

Swapnatanam: Malayalam Cinema's Early Attempts with the Idea of Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

Malayalam cinema, which claims to be one of the major contributors to the Indian art cinema, has initiated various innovative trends. This is especially true regarding the time period identified as early middlebrow cinema. Directors like P N Menon, KG George, Bharathan and Padmarajan whom cine enthusiasts generally refer to as the pioneers of middlebrow cinema have made efforts to induce global trends into Malayalam cinema. They address not merely the question of new genres, but narrative patterns and content as well. Questions on content and form are the traditionally inquired zones in any art form. The binary of arguing cinema as an art and material of content and form have put many inquiries in an undermining status. The attempts made on cinema are not purely on the content if such a specificity is claimed anywhere. The nature and environment from where the thread of the cinema is nurtured also has a significant claim in related debates. This study searches the pattern of the cinema Swapnatanam (Dream Walk) directed by K G George in the year 1976, in Black and White. The debut film of K G George has some particularities within the content and its extended bond towards the social from which it draws much input. The study inquires this connect between the prevalent environment and the capacity to hold the global vision of the newly identified theme of Psychoanalysis of the period. The environment outside the realm of traditional content platform of cinema is the concern of this inquiry. The director, the story and script writers and the emergence of the literary radicalism are the major concerns of this study. It also tries to post this attempt of making such a film as one of the early gestures showing an affinity towards embracing the theme of Psychoanalysis in Malayalam cinema, though if strictly defined may lack its scope as a psychoanalytic film. But the study engages Swapnatanam as a cinema that contributed to the genesis of psychoanalysis in Malayalam cinema. The inquiry is an attempt to indicate the traces of psychoanalysis in the cinema and no claims and questions are leveraged up on the merits of this tendency.

Keywords : *Swapnatanam, Psychoanalysis, Malayalam Cinema, Social*

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Introduction

Questions of content and form are the traditionally inquired zones in any art form. Cinema as an artform has a wide canvas in which content is an important concern. This content is often understood as the story and its narrative lines. Once the debate over form is initiated, generally the technical and technological sophistication come to the scene. This general assumption also has exceptions. The binary of arguing cinema as an art and material of content and form have put many other inquiries in an undermining status. The attempt to study cinema is not often based on the content even if such a specificity is claimed. The nature and environment from where the thread of the cinema is nurtured also have a significant claim in related debates. The inspiration or the inception has several choices and options. Only some among them are usually chosen or collectively articulated. They may be generally referred to as political, social, cultural, philosophical etc, if stratified for the ease of understanding. But, beyond these broad and singular categorization, different realms of plural reading possibilities co-exist in cinema as in any other art form. This indeed provides the scope to place cinema beyond the usual art-commercial categorization. The middlebrow cinema, other than the literal meaning it propagates, has implications on the selection of themes and treatment of the content. Invariably it focuses on the success of cinema as a product, appealing itself to deal with issues of popular themes. Thus popularized subjects became the content but it consciously broke the routine paths of commercial successes. This selection is done from the choices and often not connected with the investigations on content. The study focuses on this area of selection and treatment of the content in *Swapnadanam*, the debut of the director K G George, in Black and White. Many earlier cinemas in Malayalam also have shown similar concerns. But what marks the uniqueness of *Swapnadanam* is the crew who had a strong background in the respective areas the film embarked upon. Many of them were strongly grounded in their art work as well as in their professional engagements with psychology.

Debates on progressiveness and art's commitments

Malayalam cinema which has shown interests towards psychological and emotive matters as its content from the early 60's of the last century, has produced cinemas like *Bhargavi Nilayam* (1964), *Iruttinte Athmavu* (1966),

Yakshi (1968), Punarjanmam (1972) etc. But the major thrust of these cinemas were enquiries outside the individual psyche and rather focused on aloofness, loneliness and isolation. The focus was also much on the social stigma. How these characters were set onto the traditional social fabric of psychological trauma was the central theme of the content. The treatment of this content seemingly has faced a problem as the art forms of the period were not really bothered about dealing the issues with a proper medical or scientific engagement. The stereotypical shades of such portrayals and narratives in the related art forms also might have influenced this traditionality. Early cinemas also showed an enthusiasm to create a sense of thriller genre during the period rather than concentrating the main theme on psychological issues. Very often these cinemas involved a narrative pattern of enquiry focussing on the individuals whom the cinema and society find as cause of these issues. The reason, as one may search for it, may be somewhat abstract or may be absent in the narrative. This issue may have arisen due to the urge to have a specificity in terms of storytelling as Malayalam fiction was also moulded as if to address the reasons beyond the imagination of conceiving fiction as a sole track. Also it would be interesting to note that the paradigm of modernity had not hitherto influenced the pattern of content treatment in many of the art forms. The debates on art initiated by the progressive art and literature groups in Kerala during the same time-period might also have influenced the method of art forms including cinema. Marxist theoretician and leader from Kerala K. Damodaran in his writings describes it as a movement formed to satisfy certain social commitments. The organisation was called Jeeval Sahithya Sangham when it was formed in 1937 and later renamed as progressive literary movement in 1942. There were many edicts by the organisation that were discussed widely and which unfolded controversial debates in the cultural public sphere of Kerala. This is a movement by writers who deliberately write for social progress (Damodaran 2009-2020). K. Damodaran further expands the responsibility of this movement by explaining that the organisation is formed with an objective to fulfil some social requirements and to accomplish certain new cultural responsibilities. They severely criticized the romantic movement and called on to model socialist realism. The conservative writers according to the movement were who possess and promote despondency, mysticism, helplessness of humankind, deterioration, sexual anarchism, contempt to the cultural values, disbelief in good and belief in the evils, high regard to the war and massacres, hostility to ideals. (Damodaran 2009-2020). Thus, it tried to publish the idea, art

is for art's sake by fixing certain standards for a work of art and created an unrest in the socio-political spectrum of Kerala.

The cinema *Swapnatanam* is a cynosure, in its point of departure, if revisited in the backdrop of this proclamation. *Swapnatanam* created a pathbreaking treatment on the theme of soundness of human mind. Unlike the many similar contemporary cinema tropes this cinema opened up a new discussion floor. It focussed on the introspection of personal mental trauma with a new approach to the Malayalam cinema. Therefore the theme of Psychoanalysis had not directly set foot into the narrative lines of Malayalam cinema as seen in *Swapnatanam*. This climacteric shift may find sapless if we dissect content, but would prove otherwise if the social segments of its conception are considered.

Individual pin in the social settlement

The first democratic election mandate in the state of Kerala in 1957, in favour of the Communist Party, strongly claimed progressive stands in the making of the new state. This might also have influenced and directed the art forms of the region to find a social reason or imagination for the art works produced within the state. This logic of propaganda has been strongly backing up the initiatives in theatre movements like Kerala Peoples Arts Club, KPAC as well as literary groups like Purogamana Kala Sahithya Sangham (Progressive Arts and Literature Society) in Kerala widely during the period. KPAC's history as briefed in the kpackerala.com describes the early years as "*The new cultural humanism in Kerala began to take shape in the early decades of 20th century. The renaissance in the socio-political scenario paved the way for a new and progressive approach in the cultural arena also. The tradition of entertainment which revolved round the aristocratic tastes was forced to highlight the plight of the sidelined and the neglected. It infused new blood to transform the keralite spirit and concept of art. The impetus for the new culture was strengthened by the literary works of eminent poets and playwrights*".

One could see the social concerns behind the art forms which have won the awards in the national as well as in the state especially in the field of cinema. Cinemas, which had their perturbs towards the social, often trying to suggest ways to resolve them were also a customary practice. The easy matrix of cause and effect was seen quite evidently in such cinema plots. Though attempts were made parallel to the stream of this ideological fumble, the central theme remained to continue as social reason. Social reasons that probe the intricacies

with an individual pin is the shift that was visible later in the 70's. This is important for many reasons. Firstly, it tried to figure out the complexity of the human mind and found issues in the terrain of tangibility to the social by individuals. Also, the fictitious narration had to coalesce with the rational scientific explanation as a reason to the "defined cause". The intention to explain the reason with a fictitious vigour couldn't match the narrative orthodoxy of the past. This shift has to be further examined in detail beyond the limits of a single cinema during the inception period of modernity. The study also has no further claims in this regard as the scope of further investigations may describe it with variant capacities.

New cinematization method

The cinema *Swapnatanam* released in 1976, had censorship certification of (A), adult watch. A certificate is generally given to the cinemas if the content has strong violence, explicit and strong sexual scenes, abusive language etc. The cinematograph Act of 1952 and censor board of film certification also insists on the same. Besides the fact that the cinema has some intimate scenes (not nude or sex scenes in its real sense, one may argue) for two minutes, the certification suggests something else present in the cinema. The viewing standards and interpretations surely matter in such cases. But this is stated as to pose the argument that the normal way of cinematization has been kept off. The sensitivity may not be towards the issues of the body; but what the cinema is doing to the mind. This is also a serious shift that showcases the deviation. The overall setting of this treatment is beyond the control of normal assessment which might have mattered in this cinema. The extent to which this sensitivity is extended beyond the language, cinematic metaphors and visual pattern and the different way of cinematizing with this new sense of theme, is the matter of discussion. This level of treatment, 'innovative cinematization' if named, might have drawn energy from the production crew and their association with the theme. If the crew was not thematically bonded this cinema would not have turned away from the routine methods of cinematization.

Psychoanalysis as Means of a Narrative – Discussion

Swapnatanam, the debut of the director K G George had a resourceful team within the production as well as a setting outside. The crew included Pamman, (real name R P Parameswaran) as one of the script writers. The story was by Psycho Muhammad (real name Prof. E. Muhammad) and K G George, the

director. They often had this tint for analysing mind in their artistic and professional life. Pamman, a popular novelist in Malayalam, had a wide range of literary works that showcased a poignant treatment of the human mind. He had overtly dealt with issues of the body, sex and lust with psychic metres in the mainstream, unusual in the public during the period. It is pertinent to understand that Pamman was chosen for co-scripting the story with the director K G George. The argument that their treatment of the content beyond the level of fiction and cinematic language is ascertained by the works they had performed before and after the cinema *Swapnatanam*. Pamman's most celebrated work titled *Bhraanthu* (1980) has a theme of lust and recognition. In her urge to accomplish both the central female character, Ammukutty, turns insane. Other than the parameters involved in the popular novels of the time, *Bhraanthu* proposes the involvement of mind and psychological engagements as the reason that requires a clinical solution; a rare occurrence as it surpasses the fictitious boundary of mere illusions and fantasies. The novel was released only in the year 1980, four years after the cinema *Swapnatanam* was released. But during the process of its production, Pamman was deliberately chosen for the co-scripting as some of his works like *Chattakkari*(1974) and *Adimakal* (1969) had been commercial successes. The underpinnings of Pamman's storylines always inquired about the mysterious espousal of human minds.

The story was written by Prof. E. Muhammad, popularly known as Psycho Muhammad. He was one of the founding members and former president of the association of clinical psychologists in India. He took his Psychology graduation (Honors) in 1958 from the Madras Presidency College. He was the student of the first batch of BA Honors Psychology from the college. Later he joined National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences, Bangalore (NIMHANS) in 1959 for DM and SP diploma programme. In an interview with Dr. Rajan Chunkath published by Mathrubhumi in June 2013, he had observed that out of the twelve students he was the only one from Kerala and most of them had completed MBBS. Psychology and Psychiatry classes were engaged together during those days. He successfully completed the programme and joined the same institution as an assistant research officer. Later he joined the army as a clinical psychologist in 1963, at the Pune command hospital. Film and Television Institute of India was established in 1960. It was during this period that he met many filmmakers. The producer of the cinema, T Muhammad Bapu was a close friend of E Muhammad. Prof E Muhammad recalls that during the period he began writing Psychological articles in the weekly Chandrika. Later with the support of the editor V M Korath he started writing a column on

Psychological matters “Alpam Manasastram” (Briefly on Psychology) in Mathrubhumi. As he started his career in NIMHANS, he realised the importance of attending the layman queries regularly in a popular magazine, and thus began the column ask the psychologist. He disclaims the claim that he had initiated the column and instead gives credit to Dr. V. K. Alexander, who used to write in Manorama. Prof. E. Muhammad once received a letter from a forty-eight year old woman from Coimbatore asking his advice. She was seeking help to find a solution to her fifty year old husband’s suspicion and trust issues regarding her. But before his reply was published, he came to know that the husband murdered her and committed suicide. This real life incident may have had the capacity to trigger him as a writer. Muhammed had said that the way in which the thread to the story “Palayanam” (“Retreat”), later became the story draft of the cinema *Swapnatanam*, was also coincidental. He had to attend the case of a man found unconscious from Egmore, Chennai who couldn’t recall his past. Once they did narco analysis some of his life stories got unveiled. The man who had gone to Thiruvananthapuram Chala market in a scooter later reached Egmore in a condition where he was blank and lost. When his friend, producer T Muhammad Bapu urgently needed a story for his cinema, Prof Muhammad decided to make a script out of this story and suggested Pamman to the director and producer.

Prof Muhammad, an ardent admirer of Sigmund Freud and left leaning, was fond of Russia. Being a Government servant he had some concerns in engaging his thoughts as a Psychologist and writer. Hence, he wrote under the Russian pseudonym PsychoV. Later it was the editor of Mathrubhumi weekly who changed it to ‘Psycho’ as he was writing continuously on Psychological problems. The title card of the cinema *Swapnatanam* also credits the story to Psycho instead of his real name.

K G George, a self-declared passionate lover of the cinemas of Federico Fellini, the Italian film maker, inadvertently hints on the themes of his cinema. Fellini’s cinemas like *8^{1/2}*, *I Vitelloni*, *Juliet of the Spirits* and *Amarcord* later had readings stating the influence of Psychoanalysis. Fellini’s works were also categorised as showing nuances of the famous discourses of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. *Swapnatanam* being his debut, George has thematically favoured this taste. The title of the cinema was changed to *Swapnatanam* (Dream walk) from *Palayanam (Retreat)* by Uroob, (real name P C Kuttikrishnan) famous Malayalam novelist. K G George’s experiments with this

theme of Psychoanalysis didn't end with Swapnatanam. He continued this long journey with cinemas of Psycho genre with mildly dilated themes.

The social setting, during the period had also shown similar gentle shifts. One could remember that in 1960 the cinema, *Psycho* directed by Alfred Hitchcock was released. Cinema has no claims as it is under the thematic genre of Psycho; and finds its place under the banner horror/thriller. But beyond the level of crime or murder, cinema enquires the possibility of the reason connected with human mind. As argued earlier, this relocation of cinema on the reasons as justification of an act are seen as a point of departure from the traditional treatment. *Psycho*, raging the temperament in the title itself is a global imagination in cinema that happened during the period. Much to add to the argument, Kerala also witnessed the launch of special interest magazines which were exclusively marked with psychological contents. The magazine in Malayalam, *Psycho* started from Kozhikode in 1969. The editor Chelavoor Venu claims it to be the second of its kind following *Psychology Today*, an American magazine published in 1967. The content of the magazine was supported from clinical psychologists and academicians. As this paper argues, the pure fictitious art works learned and demanded the support from the experts of the field. The editorial advisory board consisted of Dr. S., Santha Kumar, MBBS, MRCP, FRCP, DPM, Dr. T.O. Abraham MBBS, DPM, Dr. A K Rajan, MBBS, Dr P M Mathew MADM & SP together with Ettumanoor Hariharan MA. (DPM means Diploma in Psychological Medicine, MADM means maintenance antidepressant medication in its contemporary usages). The new era writers of Malayalam literature like Paul Zakharia also contributed in *Psycho*. One of the surprising coincidences is that the editor of the new trendy magazine *Psycho* himself became the founder of a Film Society movement in Malabar region of Kerala in 1969 by establishing the film society Aswini.

Presence of an invisible Freud

The characters in the cinema *Swapnatanam*, in its simple observation itself reveals that, even if the social is punched as a layer of storytelling, each character tries to tell a different story. So, the narrative pattern or the treatment of the content itself has multilayers of understanding the social, withering the long-established social stigma from the pivotal spot. This can not be counted as a mere fortuity as this scattering of the social to the individual mind as separate entities possessing a region of social within its separate individual patches have been finely argued by Sigmund Freud.

In the work *History of Psychoanalysis*, Freud argues that the subjective experiences, regression and repression are the ideas where Psychoanalysis has roughly mounted its base. This subjective experience which has its units deeply invested in the personal memory often comes in conflict with the social anxieties. In case if the analysis to find the cause fails to attend this personal memory of the individual and laid out on the mock executions of the social, the attempt to extend the plot may not get an exit. The haphazard social anxieties of the period were confusing in the real-world projections as well as in the imaginations of art works.

As proposed by Freud, unconscious memories, thoughts, and urges of individuals constitute personal memory. He says that the psyche comprises three aspects: the id, ego, and superego. The id is entirely unconscious, while the ego operates in the conscious mind. The superego operates both unconsciously and consciously. So, the operative tools may assume a position not to fix a specific spot of cause or solution which is tangible in the social. Thus, a presupposition, not to conclude the reasons with social anxieties alone may be one of the aspects for this transition phase to psychoanalysis in cinema. Once this new imagination emerged, cinema witnessed a drastic shift in the treatment of the content. Content and the treatment came into equal possessions. The storyline that has been presented earlier showing straight answers to social disquiet were revisited with an alternative. This alternative narrative obviously focussed the individual and the personal woes more. Being personal didn't ignore the social stanchion. This is evident if one dissects the works of the period. In the absolute stringent method of psychoanalysis, the design and the narrative may disapprove this imagination scientifically in the art works including cinema. But the study is only an attempt to plot the shift as is evident from the many circumstances in and around the period of production of the cinema *Swapnatanam*. Also, there were many initiatives globally many attempted this new stream of imagination in art forms including cinemas, *Secrets of a Soul* (1926), *Now, Voyager* (1942), *Spellbound* (1945) *Captive Wild Woman* (1943) and *Shock* (1945) in the earlier period after Freud's *The History of Psychoanalytic Movement* in 1914.

The study is only a rock bottom attempt to delineate the shift that happened in the history of Malayalam cinema. The social settings outside the realm of cinema and how it correlated this outer existence is the prime concern of this inquiry. The concepts of Psychoanalysis as discussed in this work is an attempt to tie in as a base study, if at all it can be called as a pilot study. More rigorous efforts are to be engaged to sufficiently articulate the bends and loops of this

trajectory. Prudent processing of the data and diligent field work may help the study to theorise and comprehensively assess the climatization process of the period.

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