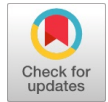


The Influence of Lacanian Jouissance on K. G. George Movies

Nayana Thankachan



Abstract: This paper explores the influence of Lacanian jouissance on the films of K. G. George, a pivotal figure in shaping the narrative and style of Malayalam cinema between 1974 and 1998, who passed away on September 24, 2023. George's career as a filmmaker paralleled significant changes in society and politics, and his films delved into the intricacies of the human mind in the face of shifting social contexts. The examination of Lacanian jouissance in K. G. George's films shed light on the complex interactions that shape the psychological landscapes of the characters via lack, desire, and social constraints. This is made possible through the qualitative content analysis of a purposively sampled set of K. G. George movies that include *Yavanika* (1982), *Adaminte Variyellu* (1983), *Irakal* (1985), *Mattoral* (1988), and *Ee Kanni Koodi* (1990). These films serve as representations that allow spectators to confront their unconscious desires and the constraints imposed on them by social conventions, such as gender norms. The study of these films also encourages a contemplative examination of the human condition by engaging with the complexities of desire, societal expectations and shifting human relationships. Applying Lacanian Jouissance to the study of K. G. George movies focus on individual psychology with broader social commentaries, offering a nuanced perspective on the interplay between human consciousness and societal structures. As a director hailed for using psychology and psychoanalytic concepts in his films, it is essential to theoretically situate the observed influence of Lacanian Jouissance on his work.

Keyword: K.G. George, Malayalam Cinema, Jouissance, Psycho-social.

I. INTRODUCTION

K.G. George was a prominent figure in marking a significant shift in the Malayalam Film Industry's storytelling and filmmaking techniques. Between 1974 and 1998, he was actively involved in both scripting and direction. His career as a director began with *Swapnadanam* (1976), his directorial debut, and it ended with *Elavamkodu Desam* (1998). This period of two decades coincided with major societal shifts brought about by the hippie movement, the Vietnam War, existentialism in the 1970s, the Emergency of India (1975-1977), and the economic liberalisation, globalisation, and commoditization of the 1990s. C. S. Venkiteswaran observes that in hindsight, the ripples of these socio-political conditions can be observed in George's Movies (Venkiteswaran, 2023 [1]).

Similarly, in the documentary film *8½ Intercuts: Life and Films of K.G. George*, directed by Lijin Jose, M. G. Radhakrishnan observes how the psychology of violence in the post-emergency period is portrayed in George's films, such as *Irakal* (1985). George imagines a wealthy and privileged family that generates immense violence towards each other in the family and their employees (Jose, 2017, 52:08 [2]). George says that he aimed to plant the idea of the violence during the Emergency, into a family of power, referring to the family of Indira Gandhi (Jose, 2017, 52:42 [2]). George's initial foray into the film industry involved screenwriting for Ramu Kariat's 1974 film *Nellu*. His vision was clear from the start: to challenge the prevailing formulaic storytelling style that dominated Malayalam cinema at the time. These formulaic films were categorised by exaggerated and theatrical acting, interruptive song and dance sequences, multi-plot narratives, and vibrant sets.

When George's films first appeared, they broke new ground while still earning a profit at the box office. His marital psychodrama, *Swapnadanam* (1976), was a box office blockbuster, even without any song and dance sequences or overly dramatic sets and performances. K.G. George's versatility as a filmmaker was evident in his exploration of various genres, including psychodrama, psychological thrillers, satire, crime drama, and the detective genre. His deep interest in human psychology served as a driving force behind his storytelling. He was closely associated with Prof. Eledath Mohamed, a popular clinical psychologist from Kerala and one of the founding members of the Indian Association of Clinical Psychologists (IACP). He wrote the story for George's *Swapnadanam*, which later won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Malayalam. *Swapnadanam* was also the first movie reviewed by the magazine 'Psycho,' the only psychology magazine in Kerala, started by Chelavoor Venu and was famous in Kerala during the time (Jose, 2017 [2]). K. G. George also made history as the director of the first Malayalam campus movie, *Ulkkadal* (1978), which featured Jalaja and Venu Nagavally. He used to 'search actors for characters and not make characters for actors,' recalls Jalaja. His choices and methods helped save Malayalam cinema from further commercialization of the time (Madhavan, 2021[3]). Venu, who worked with George as assistant cameraman for *Panchavadi Palam* (1984) and as cinematographer for *Irakal* and *Kathaykku Pinnil* (1987), recalls George's firm grasp of the structural and technical aspects of filmmaking and its clever utilisation to make masterworks. George promoted method acting and used more shots with lesser duration. Subsequently, he would integrate the novel concept that surfaced from the actors' reactions throughout the rehearsal process.

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Timing was a crucial element in George's filmmaking process, and he always aimed to create a rhythmic synchrony between dialogues and actions. His contributions to Malayalam cinema transcended conventional filmmaking standards, opening the door for a more complex and creative style of storytelling that left an enduring impression. Venu also recalls how K.G. George was keen about symbolic representations through objects, props and images in his films (Venu, 2023 [4]). Many of George's shots were metaphorical and symbolic, generating new meanings and profound psychological implications. The paper employs Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic framework, particularly the concept of jouissance, to analyse K. G. George's films. Lacanian jouissance offers a unique perspective on understanding the characters' psychological complexities and the subjects' societal constraints.

II. LACANIAN JOUISSANCE: SUBJECT AS INTERSECTION OF DESIRE AND LACK

Jacques Lacan uses his popular metaphor of the 'mirror' as a reminder of 'what it is to exist.' It is the metaphor of the mirror that marks the point where we split ourselves as a subject, into an outside other, encountering the 'ideal ego.' Like the baby who is seduced by the self-alienated specular of itself in the mirror, Lacan argues that the spectator tends to be unconsciously fascinated by the visual, in terms of 'desire' and 'pleasure.' Lacan's idea of the Gaze is not unidirectional. The spectator gazes at the image, and the image gazes back at the spectator. This act of mirroring challenges the very notion of subjectivity, for there is a transition of the ego-centric subject into the realm of the 'symbolic', which includes signifiers of society and social norms. Two points are to be noted: first, that the subject is inserting a sense of self through the imaginary. Second, the 'symbolic' is crucial in this process of meaning making (Fuery & Fuery, 2003 [5]).

The 'symbolic' could as well be antithetical to meaning making and understanding of the self. The visual is capable of threatening or inducing shock by reminding the spectator of the incapability or fragility that looms over them. It might draw them into an abyss of insecurities, self-questioning, and existential crises. It ruptures the illusoriness of pleasure and security of their world and leads them to fascination with an undertaking beyond the limits of their world. Lacanian jouissance is a concept that describes the experience of intense pleasure or enjoyment that exceeds the boundaries of what is 'normal' and/or 'useful.' Lacan uses the concept to describe strong types of delight or sexual pleasure. Put another way, Lacan defines jouissance as a form of excess or surplus that transcends reason or usefulness and may have both beneficial as well as detrimental effects on an individual's well-being (Lacan, Miller & Fink, 1999 [6]). Lacan employs jouissance to locate the self as an effect of 'unconscious desire' stretched between conflicts of ethics, morality, and social order. Jouissance doesn't relate to the reflection in the mirror placed opposite. Instead, it facilitates an 'upward gaze' from the spectator (Fuery & Fuery, 2003 [5]).

Just as in the Baroque, where angels and saints gaze at the spectator from the top of the domes, the images that encompass jouissance gaze at the spectator from desirable heights. It reminds the spectator of how they choose to remain

on the ground, within the mediocrity, acting on the ground and not being able to 'fly.' They are reminded that their pleasure can be defined only by succumbing to societal order, thus not breaking up with the peace of mind and harmony. Even though there might be mediocre acts of opposition and non-observance, one might not experience the 'surplus enjoyment' of transgression as in Jouissance, for here, pleasure is pain.

Lacanian Jouissance becomes the major theoretical framework for this paper, which undertakes the study of characters in selected K. G. George movies.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sahapedia's special module, released on September 7, 2017, features articles by Geetha G, C. S. Venkiteswaran, Ajay S. Shekhar, and Rasmi Binoy, offering retrospectives on the life and work of K. G. George. Geetha G [6] delves into George's filmography, while C. S. Venkiteswaran [7] explores the moral void within his movies. Ajay S. Shekhar [8] delves into the socio-cultural facets of George's filmic narratives, and Rasmi Binoy [9] analyses gendered spaces in Post-Emergency Kerala through the cinematic lens of K. G. George. This paper aligns with Rasmi Binoy's exploration, asserting that George's movies serve as a mirror reflecting the clash between socio-cultural dynamics and individual experiences. However, the analysis extends beyond Rasmi Binoy's focus on women characters, delving into both male and female perspectives through the lens of jouissance, highlighting extremely transgressive acts of pleasure observed in George's films. While Rasmi Binoy concentrates on the portrayal of women beyond hazy and mysterious glasses, addressing their struggles and the 'male' question in George's movies, this paper widens the scope to encompass both genders, providing a nuanced examination of jouissance and transgressive pleasures within George's cinematic narratives.

The articles by Dr Ajay S. Shekhar [8] and C. S. Venkiteswaran [7] are also featured in the 2023 book titled *Swapnadakanaaya Genius*, edited by Rajesh K. Erumely [10]. This compilation also includes chapters contributed by G. P. Ramachandran, Vijayakrishnan, M.C. Rajanarayanan, and C. B. Mohandas, covering diverse aspects of filmmaking by K. G. George. It includes George's focus on art and life, his portrayal of the human mind, the absence of morality and social ethics in his works, the dynamics of power and family, the intricacies of neurosis, the symbolism of the curtain within the silver screen world of Yavanaika and the exploration of the unconscious through dreams.

Dr T. Tasleema, who holds a Ph.D. in the visual and sound symbolism of K.G. George's movies in narration and meaning-making, has authored an article for *Aidem* magazine, which also discusses dream sequences in K.G. George's films. The article, titled *Abodhathinte Thirakkazhchakal*, explores the craftsmanship, visualization, and implications of these dream sequences, shedding light on the intricate interplay between dreams and reality within George's cinematic narratives [11].



Smitha E. K.'s Ph.D. thesis, titled 'History of Malayalam Cinema from 1975 to 1991 with Special Reference to K. G. George,' submitted at Madurai Kamaraj University delves into the historical trajectory of Malayalam cinema during the period from 1975 to 1991 with a specific focus on George's impact, innovations, and influence on Malayalam cinema within the mentioned timeframe [12].

In the Nana film magazine, Balachandra Menon's "*Oru Nishabdha Samvidhayakante Kroora Pareekshanam*" scrutinises K.G. George's "*Swapnaadanam*" (1976) as an unconventional form of filmmaking, devoid of a structured narrative, songs, and glamour. Menon further elaborates on how *Swapnaadanam* represents a novel approach to filmmaking, discussing its impact on the audience and positioning it as a distinctive cinematic experience [13].

Although indebted to all the above-mentioned works, the article is novel in its analysis of K. G. George's movies, employing Lacanian Psychoanalysis with a special focus on the concept of 'jouissance.'

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How do the male protagonists in *Yavanika* (1982), *Irakal* (1985) and *Mattoral* (1988) navigate societal expectations and pursue power, as analysed through the psychoanalytic lens of jouissance?
- 2) How is feminine jouissance portrayed in *Mattoral* (1988), *Adaminte Variyellu* (1983), and *Ee Kanni Koodi* (1990), and what multifaceted experiences do the female protagonists undergo in response to societal norms and patriarchal expectation?

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section examines the nuanced portrayal of gender dynamics in K. G. George's movies, focusing on the films *Yavanika* (1982), *Adaminte Variyellu* (1983), *Irakal* (1985), *Mattoral* (1988), and *Ee Kanni Koodi* (1990). George's exploration of male jouissance in *Yavanika*, *Irakal*, and *Mattoral* unveils the deep-seated patriarchal anxieties and toxic masculinity impacting the protagonists, as they grapple with societal expectations and the pursuit of phallic power. The psychoanalytic lens, particularly the Lacanian concept of jouissance, provides insight into the complexities of the male characters and their tumultuous interactions within family, work, education, and society. Shifting our focus to feminine jouissance, *Mattoral* (1988), *Adaminte Variyellu* (1983) and *Ee Kanni Koodi* (1990) illuminate the multifaceted experiences of women in George's narratives. Susheela's bold act of elopement in *Mattoral* challenges traditional norms, while the women in *Adaminte Variyellu* exhibit hysteria as a form of jouissance and emancipation from oppressive societal structures. *Ee Kanni Koodi* (1990) further exemplifies George's exploration of assertive women, depicting Kumudam's journey from love to betrayal and her exercise of agency. This section delves into the implications of George's cinematic narratives, analysing the socio-cultural context and the enduring relevance of his exploration of gender complexities. Through this examination, we uncover the director's profound insights into human relationships, challenge societal norms, and explore the timeless impact of psychoanalytic perspectives on gender dynamics within the film industry.

A. The Phallic Pain

K. G. George's *Irakal* (1985) portrays the deep patriarchal anxieties of an irritated young man striving for phallic power in an educational institution, a family, and a marriage - social institutions dominated by fixed gender roles. Baby (Ganesh Kumar), who already exhibits irritability, murder instincts, hallucinations and insomnia, results of being part of a toxic family that is violent, is deeply provoked by people and incidents that question his poisonous masculinity. Baby finds pleasure in the forbidden, which he expresses to his friend Raghavan (Ashokan), while coming out, rejecting the village prostitute Rohini. He says that he doesn't find offerings pleasurable. He likes them to be forcefully gained. The baby also develops a sense of rivalry towards his sister, Annie (Sree Vidya), who can gain forbidden pleasures.

Annie is portrayed as a woman who drinks, gets sexual gratification outside marriage, and hangs out with other 'loose' women. However, she manages to live a happy life due to the privilege of being born into a wealthy family and her exceptional skills in deception, which are bemoaned by her heartbroken husband (Nedumudi Venu). Baby, on the other hand, being the youngest in the family, is never considered man enough compared to his elder brothers. He is not allowed to be present around or question Annie, who is ten years his senior. Despite being a woman, Annie's age will enable her to shun and shoo Baby away. Baby also tries to molest Nirmala (Radha), his ex-lover, who is about to get married to someone else. However, Baby fails in the attempt, which leads him to the prostitute and later turns her down himself.

In the light of psychoanalytic theory, Lacan asserts that to violate and to assault is an innate masculine trait. It belongs to the phallic jouissance that defines men. However, it is being regulated by the forces of social penance. He discusses the role of 'castration' in this context, determining male-female gender differences in society. Castration is presented as a symbolic operation that is necessary for the positioning of subjects within the realm of desire and sexual relationships. Lacan argues that the experience of castration is central to the formation of subjectivity, particularly the formation of gender identity. Regarding the feminine, he asserts that in society, women are positioned as 'not-whole' or 'pas-tout' concerning phallic jouissance, which means that a woman's sexual organ has no intrinsic value in and of itself, but only about a man's phallic function. In other words, women are defined by their lack of a phallus, which is seen as a necessary symbol of desire and having an intrinsic value in a patriarchal society (Lacan, Miller & Fink, 1999, p. 7,35 [14]). Annie's sexual freedom triggers Baby to the level that he kills her paramour, Unnunni (Mohan Jose). Later in the movie, Baby ends up killing Nirmala's fiancé and is exposed while trying to kill Raghavan, who decides to marry Nirmala after her ex-fiancé's death. As C. S. Venkiteswaran observes, K. G. George's narratives emphasise 'obsession' over the male protagonist's existential misery, failure in leadership, and the violence within him.

George never portrayed individuals in his purest interiority, adventure, or tragedy. George's narrative world also includes the psychological, social, and economic institutions that surround them. They are inextricably linked with matter and reason. They were reminded of how often the family, the community, the work environment, the attitudes, and reactions of the people within them were anti-love, unkind, and violent (Venkiteswaran, 2023 [1]). In *Mattoral* (1988), directed and co-scripted by George, we see that Kaimal (Karamana Janardhanan Nair) is a well-respected man due to his tenacity and uncompromising behaviour in the family, at work, and in his interpersonal relationships. Tension builds up when Susheela (Seema), his wife, doesn't pick up his call, while he calls her up in front of his friend Balan (Mammooty) and social acquaintance Mahesh (Murali). Kaimal, who doesn't send his wife to work, doesn't involve her in the family's finance management or doesn't give her access to the letters from friends and family, thinks that everything should be passed down to her only through him. We see a confused Kaimal when Susheela initiates asking Balan and his wife Veni (Urvashi) to stay over at their place. For Kaimal, Susheela is an asset that adds to his social status and capital, to whom he has assigned definite roles. When we learn that Susheela has eloped with Giri, we see an overwhelmed Kaimal who starts calling himself an inept man, not capable of keeping his wife. Finally, Kaimal takes revenge on a heartbroken Susheela (as Giri mistreats her) by asking her to return, where she witnesses Kaimal's dead body. In *Yavanika* (1982), the protagonist Ayyappan is also the antagonist. The film revolves around the mysterious disappearance of Ayyappan, the tablaist of a famous drama troupe run by Vakkachan (Thilakan). Through the stories shared by different characters in the film, Ayyappan is portrayed as a man of entitlement, possessiveness, aggression, and disregard for others. Ayyappan's authority over Rohini (Jalaja) and her ornaments indicates his sense of entitlement to exercise authority and upholds gender norms. References to Ayyappan's three wives in three different cities expose a pattern of debauchery and exploitation, emphasising his toxic masculinity traits. He also tries to molest one of the female actors in the drama troupe, which leads to a confrontation between Ayyappan and other male artists in the troupe. Ayyappan's son, Vishnu, is portrayed as a young man with deep-seated paternal issues, thus becoming a potential reprisal for Ayyappan. Every other character in the movie is depicted as having a grudge against Ayyappan because of his harmful attitudes associated with traditional masculinity. These films provide a critical exploration of male jouissance, unravelling the complexities of patriarchal anxieties, toxic masculinity, and societal expectations. The nuanced portrayal of male characters, shaped by Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts, invites reflection on the consequences of gender norms and the intersections between individual psychology and societal structures. At the same time, K.G. George also celebrates feminine jouissance in his movies.

B. Feminine Jouissance:

Feminine jouissance is characterised by a distinct relationship to the phallus and the dynamic between men and women in terms of their sexual relationship. Lacan argues

that women are defined by a position of 'not-all' concerning phallic jouissance, meaning that women experience a different type of pleasure that is not reducible to the pleasure experienced by men through their phallic function. Women's jouissance is tied more to her own body and the Other and is not limited to the sexual act itself. Lacan further explores these concepts, examining the limits and possibilities of feminine jouissance as it unfolds about language, fantasy, and the unconscious (Lacan, Miller & Fink, 1999, pp. 73-77, 103 [14]). The Lacanian concept of feminine jouissance is evident in many of the celebrated female protagonists in K. G. George's movies. Director B. Unnikrishnan, for example, observes that George's female protagonists, mainly those portrayed in *Adaminte Variyellu* (1983), explodes into a sort of insanity (Jose, 2017, 41:17 [2]).

Mattoral (1988) revolves around Susheela, who, on a fine day, disappears from home, deserting her children and husband to begin a new life with Giri (Ebin), a car mechanic who occasionally repairs their car. Susheela doesn't seem to be haunted or moved by guilt, sympathy, compassion, or attachment in the act. She is sure about her decision. Society and social status aren't her concern anymore. Susheela's act appears puzzling and bizarre to all the other characters in the film. Different characters in the film, including her neighbours, housemaid, friends, and family, interpret the act differently. The film suggests that Veni somehow understands Susheela. Veni is a woman of a modern outlook who works in an advertising company. Her company's name, 'Alpha and Omega,' is interestingly placed throughout the film. Alpha and Omega are two personality types that have their origins in popular culture and social mythology rather than psychological theories. The concepts refer to dominant and assertive individuals, typically those in elite status (alpha), and less dominant and introverted individuals, often from non-elite backgrounds (omega). Veni is portrayed as having access to both types of men, which include Balan, Mahesh, and Kaimal, among many others. Her interaction with these men helps her gain a better understanding of patriarchal society and how to navigate it. She also understands Susheela's urge to escape them.

Susheela's urge is above the logic of the 'pleasure principle,' or even 'desire.' It is an act of transgression bordered on sexual rupture, which Helene Cixous (1976) would call 'limitless explosion' [15]. However, it is more than just sexual gratification and extends to other emotions like consideration, care, respect, and affiliation, which she doesn't get from Giri either.

Adaminte Variyellu (Adam's Rib, 1983), the name that recalls the Christian mythology of Eve (women) being created from the ribs of Adam (men), is a declaration of the societal concept of women being the 'not-whole,' that Lacan had been addressing. *Adaminte Variyellu* portrays three women who act hysterically towards the end of their plight in the movie. Freudian *hysteria* (earlier defined as a mental illness of emotional excess, affecting only women; later attributed to men) is jouissance perverted by patriarchy. It is a ruptural state representing emancipation from oppressive linearities.



Vasanthi (Suhasini) goes mad from the drudgery in her husband's home and behaves as if her father-in-law's ghost possesses her. Sitting on her dead father-in-law's armchair, she orders her mother-in-law to cook dinner and run a hot bath for her. When a worried mother-in-law calls for her son, who arrives drunk, Vasanthi commands him to quit loafing. Alice (Sri Vidya), who isn't satisfied in her marriage, finds solace in alcohol and extra marital affairs. She commits suicide when she is refused a divorce. Ammini (Soorya), a brutally exploited housemaid who ends up in a rehabilitation home, decides not to stay in the suffocating place. She runs out of the place along with all the inhabitants. If jouissance could be illustrated in one shot, it couldn't be better than the climax shot of *Adaminte Variyellu*, where we see an ever-increasing number of women hysterically running towards their limitlessness, smashing into the camera and the audience.

By the time *Ee Kanni Koodi* (1990) was released, educated and employed women had become a norm; however, they were often portrayed as self-effacing and docile mothers and wives within 'Ideal families.' It was also a period during which feminism and feminist movements faced significant backlash worldwide. Movies like *Pidakkozhi Koovunna Noottandu* (1994), *Amma Ammayiyamma* (1998), and *Njangal Santhustaraanu* (1999) are fine examples of how assertive and non-docile women were demonised in Malayalam cinema of the 1990s. Kumudam/Susan (Ashwini) in *Ee Kanni Koodi* is depicted as a brilliant and confident woman with an artistic bent of mind, who leaves her family for love. Later, betrayal and life struggles trigger new insights in her, and she treats her body as a mere resource to earn money. The film revolves around the mysterious death of Kumudam, the most expensive sex worker in the city, and the Circle Inspector who investigates the case. *Rappadikalude Gatha* (1978) portrays a young woman finding happiness in drugs and music. In these films, feminine jouissance is masterfully portrayed as a complex and multifaceted experience for the female protagonists. The narratives unfold as the female characters respond to societal norms, illustrating how they challenge the rigid expectations placed upon them. The cinematic exploration delves into the nuances of their journeys, capturing moments of liberation, rebellion, and self-discovery. Through these portrayals, the films offer a compelling reflection on the intricate interplay between individual agency and the pervasive influence of patriarchal structures.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the above discussed films, K. G. George navigates the realms of male and female jouissance, unravelling the intricate dynamics of gender norms, patriarchal anxieties, toxic masculinity, societal expectations, female self-discovery, and transgression. The above films also shock the viewers about the orgasmic pleasure of the forbidden. These films expose the taboo and often suppressed desires that individuals harbour to form and belong in a society. The characters in these films are driven by their desires and usually find themselves in transgressive situations. Lacan observes that excessive pleasures require a sense of transgression to operate. Thus, the characters in these films remind the spectators of the social order that constantly

monitors their unconscious desires. Employing jouissance in the study of K. G. George films helps expose how we are always destined to be subjects of unfulfilled desire, due to the 'lack' imposed on us by society. Lacan's concept of 'lack' is a key element in understanding the human condition. As socialised subjects, individuals are moulded by societal norms and expectations, which impose limitations and create a sense of insufficiency. The films illustrate how the characters' unfulfilled desires are often a result of this imposed 'lack.' Thus, these films demand an upward gaze towards the characters. The close observation of these films enables a self-analysis of the ethics and ethical behaviour of the spectator over which s/he has little agency. Elements of Jouissance allow the audience to experience the pleasure of knowing that other factors manipulate their agency and is necessary in the formation of society.

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