

Existentialism Transcending Boundaries: A Comparative Study of ‘Kaliyattam’ ‘Vanaprastham’

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Abstract

This research paper examines the idea of existentialism in Indian films, particularly in the films *Kaliyattam* directed by Jayaraj and *Vanaprastham* directed by Shaji N Karun. Through a comparative approach, it delves deep into how concepts like alienation, absurdity, liberty, and quest of meaning are reflected in characters and the stories of these notable Malayalam movies. Through an analysis of thematic similarity, characterisation, symbols and narrative structure, this paper aims to understand on how Indian cinema grapples with philosophical questions and general cultural representations of the society. This study explores social themes in Indian cinema thereby also seeking to understand the cultural and contextual context. The paper also tries to understand the power of cinema as a medium for exploring the depths of human psyche. The aim of this paper is to examine how existentialism in Indian cinema contributes to a better understanding of contemporary society.

Keywords: Existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard, Indian Cinema, Kaliyattam, Vanaprastham

Introduction

Every book has an adaptation. They work together, giving life to storytelling as each form has something unique to offer. In an interview with Diablo’s senior editor Pete Crooks, Khaled Hosseini said, “Literature and film have a way of lifting you from your own existence and transporting you to some foreign place and putting you in the shoes with an experience different than your own.”. This illustrates how powerful escapism can be; it also shows us that movies or novels are capable of taking us somewhere else entirely! One becomes raw material for another – plot lines come from books while characters find their birth on screen; themes are shared between them both but shown visually through cinematography more effectively than any other medium could achieve.

Kaliyattam and *Vanaprastham* are two Indian movies which can be understood through the lens of existentialism as defined by Søren Kierkegaard. Directed by Jayaraj and Shaji N. Karun respectively, these films deal with various ideas about who we are in relation to others (identity), our true selves (authenticity) or what society expects from us (social pressures) thus showing different facets of being human such like identity crisis, self-realisation etc.

With the use of Othello, a Shakespeare classic as its base for comparing jealousy and consequences of unbridled passion, *Kaliyattam* talks about a Theyyam artist searching for truth in his life. Whereas *Vanaprastham* is about Kunjikuttan who searches for himself while discovering self-expression through the artistry of Kathakali.

Pieces of literature or movies can always bring new insights into human experience. Existentialism can be seen in both *Kaliyattam* or *Vanaprastham* – both ask questions about paradoxes in life and look for truth when everything seems uncertain. So we read into these films as if they were stories told from within: they take us on an inward journey towards self-knowledge, critical thinking skills development and understanding better our own condition within an absurd world.

Theoretical Framework

Existentialism

In response to the Second World War, the Holocaust and the atomic bombings which shook the world during mid-twentieth-century France, existentialism came into being. Despite being commonly associated with people such as Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus, its origins can be found in earlier thinkers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as well as German and Spanish philosophers. It was unique among other philosophies because of its impact outside academia; it influenced films, art politics or even psychotherapy.

Existentialism criticises conformity in mass societies that dehumanises individuals ultimately leading to nihilism via an encounter with the fundamental meaninglessness of life. Systems detached from reality are challenged by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche who promote personal truths against objective truths while viewing truth pragmatically as socially constructed.

This means that according to Heidegger and Sartre existence precedes essence because human beings have no predetermined nature but rather they define themselves through choices they make. That is why existentialism claims for every person's responsibility in creating their own meaning by rejecting any given essence. However this freedom causes dread of living without hiding behind facades or pretending to be what one is not hence there is need for authentic living based on self realisation against social standards which may force someone into what he or she does not want to become.

Existential ethics overthrows morality from the outside, and accentuates personal experiences and beliefs. Awareness of ethical responsibility involves realising another person's liberty as well as fostering mutual respect and cooperation. Sartre and Beauvoir delve into social relations in which they underscore the fight for self-assertion and need for genuine love within relationships.

Existentialism has far-reaching effects; it is not only restricted to philosophy but also touches on various other disciplines such as ethics, cognitive science, post-structuralism among others. It questions conventional understandings of selfhoods or identities and truthfulness by underlining historical consciousness in their formation vis-à-vis social environments. In other words individuals are always interpreting themselves against a backdrop of changed reality brought about by the times they have lived through so far.

Søren Kierkegaard's Existentialism

Søren Kierkegaard wrote in the fields of philosophy, theology, literature, psychology, and social criticism. He does not believe in systematic philosophy; instead he focuses on the subjective experience of the individual in relation to their own existence. Although commonly referred to as 'the father of existentialism,' his influence goes beyond this title as it echoes through various thinkers from different traditions. For Kierkegaard, a person is always becoming themselves – they must actively define who they are whilst also accepting themselves. He criticises modern society for destroying individuality by ignoring inwardness and subjectivity's role in identity formation.

The Danish philosopher's notion of 'existence-spheres' or 'stages' examines different ways people can view the meaning of life: ranging from an aesthetic outlook through to ethics and religion. These spheres do not represent a linear progression but rather offer glimpses into what it means to be human and how we might live genuinely.

Kierkegaard's works such as *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* deal with faith, love, despair & forgiveness. He insists that one needs divine grace to acquire virtues while questioning traditional understandings about religion and society at large. Kierkegaard's philosophy cannot be easily categorised, they offer profound insights into individuality, emotions and limitations of objectivity. His works continue to inspire scholars across disciplines, demanding subjective engagement to fully appreciate their depth and complexity.

Discussion

Kierkegaard's theory of existentialism gives us a way to understand characters in movies better by seeing them not just as actors but as symbols for real people who are grappling with existence. He intertwines human existence with theology and digs into the intricacy of being.

Like Sartre, Kierkegaard also emphasizes that it is essential for humans to create their own meanings; however, he introduces an additional aspect which is self-acceptance. According to him, the process of becoming oneself requires interaction with others and the divine rather than isolating oneself from them. For him subjectivity is important because it goes beyond just accumulating objective knowledge. "Truth, is that sort of error without which a certain species of life could not live." (Nietzsche 493). What Kierkegaard calls existential anxiety can prompt moral development and search for ultimate truth. "Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate"(Kierkegaard 155)

Kierkegaard identifies three spheres of life: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. During the aesthetic stage people seek pleasure while attempting to avoid moral responsibilities. In order to transition into the ethical phase one has to commit themselves towards following social morals, although this stage still maintains some level of objectivity that curbs full subjectivity. In the religious stage, we realise that the true objectivity lies with God, thus prompting individuals to embrace their subjectivity rather than seeking definitive answers.

Kierkegaard's Existentialism in Kaliyattam

The film *Kaliyattam* cleverly stitches existentialist philosophies of Søren Kierkegaard's work into its construct, painting an existential narrative that explores the human existence journey towards self-realisation. Set in the traditional Indian art form of Theyyam but enacted in the setting of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the movie goes through the alley of human identity, morality, and mankind's quest for the meaning of life. *Kaliyattam* embodies three major themes depicting Kierkegaard's existentialism, including subjective truth, the spheres of life, and the significance of individual decisions and authenticity. Through the protagonist Kannan Perumalayan, the counterpart of Othello, the film shows the existential journey from despair to self-awareness and redemption.

The protagonist embodies the core of existentialism in his quest for meaning in life. Perumalayan tries to create a meaning for his life by creating a family with the woman he loved so that he could be respected in the society. He wanted someone to see the real him behind his mask of *Theechamundi* (Fire Dancer, a manifestation of Goddess in the North Malabar region of Kerala, India). Perumalayan was also able to accept himself finally when he saw the love and devotion his lover and wife Thamara had for him. It helped him embrace the ugly scars and pock marks that marred his body.

The protagonist also had the presence of the divine in the meaning making process of his life. Perumalayan, once he has put on the costume of *Theechamundi* is no longer human but God. Therefore, he has transcended the human realm. Jayaraj in an interview with Shobha Warriar stated, "when the artist dons the makeup, he is considered as God (...) When he removes the makeup he becomes a man once again. I saw in Theyyam the best opportunity to express a split personality. I saw the same dichotomy in Othello's mind also". In the movie's various circumstances, we can see him in the costume thus asserting the fact that God has also been a witness in Perumalayan's life.

The protagonist also has a profound shift embracing objective to subjective knowledge in the movie since it is important in life as Kierkegaard states - "The more objective the observer becomes, the less he builds an eternal happiness, that is, his eternal happiness, on his relation to his observation, because an eternal happiness is a question only for the impassioned, infinitely interested subjectivity." (32)

In the initial stages of the movie, Perumalayan adheres to the societal norms that govern a person. His truths are influenced by others especially Paniyan who coveted Perumalayan's role of *Theechamundi*. Paniyan weaves a web of lies to lure Perumalayan to the same to bring him to his end. By sowing the seed of doubt regarding Thamara's infidelity, Paniyan was successful in bringing out Perumalayan's insecurity as he believed deep down Thamara could never love his ugly self since he is from the lower class compared to Thamara.

Therefore, he believes Paniyan instigation that Thamara is cheating him with Kanthan. He lives in anxiety regarding the truth as he is not able to believe that Thamara will cheat on him but the evidences and his psyche says otherwise. In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard states - "Not until the individual's love has truly opened his heart..., not until the individual has deposited everything in the shared consciousness, not until then does secretiveness gain its strength, life and meaning. But a decisive step is required for this, and consequently courage is also required; yet marital love collapses into nothing if this does not take place, for only thereby does one show that one loves not oneself but another." (109) Through these words we can understand that secretiveness has gained strength in this relationship since Perumalayan could never muster the courage to ask Thamara regarding her supposed 'infidelity'.

Finally, Perumalayan's awakening occurs when Cheerma, Paniyan's wife reveals her husbands schemes and manipulations shattering the illusion of objective truth and thus forcing Perumalayan to confront the disparity between the reality and the subjective truth hidden beneath it. But all this occurs only after Perumalayan asphyxiates Thamara to death and thus has to grapple with the implications of the revelation. Thus as Kierkegaard states that despair is a necessary step towards authentic existence and thus subjective truth, in case of Perumalayan his subjective truth tells him to act according to his convictions rather than external expectations. He punishes Paniyan and kills himself in a suicide.

Perumalayan's life also unfolds through the three stages of existence explained by Kierkegaard. In his initial stages of life or aesthetic stage, Perumalayan revels in the pleasures of performance and fame. He elopes with Thamara without any deeper thought and lives in a state of euphoria as seen in the song *Velikku Veluppaankaalam*. Perumalayan's shift to his ethical stage can be seen once the intervention of outside forces comes between their marriage. He has his moral responsibility and duty as Thamara's husband which he shows through various scenes in the movie. His moral responsibilities take the driver's seat of his life when he believes Paniyan's instigation regarding his wife's chastity. He does not delve deeper into the truth and believes others words even though there is a hint of skepticism as he believes in Thamara. He also remembers Thamara's father's words "*Perumalaya, ol achane vanjichavala, ninneyum vanjichekkam*" (Perumalayan she has betrayed her father, she may also betray you).

Tradition has it that if a *theechamundi*'s mind is not pure, and free of all negative emotions, the embers will burn him alive. This holds true in case of Perumalayan. He kills Thamara for the infidelity hoping it would punish her. But once he realises the truth there is a shift from ethical stage to religious stage. Perumalayan who was already in half makeup for his performance, can be seen as someone who has transcended the human realm but not in divine realm. But once he realises the truth there is a shift from ethical stage to religious stage. As he confronts the tragic consequences of his action, there is a hope for salvation and redemption as he has a spiritual awakening and reconciliation with the divine. "The relationship between the individual and God, the God-relationship, is the conscience." (Kierkegaard 143). In the final moments of the movie, Perumalayan confronts his inner and external demons and kills himself in the embers of the fire of *Perumkaliyattam*.

Kierkegaard's Existentialism in Vanaprastham

Vanaprastham also provides a compelling portrayal of existential ideas of Søren Kierkegaard. Kunjikuttan, the protagonist of the movie is a Kathakali artist whose journey in life is an exploration of existential themes such as the search for meaning, self-acceptance, and the confrontation of societal expectations. The protagonist tries to create a meaning in his life by being a good father to his kids since he was denied the same as his father never accepted him as his son. He tried to be a good father to his daughter Saradha but later forgot his duties towards her while lamenting about not being allowed to be a father to Abhimanyu. Therefore, he tries to create meaning in his life by donning different mythological characters and finds self expression in the same.

Kunjikuttan becomes able to accept himself through the appreciation he received from Subhadra, a high caste woman. He was ecstatic at the fact that even if his father never accepted him, a higher caste woman was able to accept for who he is, thus allowing him to accept himself. But later he realises even this acceptance was just a

illusion and even Subhadra only saw him for the character of Arjuna he put on and not for Kunjikuttan himself. He was only able to finally accept his life as it is after he goes to Kasi and accepts his conditions as it is.

Just like other characters played a role in creating meaning in his life, God also played an important role as Kunjikuttan is an artist of an art who represents the story of Gods and thus a manifestation of God in human form when he has donned the costume. His life is also extensively paralleled with Arjuna since their lives are similar in many aspects. His daughter is paralleled to Lord Krishna from the initial scenes in the movie as she has been called as Kunjikuttan's Krishna which can be seen in the dialogue of his wife Savithri, "*Saradhe appadi visha Poothanede mulayil. Ninakkum veno aa visham.*" (Saradha, Poothana's breast is filled with poison. Do you also want that poison.). Like Krishna was the guiding light to Arjuna, Saradha was the only light in the life of Kunjikuttan which was fraught with despair, identity crisis and anguish.

There is also a shift from objective truth to subjective truth in Kunjikuttan's life. His identity is intertwined with his performance, which has also shaped his understanding of the world and his self. He adheres to the external reality and the objective truths of traditional storytelling and embodies characters defined by established narratives and cultural norms. His shift from objective truth to subjective takes place through his encounters with Subhadra and his son Abhimanyu. He begins questioning the objective truths governing his life while also facing existential anguish.

He follows his subjective truth from the moment he receives the rejection from Subhadra from being a father to the product of their romantic liaison, Abhimanyu. He realises he was not accepted as Kunjikuttan but as Arjuna. This is shown in the dialogue "*Chuttiyilla, veshamilla, keeridamilla. Verum manushyanayi ivide vannath Kunjikuttante buddhi illayma*" (No ornaments, costume or crown. It was Kunjikuttan's stupidity to come here as a common man.)

He turns to the dark side of his psyche, plays villainous roles, completes the funeral rites of his father although he was not allowed to do the same since he was not born from the legitimate wife of his father. We see a man who was once confused about the world and his affairs has now understood how to let go of this world and its affairs just like the title of the movie symbolises. He enacts the final *Subhadraharanam* with his daughter and romancing her in this act hoping to attain salvation through punishing himself in this form.

He goes through a journey of self discovery and introspection, and finds liberation from the oppressive weight of objective truth and societal roles. Like Kierkegaard posits that despair is a necessary step towards authentic existence, Kunjikuttan was able to embrace his life finally. This can be explained in one of the final scenes of the movie when Kunjikuttan muses, "*Ippo munnil verum shoonyatha. Enth shoonyamayirikkunuvvo athilekk ellam vannu nirayumenn kettittille. Samastha sugha dukhangalum vannu nirayunna aa manohara muhurthathin njanum kathirikkiya. Enne ippo onnum alattunilla.*" (Now it is a void in front of me. Haven't you heard everything culminates in a void. I am waiting for that glorious moment when all joys melt together with all painful moments. Nothing matters to me anymore.). This line can be compared to Kierkegaard's thought- "Everything is to be acquired in stillness, and in the silence of the divine. It is not only of Psyche's future child it holds that its future depends on her silence." (31)

Kunjikuttan's life can also be analysed through the three stages of existence. In his aesthetic stage, we can observe Kunjikuttan's focus on immediate pleasures through his dedication to Kathakali in which he revelled in the fame that came along with it. He also drank alcohol to a point of inebriety. He found solace in these materials in his aesthetic stage. He also starts an extra marital affair with Subhadra in this stage and their relation even ends in a son. But this turn in his life shifts him from aesthetic to ethical stage. He believes that he has to be a good father to his son since that is what the society dictates. He tries to be a good son by conducting the funeral rights of his father in Kasi. He also tries to be a good friend by trying to provide for his sick friend Vasu Namboothiri. But everything is in vain and he was rejected from doing the same. Although he tried to act according to what the society dictated was right, everything he tried to do was fraught with internal and external conflicts and constraints marked by hierarchies and prejudices of tradition and societal expectations further complicated by his status as a lower-caste individual in a society.

In the final stage, or religious stage, in Kunjikuttan's life there is a sense of catharsis and spiritual fulfilment. In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard writes- "Faith therefore is not an aesthetic emotion but something far higher, precisely because it has resignation as its presupposition; it is not an immediate instinct of the heart, but is the paradox of life and existence." (58). He punishes himself by romancing his daughter on stage for an act that was scripted by Subhadra. In his final letter to Subhadra, we see his inner struggles and realisations. He states that he has had enough rejections in life and cannot handle anymore. His daughter was the only piece of light in his life and he hopes she could bring him salvation. And in the end he dies in the arms of his daughter hinting his salvation.

Tharun writes in his blog *Film Infinity* "Vanaprastham does not just remain an account of a poor Kathakali artist and his identity crisis, instead it charts into the territory of life as a whole. When a fellow artist falls ill, Kunjikuttan is unable to perform without him and he treads on a path of pain. He was a part of not just his plays, but also his life. One's life was never about him alone, it affects and gets affected by others while some people are able to have a control on it, others do not. May be that's why Vanaprastham remains an interesting tale like Mahabharata every time I revisit it, because it speaks more, than just a fable."

Comparative Analysis of Existentialism in Kaliyattam and Vanaprastham.

In both the films *Kaliyattam* and *Vanaprastham* the protagonists, Perumalayan and Kunjikuttan, attempt to find meaning in their lives amidst societal constraints and private struggles. Perumalayan, an orphan, seeks to create a family with the woman he loves, hoping for recognition past his social reputation and theatrical personality as *theechamundi*. Similarly, Kunjikuttan, an illegitimate son, endeavours to be an excellent father to his daughter Saradha and his son with Subhadra, aiming to counter the rejection he confronted all through his existence. Drawing from Kierkegaard's existential philosophy, both protagonists navigate the adventure of self-acceptance with the help of others. Thamara's unconditional love and Subhadra's appreciation of Kunjikuttan's art play critical roles in their recognition of themselves.

However, both characters come across situations regarding their acceptance, as Perumalayan struggles with insecurity and Kunjikuttan's phantasm of acceptance shatters whilst he realises he is most only valued for his portrayal of Arjuna. God serves as a witness to the protagonists' lives, symbolising the divine's function in defining one's self.

Perumalayan's transformation from objective to subjective reality is caused with the aid of Cheerma's revelation, and Kunjikuttan's shift happens when Subhadra denies him his right to fatherhood. Both characters go through Kierkegaard's stages of existentialism, with Perumalayan revelling in aesthetic pleasures and Kunjikuttan finding solace in Kathakali performances. Their transitions to ethical stage involves confronting moral obligations, as Perumalayan grapples with societal norms and Kunjikuttan strives to uphold moral considerations regardless of societal constraints. Finally, within the spiritual level, Perumalayan confronts the consequences of his actions and finds purpose in his function as *theechamundi*. Similarly, Kunjikuttan embarks on a journey for spiritual fulfillment, seeking redemption through a very last performance along with his daughter. In essence, both characters' journeys mirror Kierkegaard's existential ideals of authenticity, despair, and self-acceptance, imparting profound insights into the human situation and the quest for meaning and fulfilment in life.

Conclusion

The examination of *Kaliyattam* and *Vanaprastham* through the lens of Søren Kierkegaard's existential philosophy reveals profound parallels between Indian cinema and existential idea. Both movies depict protagonists struggling with the complexities of existence, confronting freedom, preference, and responsibility. Kannan Perumalayan and Kunjikuttan embody existential despair, grappling with societal expectations and the quest for authenticity. Their journey mirrors Kierkegaard's concept of self-realisation amidst existence's absurdity.

The movies emphasise subjective truth and passionate dedication, illustrating the consequences of living inauthentically. They exhibit how existential questions go beyond cultural obstacles and resonate universally. Moreover, the cultural contexts of Kerala's folk traditions and Kathakali improve our know-how of existential issues in Indian cinema. *Kaliyattam* explores tragic love and moral conflict, while *Vanaprastham* delves into the

struggles of an artist torn between artwork and personal existence. Ultimately, the comparative analysis prompts viewers to contemplate existential questions about authenticity and that means in a global fraught with despair. It highlights cinema's electricity to explore the human psyche and reaffirms the timeless quest for meaning and authenticity.

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