

FLUID NARRATIVES & EXISTENTIALISM: A STUDY OF WATER AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL METAPHOR IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYALAM CINEMA

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Abstract

Water transcends its function as a vital resource, emerging as a powerful symbol that encapsulates the emotional, social, and ecological dimensions of human existence. This study investigates the thought-provoking socio-cultural significance of water and aquatic habitats in contemporary Malayalam cinema, focusing on their role in portraying human relationships. Through a critical analysis of select films, this research reveals how water imagery serves as a narrative device to explore complex interpersonal dynamics, migration, environmental degradation, and cultural identity. This study highlights the complex interactions between water, culture, and human connections in contemporary Malayalam cinema by employing critical perspectives from existentialism and exploring the ever-growing realm of Blue Humanities. It demonstrates how filmmakers skilfully use water as a theme to deepen viewers' understanding of cultural contexts and encourage critical thought about how people interact with the natural world. The fluidity of water not only mirrors the ebb and flow of human emotions but also reflects societal issues, fostering a nuanced dialogue about survival and resilience in the face of ecological challenges. By evaluating the intricate narratives within Malayalam films, this research contributes to the expanding discourse on water as a metaphor for human relationships, emphasizing its critical role in shaping narratives and identities. The findings illuminate how the representation of water archetypes enriches cultural commentary, revealing the connections between people and their environments. Further, This study seeks to foster a more nuanced appreciation of the portrayal of water in Malayalam cinema, positioning it as a critical lens through which to examine broader socio-cultural themes and facets of human experience.

Keywords: human relationships, water, cultural identity, blue humanities, existentialism, New Wave, Malayalam Cinema, survival.

Introduction

Water, characterized by its intrinsic fluidity and transformative properties, has historically served as a source of inspiration for writers across diverse cultures and historical periods. Its ability to take on numerous shapes, from calm ponds to raging torrents, reflects the intricacies of human

interactions. Water, our planet's lifeblood, is more than just a physical material; it can be a unifying force bringing people together or a divisive force, causing chasms of alienation. At its core, water is essential for survival and often serves as a vital force within literary texts that underscores the continuity of human interactions. Just as water sustains life, elements such as love, empathy, and understanding nurture and uphold human relationships, illustrating the interconnectedness of these fundamental aspects of existence. Relationships can suffer from a lack of these attributes, similar to how plants wither without water. As closely observed, contemporary Malayalam cinema presents water as a potent character that speaks volumes about human relationships, their subtle emotions, tensions, actions, dilemmas, and numerous other facets that will be explored later in this paper.

In the field of blue humanities, water transcends its elemental significance; it is a powerful metaphor that stimulates literary reflection and discussion. Researchers have started looking at the many facets of water's role, taking into account its ecological, social, and cultural ramifications. This multidisciplinary approach emphasizes how water actively participates in forming storylines, impacting character arcs, and exposing deeper existential concerns rather than just serving as a background. Classic literary books such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Tempest*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, etc. illustrate how water serves as a powerful element that reflects human resilience, adventure, and existential inquiry. By situating water within the framework of existentialism, the study uncovers its symbolic weight in articulating human experiences of longing, connection, and disconnection.

The Malayalam cinema, renowned for its nuanced storytelling and cultural richness, has long recognized the thematic significance of water. As we navigate through this evolution, the paper explores how contemporary Malayalam cinema continues to wield water as a dynamic socio-cultural metaphor, thereby enriching the understanding of its role in shaping collective consciousness. From seminal classics such as *Padunna Puzha* (1968), *Chemmeen* (1965), *Panchavadi Palam* (1984), *Thoovana Thumbikal* (1987), *Vaishali* (1989), *Amaram* (1991), etc., the representation of water whether as a seashore, river, or lake has consistently inspired and shaped narratives in Malayalam cinema, underscoring its power as a transformative element. This theme continued into the 1990s and 2000s, with films like *Kadal* (1994), *Saagaram Sakshi* (1994), *Nila* (1994), *Thirakalkkappuram* (1998), *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (1998), *Perumazhakkalam* (2004), *Jalolsavam* (2004), and *Chanthupottu* (2005) employing water as a narrative device that reflects diverse human emotions, conflicts, and existential challenges. These films portray water not merely as a natural element but as a powerful emotional force, capturing moments that resonate deeply with audiences and often symbolizing the complexities of human relationships.

Rationale

Kerala's long-standing relationship with its natural surroundings can be examined via the culturally complex and thought-provoking lens of Malayalam cinema's depiction of water. Water plays a central role in Kerala's social, economic, and spiritual life. The state is well-known for its rivers, backwaters, and coastal landscapes. In recent Malayalam films, water has become a more common narrative device that reflects complicated themes like love, conflict, social injustice, migration, and environmental degradation. Malayalam cinema has evolved to fit within the framework of Blue Humanities, an interdisciplinary area that examines the philosophical, ecological, and cultural aspects of water. Examining how filmmakers in the industry employ water as a cultural expression

tool reveals how local stories reflect global environmental issues, such as water scarcity and climate change.

This research is significant because of its scholarly discourse on environmental humanities in regional cinema, providing a new viewpoint on how local storytelling might affect public conceptions of ecology, sustainability, and identity. These films, which reflect and challenge cultural attitudes toward nature, are effective advocates for ecological awareness and long-term ties with natural resources. By investigating water's symbolic and narrative role in Malayalam cinema, this study highlights cinema's ability to foster cultural introspection, challenge societal norms, and inspire ecological consciousness, making it a timely addition to academic discussions about culture, sustainability, environmental, and psychological storytelling.

Research Questions

- How does the depiction of water in contemporary Malayalam cinema contribute to the cultural and philosophical discourse within Blue Humanities?
- In what ways does water imagery in Malayalam films symbolize and critique societal issues such as survival, social inequality, and more?
- How do Malayalam filmmakers employ aquatic environments as narrative devices to shape themes of cultural identity and belonging?
- How do the symbolic uses of water in selected Malayalam films influence the audience's perceptions of their relationship with nature and sustainability?
- What are the philosophical and emotional dimensions conveyed through water in Malayalam films, and how do they resonate with or challenge traditional cultural representations?

Research Objectives

- To analyze the representation of water in select Malayalam films and its cultural implications.
- To reflect on the use of water as a narrative device in literary works.
- To explore how water serves as a metaphor for societal issues, identity, and emotional states.

In contemporary Malayalam cinema, the use of water as a narrative device is increasingly prominent, forging an intricate link between human experience and environmental context. Water now serves as a potent symbol of cultural identity and socioeconomic struggle, embodying resilience, vulnerability, and survival. This evolving symbolism allows filmmakers to delve into Kerala's socio-cultural landscape, crafting powerful critiques on the tension between tradition and change. As a dynamic metaphor, water mirrors the complexities of the human condition, capturing the existential challenges posed by an ever-shifting societal and environmental reality.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology to analyze selected contemporary Malayalam films that employ water as a socio-cultural metaphor. Utilizing existentialism as the theoretical

framework, the research seeks to elucidate the complexities of human existence as portrayed in these narratives. By focusing on the symbolic representations of water, the study will investigate how these films engage with themes of identity, belonging, and the human condition. This study will explore how these films engage with themes of identity, belonging, and the human condition through their symbolic representations of water.

Analysis

Water is frequently seen in existentialist literary interpretations as a metaphor for both loneliness and the potential for connection. Symbolising the depths of human existence, water can reflect on issues of loneliness, hopelessness, or the search for purpose in interpersonal interactions. Existentialism is a philosophical philosophy that investigates the nature of existence, freedom, and the quest for meaning in a world that is frequently portrayed as chaotic and indifferent. Existentialism proposes that people make decisions based on subjective meaning rather than pure rationality. 'Existentialism' comes from the Latin word *existere*, meaning 'to exist' or 'to stand out'. The concept is built on the human experience of sorrow and bewilderment caused by the seemingly meaningless environment and the need to find or create meaning. Following World War II, the philosophical and cultural movement of Existentialism gained popularity and prominence, primarily via the works of renowned French philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Soren Kierkegaard observes in *The Sickness Unto Death*, "With every increase in the degree of consciousness and in proportion to that increase, the intensity of despair increases: the more consciousness, the more intense the despair. (Kierkegaard 44) The concept that individuals must construct their essence through decisions and actions while managing the complications of freedom, responsibility, and authenticity is central to existential thought. In this context, water is an effective metaphor for the fluid and unpredictable character of human existence. Water represents both the expanse of possibilities and the certainty of existential struggle, representing life's dual nature as a source of food and danger. As individuals struggle with their identities and the absurdity of their situations, water frequently catalyzes self-discovery and transformation, forcing them to confront their fears and desires. Water in this environment becomes a strong symbol of the human condition: fluid, unpredictable, and inextricably linked to our existential journey as we traverse the complexity of life in search of authenticity and purpose. To understand this connection more fully, examples from English literature that illustrate these ideas can be considered.

The relationship between existentialism and water is vividly depicted in literature, where the ocean or river frequently signifies the unknown - an existential environment that reflects the human psyche. In works such as *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Moby-Dick*, the heroes face the inexorable forces of nature, which represent the wider existential struggles of existence. Their efforts against the tides drive them to confront their mortality and desires and search for meaning in chaos. Ernest Hemingway's coherent representation of water in *The Old Man and the Sea* represents both the solitude of the human condition and Santiago's connection with the fish, demonstrating how partnerships can emerge even in the midst of isolation and hardship. The primary fish in *The Old Man and the Sea* is a massive marlin, which Santiago struggles to catch over three days and nights. The marlin represents Santiago's efforts, both literally and symbolically. It reflects mankind's battles in life, and Santiago regards it as a heroic adversary. The ocean serves as a metaphor for the riddles of existence and the human search for meaning in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. The novel's well-known opening sentence, in which Ishmael states, "I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world" (Melville 18), immediately introduces the reader to the

maritime setting. The relentless hunt for the white whale by Captain Ahab represents humanity's struggle with the unknown and its existential search for meaning. Characters frequently struggle against elements beyond their control since the sea is a location of isolation for the crew and evokes themes of existential solitude, independence, and the randomness of nature. It is much more beautifully demonstrated as “Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries—stand that man on his legs, set his feet a-going, and he will infallibly lead you to water... Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever. (Melville 19)

In *The Tempest*, the ocean stands for the unknown, the uncontrollable forces of fate, and the possibility of change. Prospero and the other characters face existential and personal difficulties after being shipwrecked on an enigmatic island. Characters are isolated by the sea, a natural force that makes them face their aspirations, treachery, and limitations as human beings. Shakespeare explores themes of power, forgiveness, and the potential for rebirth via the use of water as a catalyst for self-discovery and reconciliation. Water is also used as a potent existential element in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Since Robinson Crusoe finds himself left on a barren island and is forced to face his loneliness, mortality, and the necessity of self-reliance, the sea serves as both a source of freedom and a source of isolation in the novel. In a similar vein, the water serves as a setting for adventure and moral complexity in *Treasure Island*, where individuals must confront the unknown while battling themes of survival, loyalty, and greed. Water is used in both books as a metaphor for the unpredictable nature of life and the existential difficulty of paving one's way in the face of powerful, frequently uncaring forces. In *Heart of Darkness*, the Congo River is a conduit into the core of the human psyche and existential gloom. The river symbolizes a plunge into existential dread, moral ambiguity, and facing one's inner demons as Marlow travels more into the forest. Here, water represents the unknown and reflects Marlow's exploration of the intricacies of human nature, where moral ambiguity and existential loneliness cause the thin exterior of civilization to crumble. Water is a tremendous force for change, capable of changing landscapes and destroying mountains. Similarly, human relationships are in perpetual flux, influenced by time, situation, and personal development. The flow of a river can represent the passage of time and the natural changes that occur in relationships. In contrast, a tumultuous river might indicate periods of strife and turmoil that put a bond's strength to the test. “Often, they sat in the evening together by the bank on the log, said nothing, and both listened to the water, which was no water to them, but the voice of life, the voice of what exists, of what is eternally taking shape.” (Hesse, 92). An analysis of select Malayalam films illustrates how the representation of water serves to elucidate the emotional landscape of the characters.

Anarkali (2015), a notable romantic thriller written and directed by Sachy and produced by Rajeev Nair, features Prithviraj Sukumaran and Biju Menon in the lead roles. In *Anarkali* (2015), Shanthanu Varma, a former navy officer, revisits his forbidden love, Nadira Imam, in Kavaratti, Lakshadweep. The portrayal of the waters of Lakshadweep in *Anarkali* (2015) serves as a significant metaphor for the emotional turmoil and longing inherent in human relationships, underscoring the complexity and depth of interpersonal connections. Through this aquatic imagery, the film illustrates how water embodies the fluctuations of love, desire, and conflict, thereby enriching the narrative with layers of emotional resonance. Shanthanu's desperate choice to consume poison demonstrates his readiness to go to tremendous lengths for love, even as he faces major challenges in his attempt to be back together with Nadira. The vast waves of Lakshadweep rise above the mere backdrop to become an active, almost sentient force that mirrors

Shanthanu's inner agony and longing, representing the depth and unpredictability of human connections. The plot highlights how vital it is to cross the waterways to give Shanthanu timely medical attention. The audience is kept on the edge of their seats by this act of sacrifice, which increases the suspense. In the films, water acts as an existential character and assumes a dual meaning by juxtaposing water's life-sustaining and life-threatening aspects as both a conduit and barrier in Shanthanu's pursuit of Nadira.

Similarly, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (2015), is a period film set in the 1960s and 1970s against the backdrop of the Iruvazhinjippuzha river and Mukkam hamlet in Kerala. The film stems from the true love story of B. P. Moideen and Kanchanamala, who were separated by their families because of their interfaith marriage. Moideen came from a famous Muslim family, while Kanchanamala was the daughter of a Hindu Thiyya landlord. Iruvazhanjipuzha represents the boundary between Moideen and Kanchanamala, both physically and symbolically. They often meet on its banks, with the river highlighting both the separation imposed by their families and society and their relentless determination to be together. Despite societal constraints, this river becomes a witness to their love—a space where they share their dreams, communicate in secrecy, and affirm their commitment. Moreover, the river reflects the turbulent, unpredictable nature of their relationship. Just as the river flows through obstacles, Moideen and Kanchanamala's love withstands hurdles over many years. In the climax, the river also becomes a tragic force, representing the ultimate challenge that they cannot overcome. Moideen's attempt to cross it to reach Kanchanamala leads to his tragic death, symbolizing the cost of a love that defied all odds but was never destined to find peace in this world. Similarly, in *Life of Pi* (2012), the ocean becomes a vast, existential force reflecting Pi's inner turmoil, much like how the Iruvazhinjippuzha river in *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (2015) symbolises the boundary, challenges, and ultimate cost of Moideen and Kanchanamala's love. Pi Patel encounters the harsh, uncaring forces of nature in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, an existential survival tale set in the Pacific Ocean. He is alone and forced to face his fears, mortality, and the unknown while stranded on the ocean. Pi's internal conflict over faith, purpose, and survival instincts is reflected in the river, which serves as both a lifeline and a menace. Through themes of spirituality, resiliency, and the human will to find meaning even in pain, his voyage across the ocean turns into a quest for existential knowledge. "He coughed out water and started breathing air, but it forced all his flesh and blood to his upper body. That's why his chest is so thick and his legs are so skinny." (Marel 7) In the survival thriller *2018* (2023), directed by Jude Anthany Joseph, water becomes a tremendous existential force, representing both the fragility of human existence and the human spirit's tenacity in the face of the Kerala floods. The unprecedented floodwaters overran Kerala's cities, villages, and landscapes, forcing people to confront their death and helplessness in the face of nature's overpowering force. Like the symbolic rivers and oceans in *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (2015) and *Life of Pi*, the 2018 floods force characters to confront profound questions about survival, meaning, and human connection. This flood forces communities to overcome personal fears and embrace unity, exemplifying existential themes of communal and individual resilience. However, water represents survival and existential resilience in *Aadujeevitham: The Goat Life* (2024), a Blessy film inspired by Benyamin's original novel, as the protagonist navigates the harsh realities of desert existence. The never-ending search for water emphasizes the harsh reality of mortality, with each drop functioning as a beacon of hope in the midst of sorrow. This journey goes beyond physical necessity, symbolizing the irrepressible human spirit's fight for survival in the face of insurmountable obstacles. The narrative exemplifies existentialism at its best through these evocative depictions, in which the fragility of existence and the necessary link to water highlight the profound search for meaning and survival.

In contrast, *Pullipulikalum Aattinkuttikalum* (2013) takes a lighter approach to the themes of love and water. The film, set in the gorgeous backdrop of Kuttanad, makes extensive use of Kerala's waterways, canals, and houseboats to frame the characters' romance and struggles. Chakka Gopan (played by Kunchacko Boban) is a houseboat owner and tour guide who spends much of his time in the backwaters. The water, which is crucial to his livelihood, also serves as the background for his amorous relations with Kainakary Jayasree (Namitha Pramod). Their relationship blossoms amid boat trips, gorgeous canals, and the bustling atmosphere of Kuttanad as Gopan struggles to manage his life, family difficulties, and love. In this film, water is associated with joy, perseverance, and everyday problems, as opposed to tragic associations in previous love stories. It represents Gopan's flexible, adaptive life as he navigates his difficult family settings and his growing love for Jayasree. The playful approach to love, as well as the stunning water scenes, provide a joyful touch to the film, making water more than simply a scenic backdrop but an integral component of the characters' lives and livelihoods in Kuttanad.

Similarly, *Kuttanadan Marpappa* (2018) uses water to underscore the themes of love and relationships with humour and a sense of everyday romance. The film, set in the lovely region of Kuttanad, follows John Paul (Kunchacko Boban), a wedding photographer whose life is inextricably linked to the people and surroundings of this water-bound territory. The canals of Kuttanad act as both a backdrop and a symbolic element in the story. Boat rides, canals, and the lush, watery landscape of Kuttanad are regularly used to depict John's romantic interest, Jessy (played by Aditi Ravi), and the flowering of their relationship. In addition to reflecting their laid-back relationship, these placid waterways serve as a comical diversion from the misunderstandings and mishaps that occur during their journey. The way that water is shown in the film highlights the distinctive way of life of the people who reside in Kuttanad, where everyday events, festivals, and even romantic relationships take place on and around the backwaters. Water is a symbol of both peace and the unpredictable nature of relationships in *Kuttanadan Marpappa*. Its calming presence emphasizes the beauty and simplicity of love in this idyllic setting. In addition to enhancing the romance, the film grounds the love tale in Kuttanad culture by using the river to evoke a feeling of place and community.

In *Pathombatham Nootandu* (2022), water represents both freedom and hardship, defining the film's deep interpersonal themes. The story takes place in Kerala during the British colonial period, following the journey of Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker, a social reformer and fighter who opposed caste injustice and battled for the rights of underprivileged populations. Water is a significant metaphor in two ways: it signifies Kerala's cultural roots and strength and represents the harsh reality and hardships they confront. The extensive backwaters and rivers in the film highlight people's connections to their land, heritage, and rights. Velayudha Panicker's bond with the community is inextricably linked to the waters that serve as Kerala's socio-cultural lifeline. His journey frequently takes him across waterways, which serve as both escape routes and battlegrounds, demonstrating his tenacity and connection to the country he defends. In terms of human connections, water is a recurring image that frames Velayudha Panicker's love, sorrow, and sacrifices for his loved ones. Water images carry emotional weight, representing both a community's calm hopes for equality and the turmoil of a conflict-ridden culture. Water's association with the characters' personal and community conflicts reflects the undercurrents of rebellion, resilience, and solidarity, making it both a symbolic and narrative force in the film. In comparison to literature, Edna Pontellier, the main character in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, uses the ocean as a metaphor for her desire for autonomy, self-awareness, and genuineness in a

culture that limits women's roles. Edna's wish to defy social norms and seek an individual identity is symbolized by her time by the water. The sea, which represents her existential awakening and her fight against the limitations of her reality, is both freeing and dangerous. Edna's internal struggle, where liberation comes with the existential cost of isolation and alienation, is depicted in the story through the usage of water.

Prajesh Sen's biographical drama film *Vellam* (2021) is a powerful social awareness film that examines the negative effects of alcohol on human relationships in contrast to the elemental significance of water, which is often seen as a source of life and nourishment and represents purity and clarity in stark contrast to the chaos caused by alcohol consumption. The film explores existential themes, reflecting on how addiction can lead to the erosion of personal connections in the same way that a drought depletes a thriving ecosystem. Characters struggle with their reality, questioning their existence and the decisions that have left them hopeless, much like water is necessary for life. This sociocultural commentary emphasizes how alcohol damages the basic relationships that bind people to their communities and to each other, even though it may offer a little reprieve. *Vellam* advocates for a return to clarity and connection by highlighting the life-giving properties of water and challenging viewers to reevaluate their interactions with substances and one another. Thus, water is used as a very influential socio-cultural metaphor by the scriptwriters and directors to employ the existential themes in contemporary Malayalam films.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that water functions as a potent and multifaceted symbol within Malayalam cinema, providing a nuanced framework for the exploration of cultural identity, socioeconomic issues, and ecological themes. Through the depiction of water, Malayalam filmmakers engage with the cultural discourse within Blue Humanities, presenting water as a metaphor for survival, social inequalities, and resilience. This analysis demonstrates how water is more than just a physical element; it is also a narrative force that represents Kerala's socio-cultural setting, affecting audience perceptions and promoting a greater understanding of both cultural heritage and environmental concerns.

Further, the frequent symbolic usage of water in these films emphasizes its importance in evaluating current issues, particularly when environmental challenges influence storytelling. Water becomes a strong narrative device that simultaneously echoes and reinterprets previous depictions, prompting spectators to consider their relationship with the environment, sustainability, and collective identity. Consequently, the evolving representation of water in Malayalam cinema underscores the philosophical and emotional dimensions of the human experience, reaffirming the medium's capacity to address the intricate intersections of identity, belonging, and environmental transformation.

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