Christian archetypes, and motifs. The localization of the universal theme of death has placed *Ea. Ma. Yau.* on par with world cinema.

Set against the backdrop of Chellanam, a village in Ernakulam, the film recounts the death of Vavachan Mesthiri and the efforts of his son Eeshi to organize a grand funeral as had been promised to his father. The unanticipated event generates intense tension in the family. A string of absurd events, fights, and suspicions take forward the tale of ordinary people. The postmodern significance of the movie is its link with real life and the presentation of the modern world with realistic fiction. All the characters in the film are unrefined human beings who live a real life. The employment of single shots has effectively portrayed the rawness of human emotions and the idiosyncrasies in human character in its true sense.

Pellissery's inclination to dabble in dark humour when dealing with faith is evident in the film. The drastic weather transformations in the background are the reflections of chaotic human life. The conversation between two card-players shown on the sea-shore is a metaphoric reference to the absurdity of human existence. Various collage sequences in the film also signify the pervasive presence of death. The colour-grading and sound effects also complement the mood of the film. Loaded with allusions and tributes, the director provokes the spectators to reflect on the ultimate meaning of life. Reflection, in postmodern terms, the reverberation of real-life events in the communication content is a core feature of *Ea. Ma. Yau.*

_Jallikattu_
Jallikattu (2019) is a visually crafted adventurous thriller that established Lijo Jose Pellissery as a non-conformist in Malayalam film industry. Pellissery received the Best Director Trophy for the film at the 50th International Film Festival of India. Jallikattu was premiered at the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival, BFI London Film Festival, as well as Busan International Film Festival. The screenplay is an adaptation of "Maoist", a short story by S. Harish. It also evokes a strong resemblance to William Golding's Lord of the Flies.

The film narrates the story of a buffalo that wreaks havoc in a hilly village as it runs amok from a slaughterhouse. Capturing the anxiety of the situation, as the entire village chases the buffalo; Pellissery traces the elements of the crude masculinity in humankind. The title Jallikattu refers to a controversial sport in Tamil Nadu, in which a bull is challenged by a man to exhibit his physical prowess and masculine spirit. In the film, the director blurs the distinction between humans and animals by exposing the animalistic nature of man, which is more grotesque than an animal. A cultural critique of the current socio-political situation, the film is an allegory for the devolution of humankind over the ages.

While the main plot unravels male bestiality of the human species, the sub-plots in the film discuss themes ranging from rivalry over women, lust, and domestic violence. The film is posited as a reflection of the postmodern state of the world. By emphasizing the hoard mentality of mankind through the hysterical art piece, the director underscores the absurdity of the postmodern society. Toxic behaviour, greed, and gross violence have become an inherent part of the present time where humans give in to their primitive urges. The film outlines the concept of postmodernism, described as the loss of traditional values and the stability of society.

Jallikattu marks a break with the dominant meanings and expressions of the mainstream films through the effective use of single-shots, traditional folk songs, rustic music, anxious grunts and snorts of man, and the rhythm of human breath. The montage in the
opening sequence that shows people waking up to an unprecedented reality and the ticking of the clock in the background are other factors that contribute to the sense of paranoia in the film. According to Pellissery, the film has only two characters, the buffalo and the crowd representing the victim and the hunter respectively. Thus buffalo is interpreted as a victim of machismo that we inherited as a postmodern society.

The invaluable contributions of Lijo Jose Pellissery have changed the face of Malayalam cinema. Pellissery established his name as an auteur in the film industry with his irresistible visual styles and unconventional narrative strategies. Localized to the nooks and corners of Kerala, his films are a reflection of the lower middle-class settlement. According to Pellissery, the more local the story, the more international it is (Balasubramanian 2018). He is also interested in excavating the innateness of his characters. The extensive use of the 'wide-angle' range of the lens is to show the absurdity and distortion of his characters and stories. Most of his characters are people with hybrid identities seeking the purpose of their lives. His stories focus more on society rather than an individual hero. Characters are framed in a way that that they look into the camera as if addressing the viewers. He also uses a God's eye point of view to emphasize the 'big world, small man' concept. Intricate frame designing with a defined colour palette, another significant feature in his films is a new practice in Malayalam cinema. With an assortment of symbolic images, intertextual references, massive violence, and dark humour, his films portray an impeccable image of a postmodern society.

**Conclusion**

As far as the former director of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) John Sankaramangalam is concerned, 'New Generation cinema' is not a global terminology and one that is used in Kerala alone (Balasubramanian 2018). However, the current trend of Malayalam films which is increasingly shaped by unprecedented experiments cannot be overlooked. This has brought the director back to the center-stage of cinema.
Unlike the films of the 2000s that revolved around the popularity of leading actors, the current wave in the film industry is more like a romantic ode to the golden age of Malayalam cinema. Besides the increasing presence of unknown actors and new directors, the postmodern industry developed a whole new way of looking at cinema. Although the new trend is criticized for extracting themes and approaches from Hollywood, they adhered to the realities of Malayali life. The heightened emphasis on the Malayali consciousness is an inevitable factor that defined the movies post-2010. The New wave films also questioned the moral standards and unacceptable norms that had a dehumanizing effect on society. Moreover, films turned out to be a tool to tell the tale of places, instead of resolving the conflicts in the life of a single character. The depiction of women in central roles is also a prominent feature of the film industry. Culturally influencing the masses, postmodernist films thus challenged the thought process of the people.

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