Kerala History and Studies Journal
Published by the Kerala History Conference
ISSN No. XXXX-XXXX

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Publication Vol. 1 / Issue 1 / 2026

Stable URL https://journal.keralahistoryconference.org/article/3

Date of Release 28.11.2026

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Portrayal of Honour Killings in Malayalam Cinema: A Reflection of Social Realities

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Introduction: Cinema as Counter-Archive

There is a common version about Kerala that circulates in national and international discourse as a kind of success story: high literacy, matrilineal traditions, a political culture more attentive to social welfare than most Indian states. This version is quite impressive but not including all the essence of the Kerala society. In 2018 killing of Kevin, a young man from a lower-caste background, by the relatives of his upper-caste partner Neenu in Kollam, was not an irregularity in an otherwise egalitarian society. This actually portraying even though the society with full of literacy still running the caste honour in the vein, and it's not a contradiction with the previously mentioned indicators, which actually measuring the living standard of the people.

The National Crime Records Bureau has routinely reported between 18 and 33 honour killings per year across the entire country, a figure that strains credibility given how frequently such deaths are reclassified as accidents, suicides, or domestic disputes. The official data indicate no serious or negligible social issue due to the number recording daily, but here is the clue. Honour Killings may not be simply implying as it is, because in many of the regions actually approving as protection of the purity of blood. So, in that case honour killing become murder or suicide or accident. The culprits or the so-called protectors of the caste and family pedigree still be outside with or without the help of the local authorities. Honour-related violence is most usefully understood as premeditated, community-sanctioned killing in response to a perceived transgression of sexual or caste propriety[1]. They are organised, often planned, and frequently protected by the same communities that carry them out. Here is the importance of the analysis of Malayalam cinema in the lens of honour killing, because the industry have the guts to openly speak the politics without fear or favour. This study examines how attentiveness has been applied to honour killings, tracing

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nine films from *Kaattu Thulasi* in 1965 to *Ronth* in 2025. The goal is not a comprehensive survey but a critical reading, one attentive to what these films reveal, what they suppress, and how the politics of who tells the story shapes what can be said at all.

The Early Period (1965–1979): Violence as Fate

Malayalam films in between 1960s and 1970s did not consider honour killings as a social issue that should not be happened, but it simply approving how the society was. From the eye of historiophoty, close analysis of this period through films actually envisage how was our society during the period, which actually pointing out the truth about cinema that, cinema reflects society's realities, struggles, and aspirations[2]; however, the nature of that reflection changes depending on who holds the camera and what they believe their audience can bear.

Kaattu Thulasi (1965), written by Thoppil Bhasi and directed by M. Krishnan Nair, is in many respects a establishment text for this tradition[3]. The film follows Thulasi, a plantation village girl who falls for the educated son of an estate owner, a man from a world sufficiently distant from hers that the relationship reads, in her community's eyes, as a kind of theft. The kin who kill her are not presented as conventional villains. The film allows them a logic, even a kind of sorrow, and this is precisely what makes it so revealing as a historical document: It was genuinely rare, in 1965, for Malayalam cinema to acknowledge that gender norms were doing the killing. But acknowledging is not the same as condemning. Thulasi dies, the community continues, and the film's emotional weight settles on loss rather than outrage.

Picnic (1975), directed by J. Sasikumar, approaches similar material from a slightly different angle[4]. Generally, picnic not consider as a film that talks about honour killings, in fact it is not but its story of a romance across social boundaries and the fear and violence that follow is clearly working with the same anxieties as honour killing. From the contemporary vantage point, the film has strong edge with the refusal of easy moral resolution. The social lines being crossed are presented as real and dangerous, not simply as ignorant prejudices waiting to be overcome. This refusal to moralise was, in its way, an honest account of how such communities actually functioned.

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Thakara (1979), directed by Bharathan from a script by Padmarajan, is more explicitly engaged with questions of hierarchy and bodily autonomy[5]. Thakara is an orphan without caste protection or property, perhaps a simple human without any ties and his attachment to Subhashini, the daughter of the village strongman Mooppan, is understood from the outset as something the social order will not permit. The film never uses the word caste, because caste is not the issue here, because the one opposite has no caste. The mechanisms of exclusion and retribution are rendered with sufficient specificity that any viewer familiar with rural Kerala would recognise exactly what is operating beneath the surface. Across these three films, what is absent is almost as telling as what is present in the films. There are no surviving women who can testify. There are no community members held accountable. The violence arrives with the inevitability of weather, and the films end more or less where they began, with the social order intact. Also, in the perspective of the camera, these films climax actually telling that these are actually customary practice and sorrow that people cannot change. Films from this period actually not questing the social evil, but only showing these things are common in our society with different narration and difference casting.

The Contemporary Surge (2022–2025): Naming the Structure

The return of honour killing as a central theme in Malayalam cinema from the early 2020s was not a coincidence. It coincided with the increased visibility of Dalit activism, a wider reckoning with caste violence following several high-profile cases, and a generation of filmmakers willing to be considerably more direct than their predecessors about what they were actually depicting. Perhaps the period after 2020s simply try to break the chains of all the social norms. *Puzhu* (2022), directed by Ratheena PT, is perhaps the most psychologically precise film in this study[6]. Mammootty plays Kuttan, a retired policeman who has organised his entire inner life around the management of caste purity. His separation from his sister, who married outside the caste hierarchy, is not presented as a coincidence or a flaw but as the logical expression of a worldview the film takes seriously enough to trace in careful detail. The horror of Puzhu is not that Kuttan is monstrous. It is that he is comprehensible, that the society which made him is still very much in operation, and

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that his son is inheriting something the film frames as a kind of contamination that moves through generations. Mammotty simple just made kuttan as a silent carrier of the caste. The person is well mannered and outspoken but with the beauty of narration the theme simply matches that the character carrying honour of so-called upper caste.

O Baby (2023), directed by Ranjan Pramod, makes a point that should perhaps be clear but rarely gets said plainly in Indian cinema: caste hierarchy in Kerala is not a Hindu problem[7]. The film centres on a wealthy Christian family in the state, the kind with land and servants and a settled sense of their own elevation. The privileged family daughter get involved with a romantic relationship with the son of the family of servant, the privileged upper caste Christian family responded with unimaginable violence. The head of the upper caste family simply asking the servants to kill his own son or otherwise they kill with their own. This scene is worth dwelling on because of what it reveals about how honour violence operates: it is not simply parents killing their children's partners. The narration itself showing the caste and class structure among Christian community. From there the film actually showing the struggle between privileged and unprivileged. Eventually the son survives, but the damage is social and psychological as much as physical, and the film is clear-eyed about the fact that the culprits will not be meaningfully punished, showing the elite always use the elite power with authorities.

Sookshmadarshini (2024), directed by M. C. Jithin and scripted by Libin T. B. and Athul Ramachandran, is the most formally inventive film in this group[8]. Organised as a comedy-thriller, it follows a homemaker-detective whose investigation into what looks like a routine missing-persons case eventually leads her to the murder of a young lesbian woman killed abroad on her mother's explicit instructions, after her relationship with another woman was discovered. The film actually used something more important theme in the era of new normal. Now a days the relationship between same gender is not so uncommon, in fact those people also suffer too much hate from the side of so-called social perspective. The film uses genre to do something quite serious: it places the question of queer honour killing inside a narrative structure familiar enough to attract a mainstream audience, and then refuses to let

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that audience stay comfortable. The comedy does not defuse the grief. It makes it stranger and, in some ways, harder to dismiss.

Anweshippin Kandethum (2024), directed by Darwin Kuriakose from a screenplay by Jinu V. Abraham, is structured around two parallel investigations set in 1980s Kerala[9]. One follows the death of a domestic worker from a marginalised caste who was involved with her employer's son. Also, in other narration a university student where killed for similar condition. The parallel structure is deliberate: the film actually reproducing how the structure of honour related violence stands with different strata of the society, even though the conditions are not same. Perhaps, the film more focusing that, how state authorities, police and other administrations facilitates impurity rather than destroying it.

Thudarum (2025), directed by Tharun Moorthy, arrives at honour violence from an unusual direction[10]. Its protagonist is not a woman or a lower-caste individual but a father seeking justice for a son who died in a circumstances of police misconduct, precisely a father of a daughter as a police officer who ridiculously behaved to his daughters' romantic partner. The film extends the concept of honour-based harm to include the violence done to men, particularly lower-caste men, who fail to conform to the roles their communities have assigned them. The police in Thudarum are not corrupted in traditional way, they are actually more outspoken and simply having people police, but with direct threat to family, they become more dangerous than the in the corrupted one. They are institutionally invested in maintaining a version of events that protects the socially powerful, which is a more uncomfortable argument to make and one the film sustains with some consistency. The narration of film from the beginning to end is outstandingly done in proper manner. The evil side of police from the transition of most honourable way actually increasing the depth of the characters.

Ronth (2025), directed by Shahi Kabir, may be the most theoretically sophisticated film of recent years on this subject[11]. Its central sequence involves a young Dalit man fleeing from an upper-caste household that has misidentified him as a romantic interest of their daughter. He drowns. His death is an accident only in the narrowest causal sense: structurally, it was produced by the terror that caste hierarchy had

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already installed in his body. The death of the character strictly not honour killing, but in the film, it actually depicting as honour killing to protect the family and trap innocent police officers. What the film then does with this event is remarkable: state actors rewrite the death in official records, reclassifying a caste-induced flight as an act of romantic transgression. The violence of misrecognition does not end with the body. It continues in the paperwork.

Genre Hybridisation and Popular Cinema

One of the more outstanding features of recent Malayalam films on honour violence is their denial to consider themselves in the art-house tradition. These are genre films, thrillers, procedurals, domestic comedies, and they deploy the pleasures of those genres quite deliberately. Cinema can genuinely investigate the underlying causes and complex social and cultural factors that perpetuate practices like honour killings[12]. But for that investigation to reach anyone beyond a festival circuit, it needs formal strategies capable of holding a common viewers attention.

Understanding what has changed in how Malayalam cinema handles Dalit characters and caste violence requires going beyond a simple test of representational accuracy[13]. The question of realism, of whether the depiction is sociologically correct, is less interesting than the question of what the depiction is being used to do. Sookshmadarshini uses comedy to pave the way of conditions for grief. Anweshippin Kandethum uses technical suspense to implicate the viewer in an act of caste-historical recovery. These new narrative style is not compromising with popular taste; they are strategically build choices about how to make difficult material survivable.

Famous concept of cruel optimism by Lauren Berlant's is useful here: the films sustain in their viewers an investment in narratives of justice even when, at the level of social reality, such justice remains improbable or structurally foreclosed[14]. The revenge narrative in Thudarum operates in a related register, offering purification while simultaneously raising the question of whether the satisfaction of individual retribution does anything to address the conditions that produced the original violence[15]. Period settings and non-linear exposes serve a similar double function: they create distance that makes violence narratable while insisting on its connection to the present. Marianne Hirsch's concept of post memory, the way traumatic events

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are transmitted across generations and continue to shape experience even for those who did not directly witness them[16], is given concrete visual form in Puzhu in particular, where the father's caste formation becomes the son's inheritance[17].

Aesthetic Representation and Focalization

Narratives shape the way people understand their daily lives, their relationships, and themselves[18]. The gradual progress of Malayalam film subsequently improving the showcase of violence. The films in this study make very different choices about how to render violence visually. Some show it. Most do not, or not directly. The decision to withhold graphic representation is itself a form of argument: it insists that the violence is not the point, but the point is what the root cause of violence and it ought to be the discussion rather than showing the bloodshed. Vivian Sobchack has written about the risk that cinematic violence becomes what she calls senseless violence, a purely aesthetic event drained of moral content[19]. Recent Malayalam films on honour killing have largely avoided this. Their violence tends to arrive as consequence rather than spectacle: the horror has already happened in the social arrangements, and the killing is only the most visible expression of it. Also these films actually giving the room for visualise the violence with the catalyst of sound and music's. Filmmakers have historically been reminded of their responsibility to produce entertainment that does not violate the moral sensibilities of audiences[20], but what counts as a moral violation has changed considerably. Showing caste violence has become, in some quarters, less scandalous than excusing it.

The question of whose perspective organises the film is not merely aesthetic. It is political. Early films like Kaattu Thulasi maintained a kind of omniscient detachment that distributed moral weight somewhat evenly between the killers and the killed[21]. That distribution is itself a position, one that asks the viewer to understand, if not forgive, those who enforce honour codes. Recently the films actually moved away from that model without completely. A film centred entirely on the perpetrator risks generating sympathy for the wrong person. A film centred entirely on the victim risks reducing a person's life to their death. The most fascinating films in this group try to hold both without failing the distinction between them.

Caste and Gendered Dimensions of Honour Violence

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The films are consistent on one point in mollywood: honour killings in Kerala are not primarily crimes of passion. They are organised responses to perceived violations of caste hierarchy, and gender is the mechanism through which that hierarchy most often enforces itself. Puzhu locates this ideology in the psychology of an individual man without allowing that psychology to become a private matter; it is always legible as a social formation[22]. O Baby makes explicit what the Hindu-centric discourse around caste sometimes obscures, namely that the Christian community in Kerala has its own hierarchies, its own sense of who counts as a permissible match, and its own willingness to kill in defence of those boundaries[23].

Feminist scholars including Lata Mani and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan have argued that honour is, at its root, a gendered concept: women's bodies become the territory on which family reputation is inscribed and defended[24]. The films bear this out. But they also complicate the picture. Thudarum demonstrates that men, particularly men from lower-caste backgrounds or men who do not conform to normative masculinity, are also targets of honour-based violence, even if the mechanisms and social meanings are somewhat different. In such condition we can argue that, honour killing is not only standing with gender, beyond that who dominate and who subordinate. In most of the crimes, the dominate doing crimes without regarding gender. So gender binary is real but not total.

Queer Dimensions: Expanding the Framework

Sookshmadarshini does something that Malayalam cinema had not previously done in any sustained way: it insists that honour violence is also a queer issue. The film's central killing is motivated not by a cross-caste relationship but by a same-sex one, and it asks its viewer to understand these two forms of violation as structurally related rather than categorically distinct. Apart from honour violence, the film actually tries to tell the politics of new normal. Jasbir Puar's work on the intersections of caste, gender, and sexuality is relevant here: honour violence is not driven by any single axis of discrimination but by their combination, and the strategies for resisting it need to be correspondingly multiple[25]. Sookshmadarshini's implicit argument is that anti-caste activism and LGBTQ+ rights movements share more ground than their institutional separation might suggest.

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The film's transnational setting adds another dimension. The killing takes place home with new technical methods, with the help of own mother and brother. Here the queer relationship is not much actually accepted by the Kerala society and comparing with inter caste marriage the amount of same sex marriage is not so common and the legal side of such marriage is not protected by law in India. Sookshmadarshini makes that argument cinematically: the mother issues the order from across the world, and the family's sense of honour crosses borders without difficulty.[26].

Ideological Positions and Limitations

These films are doing something important and they are making visible a category of violence that official India prefers to count as something else. Human Rights Watch has described honour crimes as violent acts, typically murder, committed by male relatives against female family members believed to have brought shame on the family[27]. The films push past this definition to implicate entire communities and state institutions, and in doing so they align with what Partha Chatterjee calls the politics of the governed: the use of cultural forms by excluded groups to make claims the political system has not acknowledged[28]. Rather than waiting for the state to produce an authentic account of caste-based murder, these films produce their own record and that hits hard in the society.

The limitations are real and should not be softened. A well-meaning filmmaker from an upper-caste background making a film about Dalit experience runs the risk of what researcher Sara Sharma describes as elite ventriloquism: performing the voice of the marginalised rather than creating conditions in which that voice can actually be heard[29]. The revenge narrative, however emotionally satisfying, tends to frame justice as a personal rather than structural matter, and scholars working in opponent traditions have argued persuasively that this framing ultimately serves existing power arrangements more than it challenges them. These existing disparities does not neutralise what the films achieved. But they do place a responsibility on critics and audiences to notice them.

Impact on Public Discourse and Social Movements

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The effects of these films outside the cinema hall are not always easy to trace, but some patterns are reasonably clear.

- *Increased Visibility:* There is something that visual narrative can do that statistics and journalism cannot, which is to make the specific person visible within the general category. Visual storytelling amplifies suppressed voices, offering perspective and placing audiences in worlds they might not otherwise encounter[30]. Films like Puzhu and Anweshippin Kandethum have given audiences in Kerala a shared vocabulary for discussing caste violence that was previously available only within activist communities.
- *Legal and Political Mobilisation:* Kerala society actually facing the common issue that there is no specific legislation for honour related violence. But that void is actually accounting the films that contributed to public pressure for stricter enforcement of laws against honour-based violence and have provided activist groups with cultural reference points around which to organise. The connection between film and political mobilisation in Kerala has a long history, and these films are part of a continuing tradition.
- *Educational Interventions:* Most outstanding feature of films in general is, its acceptance regardless of age and gender. Several of these films have been used in classroom and workshop settings, particularly in contexts where organisations work with young people on questions of caste and gender. The emotional accessibility of cinema allows conversations that more abstract modes of education sometimes foreclose.
- *Intergenerational Dialogue:* Films actually making younger generation to think and ask, why? and for what? Perhaps most significantly, these films have given younger viewers in Kerala something to point to in conversations with older family members about caste prejudice. That the pointing sometimes goes badly is also true, but the conversation is happening, and the films have made it more possible.

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Conclusion

What Malayalam cinema has been doing with honour killings since the mid-twentieth century is not a simple story of progress. The early films were not entirely silent: they registered grief, even if they stopped short of accusation. The recent films are more willing to name what is actually happening and to hold institutions accountable, but they are also entangled with the commercial pressures and the social positions of the people who make them. What has genuinely changed is the range of voices the films attempt to include and the political directness with which they approach caste as a structural rather than personal matter. That is not a small change. Silenced histories need spaces in which to surface, and however imperfect the medium, these films have created some of those spaces. The work that remains is not only cinematic. The field needs lower-caste filmmakers with access to production resources and distribution networks, not as subjects of other people's films but as the ones making the decisions. And the films themselves need to do more than condemn what has happened. The most useful thing they can do, and occasionally do, is to insist on the possibility of different arrangements entirely.

Endnotes

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