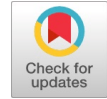


# The Influence of Lacanian Jouissance on K. G. George Movies

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 stylistic of Malayalam cinema between 1974 and 1998, who passed away on 24th of September 2023. George's career as a filmmaker paralleled important changes in society and politics, and his films explored the intricacies of the human mind in the face of shifting social scenarios. 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 are representations that allow the spectators to confront their own unconscious desires and the constraints placed 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 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 movies, it is important to theoretically place observed influence of Lacanian Jouissance on his movies.

**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 scripting as well as 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 and existentialism in the 1970s, the Emergency of India 1975-1977 and the economic liberalisation, globalisation, 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 highly rich and privileged family that generates immense violence towards each other in the family and their employees (Jose, 2017, 52:08 [2]). George says that his aim was to plant the idea of the violence during 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 right from then – to challenge the prevailing formulaic storytelling style that dominated Malayalam cinema then. 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 patterns while still making money 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 such as psychodrama, psychological thrillers, satire, crime drama and 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 one and 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) featuring 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 strong 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 and opened the door for a more complex and creative style of storytelling, leaving 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 deep psychological implications. The paper employs Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic framework, particularly the concept of jouissance, to analyse K. G. George's films. Lacanian jouissance provides a unique perspective to understand 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 '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 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 in between conflicts of ethics, morality, and social order. Jouissance doesn't relate to the reflection on the mirror placed opposite. Instead, it facilitates an 'upward gaze' from the spectator (Fuery & Fuery, 2003 [5]).

Just like how, in the Baroque, the 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. In fact, it reminds the spectator as to how he/she

chooses to remain in the ground, within the mediocrity acting on 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 of this paper that undertakes the study of the 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 insanely 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 Yavanika and the exploration of the unconscious through dreams.

Dr T. Tasleema, who holds a Ph.D. in the visual and sound symbolics of K.G. George's movies in narration and meaning making, has authored an article for *Aidem* magazine, which also discusses about 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* scrutinizes 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 these above-mentioned works, the article is purely novel in its analysis of K. G. George movies, through the Lacanian Psychoanalysis with 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 explores the nuanced portrayal of gender dynamics in K. G. George 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 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 unravel the director's profound insights into human relationships, challenging societal norms, and the timeless impact of psychoanalytic perspectives on gender dynamics within the realm of cinema.

#### 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 in nature, is deeply provoked by people and incidents that question his toxic 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. 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 in a rich family and her exceptional skills in lying, which is bawled at by her heartbroken husband (Nedumudi Venu). Baby on the other hand, being the youngest in the family, is never considered man enough as his elder brothers. He is not allowed to be present around or question Annie who ten years is older than him. Despite being a woman, Annie's age allows 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 penance acting in society. 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' with respect to phallic jouissance, which means that a woman's sexual organ has no intrinsic value in and of itself, but only in relation to 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 Unnuni (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 emphasised 'obsession' over the male protagonist's existential misery, failure over his leadership, and the violence within him.



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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 for his tenacity and uncompromising behaviour in the family, in his workplace and 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 up 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 of 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 confrontation between other Ayyappan and other male artists in the troupe. Ayyappan's son Vishnu is portrayed as a young man with deep paternal issues, thus becoming a potential reprisal to Ayyappan. In fact, every other character in the movie is portrayed 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 defined by a unique relationship to the phallus and the sexual relationship between men and women. Lacan argues that women are defined by a position

of 'not-all' with respect to 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 to 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 in relation to language, fantasy, and the unconscious (Lacan, Miller & Fink, 1999, p.73-77,103 [14]). The Lacanian concept of feminine jouissance is visible in most of the celebrated female protagonists in K. G. George 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 used to repair their car occasionally. 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. This act of Susheela 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 hints that Veni does somehow understand Susheela. Veni is a woman of modern outlook, who works in an advertising company. Her company's name board, 'Alpha and Omega' is interestingly placed throughout the film. Alpha and Omega are two personality types, which have their origin in popular culture and social mythology rather than psychological theories. The concepts refer to dominant and assertive individuals, usually elite in status (alpha) and less dominant and introverted individuals, usually belonging to a non-elite background (omega). Veni is portrayed as having access to both types of men which includes Balan, Mahesh and Kaimal among many others. Her interaction with these men helps her have a better understanding of the patriarchal society and how to navigate in it. She also understands Susheela's urge to escape them. Susheela's urge is above the logic of '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 she is possessed by her father-in-law's ghost. 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 refused 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, but were portrayed as self-effacing and docile mothers and wives within 'Ideal families.' It was also the period during which feminism and feminist movements were facing huge backlashes across the globe. Movies like *Pidakkozhi Koovunna Noottandu* (1994), *Amma Ammayiyamma* (1998), and *Njangal Santhushtaraanu* (1999) are fine examples of how assertive and non-docile women were demonised in Malayalam cinema of 1990s. Kumudam/Susan (Ashwini) in *Ee Kanni Koodi* is depicted as a highly intelligent, confident woman with an artistic bent of mind, who leaves 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 their responses to societal norms, illustrating how the female characters 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 often find themselves in transgressive situations. Lacan observes that excessive pleasures need a sense of transgression in-order to operate. Thus, the characters in these films, remind the spectators about the social order that keeps a constant

check on their unconscious desires. Employing Jouissance in in the study of K. G. George films helps in exposing how we are always destined to be subjects of unfulfilled desire, because of 'lack' imposed on us, by the 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 allows the audience to experience the pleasure of the knowledge that their agency is manipulated by other factors and its necessity in the formation of society.

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