

**LIVES ON SCREEN: A STUDY OF SELECT
MALAYALAM BIOPICS**

Thesis submitted to the
University of Calicut for the award of the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled "**Lives on Screen: A Study of Select Malayalam Biopics**" submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of the Doctor of Philosophy in English is a record of bona fide research carried out by **Jyothsana M Ramesh** under my supervision and guidance. No part of this thesis had been submitted earlier for the award of any degree, diploma, title, or recognition.

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I, Jyothsana M Ramesh, hereby declare that this thesis titled “**Lives on Screen: A Study of Select Malayalam Biopics**” submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of the Doctor of Philosophy in English is a bona fide record of research carried out by me, and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any other degree, diploma, fellowship, or any other similar titles.

Place: Devagiri
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Jyothsana M. Ramesh
Research Scholar

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ABSTRACT

Cinema, a powerful and pervasive art form, transcends linguistic and cultural barriers, connecting people across the globe through shared emotions and universal human experiences, making it one of the most influential and widely enjoyed forms of entertainment and cultural expression. As a vast and varied terrain, the cinematic landscape encompasses a wide range of genres, from the thrilling escapism of action films to the thought-provoking explorations of philosophical dramas, including biopics that offer a unique window into the lives and achievements of remarkable individuals. While Western cinema boasts a prolific tradition of biopic production, encompassing a wide range of subjects from musicians and artists to political leaders and historical icons, Indian cinema, despite notable examples, exhibits a comparatively less extensive corpus of biopics, often centering on a more circumscribed range of subjects. The Indian biopic, still a growing genre, often grapples with the delicate balance between historical accuracy and cinematic dramatization, navigating the complexities of portraying real-life figures while engaging audiences with compelling narratives. Though a relatively small segment of the industry, biopics in Malayalam have gradually evolved, transcending hagiographic representations to explore the complexities of human experience, offering nuanced depictions of its subjects. This thesis examines the evolving trajectory of the Malayalam biopic since 2010, observing a pronounced shift in focus from the public lives of its subjects towards a more intimate exploration of their private lives, as exemplified by films such as *Yugapurushan*, *Makaramanju*, *Celluloid*, *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, and *Aami*.

Keywords: cinema, biopic, Indian, Malayalam, public, private.

സംഗ്രഹം

ലോകത്ത് ആളുകളെ സ്വാധീനിക്കുന്ന കലാരൂപങ്ങളിൽ മുൻപന്തിയിൽ നിൽക്കുന്ന ഒന്നാണ് ചലച്ചിത്രം (cinema). ഭാഷാപരവും സാംസ്കാരികവുമായ അതിർത്തികളെയല്ലാമറികുന്നത്, ലോകമെമ്പാടുമുള്ള മനുഷ്യരുടെ വികാരങ്ങളുടെയും ഇതര അനുഭവങ്ങളുടെയും ദൃശ്യ-ശ്രവ്യ അനുഭൂതിതലമായി ഇത് മാറുന്നു. അതുകൊണ്ടുതന്നെയാണ് സിനിമ ഏറ്റവും സ്വാധീനമുള്ളതും വ്യാപകമായി ആസ്വദിക്കപ്പെടുന്നതുമായ വിനോദ-സാംസ്കാരിക ആവിഷ്കാരങ്ങളിലൊന്നായി മാറുന്നത്. സിനിമാറ്റിക് ലാൻഡ്സ്കേപ്പ് വൈവിധ്യമാർന്ന ജനജീവിതങ്ങളെയും ജോനറുകളെയും ഉൾക്കൊള്ളുന്ന ഒന്നാണ്. ജാതി-മത-ലിംഗ വൈവിധ്യങ്ങളെയല്ലാമ അത് തനിമയോടെ ആവിഷ്കരിക്കുന്നു. ആക്ഷൻ സിനിമകളുടെ കണ്ണഞ്ചിപ്പിക്കുന്ന കാഴ്ചകൾ, തത്വചിന്താപരമായ വിഷയങ്ങൾ, ചിരിപ്പിക്കുന്ന കരയിപ്പിക്കുന്ന ഭയപ്പെടുത്തുന്ന വിഷയങ്ങൾ, കൗതുകജനകമായ വിഷയങ്ങൾ, ശാസ്ത്രസാങ്കേതികവിഷയങ്ങൾ എന്നിങ്ങനെ വ്യത്യസ്തമായ ശൈലികളെ (Genre) സ്വീകരിക്കുന്ന ലോകസിനിമയിലെ വൈവിധ്യമാർന്ന ജോനറുകളിലൊന്നാണ് ജീവചരിത്രസിനിമകൾ (Biopic). പ്രസിദ്ധരായ വ്യക്തികളുടെ ജീവിതത്തിലേക്കും നേട്ടങ്ങളിലേക്കും ക്യാമറ ചലിപ്പിക്കുന്നതിലൂടെ അവരെയും അവരുടെ ജീവിതത്തെയും ചരിത്രത്തെക്കുറിച്ചും ഡോക്യുമെന്റ് ചെയ്യപ്പെടുകയാണ്. ജീവചരിത്ര സിനിമകളുടെ സമൃദ്ധമായ പാരമ്പര്യം പശ്ചാത്യസിനിമലോകത്തിന് അവകാശപ്പെടാനുണ്ട്. എന്നാൽ ഇന്ത്യൻ സിനിമയെ സംബന്ധിച്ചിടത്തോളം ഈ മേഖലയിൽ ശ്രദ്ധേയമായ ഉദാഹരണങ്ങൾ അപൂർവ്വമായി മാത്രമേ ഉണ്ടായിട്ടുള്ളൂ. ചുരുക്കി പറഞ്ഞാൽ ഇന്ത്യൻ ജീവചരിത്രസിനിമകൾ ഇപ്പോഴും ശൈശവദശയിലാണെന്ന് പറയാം.

യഥാർത്ഥ ജീവിതത്തെ പ്രതിനിധാനം ചെയ്യുന്നതോടൊപ്പം കാഴ്ചക്കാരെ ആകർഷിക്കുന്ന കഥകളും ആഖ്യാനമാതൃകകളും സ്വീകരിക്കുക എന്നതും ചിത്രങ്ങളുടെ സവിശേഷതയായോ വാണിജ്യപരമായ ആവശ്യകതയായോ മനസ്സിലാക്കണം. മലയാള സിനിമമേഖലയെ സംബന്ധിച്ചിടത്തോളം ജീവചരിത്രസിനിമകൾ താരതമ്യേന ചെറിയൊരു വിഭാഗമാണ്. എങ്കിൽപ്പോലും അവ ക്രമേണ വികസിച്ചു മനുഷ്യാനുഭവങ്ങളുടെ സങ്കീർണ്ണതകളെയും മനോവ്യാപാരങ്ങളെയും പ്രതിനിധീകരിക്കുന്നു. ഈ പ്രതിനിധാനം അതിശയോക്തികരമായ ആഖ്യാനമാതൃകകളെ മറികടന്നുകൊണ്ടുള്ള സൂക്ഷ്മമായ ആവിഷ്കാരങ്ങളാണ് എന്നത് സവിശേഷമാണ്.

2010 മുതൽ മലയാള ജീവചരിത്രസിനിമകളുടെ പരിണാമപാത ഈ പ്രബന്ധം പരിശോധിക്കുന്നു. വ്യക്തികളുടെ പൊതുജീവിതത്തിൽ നിന്ന് അവരുടെ സ്വകാര്യ ജീവിതങ്ങളെ കൂടുതൽ സൂക്ഷ്മമായി പരിശോധിക്കുകയും വിശകലനവിധേയമാക്കുകയും ചെയ്യുന്നു എന്നത് ഈ പ്രബന്ധത്തിന്റെ സവിശേഷതയാണ്. യുഗപുരുഷൻ, മകരമഞ്ഞ്, സെല്ലുലോയ്ഡ്, എന്നു നിന്റെ മൊയ്തീൻ, ആമി തുടങ്ങിയ സിനിമകളാണ് ഈ പഠനത്തിൽ ചർച്ച ചെയ്യപ്പെടുന്നത്.

കീവേഡുകൾ: ജീവചരിത്രസിനിമകൾ, പൊതുജീവിതം, സ്വകാര്യ ജീവിതം, ജോനറുകൾ, മലയാളസിനിമ

INTRODUCTION

Cinema operates as a multidimensional and complex art medium, with its proven expertise reflecting and representing sociocultural conventions and delineating human experiences. Intricate narratives expressed through the unique language of cinema, which comprises diverse techniques like editing, framing and lighting, aim to appeal emotionally and intellectually to film viewers. Cinema, a cultural phenomenon, transcends boundaries and cultures, thus giving insight into global empathy and the universal human condition. Veterans of cinema, like D.W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein, moulded the cinematic language, stressing cinematography and other elements, thus enhancing the scope of cinema. As an artistic agency of reality, cinema continues to evolve, providing unique narrative approaches and experiences through different genres. Genre, as a linchpin of visual storytelling, stays dynamic under the changing preferences of the audience and shapes the way stories are narrated and perceived visually.

From its very outset, cinema is seen to have banked on the past, or rather history, as a context integral to the plot, in so far as the subject matter was adopted from the historical past. Finding inspiration in episodes from both historical and contemporary periods, cinema examines a specific age or a particular person in history, which, from a larger perspective, is categorized as the historical genre. Launched with D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the historical film has continued to preserve cultural significance. The influence of Griffith's novel way of filmic representation of history is most evident in Soviet cinema, especially in Sergei

Eisenstein's movies like *Battleship Potempkin* (1925) and *Oktybar/October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (1925). The historical movie, as a part of mainstream cinema, usually has a unified structure and leaves the audience with a historical and moral vision and a sense of elevation, as in movies like *The Last Emperor* (1987). The genre takes into account the stories of eminent men, and sometimes women, who are presented with a 'great men' view of history in these movies. While dramatising history, these movies strive to deepen the viewer's comprehension of the historical events portrayed in the movie. Through historical movies, the audience gets a glimpse of the past—structures, antiquities, and terrains—through which they obtain a different way of perceiving the past. Historical movies, as a novel kind of history that functions within limited boundaries, can hardly be evaluated by the standards applied to written history, which professional historians regard as the principal source of reliable information.

Historical movies influence the way the contemporary public perceives the past. A cinematic adaptation of history involving multiple factors like screenplay, director, producer, and actor usually adopts a different stance in re-presenting history. As defined by Natalie Davis, the historical film is a genre composed of dramatic feature films in which the primary plot is based on actual historical events or in which an imagined plot utilizes historical events, making them central to the story (5). As a film genre, it has revived itself numerous times in terms of its aesthetics and approaches. Imparting the audience with an affective connection to the past, historical movies, as claimed by Robert Burgoyne, have five subdivisions: war films that portray heroism and atrocities of war, epic films that adopt an event from

history or mythology with an exuberant setting, topical films that focus on a particular period instead of grand narratives, metahistorical films that give an interpretation or critique of the conventional presentation of history and biographical films centered on a single individual (3).

A great deal of movies generally labelled as historical also belong to the biographical genre, with their focus on a central character. Such films are essentially preoccupied with a specific event or episode in which the particular subject plays a decisive role. While its precursors, like epic movies and costume dramas, combine history and fiction, simultaneously drawing attention to historical and biographical aspects, a biographical movie centres on a specific individual's life story. A biographical picture, abbreviated as a biopic, essentially deals with the life of an individual whose fame or disrepute justifies the importance or idiosyncrasy of his or her story. George F. Custen, the pioneer of biopic studies, who gave an authentic and critical study of the biopic, defines the genre in his seminal text, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*: "A biopic, then, from its earliest days, is minimally composed of the life, or the portion of a life, of a real person whose real name is used" (6). The scope of a biopic rests on the visual representation of a real individual's life, in addition to the minimal investment of time—approximately three hours—compared to a biography or autobiography, which demands a substantial amount of time.

All films that fall into the category of biopics have the same core of adapting a real person's life to screen, though the approaches selected can differ significantly. As stated by Matthew Robinson in his doctoral thesis, *Mapping the British Biopic*:

Evolution, Conventions, Reception, and Masculinities, "It offers a lesson through depicting figures from the past, their contributions, and achievements" (6). Biopics, by and large, tend to choose a particular period in the subject's life, and they portray the hardships in the subject's life just as they highlight his or her triumphs. It is rather unlikely to locate a biopic that does not feature the adversities, challenges, and hardships faced by the subject. However, the biopic as a film genre has frequently been exposed to disputes and controversies based on the portrayal of the subject. As a distinct genre, the biopic gained popularity early enough in the West, unlike in India, where the genre only recently received widespread recognition.

The rich history of Indian cinema can be traced back to the late nineteenth century when the Lumiere Brothers' movie premiered in Bombay, after which Sakharam Bhatavdekar released *The Wrestlers*, featuring a wrestling match in the Hanging Gardens in Bombay, which is claimed to be the first motion picture in India. However, the history of Indian cinema in its real sense begins with *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), the first full-length motion picture directed by Dada Saheb Phalke, often acclaimed as the Father of Indian Cinema. A commercial success in India, its narrative discourse is based on the Hindu mythology of King Harishchandra, who, in his dream, passed his kingdom to Viswamitra as alms. After its release, the Indian film scenario began to be dominated by mythological and devotional contents, which were delineated emphatically and picturesquely for their universal appeal. With the standard template of good versus evil, heavenly deities like Krishna and Rama took shape and form through such movies, thus imparting the genre a massive appeal to the audience. As Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small*

Things writes, “The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again” (229). The trend of mythological stories on screen continued even after the silent era. With movies like *Draupadi* (1931), *Radha Krishna* (1933), and *Chandrasena* (1931), the episodes from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and other mythological tales consistently became cinematic themes for quite some time. Rajesh Kumar Srivastava, in “The Study of Narratives During the Silent Era (1913–1931)” observes, “The familiarity with the mythological tales, religious devotion to gods, goddesses, and saints, and faith in divinity for performing miracles to provide solutions to problems in life all contributed to the popularity of this genre” (854). The strict censorship prevalent in the pre-independent era, as well as the nationalist sentiments against the imperialist government catapulted by such movies, augmented the popularity of the genre. Almost all the talkies in the early years were mythological, devotional, or historical; apart from mere representations of legendary figures, religions, and beliefs, they were underpinned by the nation's concerns at large.

In India, saints and holy men like Surdas and Tulsidas were rendered with the same attributes as gods because the profound influence of their lives and lessons had a significant impact on the public. The movies based on devotees, generally classified as devotional movies, are often biographical narratives of their lives, usually beginning with a mysterious birth followed by miraculous powers in adulthood, which makes them different from others. Contrary to the larger society, the saint triumphs by divine intervention or by some miracle that makes them worshipped and departs from the earthly realm with his or her mission accomplished.

In line with Rachel Dwyer, "The devotional genre is concerned with the life of a historical devotee, of a sant ("saint"), of a particular deity—a concern that brings it closer to the biopic, although the figure of the devotee has a striking iconicity and remoteness... (220). Devotional movies like *Dharmatma* (1935), *Sant Tukaram* (1936), and *Sant Sakhu* (1941), apart from being sources of entertainment, played a pivotal role in inculcating moral and spiritual values in the audience. The overlapping of genres has been a trend in Indian cinema since its early days, which substantiates the intermingling of devotional and mythological movies. Nevertheless, Dwyer differentiates the devotional from the mythological, "as they show new visual relays of looks between the audience, the devotee, and the divine, allowing the audience to relate to the film very differently from the audience of the mythological film, which demands more awe on the part of the spectator, who has to watch from something of a distance (65)." However, both mythological and devotional movies, allied to the Indian nationalist movement, endeavored to create a distinct history of honorable historical figures who sacrificed their lives for virtue, morals, and social reformation.

Another genre closely related to the Indian biopic is the historical film, which dates back to the early days of Indian cinema. Neerja Vyas, in her doctoral thesis titled *Narrative Form of Selected Hindi Biopics: An Empirical Study of Style and Structure*, observes, "biographical films or biopics hold a significant position among the various authentic historical discourses projected on the screen (2)". By portraying a nation in turmoil, historical films strive to pursue the devotion and hardships of the national heroes and heroines towards a mission. According to

Matthew Robinson, “Historical films may feature historical personages, but their principal focus is on a documented event rather than an individual’s life story (8)”. With early historical movies like *Taj Mahal* (1941) and *Humayun* (1945), there has been an attempt to safeguard and promote the cultural legacy of India, thereby contributing to the country’s collective imagination. While the significance of historical movies primarily rests on the undertones of patriotism, they also highlight the struggles and sacrifices of national figures. Reflecting the socio-political milieu, films like *Chandraguptha Chanakya* (1940) and *Jhansi ki Rani* (1953) display the concerns of pre-independent India arousing a nationalistic spirit in the audience. However, according to Sumita S. Chakravarty, “the commercial Bombay cinema has sought to stay clear of controversy by converting history into pageantry and spectacle and developing a repertoire of characters who are presented over and over again in forms firmly lodged in the public memory” (158). As in other national biopics, this genre is a precursor to Indian biopics, featuring legendary or revolutionary figures against a historical backdrop.

The Indian biopic as a film genre evolved from the mythological and historical genres, signalling a change in the cinematic narration that diligently focuses on the altering cultural and intellectual sensibilities of the viewers. Though mythological movies have no direct influence on biopics, the overlaps and parallels between the two cannot be overlooked. As previously suggested, mythological movies focus on epic figures like Rama and Krishna, who fought against vicious forces. At the same time, biopics chronicle the lives of real individuals who have made a mark in history by facing challenges in their ways. The slow shift from the

mythological to the historical, which explored the lives of renowned personalities in Indian history, gradually invoked an increased interest in real-life narratives among the film-going audience. Rachel Dwyer's assertion that the "first cycle of biopics in mainstream "Bollywood" in the early 2000s was part of the revival of the historical genre has been vindicated by movies like *Asoka* (2001), *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002), and *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005) (223). In the current scenario, biopics produced in India cover a broad spectrum of subjects, with the lives of sports stars taking center stage. Examples of sports biopics include *Soorma* (2018), based on the hockey player Sandeep Singh, *Kaun Pravin Tambe?* (2023) on the oldest IPL cricketer, Pravin Tambe, and *Shabaash Mithu* (2022) on cricketer Mithali Shah. Artists and entertainers become the subject of biopics such as *Amar Singh Chamkila* (2024) on Punjabi singer Amar Singh, *Mahanati* (2018) on actress Savitri, and *Maharashtra Shahir* (2023), a Marathi film based on Shahir Shable, a legendary figure in Marathi theatre; politicians are the subject of films like *Main Atal Hoon* (2024) on the life of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2019) on Dr Manmohan Singh, and *Thackeray* (2019) on Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray. There are films about social reformers and activists, such as *Gul Makai* (2020), about Malala Yousufzai, and *Satyashodhak* (2024), a Marathi biopic about Jyotirao Phule. There are even films about gangsters and terrorists, such as *Daddy* (2017), which is about Arun Gawli, a gangster who later became a politician, and *Omerta* (2017), which is about Omar Saeed Sheikh, a British terrorist who was originally from Pakistan. In addition, movies like *Super 30* (2019), based on the Indian mathematician Anand Kumar, reflect the fascination of the Indian biopic makers for lesser-known individuals who have made an enormous impact on society.

Along with nuanced filmmaking styles, the audience's escalating appeal for real-life narratives that investigate the complexities of human experience contributed to the evolution of Indian biopics. As a means of both entertainment and cultural assertion, the Indian biopic, in its phase of evolution, tends to present a new version or a re-creation of the past while inspiring the present generation. As a part of its evolution, the Indian biopic transitions from portraying the lives of eminent and influential figures to the stories of the marginalized and oppressed, where the biopic makers delve into their obscure lives, bringing them out to the world. Recently, there has been a proliferation of women-centric biopics like *Neerja* (2010), *Mary Kom* (2014), and *Shakuntala Devi* (2020), which elucidate both the challenges and the achievements in the lives of the protagonists. By promoting contemporary aesthetics of storytelling, the Indian biopic adopts an alternative approach to the genre, which implies an evident shift towards a refined representation of the subject with more emphasis on the intricacies of his or her inner life. Such a drift indicates the command of biographical narratives to inspire thought and action in film viewers, thus signifying a significant breakthrough as regards the evolution of Indian biopics. The biopic, however, is only a recent phenomenon in India due to cultural, historical, and socio-political reasons, such as political sensitivity, disaccord with the ruling party's ideology, and ethical controversies.

As mentioned earlier, in a global industry like Hollywood, with a rich literary tradition and penchant for celebrity culture, the biopic has been a part of the early cinematic era, and the popularity of the genre across various film industries probably rests on the international impact of Hollywood. Conventional Indian cinema, intent

on pure entertainment, predominantly relied on fictional themes until recently to suit the preferences of the viewers. Bollywood, the biggest film industry in India, possessed by economic concerns, focused on established genres like romance, melodrama, and action movies rather than biographical movies, which were considered a risky undertaking for a long time.

Until a few films in the genre became successful, the producers were unsure whether to invest in biopics. The traditional practice of ascribing a certain reverence to prominent people or historical figures, often treated with adulation, might be one of the reasons that dissuaded film directors from portraying their lives on screen, fearing controversies and litigation. The advent of the Indian biopic, associated with broader changes in society as well as the evolving tastes of the audience, led the filmmakers to explore and experiment with a variety of subjects. Along with increased exposure to Hollywood cinema, the success of a few Indian biopics has inspired filmmakers to embark on the genre. With the globalisation of cinema and the popularity of international biopics, the preferences of film viewers and film directors began to evolve, resulting in the burgeoning of biographical movies in India. As a part of the transition, directors developed a rising interest in the extraordinary lives of real people, thus making their stories a significant part of the Indian film industry. Despite the myriad challenges like authenticity, critical issues, and controversial aspects of the subjects' lives, Indian directors blaze their own trail to feature unknown life stories, promoting a subtler perception of history. Even though biopics took longer to gain a foothold in India than their Western

counterparts, their advent marks a substantial evolution in Indian cinema, bestowing the audience with a broad range of stories rooted in Indian lives and culture.

With the genre's success in Bollywood, regional film industries like Malayalam cinema also began to try their hand at the new formula of the biopic. The genesis of the Malayalam film industry can be traced as early as 1928 with J.C. Daniel's *Vigathakumaran*, long before even the state of Kerala was formed. Directed by S. Nottani, the first talkie *Balan* was released in 1938, after which there had been a wide variety of film forms ranging from arthouse to commercial ones. As previously stated, the biopic has been in vogue since 1930 in the West and post-2000 in Bollywood, but only recently developed in Malayalam cinema. According to Rachel Dwyer, "In Indian cinema, there is much overlap with other genres that have a quasi-historical nature, including the founding genre of Indian cinema, the mythological – where stories often form a mythological biopic that focuses on gods/goddesses and heroes/heroines, mostly from Hindu mythology" (220). The early years of the twentieth century saw the release of a few Malayalam mythological movies, including *Prahlada* (1948). A remake of a Tamil film, *Prahlada*, inspired by the *Vishnupurana*, recounts the story of the ardent devotee of Lord Vishnu. A further instance of a mythological movie in Malayalam is Anthony Mithradas' *Harishchandra* (1955), based on the legendary king. As a popular genre, mythological movies were common in Malayalam cinema even in the 1970s and 1980s with G. Aravindan's *Kanchana Sita* (1977), a reworking of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, *Swami Ayyappan* (1975), a bilingual movie shot simultaneously in

Malayalam and Tamil, which was a huge success, and *Sree Ayyappanum Vavarum* (1982), revolving around Lord Ayyappa and his companion Vavar.

In a similar pattern to Bollywood, Malayalam cinema also saw the emergence of the devotional genre, which, according to Rachel Dwyer,

... was mostly made in languages other than Hindi, as it used the songs of saints in the languages in which they were composed. Both of these genres- the mythological and the devotional- were closely associated with the national movement in the colonial period, as their stories focused on the creation of a different history, on the struggle of the righteous and on the semi-historical figures who underwent trials in their efforts to promote truth and (very frequently) social reform (220).

Movies like *Thomasleeha* (1975), inspired by the life of St. Thomas, the Apostle who reached the Malabar coast in 52 AD to spread Christian faith among the masses, and *Jagadguru Aadishankaran* (1977), based on the life and miracles of the eighth-century saint Sri Sankaracharya, are instances of devotional biopics in Malayalam.

The historical genre, a forerunner of the biopic, set foot as early as the silent era and established itself as a prominent category in almost all film industries around the globe. *Marthanda Varma* (1933), the second Malayalam movie, based on the historical novel of C.V. Raman Pillai of the same title, narrates the history of Travancore and Marthanda Varma's accession to the throne while fighting his arch rivals. The movie being an adaptation of a literary work justifies that visual adaptation is as old as cinema itself. Julie Sanders, in *Adaptation and Appropriation*,

writes: "On the surface, all screen versions of novels are transpositions in the sense that they take a text from one genre and deliver it to new audiences by means of aesthetic conventions of an entirely different generic process (here novel into film)" (20). Over the years, Malayalam cinema itself has proved its mettle in adapting literary works through huge successes like *Thoovanathumpikal* (1987), *Mathilukal* (1990), *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* (2009), and many more. An extensive adaptation of biographies or real-life narratives onto the big screen came only in the later phase of the evolution of Malayalam cinema.

With its great heritage, Malayalam cinema has been credited with notable historical movies or historical biopics that have left a substantial impact on the audience. Directed by G Viswanath, the historical movie *Veluthambi Dalawa* (1962) chronicles the life of the Diwan of Travancore, who rebelled against the dominance of the English East India Company. *Thacholi Othenan* (1964), another historical movie, centres on the life of the gifted warrior who lived in 16th-century Kerala. *Pazhassi Raja* (1964), directed by Kunchako and Kottarakkara Sreedharan Nair in the titular role, adapts the life of the eighteenth-century ruler famed for his guerilla warfare. Lenin Rajendran's *Swathi Thirunal* (1987) depicts the life of Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma, the Maharaja of Travancore, who was distinguished as an outstanding musician with more than four hundred classical compositions to his credit. The long-preserved stories of these historical figures found new life with the release of historical and biographical movies, and the genre has retained its popularity even in the twenty-first century. Mammooty as Pazhassi Raja, a later screen adaptation, *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* (2009), by M.T. Vasudevan Nair and

Hariharan, reveals how the king, despite the limited resources, confronted the English East India Company with the support of tribal warriors like Thalakkal Chanthu and Neeli, played by Manoj K. Jayan and Padmapriya, respectively. Focusing on the ideologies and philosophies of Sree Narayana Guru, the great social reformer, *Yugapurushan* (2010) delineates his public life while highlighting the major reform movements of his age. *Veeraputhran* (2011), inspired by the life of freedom fighter Mohammed Abdur Rahiman, traces the momentous history of Malabar along with nationalist movements like the Khilafat Movement and Salt Satyagraha. The postmodern era, with its innovative textual and pictorial platforms, enables new theories of history to perceive genres as flexible, which in turn inspires creative and experimental representations of the past. The proliferation of new kinds of history in the form of documentaries and movies has facilitated the rise and popularity of historical biopics.

A biopic, as previously noted, depicts the life of a real person employing his or her real name, which enhances the authenticity of the movie. However, Rachel Dwyer reflects on movies that seem to be based on real-life characters and are easily identifiable, where the subject's real name is cached, which she brands 'quasi-biopics':

A cycle of quasi-biopics in the late 2000s dealt with recent lives of less revered figures, easily identified though not named, although the stories were closely based on the heroes of India's emerging new middle classes: businessmen (*Guru*, directed by Mani Ratnam, 2007), sportspeople (*Chak De! India*, directed by Shimit Amin, 2007), filmstars (*Woh Lamhe*, directed by

Mohit Suri, 2006; *Khoya Khoya Chand* directed by Sudhir Misra, 2007) and underworld dons (*Sarkar*, 2005 and *Sarkar Raj*, 2008, both directed by Ram Gopal Varma), the latter drawing heavily on the *Godfather* story. *Once upon a Time in Mumbai* (directed by Milan Luthria, 2010) was immediately identified with the story of gangsters Haji Mastan and Daud Ibrahim. (226)

The Malayalam movie industry has also long included quasi-biopics, which explore the lives of actual individuals from diverse spheres while replacing their true names with fictitious ones. One of the easily identifiable quasi-biopics, *Lekhayude Maranam Oru Flashback* (1983), directed by K.G. George, is presumably based on the yesteryear actress Shobha and her relationship with a director, culminating in her suicide. *Piravi* (1989), directed by Shaji N. Karun, relies on the life of Professor T.V. Eachara Warriar, who was in the public eye for his legal battle against the Congress government during the Emergency period in an attempt to gather the facts about the disappearance of his son Rajan, then a student at Calicut Regional Engineering College, who was arrested by Kerala Police for his alleged naxal association and perhaps died in police custody. Helmed by director Ranjith, *Thirakkatha* (2008) is supposedly inspired by the love affair of the yesteryear actress Srividhya and Kamal Hassan. With a remarkable narrative style, shifting between past and present through the perspectives of different characters, the movie highlighting Sreevidya's life based itself on many good old actresses whose once glorious days dwindled into sheer destitution. Darshana Sreedhar and Vinu Abraham, in "When Ghosts Come Calling: Re-Projecting the Disappeared Muses of Malayalam Cinema," write:

The tumultuous but short-lived romance between Sreevidya and co-actor Kamal Hasan became the cornerstone for weaving the narrative into a ‘pastiche’, liberally borrowing from the gossip columns familiar to film viewers. The intertextual references to film texts were such that it brought a vibrant community of online bloggers to open up the interpretative possibilities which the film offered when read alongside the offscreen references. (337-338)

Chalakkudikkaran Changathi (2018), directed by Vinayan, is apparently built on Malayalam actor Kalabhavan Mani’s life, which addresses all the crucial incidents of his life and attempts to rule out his mysterious death. There are plenty of other quasi-biopics in Malayalam addressing real-life characters and incidents, including *Devaasuram* (1993), one of the evergreen hits in Malayalam cinema, which was premised on the life of Mullasserri Rajagopal, a feudal lord and a connoisseur of art, with Mohanlal as Mangalasseri Neelakantan and Revathi as his love interest, Bhanumathi. The actual names were stashed due to the fear of unforeseen controversies and legal issues, and many biographical narratives were relegated to quasi-biopics.

A recently launched genre of Indian cinema, the biopic began to yield success at the end of the 2000s, consequentially leading to a surge of biopics in India. According to Dwyer, “the circulation of life stories in the media—from books to internet sites, urban legends, gossip, and historical documents—clearly provides a rich source of potential biopics” (228). The contemporary prevalence of the biopic points to the current fascination for celebrity culture, which is enhanced by the

ubiquitous influence of digital media. Nevertheless, the biopic as a film genre is often tethered to scepticism and ambiguity regarding film critics and serious cinema viewers, constituting a major reason for the exiguity of biopics. Woven into the concept of biopics are some challenging hurdles that the directors must overcome when making a biopic. Primarily, the consent of the subject's family is to be sought for the threat of legal complications before commencing the production of a biopic. Dwyer discusses the issues of biopic making in India:

If the leading character is a figure of national stature in India and therefore has to fit the Indian contemporary audience's requirements of middle-class morality, then that character cannot be shown to be too human or too frail. Portraits must be hagiographic and conceal the unpleasant side of the personality they represent. Respect for the family of a biopic's hero is often cited, along with the threat of legal action and censorship, as either of these could delay a film indefinitely and be extremely costly. Juicy stories circulate now in other media, in particular in the digital realm, but not yet in film. (228)

In its infancy, the biographical genre dealt with great men of historical significance, while the recent biopics addressed the lives of ordinary people or relatively unknown people. The depiction of struggles, hardships, and challenges faced by ordinary people who rose to fame has created an enormous interest in biopics among the audience. So, too, the makers of a biopics are bound to portray the subjects convincingly, which is equally challenging to both the director and actors.

Another demand of the biopic is to get under the skin of the subject portrayed and to recount a story that has not been told yet. Given the demand of the

contemporary audience and to circumvent the redundancy of the accepted aspects of a renowned personality, the biopic makers interweave the unprecedented or lesser-known events of the subject's life into the narrative that entices the audience, which desires to inquire into the obscure facets of his or her life. Compressing the cradle-to-grave period of a person's life into a single movie that runs for two or three hours, needless to say, is a daunting proposition. According to Neerja Vyas:

In the Indian context, the biographical film genre can be seen to encompass films about musicians, artists, scientists, political figures, writers, sports heroes, etc. Further, the genre also encompasses films that take extremely different approaches to dramatizing lives; some biopics attempt to give a comprehensive view of the subject's entire life, while others might dramatize only one significant period in the depicted person's life. (6)

For instance, in a biopic like *Makaramanju* (2011), it is not the entire life of Raja Ravi but his life as a painter that becomes the focus of the movie.

The increasing popularity of a genre that focuses on the life of an actual individual is subject to the artistic license of the director, who employs the liberty to heighten the biographical facts and events in the subject's life. To fit into Indian cinema, the director portrays the life story with dramatic or gripping scenes, charming music, and a well-defined script. The commercial rationale of a biopic may result in the overdramatization of certain events in the subject's life, which might eventually affect the aesthetics of the biopic. The directors of commercial movies cannot afford to compromise the entertainment value of a movie, and as far as biopics are concerned, entertainment and accuracy involve a compromise; fact

and fiction need to find a perfect amalgamation in biopics. Matthew Robinson points out:

The most pervasive debate amongst reviewers and audiences concentrates on the biopic's claim to represent real people and events and its status as a commercial film, and the need to entertain. This leads to a variety of responses and judgements by reviewers and audiences. One position taken is that biopics must be historically accurate, and attempts to make them entertaining undermine this. Others consider that biopics, like other films, must entertain their audiences, even at the expense of strict historical accuracy. For some, the tension between accuracy and entertainment must always involve compromise, a trade-off, but others believe that biopics can be both accurate and entertaining. (129)

When a real-life narrative is adapted for the screen, filmmakers should be aware that an extravagant cinematic gloss can disparage the authenticity or reliability of the depiction.

The performance of actors is another onerous task in the biopic, as it is not merely about physical similarity but also about bringing life to a familiar person on screen, which demands a lot of research and exceptional insight to portray the subject. The biopic tries to offer the public a visual version of what is deemed to be the truth. Robinson records: "The biopic stimulates interest in the subject, but the visual images within the film also provide a basis from which the viewer learns about historical events and personages. The pleasure of biopics [is] linked to their contribution to the existing historical discourse" (137). By portraying a real-life

individual on screen, biopics tend to offer more verisimilitude than purely fictional narratives, as they are forceful stories of grit and glory. However, the visual representation of a real person's life could hardly be an exact or perfect adaptation of the biopic subject's life, making the movie contentious by including, blurring, and magnifying specific incidents of his or her life. Indian cinema's tryst with biopics has not been an easy cakewalk, with its multitude of challenges permeating the process of its making and the release thereafter.

Often acclaimed for its realistic tradition, Malayalam cinema experienced a notable increase in biographical movies post-2000, echoing the popular trend of the film audience's fascination for real-life portraiture. The Malayalam biopic, by and large, ventures to portray the lives of individuals from diverse spheres who have sculpted the socio-cultural panorama of Kerala. The trend also heralds a shift in the narratological approach from delineating the public personae to exploring the emotional depths of the biopic subjects, instigating the movie makers to open new horizons of storytelling. Among the few notable instances of biopics in Malayalam are *Makaramanju* (2011), based on the life of the celebrated painter Raja Ravi Varma, *Celluloid* (2013), on J.C. Daniel, the Father of Malayalam Cinema, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (2015), on B.P. Moideen, a sociopolitical activist from Makkam in Kerala, *Clint* (2017), on a child prodigy who has 25000 paintings to his credit, *Aami* (2018), on the iconic writer Kamala Das, and *Captain* (2018), the first sports biopic in Malayalam that renders a vignette of the life of the legendary football player V.P. Sathyan. After the massive success of movies like *Dangal* (2016) in Bollywood, the appetite for biopics has only grown, which, in fact, has had its reverberations in

Malayalam cinema as well, eventually leading to a line-up of biopics on people belonging to various domains. Despite being a tightrope walk, the passion for biopic making is rife in the new millennia, which is likely to witness the release of biopics inspired by the lives of PT Usha, Kunjan Nambiar, N.N. Pillai, and numerous others.

Reviewing the existing literature or previous studies on a specific topic is an indispensable part of research, which helps to establish the conceptual framework of a study through the integration of the already existing arguments and findings. As regards a distinct genre like the Indian biopic, it has only received meagre critical interest, including academic research, even though it has been a continuing presence in the film scenario in recent years. Reviewers and critics have constantly scrutinised historical and biographical movies for their alleged incompetence in depicting facts. The biopic, a film genre patently depicting the life of a real person, is frequently impugned for disparities in veracity, reliability, and credibility. The number of biopics and related studies—including books and scholarly research—is relatively small in India compared to the West, where the genre has been prominent since the studio era. After a comprehensive review of books, research papers, articles, and different kinds of dissertations, the researcher seeks to figure out the various approaches of scholars in the field of biopics.

George F. Custen's *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992), the seminal text of the biopic, makes an extensive study of the genre in which he attempts a quantitative analysis of 291 biopics released between 1927 and 1960 in Hollywood. Custen selects biopics produced in the studio era for his interest in the mechanics of the studios, including the roles of directors and producers, actors,

copyright issues, and how they shape these movies regardless of the protagonists. He also discusses the conventions of the studio biopic, which stipulate a template to analyse the generic features of biographical movies in Britain.

Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre

(2010) by Dennis Bingham seeks to define the biopic and explore the reasons behind its marginalisation. Dealing with concerns like genre, gender, and form, Bingham tries to surmount the fallacies regarding the biopic and how film studies fail to acknowledge it as a genre with a history of its own. In his perspective, “At the heart of the biopic is to dramatize actuality, and find in it the filmmaker’s own version of truth” (10). Along with discussing the evolution and life-cycle changes of this particular genre, he identifies the differences between male biopics and female biopics, where the latter presents women’s achievements and the conventional prospects of their domesticity.

Ellen Cheshire, in *Bio-Pics: A Life in Pictures* (2014), delves into the resurgence of the biopic genre through a meticulous selection of biopics that are connected thematically. The book examines films released since 1990, categorized by the profession of the biopic subjects. Each chapter focuses on a specific profession and concludes with a list of films recommended for further exploration. With a focus mainly on Hollywood movies, the book reviews details like the biopic subject, the actors chosen, and the reception of the movies. Through her discussion of the British screenwriter Peter Morgan, who has worked on several biopics like *The Queen* (2006), she builds a picture of British biopics, their features, and the patterns used to portray British subjects.

The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture (2013), edited by Tom Brown and Belen Vidal, offers a collection of essays that discuss how the biopic subject portrays himself or herself and how the multifarious media that creates celebrities depict him or her. The book anticipates "the international life of the biopic through its hybrid forms, narratives, and politics" (2) rather than promoting studio filmmaking and "Hollywood myth-making." The biopic is called a "troublesome genre" (2) because the biopics produced in Hollywood follow the trend of a stock narrative layout with the usual melodramatic tone. As the essays in this volume try to explore the idiosyncratic visual techniques and narrative strategies in depicting real lives, they claim that the biopic is a film genre whereby a culture exemplifies the past and the present.

Addressing the thematic, theoretical, and historical approaches, *A Companion to the Biopic* (2020), edited by Deborah Cartmell and Ashley D. Polasek, is a recent study on the genre that consolidates the accounts of the lives of people, including authors, politicians, and pop stars. The book examines the changing attitudes and diverse outlooks on the biopic, focusing on issues like the difference between a biopic and a literary melodrama, stereotypes and critiques of the genre, and its social and moral ethics. As an in-depth study of the genre, it focuses on topics like what is and what is not a biopic, how a historical person reflects a current context, and underscores biopics that delineate issues of gender and race.

With a focus on British celebrities' biographical narratives adapted for both films and television, *Adaptation, Intermediality, and the British Celebrity Biopic* (2014), edited by Marta Minier and Maddalena Pennachia, confers a

multidisciplinary context that unveils how historical lives are rendered and recreated for contemporary film viewers in an engaging fashion. With the claim that the biopic is a kind of adaptation and an instance of intermediality, it analyses the hybridity of the genre along with the coinciding problematic issues of truth claim and fidelity. Through the case studies of historically renowned individuals like Queen Elizabeth, John Lennon, and William Shakespeare, the book seeks to address the British identity of legendary lives and shows how they have been redefined for films.

Invented Lives, Imagined Communities: The Biopic and American National Identity (2016) by William H. Epstein and R. Barton Palmer examines American biopics with special attention to major releases in American cinema and recent developments in film studies. The essays in this collection study how biopics express the "familiar, if often vexing, politico-cultural formation of American national identity" (2). William Epstein strives to conceive the notion of American national identity as a generic plot by bringing together Custen's insight and his own theorization of written biography. The book, while reflecting on the complex nature of the genre, attempts to illuminate the ambivalent disposition of the subject as exceptional and, at the same time, excluded from his or her society.

Browyn Polaschek's *The Postfeminist Biopic: Narrating the Lives of Plath, Kahlo, Woolf, and Austen* (2013) focuses on female biopics that are examined through a perspective of feminist theories. Within a sharp critical framework, Polaschek examines biopics released since 2000 and centres on women as creative artists, especially in movies like *Frida* (2002), *Sylvia* (2003), and *Becoming Jane* (2007). She argues that the female biopic has evolved into a subgenre in modern

cinema that manifests a "pluralistic conception of feminisms" (162). This book works in two complementary ways and imparts the desired feminist perspective to a genre premised on women. It also uses the biopic itself to reclaim feminist philosophy in mainstream cinema.

Screening the Author: The Literary Biopic (2019) by Hila Shachar, which attempts an analysis of the biopics of renowned authors, examines how their biographies have been adapted to screen. Examining the adaptations of the biographies of authors like Jane Austen, Shakespeare, and Sylvia Plath, Shachar analyses how the author is re-created on screen, thereby classifying it under the distinct genre of the literary biopic. She probes into the reason behind the perpetual significance of a particular author and considers the author's personality from cultural, ideological, and economic perspectives as a biopic subject. By employing conventional biopic tropes, the book advocates that the literary biopic deserves recognition as a genre in its own right.

In the article "Biopics and Politics: The Making and Unmaking of the Rhodes Movies" (2000), James Burns discusses the six-hour movie *Rhodes* (1996) produced by the BBC based on Cecil Rhodes, an English mining magnate and politician in Africa. As one of his generation's most popular men, Cecil Rhodes has fascinated many filmmakers. However, many of their movie projects based on his life failed because of the enormous shadow that he continues to cast over the South African political scenario. While the British colonialists perceive him as a chivalrous character, the rural natives of Africa view him as a villain who attempted to subdue them. While the article discusses other Rhodes movies like *Rhodes of Africa* (1936),

which share certain amusing parallels, it charts out the differences wherein the BBC production includes various events in Rhodes's life that were excluded in the earlier movie.

Giselle Bastin's "Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family" argues that as the definitions of the biopic change as per the period in which they are produced, so do the biopics on royalty, which show an attitudinal shift to the meaning of "royalty" itself. Compared to other biopics, the British royal biopics have an exceptional status because they deal with the most distinguished people in the West. This article discusses the Charles-Diana biopics, including *Charles and Diana: A Royal Love Story* (1982) and *The Royal Romance of Charles and Diana* (1982); it argues that royal biopics are inferior to their literary equivalents.

In "I Do Want to Live! Female Voices, Male Discourse, and Hollywood Biopics", Dennis Bingham writes about how women are depicted in biographies, arguing that the exploitation and suffering of women began to find a place in biographies since the Second World War. With special reference to Robert Wise's 1958 film, *I Want to Live!* premised on Barbara Graham, an American woman accused of murder, he contemplates female biopics that emphasise the "contradictions between the public positions—positive and negative—women have achieved and the unladylike activities that have landed them there" (1). According to Bingham, the female biopic on Graham is an instance of the male filmmakers' effort to portray a female protagonist's life story without structuring it within a patriarchal framework.

“The Mechanical Life in the Age of Human Reproduction: American Biopics, 1961–1980” (2000) by George Custen is more or less an addendum to his monograph *Bio/Pics*. In this article, he focuses on the post-studio era and television as significant sites of biopic production. With tables of biopic subjects classified according to their profession, the article seeks to investigate Hollywood's cultural context in the latter half of the twentieth century and how it created public history in the post-studio era.

Lee Marshal and Isabel Kongsgaard, in their article “Representing Popular Music Stardom on Screen: The Popular Music Biopic” (2012) gives an account of the fundamental tropes of famous music stardom and how they are reproduced in recent biopics, including *Ray* (2004) on Ray Charles, *Walk the Line* (2005) on Johnny Cash, *Control* (2006) on Ian Curtis, *Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll* (2009) on Ian Dury, of which the first two are successful American productions and the last two British productions that were not box-office hits. By discussing the ambiguous relationship of music biopics to truth, the analysis focuses mainly on three aspects of the genre: the association between art and life, the music industry, and the conflict between the private and the public.

“Re-envisioning the Artist Hero Through Two Cole Porter Biopics” by Derek Johnston (2012) deals with two biopics—*Night and Day* (1946) and *De-Lovely* (2004)—based on the life of the lyricist Cole Porter and how these movies are strikingly dissimilar, which inadvertently points at the change in society's anticipation of an artist and the act of creativity. While the artist was an ordinary man in the twentieth century, he became a particular individual in the twenty-first

century. With these two biopics as samples, Johnston examines the changing notions regarding the portrayal of the artist and his art, thereby hinting at the shifting concerns in American society.

David Allan Bovey, in his doctoral thesis, *The Artist Biopic: A Historical Analysis of Narrative Cinema, 1934–2010* (2015), offers a historical overview of the artist biopic as an individual subgenre of the more prominent genre of the biopic, which sums up to around ninety films produced in Europe and America since the first artist biopic in 1934. Its development is examined by classifying thematically connected films and using British biopics for a case study that promulgates the idea of national stereotypes. By analysing the biopics of female and queer artists within the context of gender studies, the thesis argues that the artist biopic, which is exceptionally adaptable, indicates the varying perspectives towards artists and art.

Courtney G. Gregg's thesis *True Life Story: Myth Making in Biographical Films* (2016) attempts a textual analysis of three films based on entertainers – *Beyond the Sea* (2004) on Bobby Darin, *Ray* on Ray Charles, and *Walk the Line* on Johnny Cash. The thesis examines how particular myths and themes are performed in the chosen biopics.

In her dissertation titled *With Tears and a Journey: Recreating Shakespeare's Life on Screen* (2013), Eliza Jimenez Aguilar studies the movie *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) in the context of the biopic, where she examines how Shakespeare is represented in the film against the backdrop of contemporary studies in the genre. By employing the theories of adaptation and intertextuality, this dissertation examines how the movie fictionalises Shakespeare's life while integrating a few of

his literary works into it. From Aguilar's viewpoint, the movie capitalises on various sources, like Shakespeare's biographies and earlier adaptations of his life.

Matthew Robinson's doctoral thesis, *Mapping the British Biopic: Evolution, Conventions, Reception, and Masculinities* (2016), as extensive research on the genre, attempts to reassess the biopic that has often been sidelined as an offshoot of the historical film. Robinson, who identifies perpetual neglect towards the genre despite its successful presence since the early days of cinema, argues that the biopic is a valid genre as it creates a public history for the larger public. While providing a timeline of the British biopics released between 1900 and 2014, the thesis proposes a detailed analysis of the genre in general and the representation of masculinity in these films.

Sonia Amalia Haiduc's thesis, *Writers on Screen: Embodying the Life-Text in the Literary Biopic*, studies the literary biopic as a subgenre and how it overlaps with literary texts and other movie genres in the frame of a melodramatic tone. Analysing major English productions coupled with a few international movies, Haiduc argues that a biopic should be melodramatic to be 'true'. With a comprehensive review of movies like *An Angel at My Table* (1990), *A Quiet Passion* (2016), and *The Happy Prince* (2018), the thesis characterises the literary biopic as an increasingly complex genre that exemplifies the writer's personality as well as the cultural milieu as a whole.

The studies specified above on the biopic as a film genre identify that major concerns reflected in biographical research mainly signify the expansion and evolution of film biography in Hollywood and other English-speaking film

industries. As seen in these studies, other significant areas of interest are subgenres like the artist biopic, the literary biopic, and the music biopic, along with challenges like authenticity and fidelity in biopics and adaptations of historical lives from written biographies.

Recently, Indian cinema has witnessed an increasing demand for biopics, with many of them making their way to screens. From the valorisation to the glamorisation of the subjects, the biopic has traversed quite a long way in Indian movie scenarios. However, there is an evident deficit of scholarly research on Indian biopics. In “The Biopic in Hindi Cinema”, Rachel Dwyer observes, “No study has been made of the early biopics, and the extent to which they are biopics is also not entirely clear” (228). While specifically discussing the Malayalam biopic, which is only a contemporary phenomenon, scholarly articles or academic research remain scarce.

Rachel Dwyer’s “The Biopic of the New Middle Classes in Contemporary Hindi Cinema” (2013) believes that contemporary biopics in Hindi cinema reflect the hopes and aspirations of the new middle classes. According to Dwyer, online celebrity culture and legal obligations shape the semi-fictionalised narratives, which also tend to incorporate the conventional motifs of Bollywood. This article mainly focuses on the second cycle of biopics, i.e., the ones released in the early years of the twenty-first century. These partially fictionalised biopics thrived on the recent lives of less revered individuals who became successful mainly through business or entertainment. By exploring box-office hits like *Guru* (2007) on Dhirubai Ambani, the business magnate, and *Dirty Picture* (2011) on the soft-porn actress Silk Smitha,

Dwyer reveals how the new middle-class values shape the Indian socio-cultural context.

In Dwyer's chapter titled "The Biopic in Hindi Cinema" in *A Companion to Historical Cinema* (2013), she locates the key transformations in Indian cinema with its enormous appetite for biopics. The chapter traces the development of Indian biopics while discussing the various forms of the genre, like old Hindi biopics, which include movies like *Pyasa* (1957), new Hindi biopics, including *Bhumika* (1977), quasi-biopics like *Woh Lamhe* (2006), and the major challenges faced by filmmakers in making biopics. While discussing the early forms of biopics, such as mythological and devotional movies, Dwyer identifies that biopics overlap with other film genres.

Pramod K Nayar's "Biopics" included in his *Essays in Celebrity Culture* (2021) discusses the surge of biopics in contemporary Indian cinema, which mainly revolves around the lives of sports stars like Sachin Tendulkar (*Sachin: A Billion Dreams*), Milkha Singh (*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*), and M.S. Dhoni (*M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story*). According to Nayar, the victory and failure of sports personae form a national symbol where the hero becomes an embodiment of a nation's dreams and virtues. Retaining the traditional paradigm of Hindi cinema, these sports biopics include personal aspects like the subject's family. He brands the biopic as a "performative documentary," which is an instance of "artefactuality," merging "artifice and artifact".

In the article "Redefining the Lost Memory: A Study of Selected Biopics in Indian Cinema" (2018) by Pradeepta Nayak and Jayaprakash Paramaguru,

Bollywood is perceived as a reflection of society, where the audience is captivated to watch films based on actual persons and incidents. Analysing the three Bollywood movies *Gandhi* (1982), *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012), and *Mary Kom* (2014), the article determines how the audience effortlessly connects with the life stories of freedom fighters, business people, sports stars, or politicians whose life narratives become sources of their inspiration.

Chetali Shekhawat, in “Revisiting History Through Biopics” (2023), perceives the biopic not just as a means of entertainment but as one that caters to social interaction and personal identity to the spectators. She believes that biopics based on the lives of national leaders are crucial because they help build memory, represent history, and shape national identity, which she expounds on through movies like *Gandhi* and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002). It asserts the biopic's pivotal role in redefining history through the life stories of historical leaders, consequently branding the genre with substantial significance.

Preeti Kumar, in “Retelling Nation: Narrating the Nation Through Biopics” (2013), thinks of biographical movies, which form a part of the nationalistic rhetoric, as a means of constructing a nation. By employing narrative strategies like the idealisation of hypermasculinity, the biopic has receded from the concept of 'Mother India' to produce a specific variant of nationalism. Through movies like *Sardar* (1993), *Mangal Pandey - The Rising*, and *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, this article studies how concepts like national idealism and national pride are conveyed to the audience. It also shows how the great men's biopics play up the subject of nation-building as a

thematic concern while at the same time celebrating the nation, which has been represented as 'manly'.

With specific emphasis on biopics like *Mary Kom*, *Sanju* (2018), and the series *Karanjit Kaur: The Untold Story of Sunny Leone* (2018), the research article “Increasing Popularity of Biopic in India: An Analysis of Psychological Perspective” (2019) by Aparajita Chakraborty and Susmita Halder analyses the psychological perspectives of the biopic and the rising demand for the genre. The renewed interest of the audience in watching actual people and incidents in a creative medium has led to the increasing popularity of the biopic as a film genre. The desire of the new middle class to watch the heroes as representing their values, along with economic liberalisation, actors' interests, and the social and political ambience of the nation, largely caters to the demand of the genre.

Annu Sangwan and Dr Manasvi Maheswari in “Role of Biopic Films in Promoting Sportsmen and Sports in India” (2019) seek to examine the content of the biopics, the audience's attitude towards sports biopics and the role played by these biopics in raising awareness about sports and sportsmen. Analysing the content of eight sports biopics released in India between 2013 and 2018, including *Dangal* (2016), *Azhar* (2016), and *Budhia Singh: Born to Run* (2016), which showcase the sportsperson's passion, resilience, and journey to success fighting all odds, the authors argue that sports biopics foster virtue, harmony, and nationalism. Through a survey conducted by them, they claim that sports biopics are motivational in presentation because of the sportsperson depicted in the movie.

“Biopics as Visual Palimpsest: Mapping Social Hegemonies in *Bandit Queen*” (2017) by Reema Chowdary and Nirmala Menon investigates life stories and biopics on bandits in India, with a special focus on the life of Phoolan Devi in *Bandit Queen* (1994). With a comparative study of the subject's public persona portrayed in the movie and her biographical descriptions in other genres like autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, and interviews to exemplify Phoolan Devi's life, providing a short description of banditry in India, the research article argues how the life narratives of bandits or thugs trace the hegemonies of colonial structure. With a critique of the biopic, the paper, at large, investigates if cinematic portrayals are potent enough to depict the social condition in which banditry could generally be located.

Swarnavel Eswaran's “*Periyar* as a Biopic: Star Persona, Historical Events, and Politics” (2018) examines the representation of history through the portrayal of the life of EV Ramaswami, also known as Periyar, a revolutionary politician and activist. With Sathyaraj as Periyar, the paper analyses the film's episodic structure while probing into the challenges of making a movie about a legendary icon for a mass audience. It does not fail to address the crucial instances and significant figures associated with his revolutionary mode of politics, where he deconstructs the ideas of caste and religion.

Inquiring into the caste concerns and biographical accounts in the biopic, “Affective Returns: Biopics as Life Narratives” (2017) by Bindu Menon seeks to delineate caste violence in the early part of the twentieth century in Kerala. The paper attempts to create a structured canvas of P.K. Rosy's life from the available

fragments of her life in several media, like biographies, films, and sociopolitical history. *Vigathakumaran's* controversial nature has always been at the centre of discussion and debate on Rosy's departure, instigating her tragic plight into a more extensive discussion of caste, gender, and cinema. According to the author, Rosy, who has been empathetically portrayed in Kamal's biopic, vanishes with the completion of filmmaking, and how the movie represents Rosy is not unambiguous regarding caste issues in the contextual framework of cinema in the early twentieth century.

Pavitra Sreekumar, in her dissertation, *The Biopic in Indian Cinema* (2018), outlines the history of the biopic in Indian cinema. According to the researcher, deconstructing the biopic's format helps comprehend the reasons for its newfound fame, and its success lies in its adaptability and inclusivity. Usually placed between documentary and fiction films, Indian biopics create a memory of the past, portraying historical icons in multiple ways, from adoration to vilification. It fills the gap between the ancient heroes and scriptures of India and the changes in the ideas of modern India, making it relatable to the nation's citizens. The researcher argues that the suspension of disbelief will guarantee the success and future of the biopic genre, thus leading to its rising demand among the Indian audience.

In his doctoral thesis titled, *Constructing a Biopic Screenplay: Fictional Invention in the Biopic with Scant Evidence* (2020), Indranil Chakravorty attempts a screenplay based on the life of Suresh Biswas, an obscure wildlife trainer and adventurer from Bengal who later became a captain in the Brazilian Army. This thesis investigates the innovative and critical challenges related to the biopic subject,

vanquishing the issue of scant evidence and placing it in a lasting framework. The researcher argues that a logical fusion of fictional innovation and meticulous research of the evidence assists the screenwriter in closing in on the biopic subject.

The doctoral thesis titled *Narrative Form of Selected Hindi Biopics: An Empirical Study of Style and Structure* (2017) by Neerja Vyas analyses the general structure and style of biopics, trying to map an identical pattern with the case of five Bollywood biopics: *Rang Rasiya* (2008), *Paan Singh Tomar*, *Mary Kom*, *Aligarh* (2015), and *Manjhi: The Mountain Man* (2015). It also draws a comparison of how the narrative elements are structured and portrayed in different films in terms of content and cinematic style. Through an empirical mode of research, the thesis concludes that the biopics are similar and distinguishable yet interesting in various dimensions, including the narrative style, form, and technical aspects.

Gayatri Binu investigates the challenges concerning biopics based on autobiographical and biographical accounts in her dissertation titled *Malayalam Biopics: From Books to Films* (2015). With a special focus on three Malayalam movies, *Swathi Thirunal* (1987), *Veeraputhran* (2011), and *Celluloid* (2013), the researcher aims to analyse how three different filmmakers have approached these adaptations and how they are different from their source texts. The conflict between fact and fiction is evident at numerous points where the customarily emotional aspects of the movie overpower factual evidence. This dissertation perceives that the biopics selected for the study highlight the emotional interpretations of the directors rather than factual representations of the subjects.

The above-discussed review of literature, as regards the Indian biopic, implies the dearth of biopic studies and the limited contexts in which they are discussed. The available research is mainly engaged in the history of the genre, its style and structure, and the antithesis between fact and fiction instead of inquiring into the changes in the treatment of the biopic subject. Regarding relevant literature, academic research, specifically in the context of Malayalam cinema, is too sparse to mention. It is essential to study the transition in treating biopic subjects over time to comprehend the evolution of the biopic genre since its early years.

While analysing the Malayalam biopic, it can be seen that it traverses a trajectory that shifts from the public to the private lives of the subjects, with the insight that real lives are a complex juxtaposition of achievements as well as failures. It is challenging to strike a balance between the success and susceptibility of the biopic subjects, intending to give a detailed portrayal of their lives that resonates with contemporary audiences. In contrast, biopics previously amplified the public aspects and momentous episodes in the lives of renowned figures; the recent trend of featuring the private aspects gives the genre a broader scope, portraying them in a more personal way. Recently, biopic makers have revealed an enhanced interest in examining the subjects' personal dimensions and inner struggles, through which the viewers comprehend them more intimately. For instance, a recent biopic, *Gramavrikshathile Kuyil* (2022), that follows the life of the great poet and social reformer Kumaran Asan, predominantly discusses his private life, including moments with his wife, alongside his profile as a poet. Adopting such an approach, the directors offer a holistic depiction of the protagonists, emphasising their frailties,

inner conflicts, and vulnerabilities, in addition to the milestones they achieved. Apart from luring the audience, this trend sheds light on socio-cultural interactions, thereby delineating the human experience more profoundly. While trying to keep the entertainment value intact, recent biopics allow the viewers to draw a parallel between their lives and the biographical narratives on screen. By and large, the movement from the public to the private in Malayalam biopics caters to the genre's evolution, underscoring the psychological dynamics in a visual narrative. The present study attempts to trace the trajectory of the Malayalam biopic that shifts its focus from the public lives of the subjects to their private lives in post-2010 movies like *Yugapurushan* (2010), *Makaramanju* (2011), *Celluloid* (2013), *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (2015), and *Aami* (2018). Although the thesis establishes a demarcation between the public and private attributes of biopic subjects, it is pivotal to understand the fluid nature of this boundary and the innate intersection between the two. Nevertheless, it is unequivocal that a division exists between the public and private spheres in the biopics chosen for this study.

This thesis is divided into eight chapters, including an introduction, a theoretical framework, five analytical chapters, and a conclusion.

The Introductory chapter, offers a background study of the biopic as a film genre, tracing its history in the Western film scenario and its advent in India. The chapter discusses the Malayalam biopic, which, at large, is only a contemporary development. The review of literature associated with various aspects of biopics included here gives an overview of the major books, research articles, and academic research done in this area.

Chapter one postulates the theoretical framework of the thesis, with a significant thrust on the theory of the biopic, exemplifying its basic tenets. As this research is a content-based analysis, it mainly relies on the fundamental features of the biopic genre rather than other major film theories. This chapter moderately considers some of the theoretical approaches to the biopic, like genre studies, adaptation, representation, intertextuality and reception studies.

Chapter two, “*Yugapurushan: Mystic Vision and Social Reform*”, based on Sree Narayana Guru’s biopic, *Yugapurushan* (2010), directed by R. Sukumaran, examines how the movie renders the public life of Guru. With Thalaivasal Vijay as Guru, the movie presents him as a legendary social reformer and torchbearer of the Kerala Renaissance, interweaving public events of his life, such as temple consecrations and historic movements, including the Vaikom Satyagraha. Guru is being treated as a personification of divinity, and the movie incorporates his aphorisms, which had a considerable impact on Kerala society, into the narrative. As a biopic closely aligned with historical movies, *Yugapurushan* portrays only nominal scenes of his private life.

Chapter three, “*Makaramanju: Timeless Hues and Endless Passion*”, deals with the artist biopic *Makaramanju* (2011), directed by Lenin Rajendran, premised on the life of Raja Ravi Varma. Emphasising a particular phase in Ravi Varma’s artistic career, the movie acquaints the audience with some of his renowned paintings. The movie depicts the mythical tale behind his distinguished painting *Urvashi and Pururavas* as the subplot, thereby drawing a parallel between Urvashi and

Pururavas and the artist and his muse. Along with his business ventures like the lithographic press in Bombay, altercations with his partner, and the legal challenges he faced for painting nudity, the movie focuses mainly on his public life while partially referring to his private life, including his marital discord.

Chapter four, “*Celluloid: Filmic Dreams and Cinematic Legacy*”, addresses *Celluloid* (2013), directed by Kamal, as a biographical movie based on the life of J.C. Daniel, the Father of Malayalam Cinema. The movie illustrates the making of the first Malayalam movie, *Vigathakumaran*, its release, and the repercussions; to a great extent, it delineates J.C. Daniel’s public life. The rise and fall of P.K. Rosy as the first heroine of Malayalam cinema form the subplot, which attempts to reveal her obscure life to the cinema audience. The second half of the movie, structured as the investigation of a journalist, delves into Daniel’s private life steeped in failures, penury, and dejection, with increased attention on his wife’s pivotal role both in his public and private lives.

Chapter five, “*Ennu Ninte Moideen: Confined Desire and Unfathomed Destiny*” examines R.S. Vimal's *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (2015), centred on the life of B.P. Moideen, a local luminary of Mukkam, a village in Kerala. Unlike the previous biopics, the movie's plot extensively focuses on the private life of Moideen, specifically his love life. An archetype of romance, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* tells the story of an interfaith couple so replete with various aspects of their love that even his public life acts only as a background to his tumultuous love affair. Though Moideen was an active figure in the sociopolitical scenario of his village, the movie

prioritises the trials and tribulations in the lives of the star-crossed lovers, which culminate in his death.

Chapter six, “*Aami: Bared Words and Unveiled Desires*”, analyses another directorial venture of Kamal, *Aami* (2018), a literary biopic of the iconic Indian English author Kamala Das/Madhavikutty. The diegesis, divided into different phases of Kamala Das's life—childhood, teenage, youth, and old age—primarily focuses on her fantasies, delusions, and insecurities in each of these phases. As a biopic geared towards the personal life of Kamala Das, it traces her relationship with her husband and her love affair with a Muslim youth, which even leads to her conversion to Islam. Apart from partial references to her controversial autobiography, *Ente Kadha/My Story*, and a few of her other works like “Neermatalam Pootha Kaalam” and “Nastapetta Neelambari,” her literary career, or her public life, is not delineated much in the movie, thus making it largely private.

The concluding chapter, indicates the outcome of the research based on the five Malayalam biopics taken as samples. It demonstrates a gradual incorporation of the subjects' private aspects, substantiating the biopic's thematic shift from the public to the private.

Given the burgeoning stage of the Malayalam biopic, a significant gap exists in scholarly literature dedicated to this emerging film genre. With an exclusive focus on the changeover from the public to the private lives of the biopic subjects, this thesis intends to give a purview of the genre's evolution. Apart from a documented account of a historical figure, recent biopics enquire into the private and personal

facets of the subjects, disclosing the dynamics between their personal lives and public expectations. In the context of upgrading the intensity of biographical movies, the inquest into the private lives of individuals authorises the audience to relate to the ordinary side of their extraordinary lives, which justifies the genre's surging popularity.

CHAPTER I

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Film as an art form has long been viewed as a portraiture of society and is a significant channel for entertainment that is potent enough to embody the broad spectrum of human experiences, mirroring the expansion and evolution of society. Even by the end of the silent era, films were classified into different genres, which helped spectators identify films and make their own choices over time. 'Genre' originally meant 'kind' or 'class', which Daniel Chandler in "An Introduction to Genre Theory" describes as "widely used in rhetoric, literary theory, media theory, and more recently linguistics to refer to a distinctive type of text" (1). Film genres merely mean classifying movies based on stylistic and semantic implications; they have been a part of the production and reception of films on a global scale.

Genres, usually ascertained by standard formulaic elements, are configured in a consistent and identifiable pattern; they serve as a guide to the audience, providing hints and cues that help in the negotiation of meaning. Silverblatt, in *Genre Studies in Mass Media*, writes about the artists in a genre film, "Artists are challenged to be innovative within the constraints of the formula" (29). Popular genres are easily identifiable in structure and style, with plot conventions equipping the audience with insight into their nuances. The success of a genre invariably depends on the audience's ability to identify the formula of a specific genre and what they expect while watching a film in an individual genre like the biopic.

As genres began to evolve, their boundaries became permeable as a response to the altering socio-political and economic conditions. Moreover, while adhering to a particular genre, the makers utilise specific conventions while simultaneously developing new ones. Rick Altman observes, "The transhistorical nature of current generic speculation often leads to the treatment of a single film or group of films as having a special role in defining a genre or expressing its effects" (20). However, generic meaning cannot be stamped within a single movie, as it is the repetition of specific motifs in different movies that gives the genre its status. Genres are not only about repetition but also about differences, which make them more assimilative and attractive. For instance, there are both fictional and non-fictional genres, and when a non-fictional film like a biopic is produced, it adopts features of fictional films; the hybrid genre thus formed helps both entertain and inform the audience. Sarah Flint cites John Cawalti's thoughts on the formation of new genres, "John Cawalti has argued, for example, that following their phases of innovation and classicism, genres go through a period of revisionist self-awareness on the part of both creators and audiences, resulting in the popularity of parodic and satiric treatments and the eventual formation of new genres" (29). The growth of a genre largely depends on changes in the configuration of traits and cultural conditions.

Considering the efficiency quotient of film genres helps the makers and audience delineate a particular genre, and scholars use them as critical and analytical tools. Critics like Robert Kapsis observe that "the very existence of genre films and cycles is a product of the film industry's attempt to overcome the problem of uncertainty, of not knowing the future tastes of the mass audience" (70). To a great

extent, a genre plays a decisive role in directing the choices and expectations of the viewers and helps them judge the reality status of a particular film text. Genres with extensive connotations in films serve the producers to promote a film to the desired audience, which in turn helps the audience shape their worldview. In addition to the apparent function of information, genres have therapeutic functions, too. Silverblatt notes, "Genres put people in touch with a range of affective responses or emotional reactions. In fact, many popular genres correspond to our primal emotions. Genres often play on the affective responses of the audience to build dramatic tension in the narrative" (9). For a genre like the biopic, which is based on the lives of actual individuals, it entails different cathartic functions that give expression to the private impulses of the audience members.

The evolution of genres happens on an ideological level, where it responds to the audience's demands; the audience expects a reflection of their values and ideals in the movies of their choice. Popular genres, like the biopic, are usually instrumental in promoting an ideology, but the generic conventions change according to the ideological climate of a particular period. Genres involve commercial considerations, too, where the producers make movies belonging to a particular genre with an eye on its marketing function. Economic imperatives exert a significant impact on the content of a film that belongs to a distinct genre. Genre films help filmmakers guess what would sell, and they use specific techniques to evoke anticipated responses from viewers. Rick Altman says, "The pleasure of genre film spectatorship thus derives more from reaffirmation than from novelty. People go to genre films to participate in events that somehow feel familiar" (25). Given

this industry approach, a film genre like biographical film or biopic is seen to gain currency in the contemporary period.

Based on the lives of real individuals, the biopic was initially treated as a sub-genre of historical movies. In the West, the genre has been so popular that it has offered numerous examples of how to portray real people and actual incidents. Dennis Bingham, in “The Lives and Times of the Biopic”, claims, “As a historical film, the biopic occupies a liminal space—closer to actuality than fiction, more focused on individuals, to the point where they become characters—to be what we understand as history. To be specific, the biopic, a compound word for “biographical picture,” is the dramatisation of a life” (247). A combination of drama and documentary, the biopic confers a unique portrayal of an individual’s life, which seems to lure the audience to this genre, and the film industry is seen to be responding to the desires of the audience. Though the biopic as a genre has its specific conventions, the filmmakers tend to employ different methods to render novelty in their way of re-telling the story. Courtney Gregg writes in her doctoral thesis, “Biographical films provide a platform not only for introducing and reviewing knowledge on a specific person(s), they also allow for evaluation of themes present within mass media, filmmaking in general, and our culture and society” (1). In addition to knowledge about the individual, the audience gets a glimpse of the past through the cinematic portrayal of his or her life. Furthermore, when a film is founded on a real-life incident, or rather, a real-life person, the impact of the film is augmented many times.

Biopics began to hit the screens during the silent era, with movies like *Joan of Arc* (1900) and *Edgar Allan Poe* (1909). Their expansion began with the emergence of talkies in 1928. Indian cinema, with its beginnings in mythological movies and later historical movies, has seen the rise of biopics only lately. In her doctoral thesis, Neerja Vyas comments about the first full-length feature film in India, "In India, the silent mythological film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) by Dadasaheb Phalke, based on the legend of Raja Harishchandra, not only marked a historic benchmark in the film industry in India but also proved to be a commercial success, paving the way for more such films" (1). *Sant Dnyaneshwar* (1940) is another Indian biographical movie based on the thirteenth-century poet and philosopher Jnaneshwar. Of late, there has been a shift from the Great Man approach to the New Biography, which marked a relocation from the reverential and adulatory towards a critical emphasis on the personality of the biopic subject. Pramod K. Nayar comments about the shift in the treatment of subjects in the Indian biopics:

Films have also been built around other real-life people whose actions in extraordinary, often inimical, and daunting conditions become the subject of the biopic: Neerja Bhanot, the flight attendant who died in the 1986 Pan Am hijacking, is portrayed in *Neerja* (2016); Manjhi, a man who, over twenty-two years, carved a route through a hillock armed with just a hammer and a chisel, is portrayed in *Manjhi: The Mountain Man* (2015) and Charles Sobhraj, the conman and killer, is portrayed in *Main Aur Charles* (2015). (75)

Pramod K Nayar also cites instances where even notoriety or infamy of the subject also becomes the thread of biopics, "Infamy, in the case of *Azhar* and *Main Aur*

Charles, also serves as a national symbolic because these real-life characters come to embody the flaws in the individual but also perhaps in India's cultural make-up" (78). It serves as a validation that while the earlier biopics underscore the valiant deeds and achievements, reaffirming the public lives of the subjects, the later biopics are obsessed with the subject's personal and psychological aspects as well as the narratological nuances in shaping the vital instances of the subject's life. With the filmmaker's imagination and stylised narrative techniques, fact and fiction blend so ingeniously that the biopic becomes an auteurist genre. That is how the biopic differs from the documentary, where the former is not enumerating the facts of someone's life but dramatising the actual events to deliver the filmmaker's delineation of truth.

The resurgence of the biopic genre in the late twentieth century attests to the appeal of biopics among the masses. Dennis Bingham in *Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as a Contemporary Genre* finds the biopic to be "a genuine, dynamic genre and an important one" (10). The filmmakers consciously try to bring the life of a familiar person onto the screen, about whom the audience will have prior knowledge to a certain extent. The audience may identify the subject portrayed but not how he or she attained honour or dishonour, and inherently, it attracts a curious interest in the life narrative of the person. The socio-cultural scenario, the new middle class, and the audience's demand cater to the revived resurgence of the biopic genre.

Dennis Bingham holds that, "[f]ilm studies has not recognised the biopic as a genre with its own conventions and historical stages of development, disintegration,

investigation, parody, and revival” (11) but believes that “like any genre that dates back nearly to the beginning of narrative cinema, the biopic has gone through developmental stages from each of its historical cycles”(17). Hence, he formulates the developmental stages of the biopic thus:

- the classical, celebratory form (melodrama)
- warts-and-all (melodrama/realism)
- the transition of a producer’s genre to an auteurist director’s genre (Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, Oliver Stone, Mary Harron, Julian Schnabel, etc)
- critical investigation and atomization of the subject (or the *Citizen Kane* mode)
- parody (in terms of choice of biographical subject; what Alexander and Karazweki call the anti-biopic – a movie about somebody who doesn’t deserve one” [Man vii], mocking the very notions of heroes and fame in a culture based on consumerism and celebrity rather than high culture values)
- minority appropriation (as in queer or feminist, African American or third world, whereby Janet Frame or Harvey Milk and Malcolm X or Patrice Lumumba own the conventional mythologizing form that once would have been used to marginalize or stigmatize them)
- since 2000, the neoclassical biopic, which integrates elements of all or most of these (17 – 18)

Similar mapping and the classification of the developmental stages of biopics determine them to be a genre by themselves, though earlier, they were relegated to the margins as a sub-genre of the historical film.

The reputation or notability of the biopic had been obscured for a long time, which accounts for the dearth of its study as an established film genre. Ellen Cheshire, in *Bio-Pics*, observes how the biopic genre lacks the customs and protocols that the other genres possess, “Unlike other genre forms, the biopic seemingly shares no familiar iconography, codes, or conventions. They can be set anywhere and at any time. What links them is quite simply that the films depict the life of an important real person” (4). The basic tenet of the genre is that it is inspired by a real person whose life acts as a rostrum for cinematic narratives. With its foundation in reality, the biopic stations itself in an interim space between actuality and fantasy, about which Bingham feels, “Biopics materialise out of a filmmaker’s desire to create drama out of the lives of someone he or she finds interesting” (377). Still, the accuracy of facts can hardly be ignored, which inherently differentiates the biopic from other film genres. Scholars like Ellen Cheshire point out that “sometimes bio-pics stretch the truth and tell a life story with varying degrees of accuracy” (12). Apart from the depiction of reality, there are certain other conventions that authenticate the biopic as a film genre.

Even though biopics lack consistent syntactic qualities, they adhere to certain semantic traditions like introductory credits, voiceovers, and flashbacks, which form a significant section of Custen’s study. However, these elements are not unique to the biopic due to its hybrid nature; they are also extensively found in other film

genres. One of the formal elements, the title card or introductory title, frequently forms a vital part of the biopic, which aids in asserting truth as biopics claim to portray real lives. Custen explains, “Unlike most films, almost every biopic opens with title cards that place the piece in context or with a voiceover narration that historically sets up the film” (51). It serves to emphasise the particular perspective of the biopic subject traced in the movie. For instance, Richard Attenborough’s movie *Gandhi* (1982), which examines Gandhi’s life in Africa up to his assassination by Godse in 1948, opens with the title card:

No man’s life can be encompassed in one telling. There is no way to give each year its allotted weight, to include each event, each person who helped to shape a lifetime. What can be done is to be faithful in spirit to the record and try to find one’s way to the heart of the man...

In Matthew Robinson's perspective, "the opening captions of *Gandhi* attempt to manage the anxieties and expectations associated with the genre, highlighting how the depiction is constrained by the confines of the medium" (156). One of the movies chosen for this study, *Yugapurushan* (2010), begins with the title card along with a voiceover describing the biographical details as well as the philosophical ideology of Sree Narayana Guru, the renaissance leader of Kerala. Custen endorses the significance of the title card; thus, "The title also sets up the moment of life when we can witness the birth of a particular talent—rarely the character's literal birth... Many film lives selectively highlight a part of life so well known that a portion of it bears closer scrutiny" (51).

Another formal element that fits in the biopic genre is the *in medias res* opening. Custen affirms, "By opening life in media res, the biopic allows the famous figure to invent his or her own future" (151). One of the typical characteristics of the genre, the *in medias res* opening, sets up a majority of biopics "with the figure past the age where his or her values can be influenced by the family" (149). While Custen's study refers to Hollywood biopics, this aspect of the biopic genre constitutes Indian biopics, too. Rakeysh Om Prakash Mehra's sports biopic *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013) opens with the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome and introduces an adult Milkha Singh contesting in the 400-metre race. A cradle-to-grave depiction of an individual's life is barely possible, as a result of which most biopics start at the peak of fame or the extreme point of weakness in the protagonist's life. *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (2015), along with the title cards, shows Moideen in the most vulnerable state of his life when his father stabs him, and as the movie begins, Moideen's victory in a football match is displayed. Custen writes, "Film could open life at the jumping-off point of fame and, more economically, deal with the particular representations of success through montage or flashback" (182).

As an editing technique that combines and abbreviates various sequences, montage is yet another formal element of the biopic films with which Custen precisely deals in his study. He records:

Montage became not a key to the unconscious, but a shorthand of narrative action. Montage thus does not take us into the mind of the great man or woman - this is done largely through set speeches or scenes of public judgement- but instead for a rapid tour through his or her career. Montage is

the abbreviated evidence of the success that made the person famous. As such it is as essential a part of the biopic as other components that differentiate this genre from other films... (184)

Montage helps the filmmakers divulge a large amount of information in a short period, which helps ensure the context and exposition of the movie. Matthew Robinson expounds in his thesis on the relevance of montage in biopics:

Montage sequences can condense a life into a manageable cinematic form. They can provide accelerated summary through the subject's career, signified in shifting newspaper headlines or inventors persistently failing until a breakthrough 'moment' in which their theory is proved correct. They can signify both movements through extended periods of time and the individual's rise to fame or their decline. (161)

Another formal element of the biopic, the flashback, presents events outside the linear narrative order. Flashbacks, an alternation in the sequential story order, take the audience back to the incidents that have formerly taken place. George Custen notes, "A flashback creates its internal sense of time. The present tense of the narrative is contrasted with the "history" of the flashback, imbuing the film with its own validity as historical data simultaneous with the creation of history" (183). As a narrative device, flashback attempts to reprise history, and according to Custen, one of its functions is "to retell history from the vantage point of a particular narrator. This privilege allows the narrator to frame life not just in terms of the order and content of events but to frame its significance" (183). It binds time, action, and place to evince a past emotional or traumatic event that affects the protagonist and takes

the narration forward. Matthew Robinson notes four main ways in which flashbacks are utilised:

i) those films in which the figure's death is visualized in the opening scene before a flashback retells their life up to that death; ii) those which adopt the "rags-to-riches" perspective by beginning with the subject already famous and then in flashback constructing how they arrived at that point; iii) films which use multiple flashbacks from different points-of-view; iv) the traumatic flashback which conveys the damaged psychological state of the subject. (164)

As a case in point, *Thalaivii* (2021), a Tamil biographical movie based on the life of the yesteryear actress-politician J. Jayalalitha, employs flashbacks as a narrative device. The movie begins with Jayalalitha, a political leader, arriving at the state's budget session, addressed by the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. The session ends in a brawl when the opposition party probes her relationship with MGR and even tries to outrage her modesty. It is in a flashback that Jayalalitha is shown as an upcoming actress shooting at the AVM Studios in the year 1965 and MGR as a mighty power both in the industry as well as the politics of the state, with whom Jaya later develops a relationship. Matthew Robinson observes, "Flashbacks, accompanied by dated captions, [then] signify a shift to an earlier period and chart the life in chronological order..." (165). Another instance of using flashbacks is *Celluloid* (2013), which opens with Daniel travelling to meet Dadasaheb Phalke in Bombay in 1928. The movie, which travels back and forth in time, shows *Vigathakumaran's* release in 1930 and leaps to 1966 when Chelangatt

Gopalakrishnan meets the ailing Daniel. Framing devices like flashbacks form an integral part of the biopic, which helps to place a story economically.

Voiceover, another production technique classified among the formal elements of the biopic, further augments the factuality of the genre. An instance of non-diegetic sound, this offscreen voice imparts the audience with important facts and opinions regarding the biopic subject. According to Custen, "titles or introductory voiceovers were also conventions of documentaries of the period, and it is likely they were appropriated by biopics as a recognisable signal that the film was true" (54). He believes that a voiceover narration "historically sets up the film." As a technique, voiceover aids in the quick exposition of the plot, validating the authenticity of the biopic. Matthew Robinson, in his thesis on the British biopic, records the different functions of voiceovers:

... some serve a didactic function and assert how the figure in question should be understood, others are used to transmit information, the setting and major events of the period depicted. Rather than asserting the film is true, some voice-overs are spoken by characters within the film and, combined with flashback, they assert how the figure depicted is being remembered by a certain character. Others are deliberately contentious and are characterized by irony, calling the status of the narrator into question. (158)

Whatever the kind of voiceover, it gains persuasive power in the narrative space and intentionally foregrounds the authority of the film. *Saina* (2021), a biopic on Indian badminton player Saina Nehwal, employs voiceover in the first shot, which takes the movie forward. In *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (2015), the movie ends with a voiceover by

the character Mukkam Bhasi, who meditates on the life of Kanchanamala after Moideen's death. By providing a closer look into the characters' minds, voiceovers provide a better connection with the audience and enhance the clarity of the movie.

Another mandatory criterion of the biopic is its casting, where the physical resemblance between the subject and the actor enhances the movie's credibility. It has a decisive role in moulding the lives of biopic subjects, where the director, to a great extent, assures the compatibility between the actor and the biopic subject. Matthew Robinson emphasises the struggles behind casting an appropriate actor to assume the role of the protagonist, which, in a way, is distinctive to the genre:

Casting and performance in biopics is characterized by constraints and pressures which are distinctive to the genre. Satisfying those figures who are represented or are close to those represented is the first issue. Endorsements are powerful truth claims but depictions which fail to satisfy the figure, or their family and friends, risk litigation and public denouncement. (175)

R.S. Vimal, the director of *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, recalled in a telephone conversation with the researcher how the real-life heroine Kanchanamala insisted on casting Prithviraj as B.P. Moideen because of the striking resemblance between the two. The selection of a particular actor for the role of a historical figure and the pressure on the actors to get into the skin of the subject are equally challenging aspects of the making of a biopic. "A Filmmaker's Destiny", an article on *Yugapurushan*, records the director's take on selecting Thalaivasal Vijay as Sree Narayana Guru:

He said finding a suitable actor for the lead role was difficult. It was the film's editor Sai Suresh who introduced Thalaivasal Vijay. In the first two screen tests, he was found wanting. But when he was tested for a third time, there was a huge difference in his mannerisms and presentation. Vijay, who had been used to playing villain roles in Tamil films, read many books on Sree Narayana Guru, gave up all non-vegetarian food and also liquor to do justice to his role. When the first shots were taken, his eyes were full of piety, in place of cruelty. His body language also had changed. By the end of the shooting, he did not even need a shawl to drape his macho frame.

The audience's identification of the biopic subject switches between the actor's self and the historical figure portrayed, which makes the perplexity irresolvable. As the protagonists of biopics are actual people known to the public whose characteristics are nevertheless documented, the actors find those roles most challenging. Seema Biswas, who played the role of Phoolan Devi in *Bandit Queen* (1994), said in an interview with Wild Films India that it was indeed traumatic to get under the skin of Phoolan Devi, who suffered brutal physical and mental atrocities. When the real, living subjects themselves appraise the performance of the actors donning their roles, the potential of the biopic to mediate the discourse of history cannot be overlooked. Milkha Singh, the legendary athlete himself, applauds Farhaan Akthar's performance in the biopic *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* in K Pradeep's article "On the Track with Milkha Singh" published in *The Hindu*. Matthew Robinson describes, "Just as the use of visual conventions, such as captions and archival footage, can propose an intertextual relationship between the documentary and the biopic, the casting of a

specific actor lends textual meanings to the historical figure portrayed" (176). In some cases, an unknown or lesser-known actor is chosen to play the role of a historical figure. For example, Santosh Sivan, a distinguished cinematographer lesser known as an actor, plays the role of the painter Prince Raja Ravi Varma in *Makaramanju*. The metamorphosis of the actor to perform the role of a historical figure is crucial in the casting process of a biopic, about which Custen states, "Thus, unless one had or developed an actor whose association with the biopic was natural or became naturalized, the actor could be inserted into the role, with the role undergoing specific modifications" (197). Just as the actor's physical resemblance is pivotal in intensifying the authenticity of a biopic, so is the setting of the movie. The authentic setting that augments the veracity of a biopic imparts the audience with insights into a specific era, enhancing the imagination of the spectator to reflect on the movie as an experience.

Apart from the narrative techniques, the biopic has certain thematic conventions, one of which is that the protagonist is often found to be in opposition to the ideology of the larger community. Custen formulates:

The famous person is spurred on by resistance. In one of the large ironies of the biopic, the great person fights organized social power that is hostile, reactionary, and often abusive of power. This is an odd referent for a sitting social establishment. But its hostility is vitiated by the fact that no matter how entrenched or corrupt the system, the great person, representing the will of the people, triumphs. The system is malleable enough to adjust to the

extraordinary vision of one person whose crusade is to see truth carry the day (188).

Shahid (2013) is based on the life of Shahid Azmi, an Indian lawyer famed for defending those accused of terrorism. Azmi, who himself was accused and arrested for terrorism, gets a degree in law after his release and becomes a criminal lawyer, defending cases for the alleged terrorists, whom he believed were mere scapegoats. He pleads the case for the accused in the Mumbai train bombings and the Malegaon bombings and thus incurs the wrath of the public for supporting terrorists. Movies like *Yugapurushan* (2010) employ this theme of individual versus community to suggest the 'Great Man' approach, in which the subject devotes his own life for the sake of reforming society. By emulating the recent trend, biopics based on the lives of lesser-known people, criminals and outlaws are increasingly being produced. Matthew Robinson says, "A particular challenge to community or social values is provided by films that present criminals sympathetically" (187). For instance, *Haseena Parker* (2017), based on the Indian gangster Dawood Ibrahim's sister, traces how an innocent little bride was forced to be the 'Aapa' or the Godmother of the Mumbai underworld. Though there were several cases of extortion against Haseena, the court's judge eventually became sympathetic towards her.

The involvement of the family of the biopic subject as an obligatory element forms another thematic convention of the genre. The family lives of the biopic subjects are central to the plot, defining the future and the way to his or her fame or disgrace. Pramod K Nayar alludes to the significant role of the family in a few Indian biopics like *Sachin: A Billion Dreams* (2017) and *Neerja* (2016):

The support the protagonist receives from the family and the family's stresses and sacrifices are variously foregrounded in each of the texts. Thus, even as we are shown Tendulkar fighting on behalf of the nation, it is his family's tense expression that the camera and the plot cut to. In the case of Neerja, too, as the hijacking is in progress, the frame shifts to Neerja's home, with her anxiety-ridden mother and brothers. (79)

In *Celluloid*, J.C. Daniel's wife, Janet Daniel, is seen to be constantly supporting Daniel, both emotionally and financially. While Daniel ardently pursues his dream of becoming a filmmaker, Janet constantly stays by his side, offering whatever help she can. Family need not always foster the growth of the subject by providing an appropriate environment. but can also stand in stiff opposition to the plans and perspectives of the protagonist. In *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (2016), B.P. Moideen and his father, B.P. Unni Moyin Sahib, stand in stark contrast with each other, which even culminates in the father stabbing his son. While the role of the family in the life of the biopic subject is crucial in most cases, some of them stay detached from their families; they are revealed as standing alone in their path to fame. The family's part in the biopic is indispensable, even outside the film's frame, while tracing a person's real life. The consent of the existing relatives of the subject is to be considered, and the legalities and approvals are to be taken care of before venturing into the project. According to Custen, "... legal considerations were a factor controlling a biopic life. Studios often had to consider the rights of surviving relatives of the recently deceased famous person and laws of privacy adhering to the picturing of actual

living individuals” (22). However, balancing a filmmaker's artistic licence and the subject's individual rights and privacy makes for a controversy-free biopic.

Apart from the family of the subject, the biopic shows the relationship between the protagonist and a confidante who remains a constant support. Custen suggests, "More often than not, the friend is a kind of worshipful member of an entourage whose life appears to be given meaning by association with the great person" (164). Custen further emphasises the role of the biopic friend thus:

The friend can be a representative of the larger public that acclaims the great man or woman. Providing the trappings of normal behavior – companionship, interaction, loyalty- like a Greek chorus or knowing stage manager, the companion signals the audience to applaud or occasionally to villify the behavior of the leading figure. The friend articulates common values, and acts as a kind of surrogate for the imaginary audience member. In this way, the presence in a script of these friends is a guide to the audience, getting us to empathize with these great figures, but also to revere them. (164-165)

Kamli (Kamlesh Kanhaiyalal Kapasi), played by Vicky Kaushal in Sanjay Dutt’s biopic *Sanju* (2018), is based on Dutt’s real-life friend Paresh Ghalani, whom he lovingly calls ‘Parya’, who stood with him through all the vicissitudes of his life. The close friend or confidante helps the movie articulate the remarkable qualities of the biopic subject, enunciating what makes him or her outstanding. *Ennu Ninte Moideen* portrays Mukkam Bhasi as B.P. Moideen’s bosom companion. The former is presented as so close to Moideen that he stays with him through the different

facets of his life, and his presence is marked even when Moideen loses his life in the boat wreck. Biopics formulate antagonistic relations between the protagonist and the members of a wider community. The conflict arises from the ideology of the subject being placed in apparent contradiction to the dominant ideology, which, in a way, typifies the protagonist trying to redefine the limits of a particular community. In the Kamala Das biopic, *Aami* (2018), the director depicts Kamala embracing Islam, which consequently incurs the wrath of Hindu fanatics, making her life traumatic.

Like any other film genre, romance also becomes central to the plot of biopics. Recent biopics highlight the omnipresent discourse of love, which, by and large, is an inquiry into the private lives of the subjects. The new cinema-going audience prefers an investigation of the obscured or unexplored vignettes of the subjects' lives to their already-known public personae. Consequently, the biopic directors seek to rummage the private self, or rather, the love life of the subject, which offers an intrigue that lures the audience. Movies like *Makaramanju*, *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, and *Aami* attest to the pervasive theme of love and romance in biopics, which, in a sense, is crucial regarding economic concern.

Another central theme that the genre undertakes is the issue of how the private life of the subject is placed against his or her public life. The biopic subject is positioned in a conflict between his or her inner desires and responsibility to the public. Matthew Robinson observes in his thesis that “the individual’s life is constructed as both ‘public’, containing their known achievements, and ‘private’, their desires, familial relations, romances, and responsibilities” (188–189). Lately,

biopics have extensively pursued the pattern of examining the subject's private life and its intricacies, meeting the demands of the public interest. Robinson explicates it thus:

The focus on private lives resonates with the emergence of other discourses, specifically the growing emphasis in popular journalism on stories with 'human interest' and celebrity culture. Profiles of celebrity figures changed over the course of the nineteenth century from a focus on carefully choreographed 'public' moments towards revelations about their private lives. (189)

A medley of controversy and tragedy, *Kadambari* (2015), a Bengali biopic, centres on the life of Kadambari Devi, the sister-in-law of Rabindranath Tagore, and their complex relationship. Often, the title suggests the priority of the narrative; *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, translated as 'Yours Truly, Moideen' indicates the focus of the movie—the love life of Moideen; the title 'Aami' suggests Kamala Das's sobriquet, which invariably means the movie can be more about the personal life of Das. The genre's affinity for "human interest" like romance, altercations, and crime eventually led to Bollywood biopics like *Bandit Queen* about the gangster turned politician Phoolan Devi and *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012) on the life of Paan Singh Tomar, the soldier, athlete, and afterwards an outlaw.

The public and private lives of the biopic subjects are predominantly structured around a polarity where the subject sacrifices one life for the other. *Yugapurushan* testifies to it by elucidating the different events of social reformation through which Sree Narayana Guru lived his life; by marginalising his private self,

the movie exemplifies Guru, who abandons his family for the more significant cause of betterment in the then-caste-ridden society of Kerala. *Makaramanju* maps the artistic triumphs of Raja Ravi Varma as a renowned painter while simultaneously portraying the strained relationship with his wife. By foregrounding how these protagonists pursued a larger responsibility at the cost of their personal lives, these biopics emphasise their heroes as self-sacrificing.

The biopic typically assumes a position between a documentary and a feature film, entertainingly discussing a person's life. Pramod K. Nayar introduces Michael Chaney's term 'artifactuality' about the biopic in his *Essays in Celebrity Culture*, which suggests a blend of fact and fiction: "The biopic, then, as a performative documentary, is an instance of what Michael Chaney terms "artifactuality" (181), combining artifice (the film) and artifact (footage, newspaper records)" (80). As a moral and creative responsibility, a biopic director employs his imaginative faculty to frame the subject's life. Ellen Cheshire believes that:

... ultimately biographical-pictures, bio-pics, will succeed if filmmakers find imaginative ways to present the life in question. They will have to manipulate the vast quantities of material available to them, to create a compelling well-constructed narrative. As with documentary films, there will be accusations of bias, what has been included and what has been left out. The interests of the filmmakers will inevitably be reflected in the work. (125)

Unlike documentary films, historicity and accuracy do not form the major concerns of biopics; they give prominence to the audience's interests, making the film

dramatically engaging. Biopic makers interpret history and biography and make it convenient for them to recreate the subjects' lives with the elements of a feature film. The biopic being a sure-shot box office formula, the directors and producers search for sources that zero in on characters who can excite and entertain. Custen remarks:

For the producers of biopics, historical accuracy was not the fore-most concern. While well aware of the role history might play in these films (Zanuck, for example, could be most articulate on poetic license in Fox biopics), for the most part producers were more concerned with crafting a film narrative that would win audience sympathy, thereby selling tickets. For producers, historicity and accuracy were attractive as long as they remained selling points. (128)

Moreover, it is hardly possible to condense an individual's whole life into a film where the biopic director chooses a particular phase of his or her life with only specific episodes and develops a strategy that would help shape a biopic in accordance with conventional filmmaking ethics. Unless the movie is bizarrely erroneous, the audience and film critics acknowledge the artistic license adopted by the biopic directors. Custen opines:

Although some critics and viewers lay in wait to catch the slightest slip, the attitude of most audience members, as well as producers, seemed to be that unless the error was particularly outrageous, or the events were so recent that many patrons would recall the fact, an odd mixture of careful research, of compromised whimsy, and outright fabrication characterized the sets, the

costumes, the characters, manners and mores, and the narratives of most biopics. (37)

Even though the biopic genre is not without controversy, its popularity in India is on the rise, which suggests that the hour has come for a reconsideration of the genre. Aparajita Chakraborty and Susmita Halder write, "The increasing demand of biopic may be attributed to the fact that audience like to watch 'real' stories in a fictionalized medium which may be perceived to be 'unusual'. Thereby, it inculcates a feeling of 'authenticity' in the audience and makes it more 'reliable'. Even actors are "excited" about the new challenge" (794). Apart from recounting their lives, the biopic subjects offer insights into the cultural assets and the uncertainties of a specific era. Indian cinema, recently replete with sports and political biopics, lures the audience's interest with its ostensibly simple plot that culminates in the protagonists' victory after a series of trials and tribulations. As an adaptation of a real person's life, the biopic offers narrative interest without demanding the audience stretch their imagination as they would for a feature film.

The biopic, by and large, is a screen biography that, as previously stated, adapts the life of an actual individual to the screen, which makes it imperative to study the methodologies of adaptation for the present study. In *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, Susan Heywood defines adaptations as "a synergy between the desire for sameness and reproduction on the one hand and, on the other, the acknowledgement of difference" (6). Along with the adaptations of works of fiction into movies, the adaptations of biographies or real lives have also carved their niche in the culture industry. Eli Lofaldli, in *From Biographical Text to Biopic: Adapting*

the Cultural Memory of the Eighteenth Century, observes, "Due to the fundamental similarities between adaptations and biopics, biographical films have often been seen as a form of adaptation. Tom Brown, for example, argues that the biopic is essentially a form of adaptation..." (15). The biopic, as an adapted text, presents the story of a life, or it is a story of a life being retold, but in a different format from the written biography. In *The Study of Historical Films as Adaptation: Some Critical Reflections*, Patrick Cattrysse's point of view is that "[n]either the book nor the past is actually changed; rather, an additional representation of them is made" (10).

Usually, a biopic is an adaptation of more than one specific biography or text, and there could be manifold reasons why the adapters or the biopic directors choose specific episodes from the life of the subject. Marta Minier and Maddalena Pennachia, in *Adaptation, Intermediality, and the British Celebrity Biopic*, write about the kinds of source materials, "Source materials do not tend to offer themselves to easy taxonomization; determining the sources appears to be a case-by-case matter. It can be one or more written biographies that are consulted; it may be an autobiography, a memoir, a diary, a collection of letters, interviews, or eulogies" (8). From such a plethora of source materials, the director chooses the aspects he desires to feature in the biopic and fills in the 'hermeneutic gaps' with his creative imagination. The audience also partakes in the process with their prior knowledge of the subject, eventually determining whether the biopic is a success. When a director makes a biopic with the view of drawing the viewers' narrative interest, he resorts to various techniques that eventually redefine the borders of the biopic, thus overlapping with other generic conventions to make different samples of biopics like literary biopics, gangster biopics, artist biopics, and others. The biopic, in a certain

sense, is an exceptionally sophisticated genre in which semiotic systems generally associated with specific media are seen to converge or clash on screen in the act of meaning-making. Employing diverse media in the recreation or representation of life on screen is no longer limited to the biography and the biopic; a series of interrelated media are involved in the process of bringing real life onto the screen. By adopting distinct approaches to depicting life narratives on screen, some biopic makers even go to the extent of conceiving new characters who do not form part of the source materials. As stated by Marta Minier and Maddalena Pennachia:

Although, in the majority of cases, a great deal is known to the makers of the biopic about the biographee as opposed to fictional characters who are literally imagined differently by every reader and adapter, the way a biopic fills in the gaps of how one's story has been told so far may introduce new gaps and hence may invite further retellings of the story. (13)

However, the artistic licence of the biopic directors raises the issue of fidelity in the adapted text among the audience and critics.

The issue of fidelity forms one of the core concerns in the field of adaptation, where reliability holds a prominent place, especially in a discourse like the biopic.

Minier and Pennachia write about the truth value of biopics as follows:

... the perception of the biopic as an adaptation is inextricably linked to the problematic issues of 'truth value' and the fiction-versus- fact debate. To some extent, the preoccupation with this binary opposition between source and biopic is understandable, since making a biopic- just as producing any

adaptation, and perhaps, to a lesser extent, translation—involves a process of selection and (re)arrangement based on interpretation on the maker's take on the subject. (11)

As suggested earlier, the biopic as a literal adaptation can be so minimally engaging that the director appropriates some aspects that excite the mass audience into the narrative. There can be intersecting elements of truth and fiction without compromising much on the movie's objective. However, as Dudley Andrew believes, the success of an adapted work relies not on fidelity but on its fertility. This idea accounts for the recent surge of biopics in the film industry, where exciting elements form a substantial part of the narrative, inadvertently acting as a marketing ploy by filmmakers and producers. In "Reframing Adaptation: Representing the Invisible", Wendy Everett discusses one of the dangers of examining adaptations solely based on the original text, which is "the obfuscation of the film's identity as film" (158). Sometimes, the filmmaker's effort to adhere to the original work fails by virtue of contemporary sensibilities, whereby his or her ideology infiltrates into the screenplay so that the movie attains an autonomous status. This verifies that change is predetermined and practically ineludible when a text is transposed from one genre to another.

Regarding cinema, as a part of the *mise-en-scene*, the camera plays a dominant role in reviving or adapting a real-life individual on screen. Like an eye, the camera functions in a unique way, helping the director focus on subjective details and dodge extraneous elements. The camera shots further help to blend different times and spaces through the technique of editing, giving the spectators an

experience of reality. Music, as in any other film genre, also plays a substantial role in biopics. Though often an inconspicuous device in terms of the biopic, music fosters the emotions and feelings of the audience in the process of decoding the life of the biopic subject. Wendy Everett examines the irrelevance accorded to music in adaptations, "It is also true that scores used in adaptations are frequently derivative and may simply act as temporal signifiers, music being one of the most powerful of all pointers of period, place, and memory" (156). Music, a potent narrative device, caters to shaping the emotional responses of the audience, which in turn becomes crucial to the experience of a particular scene or event in the movie.

Despite their fascination for past stories, biopics try to demonstrate the past with an outlook on the present. When a real-life story gets adapted to the screen, it offers a venue to recount the stories of the past in different ways in new paraphernalia. Eli Lofaldi says, "Part of the reason why films have such an important function in shaping our conceptions of the past is their unrivalled ability to create an emotional connection to the past for their audiences" (28). He also underscores this in the case of biopics when he says, "This is also very important for biopics since they have such a prominent focus on the life of the historical individual" (28).

A closely related theoretical perspective is intertextuality, which facilitates cross-references with other texts, thus forming an intertext. Coined by Julia Kristeva, intertextuality identifies the interrelatedness among various texts and signifies how a text is inevitably made up of other texts through different allusions, repetitions, and transformations. Like any other art form, films also capitalise on already existing

texts, both literary and non-literary. According to Das Reetamoni, "films as a form of art borrow heavily from the already prevalent customs, social, and literary traditions. Films build a self-conscious intertextual relation with already available texts and discourses" (70). For instance, Ranjit Desai's *Raja Ravi Varma: A Novel* is one of the texts that *Makaramanju* uses as a source. Intertextuality in films is not limited to the one-to-one translation of a literary text into a film but involves various other systems of representation. In recent films, especially in genres like the biopic, there has been a deliberate mixing of generic conventions, artistic style, and other elements. Such films beget multiple meanings and innovative viewpoints by readdressing already existing ideas. Reetamoni conceives, "Intertextuality frees films from the boundaries of genres and allows filmmakers to play with form and content. There is a to-and-fro movement to pre-existing texts and discourses" (74). Thus, the biopic that maps the life of a real-life individual is replete with references from a multitude of sources, making it an intertext.

Produced within a social context, film as an art form incorporates careful blending and implanting of pre-existing essentials; it seeks to foreground its cultural prestige by adapting from other art forms like theatre and literature. Kelly Williams, in *Barry Lyndon: Intertextuality and Film Adaptation*, states Bluestone's analogy that "the film becomes a different thing in the same sense that a historical painting becomes a different thing from the historical event which it illustrates" (9). The interdependence of cinema and literature through intertextual references makes a film a full-fledged artistic discourse with a realistic overtone. A film genre like the biopic forms a historical source just as any other document like a book, the

significance of which lies in its proficiency to delineate things that the audience could hardly witness in their real lives. Ewa Mazierka revisits Rosenstone's take on historical movies, "rather than dismissing popular historical films' as mere "fiction" or "entertainment" or lamenting their obvious "inaccuracies", it seems more judicious... to investigate how films work to create a historical world." (13). The reproduction of a particular art form seems increasingly original when influenced by technology, and in cinema, the camera's simulation of reality makes it a technical intertext. Mohammad Shakib in "Inevitability of Arts from Intertextuality" writes, "According to Metz, film, picture, colour, sound, motion, and adaptation from literature, whether technological or mechanical, make film a sort of technical intertextuality" (3–4). Assisted by technical equipment, the biopic director adapts and translates the source texts, making the film an intertext. The filmmaker consciously takes the subject and the storyline from diverse systems of representation, including literary and non-literary texts and socio-political and cultural traditions, with a view to a realistic portrayal of the subject. After selecting the subject, the adapter or filmmaker imbues it with his own interpretation, as it is hardly possible to transform a text from one medium into another without alterations. Factors influencing the change could primarily be the difference in media, the people involved in movie-making, and the viewers' demands. For instance, the format of a biography, or rather, a biographical source, substantially differs from a biopic's format. Marta Minier and Maddalena Pennachia observe: "The relevance of directorial style, the signature of the scriptwriter, the connotations of casting, and other factors to do with the making of the biopic can thus be seen as part of the intertextual web" (10).

Cinema being a large canvas that extensively employs intertextuality, Graham Allen argues that there are deeply rooted intertextual relationships between film and literature (180). The biopic being a genre that extensively relies on intertextual references, George Custen in *Bio/Pics* states, "Because of the ritualistic use of intertextuality, a similar shape to fame, something like an ideological taxonomy of fame, became the norm for making the cinematic life of a great man or woman" (111). Intertextuality endorses the mixture of all genres and discourses, liberating films from generic conventions and boundaries, which eventually favours the adapter to transcend the rules of specific form and matter. The intertextual connections in a biopic that shift between time and space encompass past and present events.

Intertextuality, in a sense, is also involuntarily exercised by the audience, as they can comprehend the lateral association between the film and the source texts in the case of adapted texts like the biopic. These film adaptations abound in "intertextual dialogism" and are beyond the source-adaptation dichotomy. If a film adaptation was previously judged based on the affinity between the source and the adaptation, the idea has changed considerably with the advent of intertextuality. Aguilar quotes Stam and Raengo regarding film adaptation, "As they suggest, film adaptations are caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation of texts, generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin" (17). The reception of *Makaramanju*, for example, was mediated by the known facts of Ravi Varma's life, the novel by Ranjit Desai on the romance with Sugandha Bai, and the many

paintings, reprints of which are hung in almost every Malayali house. The interconnection between adaptation and intertextuality has favoured invalidating the original-copy duality, which was prevalent in traditional adaptation studies. As a multifaceted medium, films diverge from the original source texts, attaining an independent status.

As a film genre, the biopic is often critiqued for its debatable historical authenticity and validity, even though an accurate portrayal of real life on screen is practically infeasible. Hence, far from a truthful translation of biographical sources, the biopic employs diverse intertextual references in adapting a real-life story. The flexible generic conventions of the biopic engender an intricate blending of biography, history, fiction, and adaptation.

The biopic as an intertextual discourse that represents the real-life individual on screen necessitates the study of the theory of representation. Mary Beltran states, "Representation is a visual, written, or audio depiction of something or someone. This term also broadly refers to what images and texts mean, the meanings they potentially convey, and how they come to take on those meanings" (97). Critics like Stuart Hall believe cultural studies have accorded substantial significance to representation and its practice. In a lecture by Hall concerning representation and media, he observes that the word representation has incurred a dual meaning:

Now, the word has a kind of double meaning, even in its common-sense understanding. It doesn't mean "to present", "to image", or "to depict" – to offer a depiction of something else. And the word representation or re-

presentation does sort of carry with it the notion that something was there already and, through the media, has been represented. (6)

The theory of representation is significant in a film genre like biopics as it mediates between the audience and reality, helping the former understand things with a different outlook. As an established notion, representation re-presents or revives an already-existing meaning and tends to be different from person to person.

While emphasising that all art is representation, it forms a matter of key concern in discourses like cinema, especially in genres like the biopic. Contemplating cinema as an artwork, Dudley Andrew feels artworks are suitable examples of worlds and worldmaking as they are cut off in time and space from our everyday lives (39). A genre like the biopic tends to fascinate the viewers in the way it is taken alternately as both real and fictitious and is seen as a different world altogether. As a visual medium, it has the artifice to represent people, their emotions, and their feelings in such a way that it seeks to render the life of a historical figure realistically. In *Film Form and Phantasy*, Michael O'Pray feels "the issue of the nature of representation in one way or another has been at the centre of film theory since its inception..." (3). He adds, "In discussing representation and expression in film, we have called on the notion of projection, which involves emotion, belief, and seeing-in. In other words, films move us, and we experience them in a fine web of beliefs and feelings somehow expressive of the film" (52). While a text is transferred from one medium to another, eventually, the representation of the signs also undergoes transformation or change in perception, which adds a whole new dimension to it.

The makers of biopics recreate or reconstruct reality, forming a representation of already existing actualities. However, representations are not realistic in their true sense; it is scarcely possible to confine the entire spectrum of reality to any system of representation. Though reality and representation are closely connected, the latter is not an exact reflection of the former, considering that representations are contingent on the culture and politics of the society that produced them. Andrew explains:

How does the cinema represent anything for us? In trying to answer this question, Goodman advises us not to measure the adequacy of our representations against some supposed “reality” existing beyond representation but to isolate and analyse the peculiarities that make up the representational system of the cinema and that make its effects distinctive. (40-41)

The biopic narratives invent a framework to 'construct' reality about the actual incidents or episodes in the subject's life, which enchants the film viewers to such an extent that they become ignorant of the process of signification. Apart from giving a mirror reflection of reality, representation creates reality.

Representation in the biopic largely relies on textual signs and cues like biographies, autobiographies, and other biographical materials, as well as on visual media like documentaries and other footage. A cinematic representation like the biopic, which presents a novel version of an actual individual's life, investigates not only the filmic text but also the texts concerning the world that produced it. A filmmaker who endeavours to depict real lives on screen creates a reality that is not

neutral; instead, it is a reality that is shaped by the politics of representation.

Profoundly political and ideological, representation heavily relies on the convictions of the director, especially in the depiction of aspects like caste, class, and gender in cinema. Nevertheless, the political and philosophical inclinations of the filmmakers and their effects on the filmgoers frequently cause controversies and disputes regarding the portrayal of a subject. Clara Neary and Helen Ringrow observe in “Media, Power, and Representation” that "mainstream media representation of political movements and political figures tends to intersect with dominant ideas about class, social structure, and economics" (10). Even when it is claimed that representations organise culture, knowledge, and ideology, problematic representations in biopics can have a negative impact on the audience.

Representation in the biopic is not just about the directors' policy but also about the politics of the audience, which is active and critical for the interpretation of the movie.

While the audience plays an essential role in the overall experience of cinema, reception theory becomes pivotal for the present study. Reception theory is deemed an offshoot of reader-response criticism, emphasising the reader's experience of a text rather than its formal elements. In *Film Studies*, Amy Villarejo acknowledges:

Against the influential view that a poem or a novel offers up its meanings and frames of reference univocally and intrinsically, German scholars Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss separately but relatedly proposed

models of response to literary texts that took seriously what a reader brings in terms of knowledge, experience, and openness to the text. (116)

Regarding media texts, reception theory preoccupies itself with how the audience reads a media text, thereby making meaning out of it; it also aspires to comprehend the social role of mass media. While classical film theorists treated the audience as a group of idealised and homogeneous viewers who react to films in a uniform pattern, heedless of different identifying factors like class, race, and gender, reception theorists assigned them a new role as active interpreters of meaning.

Reception theory suggests that the media text lacks an inherent meaning that gets manifested only when the audience watches and processes it. In his influential essay “Encoding, Decoding”, Stuart Hall attempts to reconcile the conflicting perspectives of the audience as passive recipients of meaning and as an autonomous entity that actively takes part in the creation of meaning. According to Hall, every media text is encoded with some meaning or message, but it is the audience or receiver who chooses how to interpret these texts. He states:

Before this message can have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need', or be put to 'use', it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded means which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade, with very complex perception, cognitive, emotional, ideological, or behavioural consequences. (509)

While generating the meaning of a text, contextual factors like the viewer's identity, his or her preconceived notions about the genre of the film, and historical and socio-political issues become more decisive than the textual factors. While watching a biopic, the spectator devises a specific meaning based on his or her pre-existing ideas of the subject, which determines the success of the movie. Viewers hold numerous subject identities that are intentionally and unintentionally maintained, including age, gender, class, caste, and sexual orientation, and they watch movies from different positions at the same time. Alexander Geimer, in "Cultural Practices of the Reception and Appropriation of Films from the Standpoint of a Praxeological Sociology of Knowledge" contends, "... it is possible that young people describe the aesthetic structure of a film without constructing the author's intentions and refer to their own perception (such as the emergence of fear, pity, and anger instructed by music, light, plot, acting skills, and so forth)" (307).

Films are said to possess an independent life that finds signification outside the textual limits, and reception studies underscore the contribution of contextual factors in the creation of meaning. Reception studies discern a range of choices that the audience is familiar with so that they can decide what kind of cinematic experience they want. The biopic, a reasonably recent phenomenon in the Indian film scenario, gains increased prominence at this juncture where the audience plays a pivotal role in moviemaking. The recent boom of the biopic, which also allows the spectator to participate in a cultural activity featuring real-life characters, indicates the audience's expanding demand for biographical narratives following a series of successes in this genre. The spectator, who previously was only a product of the

cinematic apparatus infused with the dominant ideology, defies convention and takes on an autonomous role in constructing the meaning of a cinematic text. With the emergence of the new middle class in India, biopics have grown in popularity; the reason for this is their identification with the subject and the belief that, if they overcome their barriers, they too can realise the middle-class dream.

Anne Marie Scholz writes in *Adaptation as Reception*, "Most film viewers have a strong sense of the historical about films, though they may not be conscious of it" (659). Even though the viewers of a biopic construct their own version of the narrative, they seek to relate the film's text to a pre-existing context. While adapting a life onto the screen, filmmakers invent new ways and techniques to attract a large market where they endeavour to establish something innovative in the film medium, eventually creating a different history. The increasing acceptance of the biopic, owing to audience demand and reception, has made it more commercialised, prompting filmmakers to produce more of the kind. The box-office success of recent biopics also validates contemporary audiences' preference for narratives that explore the private or lesser-known lives of the subjects. For instance, *Yugpurushan*, which primarily focuses on the protagonist's public life, did not gain the same level of commercial success as *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, a biopic that thrives largely on the subject's private love affair. Barbara Klinger, in "Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture" asserts, "It is a matter of industry policy to design a consumable identity for a film; this identity enters into the arena in which the film is encountered by the spectator" (5). Multiple factors, including genre, theme, style, directors, and characters of actors, are invariably subject to the marketing policy of a

film. Promotional practices of the industry also cater to the commercialisation of a movie, which gains force in its reception while assisting in the extra signification of the text. Advertising, press releases, and other publicity events give insight into the essence of the film, along with film reviews, magazine articles, newsletters, and box-office data that give an impression of how the audience receives a particular movie.

As regards Indian cinema, though the biopic is a burgeoning genre, it has spawned myriad subgenres that have become the flavour of the time. The biopic, concerning biographies and several other biographical sources, obliges diverse theoretical perspectives to decipher its subtleties. As part of film studies, a few theories of film operate as tools to interpret biopics, thus helping to ferret out the nuances of the genre. Since the thesis seeks an analytical study of Malayalam biopics, tracing their trajectory from the public to the private lives of the subjects, it mainly relies on the fundamental tenets of the genre itself rather than the other major film theories. An inquiry into the biopic, hence, necessitates an in-depth study of the basic precepts of the genre along with a few closely related theoretical postulations, which eventually create a cultural paradigm and a scope for further study in the field of biopics.

CHAPTER II

YUGAPURUSHAN: MYSTIC VISION AND SOCIAL REFORM

As a technological innovation of the twentieth century, cinema has set down new perspectives in the realms of art and entertainment that have served to marshal extensive and substantial changes in life globally. The decisive role cinema plays in constructing national identity through the eclectic appropriation of history is yet another aspect that looms large. Though filmmaking in India began with *Shree Pundalik* (1912), directed by Dadasaheb Thorne and N.G. Chitre, Dundiraj Govind Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) is widely regarded as the first Indian feature film. Sabrina Ciolfi, in "Popular Hindi Cinema: Narrative Structures and Points of Continuity with Tradition" observes that "[f]rom its very beginnings, Indian cinema has drawn inspiration from the styles, aesthetics, and semiotics of a great variety of cultural forms that have followed one upon another in India over the centuries, often integrating them in various ways during the process of evolution forming a vast cultural heritage". (388) Ciolfi further opines that "From the outset, Indian cinema was able to draw upon a vast and original narrative repertory" (389).

Indian cinema, in its initial phase, was largely grounded in genres like mythological movies that traced the lives of legendary kings and noble saints. The epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were the earliest sources for cinema in its infancy. India being profoundly allied with its multifarious religions and mythologies could be deemed a reason for the emergence of the mythological genre, which has been pivotal in the founding of Indian cinema in the silent era and, to some extent, in the era of talkies. Directors of mythological films customarily adopt

the characters and events from epics and other mythological stories, emphasising the victory of good over evil and the significance of self-sacrifice. Even the first full-length feature film, *Raja Harishchandra* was based on the legendary king Harishchandra of the Ishvaku dynasty, with Dattatraya Damodar Dabke in the titular role. After its release, the vast majority of the movies released were mythological in nature, and Chidananda Das Gupta in *Seeing is Believing* especially comments on Phalke's later movies: "All of the 100 films he made were mythological right up to 1937 when he made his second talkie *Gangavataran* (The Descent of Ganga)" (74). One of the motives for the cascade of mythological movies could be that the already-fabled stories are easily communicated to the audience. Some of the instances of early mythological films are *Mohini Bhasmasur* (1913), based on the story of Mohini and the ash demon Bhasmasura; *Keechakavadham* (1917), premised on the Virata Parva segment in the *Mahabharata*; and *Prem Sanyas* (1925), founded on the life of Gautama Buddha. Movies like *Sant Tukaram* (1936) about Tukaram, a Varkari saint and spiritual poet of the Bhakti Movement who stood against Brahmanical dominance, advocating the oneness of human beings sans distinction of class and creed, and *Sant Dnyaneshwar* (1940) based on the life of the thirteenth-century saint, philosopher, and yogi Dnyaneshwar, belong to a closely related genre, the devotionals, which are dedicated mainly to saints and deities.

Historical movies are another major genre of the Indian film industry, which can be said to have the proficiency to capture the period, context, matter, and manner of historical events or persons by dint of historical evidence and documents. As visual adaptations, movies are crucial in discerning history, as Marnie

Warrington attests in *History Goes to the Movies*: "For many people, 'history' is what they see in films and television programmes" (1). Filmmakers have long been in pursuit of the possibility of recreating events and personalities of the past and presenting them in movies from diverse perspectives. Acquiring the required data from varied sources gives a personal dimension to the movies, thus substantiating a version of history. Sony Raj and Rohini Sreekumar, in their article "Colonial Rebels in Indian Cinema: Narrative Ideology and Popular Culture", view historical narratives in movies as "the conceptualization, recreation, and dissemination through a linear pattern by careful assemblage of the social, political, cultural and economic happenings from the past to create a memory for the present generation" (253). Making historical films includes manifold challenges ranging from the research, findings, and amalgamation of data to employing scrupulous details like language, costumes, and location, which eventually impart the filmmaker's ideological perspective and rationale for making a particular historical film. *Jhansi ki Rani* (1953), based on the bravery of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi against the backdrop of the 1857 Mutiny; *Vikramaditya* (1945), on the valorous story of Chandragupta II, one of the powerful emperors of the Gupta period; and *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* (2009), about the gallantry of Pazhassi Raja who fought against the East India Company, can be cited as examples of historical films.

The biopic, a prominent genre of the day, was at one time considered a sub-genre of the historical, more so because it also dealt with the lives and deeds of great men in history. Though biopics follow mythological and historical films, they have undergone significant changes in subject treatment. As mentioned previously, the

first movie chosen for the study, *Yugapurushan* (2010), directed by R. Sukumaran, is centred on the life and times of Sree Narayana Guru, the pioneer of Renaissance in Kerala. The movie almost follows the pattern of mythological and historical movies that call attention to the magnificence of the subject by adopting the "great man" approach. Sree Narayana Guru is one of the most persuasive and towering personalities of the Kerala Renaissance, who redeemed the contours of Kerala society and history with his visionary goals. Unveiling Guru as a charismatic luminary, *Yugapurushan* seems to resonate with Thomas Carlyle's notion of the 'great man' that he explicates in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*:

The history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at the bottom the History of great men who worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns and in a wide sense creator, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or attain... (5)

As *Yugapurushan* approaches Sree Narayana Guru as a great man, it pays closer attention to his public life, whereby his private space is left out. In 1983, an offbeat movie based on Sree Narayana Guru's life, titled *Sree Narayana Guru*, was made by P.A. Backer. However, perhaps because it was a part of the parallel cinema movement, it neither became a part of the evolution of the Malayalam biopic nor did it have a widespread influence among the public. In a telephone conversation with the researcher on 15 June 2021, Sukumaran claims, "*Yugapurushan* is a kind of response to *Sree Narayana Guru*, by P.A. Bakker, which I feel, because of its offbeat nature, had not been a part of mainstream cinema."

This chapter is concerned with how *Yugapurushan* focuses primarily on the public life of Sree Narayana Guru and how his visionary zeal transformed the social fabric of Kerala in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The chapter will examine how R Sukumaran presents the crucial ways in which Sree Narayana Guru, in a revolutionary move, started establishing temples across the state, beginning with Aruvipuram Shiva Temple and ending with Kalavancode temple. It will be argued that the director's focus is almost solely on the social life of Sree Narayana Guru in connection with the social reforms that he initiated in a caste-based and caste-biased society in which the avarnas were subjected to inhuman treatment by the upper caste communities of Kerala.

R. Sukumaran, a painter and art tutor, accidentally got into the motion picture industry during his art exhibition in Berlin, where one of the art enthusiasts, Augustine Ilanjipally, approached him seeking his involvement in movie making. Though not a prolific film director, he has established his reputation in the Malayalam film industry with his critically acclaimed movies *Padamudra* (1988) and *Rajashilpi* (1992). A devout follower of Sree Narayana Guru, Sukumaran launched his third movie, *Yugapurushan* (2010), after extensive research spanning fifteen years on Guru and his teachings. In *Yugapurushan*, he seeks to expound on Guru's public life, where he tries to portray the social, religious, and divine aspects of Sree Narayana Guru. In a conversation with the researcher, the director explained that the fundamental objective of his movie was to delineate the visionary life of Guru, who shaped the history of society, rather than his entire life. *Yugapurushan*, translated as "The Man of an Age," is a tribute to Kerala's great mystic and reformer

who continues influencing people through his ideals and institutions. Produced under the banner of AVA Productions, the art director K Krishnamoorthy and the cinematographer Ramachandra Babu revive the remarkable life of Sree Narayana Guru on the big screen. The movie has an ensemble cast that includes Mammootty, Jagathi Sreekumar, Kalabhavan Mani, Navya Nair, Sai Kumar, and Babu Antony, with Thalaivasal Vijay in the titular role. Thalaivasal Vijay won the Special Jury Award at the Kerala State Film Awards in 2010 for his role as Sree Narayana Guru in *Yugapurushan*.

Set mainly in Aruvippuram and Sivagiri, *Yugapurushan* introduces its protagonist before the title credits through a voiceover, after which it establishes the social scenario of the time. Through a montage sequence, the film depicts the abominable caste system and the atrocities perpetrated on lower caste people by the upper castes of the time. As a personification of divinity, Sree Narayana Guru reaches a poverty-stricken seashore and saves the fishermen's families from distress by blessing them. He encounters a poor old widow in a hut on the seashore who bemoans her sad plight and helps her find a living by coir-making. Guru, as a saviour, rescues Maniyan (played by Salim Kumar), who has climbed a tree to save himself from a tiger.

Periodically employing scenes of upper caste brutalities, the movie manifests Guru's vision and his pivotal role as a messiah of the downtrodden. A lower-caste man, Kunjan, is thrashed heavily by a group of upper-caste men for entering a temple, which instigates Sree Narayana Guru to consecrate a temple at Aruvippuram where entry is granted to all. After this, Guru consecrates Vakkom

Anandavalleeswaram Temple, Mannanthala Devi Temple, and Kolathukara Siva Temple. Koran (played by Kalabhavan Mani), a Pulaya, is beaten up for crossing the path of an upper-caste Namboothiri; Guru, who counsels the unkempt Koran about the importance of hygiene, transforms him into a fine man.

As an architect of Renaissance, in the film Guru despises the cruel gods and crude rituals of the lower castes and destroys the idols they worship. He enters the ceremony of child marriage and stops it, which he deems callous and only helps to arrest the progress of society. Contemplating education as a means to save his people from superstitious practices, Guru, in a scene, articulates his plans to start night schools and also starts a Sanskrit school for children who belong to the lower castes. He establishes Sarada Madom and Advaita Ashramam based on the principles of brotherhood and oneness of humanity.

The movie delineates historical events in Kerala, where Guru's role is prominent. In the scenes depicting the Vaikom Satyagraha, Guru appears and expresses his support for its leaders, such as T.K. Madhavan and K.P. Keshava Menon, who demanded the right of untouchables to walk on the roads surrounding the Vaikom Temple. Another historical moment in the film in which Guru's ardent supporter, K.C. Kuttan (played by Mammooty), is introduced is the Ooruttambalam Agitation, an earlier protest for the right to education for all. Along with K.C. Kuttan, the movie deals with the episodes of Ayyankali (played by Babu Antony), the leader of the Pulaya community, and K. Ayyappan (played by Jishnu Raghavan), the leader of Sahodara Sangam who organised inter-caste dining at Cherai. The movie further portrays the formation of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, an organisation

started by Guru to unite the fragmented sects of people, with the support of his close associates like Dr. Palpu and Kumaran Asan. The plot includes incidents of Guru's meeting with national leaders like Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi at Sivagiri.

In most of the scenes, Sree Narayana Guru appears as a public man surrounded by his followers, to whom he delivers his sermons. His aphorisms form an integral part of the script, and the movie's subplots are based on them. Through the marriage of the fictional characters Koran and Savitri Antharjanam, who belong to two different castes, the movie demonstrates Guru's maxim, "One Caste, One Religion, One God for Mankind." The second subplot that revolves around the story of Paramu, the drunkard, validates Guru's dictum, "Alcohol is poison: Do not make it, do not serve it, do not drink it." Despite his exhortations and crusades for the Ezhavas and other downtrodden communities, the people of his community stand divided in matters of power and property distribution, which prompts him to leave his land. The movie depicts Guru's journey to Ceylon via Tamil Nadu and the ceremonial gathering at a Buddhist temple in Colombo.

As a biopic that largely addresses Guru's public life, *Yugapurushan* does not portray his private life, except in a few sequences where his wife Kalikutty is shown. The second half of the movie reveals Guru in his old age, who is seen to be modifying his ideals at temple consecrations, where he substitutes principles and mirrors for idols of gods. The movie ends with the famous mirror installation at Kalavancode Temple, after which the extremely weak Guru walks away alone into the dark of the night.

While analysing *Yugapurushan*, it becomes apparent that Sree Narayana Guru rose to prominence during a period when social inequality and caste discrimination incredibly controlled Kerala society. The land-owning upper caste enjoyed rights and immunities that bestowed on them supreme power, with which they abused the lower castes or avarnas. Devoid of a voice or post in the affairs of the government, the lower castes had to face restrictions concerning their attire, mode of conduct, education and the like. *Yugapurushan* focuses on Sree Narayana Guru as a public figure in the domain of Kerala Renaissance rather than on his personal life. Even before the title cards, the director sets the tone of the movie with a voiceover intimating the details of Guru's birth, his parents, his mission of uplifting the downtrodden, his belief in the Advaita philosophy, and his death in Varkala. The movie launches itself with Guru's vision against discrimination that prevailed in the caste-ridden society. As Paresh C Palicha points out in the review "*Yugapurushan* is Melodramatic", "To begin with, the premise is established with the Guru reminding the audience about his principles. Then his powers are shown, which include feeding a hungry child, helping fishermen to get a bumper catch, curing a leper and taming a tiger just by looking at it".

The film, starring Thalaivasal Vijay as Sree Narayana Guru, traces Guru's public profile through key events in Kerala's history. According to Unni in a review of the movie, "*Yugapurushan* is not just a peep into the life and times of Sree Narayana Guru (played by Thalaivasal Vijay), it also brings live before us the social realities of an era, with focus on many of the great men who lived in that era, came in touch with the guru and even changed the course of history". From the causes that

led to the Aruvippuram Shivalinga consecration to the final mirror installation at Kalavancode, the film's script is aligned with historical events in Kerala history and Guru's associations with great national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Tagore, as well as social reformers like Chattampi Swamikal, Ayyankali, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Dr. Palpu, and Mannath Padmanabhan.

As the movie begins, it establishes the social scenario of Kerala and evokes the acts of violence meted out to the untouchables. It introduces the brutalities with a graphic montage that sets up the background of the social system that Sree Narayana Guru vehemently opposed. Koran, a Pulaya yoked with an ox, is brutally lashed in a paddy field; writhing in pain, he cries out loudly, "Appa," which reaches Guru's ears, who is seen meditating in a rock cave at Maruthwamala. The following scene shifts to Ooruttambalam Primary School, where the upper caste men create a commotion over a Pulaya girl named Panchami studying with the savarna/upper caste children; a fight ensues between savarnas and avarnas, in the midst of which an upper caste man kicks her. Holding the broken slate and books close to her chest, she cries aloud, "Appa," which again falls on Guru's ears. The scene moves to a road near a field where Vikraman Namboothiri, an upper-caste youth, meets Koran's sister Neeli and asks her to remove her upper cloth. When she resists, he forcefully disrobes her, and in shame and dishonour, she runs away crying "Appa," which again reaches Guru. All these wailings awaken Guru from his meditation, and the camera captures Guru's face in a close-up shot, thus reflecting his inner anguish. All of the scenes in the sequence are later explained in detail, and they also feature other social reformers of Kerala.

Guru, himself a member of a backward community, namely the Ezhavas, assumed the eradication of the brutal caste system as his life's mission. Unni believes,

'Yugapurushan' deals with something that has relevance at all times. The film speaks of the many caste-based and religion-based issues and presents on celluloid an era from the history of Kerala, with references to the history of the country at large. The message of love, brotherhood, compassion etc is conveyed, with the life of the guru as the central character.

One of Guru's major acts of reformation delegated in the movie is the consecration of temples where entry was open to all, the Aruvippuram consecration being the first of them. M.K. Sanoo observes, "In Guru's vision, temples had to be the centres of purity and growth" (66). Being a radical and revolutionary step taken by Guru towards reformation in a stagnant society, the director gives a graphic description of the Aruvippuram Siva Temple in the movie. It is midnight. People start preparations for the consecration. Guru is shown meditating with a few devotees around him, and the camera positioned at a low angle projects Guru's image as a visionary who is the lifesaver of the downtrodden. A few others come from a distance and join them. Guru wakes up from meditation, gets up, and walks towards the banks of the river, followed by his devotees. With a glow on his face, he dips himself under the water, where a whirlpool is formed. As the anxious devotees look into the whirlpool, Guru rises from the river with a Sivalinga, or the idol of Shiva, and walks towards the decorated shack. A person rising from the waters, whether Aphrodite from the sea or Jesus from the river Jordan, is universally seen as a symbol of a new birth with a

newfound power, implying a transformation and a new beginning. With the idol in his hands, his face glows, and tears roll down his eyes, which fall on the idol. He places the idol on the pedestal kept inside the shack. With a spotlight on the idol, the scene gets illuminated, suggesting the light of new hope and revolution in a society ruled by oppression and iniquities. It is followed by a song reiterating the upcoming revolution attributed to the ideals of Guru. After that episode, a few agitated aristocrats arrive there, and one of them questions the right of an Ezhava like Guru, to consecrate a temple, which is a sacrilegious act according to them.

ARISTOCRAT: Who gave the rights to a non-Brahmin like you to perform it?

GURU: Rights for what?

ARISTOCRAT: What right does an Ezhava have to consecrate Lord Siva's idol?

GURU: Oh, is it? Then consider that I have consecrated Lord Siva, who is an Ezhava. Who has the right to eternal power? Who has that supreme authority? (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 35:03 – 35:21)

Listening to these words, they draw back and stop their verbal attack on Guru.

Although Guru consecrated over fifty temples after the Aruvippuram consecration, the movie illustrates only a few. With inspiring devotional music in the background, in consecutive scenes, Guru installs the Subrahmanya idol at Vakkom Anandavalleeswaram Temple, the idol of goddess Parvathi at Mannanthala Devi Temple, and the idol of Siva at Kulathur Kolathukara Siva Temple. The movie discusses Guru's evolution of thought regarding temple consecrations, highlighting

the Murukkumpuzha Temple, where Guru no longer consecrates idols. The scene depicts the sanctum sanctorum of Murukkumpuzha Temple, where he placed a dazzling inscription of Aum with the words - truth, kindness, virtue, and peace engraved around it. After the installation, Guru walks towards the crowd of devotees who are witnessing the event with utmost reverence.

Another corresponding event delineated in the movie is the consecration of Kalavancode Temple towards the movie's climax. While a group of devotees demands that idols be installed in temples, Guru, Swami Bodhananda, and others emerge from the shadows. Guru, physically tired, glances at the idols arranged for consecration and extends his arms sideways, on which a mirror is placed and says, “You should see yourself. You should see and learn for yourself. The God whom you seek is within you. (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 2:22:53 – 2:23:05). The light that reflects from the mirror falls on the group of people assembled there. Guru places the mirror against the lamps in the sanctum sanctorum, and as he walks out, he falls into the hands of K.C. Kuttan and walks away alone. Along with the temples, Guru also establishes monasteries, some of which are portrayed in the movie. The film depicts the institution of Sarada Madom, in which he installs the idol of the goddess Sarada, the deity of knowledge. Guru places the idol on a pedestal and stands with his palms folded in reverence, with a few lines from his verse “Navaratnamanjari” playing in the background. He comes out of the room to a large crowd of his followers, including Ayyankali, Kumaran Asan, and Dr. Palpu. Deeply moved by Guru's compassionate act, Ayyankali prostrates himself in gratitude. The subsequent scene shifts to the banks of the river Periyar, where he

established the Advaita Ashram. Guru is seen to be accompanied by Asan and other followers, to whom Guru expresses his desire to start a Sanskrit school open to all without regard to caste or religious differences. In *Yugapurushan* Sukumaran vividly depicts the formation of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam/SNDP Yogam, an association conceived by Guru that was initially known as Vavoottu Yogam and later as Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam. Guru is shown to be highly disturbed by the unjust treatment of people from backward communities and feels compelled to form an organisation to unite the disorganised masses. This urge leads to the formation of the SNDP Yogam, with Guru as its first president and Kumaran Asan as its first secretary. In that particular scene, Kumaran Asan addresses the audience:

KUMARAN ASAN: Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam has been transformed into Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam and registered under the company's rules. This association has been established in the name of the venerable Brahmasree Narayana Guru at the Aruvippuram Mutt. Its presidency is also dedicated to that great soul. The association formed by the efforts of special guests for the meeting at Kamalalayam Bungalow as well as prominent leaders like Dr. Palpu and M. Govindan is based on Guru's declarations "Attain fortitude through association" and "Attain liberation through education," and we hereby declare that it would bring into effect these valuable declarations by Guru. (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 1:01:53 – 1: 02: 38)

After the successful formation of the SNDP Yogam, Guru had to face several episodes of anguish caused by his followers, who had vested interests in wealth and

power. With little strength to withstand the feud among his followers, Guru leaves Kerala, travels to Tamil Nadu, and later to Ceylon. Vijayalayam Jayakumar records it thus:

But when not only the activists in SNDP Yogam, but even some of those who had embraced asceticism, were found attracted by the lure of money, Swamy for the first time felt wanting in mental strength to remain four squares against the impact of an outrage on his ideal. As a solution, he decided to stand aloof from all those organisations and individuals who stood with daggers drawn at each other in the name of wealth and position. (81)

In the movie, the director divulges Guru's departure and the reason behind it through K.C. Kuttan, who intimates the news to Pavithran Namboothiri. In the following scene, Guru is at Thirupedakam in Madurai, where, in the gentle drizzle, the people gather around him, addressing him with devout affection. A woman among them humbly seeks his blessings. Guru blesses them all and walks away, followed by his disciples. A man offers Guru a car to proceed with his journey, which he gently declines, and as he continues walking, Guru declares his plan, "We are traveling to Ceylon via Rameswaram. We once experienced their love. Isn't it?" (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 2:14:40 – 2:14:52)

In Colombo, Guru addresses a multitude of followers belonging to different nationalities. Standing in front of the Buddha Temple, he conveys the message of humanity's oneness. Guru's larger-than-life image is shown through a low-angle shot, indicating the vast impact of his philosophy. Judge Krishnan, who is among the

crowd, approaches Guru and requests that he return to Kerala. Guru, who hesitates initially, later concedes to his plea.

Though Guru installed idols in temples in all parts of Kerala, he was antipathetic towards superstitions and crude rituals adopted by the people of backward communities and the gods who demanded sacrifices from these people.

Jayakumar writes:

In those days, there was no freedom of worship in temples, and the affected people rejected savarna gods and accepted such primitive deities as Madan, Marutha, Cathan, and Camundi as their gods and worshipped them. This they were forced to do by the pressure of circumstances. Because of the compulsions of situations, superstitions most likely established deep roots in society. (100)

The director, through the fictional character of Maniyan, played by Salim Kumar, represents the ignorant, backward communities that worship fearsome gods like Madan and Marutha. As Maniyan and his friend Paraman try to smash the idols of those gods, they feel scared and move back. Guru makes his appearance there. He says, “If you are scared to do it, I will. We don’t need cruel gods anymore” (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 1:07:24 – 1:07:31). Saying this, he takes a wooden stick and beats the idols down; Guru hands over the stick to the people gathered there and walks away, after which they all jointly smash the idols. Likewise, Guru renounced other irrational rituals like 'kettukalyanam' or child marriage. The movie incorporates a scene of ‘kettukalyanam’ where Guru vehemently critiques the injustice done to the innocent kids. Guru is shown entering

the venue of a kettukalyanam along with Pavithran Namboothiri, Dr Palpu, and Asan and stops the ceremony by claiming such rituals to be unscientific. Guru's entry to the ceremony, shown in a long shot, signifies him as a part of a more significant public movement. The guests and hosts of the function remain stunned at Guru's sudden announcement, "What is the sense of getting these innocent kids married? After tying the knot, they stay together for two or three days and part ways. Will they be husbands and wives in the future? These malpractices have piled up over time. Is it not high time we got rid of them?" (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 58:37 – 59:27). Guru underscores the need for the education of girls for the upliftment of society. Listening to Guru's words, Dr. Palpu folds his palms in reverence.

Lack of education, Guru believes, is the reason for all the superstitions and regressive rituals among the backward communities, and he underscores the relevance of education in the eradication of the preposterous and irrational beliefs of the people. Guru's vision of education liberating people is shown in the scene with Chattampi Swamikal, which is also his vision of the amalgamation of spirituality and materiality. In this particular scene, Chattampi Swamikal gets down from a boat on the banks of Neyyar and walks towards Guru, who is seen helping his disciples in their work. Chattampi Swamikal, appreciative of Guru's consecrations, moves towards Guru, and they hug each other. They are joined by Pavithran Namboothiri, a believer and supporter of Guru. Guru discusses his upcoming plans towards reformation with Chattampi Swamikal:

GURU: Along with temples, I desire to start educational institutions, reading rooms, and factories.

CHATTAMPI SWAMIKAL: Should there be materiality along with spirituality?

GURU: Yes. Spirituality and materiality are not separate entities but two sides of the same coin. (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 44:56 – 45:13)

The scene concludes with the transformed Koran joining others in their work; Guru sees Koran as an envoy of reformation through whom he can achieve his goals. Guru, in a scene, is seen disturbed by the upper caste monopoly on education, which deliberately denies rights to children from backward communities; he tells Asan, Palpu, and Pavithran Namboothiri about his plans to open a night school for the Kurava community, “Lack of education has really society. False practices and superstitions are increasing (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 1:06:40 – 1:06:50). By convincing Dr. Palpu, who is dubious of the upcoming reformation, Guru moves forward as the three look at each other. Guru advocated education for all, irrespective of caste and creed; he gave importance to girls' education, who he felt should not be left out in the journey towards reformation.

The atrocities inflicted on the avarnas compelled them to convert to other religions that did not promote untouchability or unseeability. Guru's attitude towards religious conversion is portrayed in a scene where C.V. Kunjiraman declares his resolution to abandon Hinduism and accept Christianity. The specific scene in the

movie takes place on a village road, where Kunjiraman makes his suggestion to T.K. Madhavan and others assembled there. While Madhavan is apprehensive of his decision, Kunjiraman says,

KUNJIRAMAN: Christians can walk on all the roads. Muslims can do the same. But lower-caste Hindus like Pulayas, Chomas, and Kuravas are forbidden to walk on these roads. Is temple entry possible here? Is there freedom to travel? Even when fighting against the British for freedom, do we have freedom among ourselves? I don't care who opposes or supports Christianity; I'll accept it as my religion. If one becomes a Christian, one can walk on any road and procure a government job easily. (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 1:43:10 – 1:43:44)

Padmanabhan, a converted Muslim, enters the scene and claims himself to be free from untouchability because he is not a Hindu anymore. As he speaks, the camera moves to Guru and his disciples, shown in a medium shot, suggesting his close association with his people. As Guru explains his stance on conversion, the director uses a close-up shot to imply the magnitude of the great thought.

GURU: If one starts losing faith in one's religion, he must convert. It is a crime to follow a religion if you do not believe in it. However, one should not force another to convert. A change of religion is just a minor change in your life. Since every religion has similar principles, we are all the same. (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 1:44:35 – 1:45:17)

The next scene shifts to the top of a mountain where Guru leads a group of his followers, and as he walks forward, he tells his plan to organise a conference of all religions, “At Always, we will hold an interfaith conference. Its goal is not to argue and win but to learn and inform. We can declare that the entire human race belongs to one religion” (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 1:46:34 -1:46:59). Guru’s ideals of the oneness of all religions crystallise in the next scene when he solemnises the wedding of a Malayali businessman, K.C. Karunakaran, and a German lady, Margaret.

Yugapurushan, a movie that scrutinises the public life of Sree Narayana Guru, gives special emphasis to his public messages to his followers. Portraying Guru as accompanied by his disciples; the movie incorporates many scenes where Guru preaches his messages to a group of followers. The message generally identified as the central one of his life, "One Caste, One Religion, One God for Mankind," is vividly shown in the movie. In that specific scene, Guru sits on a boulder with the camera positioned at a low angle and a crowd of people, including Christians, Muslims, and even upper-caste people like Savitri Antharjanam, standing around him. By placing the camera at a low angle in this particular shot, the director magnifies the universal message given by Guru. As Guru speaks on the oneness of all living beings, they carefully listen to his words:

GURU: Love every living thing as if it were yourself. We are all one. You must have an inner knowledge of human feelings. I don’t understand why they fight on the basis of religion. The one who deems all living beings as one can become aware of the super force. We all must follow it. To overlook

the negative impact of irrational practices and superstitions is a kind of hypocrisy. We should develop the sense of oneness maintained by Advaita philosophy. What should we do about that? Wisdom! We are not mere bodies, but the wisdom we possess. All kinds of discrimination exist as long as we perceive ourselves as just a body. One cannot enter temples, one cannot walk on roads, one cannot dine with others, and one cannot even get an education. There is absolutely no freedom. Why is it so? What do human beings gain from that? The religion of human beings is humanity. No one understands this universal truth - One caste, one religion, and one God for humankind. (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 38:48 – 40:33)

The scene ends as the camera focuses on the listeners as they repeat the maxim along with Guru. To substantiate this universal message by Guru, Sukumaran introduces the story of Koran and Savitri, two fictional characters, as the movie's subplot. Koran, an untouchable avarna who represents the downtrodden communities, later changes his ways of life under the influence of Guru. His wife, Savitri Antharjanam, belongs to an aristocratic Namboothiri family, and their marriage symbolises Guru's ideal of breaking caste barriers. Their daughter Sarada represents a transforming period in society where girls begin to empower themselves through education. According to Sukumaran, the character of Savitri Antharajanam is an allusion to Savitri, the heroine of Kumaran Asan's poem "Duravastha".

Yugapurushan is a movie that deals not only with the need for caste equality but also with individual morality.

Another significant message of his life was about the dangers of alcoholism: "Alcohol is poison. Do not make it, do not give it or drink it," which is exemplified through the character of the drunkard Paramu (played by Jagathi Sreekumar). The director depicts Paramu's house in utter chaos. Paramu smashes everything inside the house and thrashes his daughters. He is seen serving toddy to guests and engaging in drunken brawls at his home. Paramu's wife runs to Guru, bemoaning her plight and seeking his help. As Paramu abuses his daughters inside the house, Guru and his disciples arrive in the courtyard and call out his name. Paramu comes out of the house and bows down before Guru in reverence. Guru's face is shown in a close-up shot following his big message:

GURU: Alcohol is poison. Please do not make it, do not give it, and do not drink it. The toddy maker's body, clothes and his house will stink. Anything that he touches will stink. If you keep doing this, your life will be like being in the deep sea. Have you understood? I have told you about these many times. Now think for yourself. (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 1:31:26 – 1:32:00)

Saying this, Guru walks away with his disciples. Paramu loses himself in deep thought, resulting in a brief period of insanity before being transformed into a new man.

Yugapurushan is one of the early Malayalam biopics that is still rooted in some of the characteristics of the earlier mythological and devotional movies. That aspect of the movie is seen in how Guru is described in some scenes as having a particular divinity and being a miracle worker. In one of the early scenes,

Sukumaran shows Guru helping fishermen catch fish. As the scene begins, a few fishermen struggling to move their boat into the sea are shown in a long shot, implying their helplessness on a poverty-stricken seashore. The long shot breaks into a close-up shot revealing Guru's hand, which helps them move the boat, thus emphasising his divine nature. The scene then shifts to Guru standing before an unassuming shack, the home of a poor widow and her daughter. Through her conversation with Guru, the director conveys that the shore is poverty-stricken. He asks her for food, and she replies that nothing is left to feed. To her surprise, Guru reminds her of the cashew seeds left behind in a pot; her daughter makes porridge from them and gives it to Guru. The scene depicts Guru's aspect of divinity as he reminds her of the cashew seeds, she had inadvertently left behind. Another episode that epitomises Guru's divinity is when Guru saves Maniyan, a lower-caste man, from a tiger. In the scene, Maniyan, played by Salim Kumar, is shown on a treetop with a tiger on the ground and a beehive on one of the boughs. Guru enters the scene alone, walks past the tiger, and asks him to come down the tree. As Maniyan goes near him, Guru finds wounds of leprosy on his body, to which he applies some herbal medicines and saves him from the disease – an act that gives insight into Guru's knowledge of medicine. Again, the divine person curing a devotee is one of the constant features of religion. Leprosy itself was seen as a scourge of humankind, and there is the instance of Janamejaya, the son of Parikshit, being cured of leprosy at the holy feet of Lord Guruvayurappa.

The centrality of Guru's role in the social and political revolution of the time can be seen in his association with other leading reformers and leaders of the period.

A central scene in the movie is a conversation between Guru and Mahatma Gandhi, establishing their views on caste and untouchability:

GANDHI: Swamiji, are you aware that untouchability is allowed in Hindu scriptures?

GURU: No.

GANDHI. Should there be a change in the Vaikom Satyagraha against untouchability?

GURU: No.

GANDHI: Some are of the opinion that force should be used instead of non-violence. What do you suggest?

GURU: Physical force should never be applied. The government should prevent it.

GANDHI: Justifying violence, one Brahmin said that it was god's will that the untouchables became untouchables.

GURU: The British too can claim it was God's will that India was enslaved.

GANDHI: Apart from eradicating untouchability, can anything be done for the upliftment of the downtrodden?

GURU: They should have education and wealth like others.

GANDHI: But even among them, there is untouchability. Swamiji, is it permitted then that everyone can enter your temples?

GURU: Yes. Of course.

GANDHI: Swamiji, you have proclaimed that there is only one caste for mankind...

GURU: Man is of one caste, as evidenced by their own bodies.

GANDHI: What you said may be true, but still look at nature. In that mango tree, each leaf has a different shape. In this way, various castes occur among human beings according to nature. Isn't it?

GURU: By nature, the shape of the leaves may be different, but what about their essence? The juice of all the leaves will taste the same. (*Yugapurushan* 2:00:47 – 2:03:39)

This particular scene clearly establishes Guru's moral vision of a righteous society. M.H. Ilias observes, "There are only two films (*Garshom* [1999] dir. P.T. Kunju Muhammed and *Yugapurushan* [2010] dir. R. Sukumaran) in the Malayalam language, having Gandhi as a primary character" (122). The scene with Gandhi is followed by another one with Rabindranath Tagore, the poet and freedom fighter. As a translator between Guru and Tagore, Kumaran Asan acquaints Tagore with the temples established by Guru for the untouchables, including the one where he installed a lamp symbolising "let the light spread." Tagore is enamoured with Guru's spiritual visions and regards Kerala as a pilgrimage site and a model for the entire country.

Kumaran Asan, a prominent poet from Kerala, is one of the devoted disciples of Guru, whose character holds a distinctive role in the movie. As a predominant

presence in the movie, snippets of Kumaran Asan's life—his family, poetry, role in reformation activities, and death—are indicated. Kumaran Asan, introduced in the movie as a disillusioned poet, is revealed to be a close associate of Guru. The movie portrays scenes of Asan's wedding, after which Guru visits his home with K. Ayyappan. Asan's presence is marked in almost all the major events, like the foundation of Sarada Madom, the kettukalyanam stopped by Guru, and the formation of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam. Along with Asan, the movie also features Dr. Palpu, who was denied recognition in Kerala because he was an Ezhava. Dr Palpu makes his first appearance in the movie along with Asan, as they both go to meet Guru. Regarding his meeting with Swami Vivekananda, Palpu explains the Indian political scenario where people have united against the British as a part of the freedom struggle. In that scene, he exhorts Guru to expand Vavoottu Yogam, an organisation Guru started, to enhance and boost the backward communities. Swami Vivekananda's words, "Arise, Awake, and Stop Not Until the Goal Is Attained," reverberate in the background as the scene concludes. Just as Asan is cast in the movie as Guru's constant companion in all the major scenes, Dr. Palpu witnesses Guru's major decisions. Another of Guru's close associates portrayed in the movie is K Ayyappan, widely known as Sahodaran Ayyappan, who is the founder of Sahodara Sangam. Ayyappan, portrayed in the movie as an educated youth, arrives with a few other men to meet Guru, who is seen sitting under a tree. Guru, sick of the caste differences prevalent in society, gives ideas of inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriages to Ayyappan as solutions to this grave problem. The next scene shifts to the courtyard of the primary school at Cherayi, where people from different castes dine together. After that, a few of them assemble

around Ayyappan, who declares the formation of Sahodara Sangam, or the Brotherhood Association, “We are all brothers. We will be known as the members of the Brotherhood Association” (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 1:22:35 – 1:22:43). They lead a procession against the abominable caste system, which a group of upper-caste men attacks, and it culminates in their pouring cow dung over Ayyappan. The fact that upper-caste Nair leaders like K.P. Keshava Menon, who led the Vaikom Satyagraha, and Mannath Padmanabhan, who led the Savarana Jatha, came to support Guru's activities demonstrates Guru's central importance in the changing social situation in the land.

The Vaikom Satyagraha, a nonviolent protest for access to the forbidden vicinity of the Vaikom temple, is a significant historical event in Kerala extensively discussed in the film. The scene showing the satyagraha exemplifies how the police ban people belonging to backward communities from entering the precincts of the temple. The agitation's leader, K.P. Keshava Menon, is granted entry to the temple but declines it, claiming the rights of backward communities to the temple as well. Guru's entry into the scene with a few disciples, shown in a long shot, underscores his relationship with society, constantly reminding the audience of his life as a public man. He addresses the protesters:

GURU: I heard about you suffering in the rain and starving as part of your protest. That is not required. You should enter places where you are not permitted to enter. You should break the fences. It is not enough that you walk on the roads; you should enter the temple itself. You should enter all the

temples. Everyone should be allowed to enter temples. (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 1:57:44 – 1:58:11)

Inspired by Guru's words, one of the agitators, Raghavan, enters the environs of the temple, but the upper-caste men intervene, and a fight ensues. In a scene, Mannath Padmanabhan, leading the Savarna Jatha in support of the Vaikom Satyagraha, reaches Sivagiri seeking Guru's blessings; Guru wishes him all success in his endeavour to work for the lower caste. The movie introduces an elite fictional character, Pavithran Namboothiri, who represents the followers of Guru from the upper-caste communities. As against his community's mandates, he deems the upper caste's customs unjust and iniquitous and chooses to follow the path shown by Guru. In one scene, he prophesies a revolution in the offing, which sheds light on the radical reformations that Guru is set to bring to society. Pavithran Namboothiri, Savitri Antharjanam's brother, blesses her wedding to Koran and stands by Guru as an unwavering support; in one of the scenes, he is shown as the tutor at the Sanskrit School started by Guru.

Another reformer influenced by Guru, as shown in the movie, is Ayyankali, the leader of the Pulaya community. Following Guru's advice, Ayyankali convenes a meeting of Pulayas, whom he persuades to unite to work for their rights. In that scene, he instructs them on their working hours and distributes clothing to cover women's breasts, who were previously forbidden from doing so. This scene takes us to an earlier fictional sequence in which Neeli, Koran's sister, was humiliated by Vikraman Namboothiri, who stripped her of her upper clothing. That his supporters ranged from the highest echelons to the lowest is shown by Sukumaran in the scenes

where Chattampi Swamikal, K.C. Kuttan, Moorkoth Kumaran, and Bodhananda Swami offer support to Guru. Moorkoth Kumaran, in a scene, intimates to Guru about the injustice that prevails at Jagannath Temple, consecrated by Guru. Guru reaches the temple where he witnesses the displeasure of a few chieftains at Pulayas entering the temple. In an extreme close-up shot, Guru's eyes are focused, from which tears roll down, clearly indicating his deep anguish at the insensitive and inhumane attitude of his people. In the following shot, the tears are transformed into rain, signifying the transformation of anguish into a rejuvenation. Moorkoth Kumaran and two other Pulayas fall at Guru's feet for his kind gesture. Even after the incident, Guru is revealed to be deeply grieved because nothing improves, despite having established temples to bring the spirit of oneness to all. In the scene, the director presents Guru at Jagannath Temple, with Moorkoth Kumaran and Bodhananda Swami as listeners. In that scene, Guru is shown with spotlight lighting that heightens his incandescent presence by focusing on his insights. He says, "No one is born untouchable. The creations of the Almighty are manipulated not by any other force but by human beings themselves" (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 2:10:11 – 2:10:25). As they listen to Guru's words, he walks up to Bodhananda Swami and holds his arms; the scene ends with a close-up shot of Guru's palm on Bodhananda's palm, connoting that Guru is becoming weaker. K.C. Kuttan, played by Mammooty, is a strong advocate of Guru's ideals, whose attitude is progressive and revolutionary. An unsigned review in *Indiaglitz* notes:

K C Kuttan's refusal to get aged and transformed according to the passage of time, stands for the unending spirit of revolution and correction, that the guru

even recognizes in the final stage as the right arms of propagation of his ideals. The character of K C Kuttan often succumbs to his star status punched with heavy catchiness and action sequences.

Kuttan is introduced in the scene of Ooruttambalam Agitation and appears in significant events such as Vaikom Satyagraha and Kalavancode consecration. Towards the climax scene, during the Kalavancode mirror installation, Guru is seen to be utterly weak, and as he walks out after the installation, he falls onto Kuttan's hands; the scene, in a way, suggests Guru's belief in Kuttan, who would not compromise with his ideals.

Yugapurushan, as one of the early biopics influenced by the aesthetics of the earlier mythological and devotional films, omits many of the subject's private details found in later biopics. It is more or less an intermediary text between the early pure historical/mythological genre of films and the later ones that focus entirely on the private lives of the subjects. The movie, rooted primarily in such early movies, shows Sree Narayana Guru as a historical character and a divine person. As a result, everything private is radically excluded from *Yugapurushan*, including his wife, who makes an appearance only in five scenes and, even then, does so in a public rather than a private setting.

While analysing the film, it is clear that the director chooses to highlight Guru as a historical figure, focusing on the reforms he brought about in the then-Kerala society. Employing a voiceover, Sukumaran presents the basic biographical details of Sree Narayana Guru:

VOICEOVER: Sree Narayana Guru was born in 1855 in Chempazhanthi, near Thiruvananthapuram, as the son of Madanasan and Kuttiyamma in Vayalvaram House. Guru set his life as an example for the world by reforming a class-caste-creed-ridden society that had lived a savage life for centuries by initiating the ideas of self-respect, team spirit, and the Advaita philosophy. The man of an age passed away in 1928 at Varkala in Sivagiri. (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 01:36 – 02:19)

As a biopic that squarely addresses the public persona of Guru, it does not investigate those times of his life that are not public, like his childhood, where he is not a public figure. Those parts of his life that are not part of the public record have been excluded from the movie, including his childhood, private space, and old age when he had to retreat from public places due to his infirmities. Even when showing his younger days, which are depicted in the film as Guru's emerging public persona, his private passions and feelings are largely absent.

Indeed, one of the most important events in any person's life in an ordinary society is his marriage and relationship with his wife. That is true of all societies, especially in Indian culture, where family is the source of any person's personality and individuality. The omission of Guru's marriage and relationship with his wife, Kalikutty, is thus a critical decision made by the director to portray Guru as a solely public figure. In an interview with the researcher on 22 June 2021, Sukumaran explained why he had so drastically excised the private life of Guru in the movie: "I have always been a passionate follower of Sree Narayana Guru and admire the reformations he brought about in our society. It has been my dream to make a film

on Guru's historical life that was dedicated to the welfare of his people, and it was a deliberate attempt on my part to exclude his private life as I find it insignificant to the narrative of this movie."

The nature of Guru's marriage has been a matter of central concern to his biographers, and there are still controversial aspects to its true nature. Robin Jeffrey thinks he was married against his will to his cousin and doubts whether the marriage was consummated (189). Jayakumar observes about Guru's married life:

It was not in his interest to identify himself with worldly life. Even after being convinced that his son's attitude towards marriage is in the negative, Madanasan decided upon a marriage for him. The prospective bride was Kaliaamma, Madanasan's niece's daughter. In those days no one gave any value to the opinions of the would-be bridegrooms and brides on their proposed marriages. (49)

As mentioned, Guru's private life and marriage are overlooked in the movie to enhance greatness as a social reformer and visionary in the public sphere. Apart from a scene about Guru's decision to embrace sanyasa, his wife Kalikutty appears only in public scenes as a member of the public or as a follower. Sukumaran introduces Kalikutty through the words of an old lady who is an acquaintance of Guru's family. The old lady, along with a few other women, on their way to meet Guru, recalls Guru's wedding, where the bridegroom's sister gave bridal clothes to the bride and brought her to the groom's house. This particular scene suggests Guru's absence even for his wedding, which used to be the day's tradition. On their way,

they meet Kalikutty on the banks of the Neyyar, where she returns from meeting Guru.

OLD LADY: Did you see him?

KALIKUTTY: Yes

OLD LADY: What did he say?

KALIKUTTY: We didn't see each other

OLD LADY: Then how did you see him?

KALIKUTTY: I saw him at a distance. (Translated by the researcher,

Yugapurushan 19:33 – 19:40)

This dialogue between the old lady and Kalikutty, in one of the earlier scenes in the movie, establishes the estranged relationship between Guru and his wife. In the following sequence, where the old lady meets Guru, the director employs the flashback technique to weave in a brief scene of Guru's mother's death and his renunciation of the family, which he adapted from Sanoo's biography, "Every person in the world is born for a particular purpose. You and I have some particular work to be accomplished. You can mind yours and let me take care of mine. He then left the place. And that was the end of the marriage (45). In this scene, depicted in a faded sepia colour, Kalikutty passively accepts her husband's will to renounce worldly life. After the flashback, Guru even tells the old lady not to remind him of the past, which indicates an absolute repudiation of his private space in the movie.

As *Yugapurushan* wards off the scenes of Guru's wedding and his private passions, it foregrounds his public life, where his disciples almost always accompany him. In the scenes of Guru's discourses to a larger audience, Kalikutty is shown to be one among the audience. In the scene where Guru gives the message of "one caste, one religion, and one God for mankind," Kalikutty is shown with folded palms in a medium shot as one of his followers. Similarly, as the kettukalyanam scene ends, Kalikutty is shown with folded palms as one among the people gathered at the ceremony. Both these scenes manifest Kalikutty only as one of the myriad followers of Guru; often, Guru is shown as not acknowledging her presence among his followers. The last scene where Kalikutty makes an appearance in the movie is during the consecration of Murukkumpuzha temple, and it is the only scene with a dialogue between Guru and Kalikutty. In this scene, a lady in the crowd forcefully pushes Kalikutty towards Guru, and as they look at each other, he asks:

GURU: Are you doing well?

KALIKUTTY: I am. (Translated by the researcher, *Yugapurushan* 1:40:02 – 1:40:07)

With such a brief dialogue between Guru and Kalikutty, Sukumaran underscores the insignificance of a private emotional spirit both in Guru's life and in his movie. Apart from marginally portraying Guru's private life, *Yugapurushan* is, on every side, an exposition of Sree Narayana Guru's public life as an influential social reformer.

Even though the movie launches Sree Narayana Guru as a young man, in no way does it portray his private and individual passions and desires, which M.K. Sanoo describes thus:

As a healthy and handsome young man, the twenty-eight-year-old Guru might have been confronted by strong sexual passions. Some proof for it can be observed in his work *Siva Satakam*... His life at this time must have seen a fierce struggle against such temptations. On the one side was the thirst for light, and on the other was the perpetual fight against the dark forces trying to seize him. This struggle against the temptations of the flesh can be seen only in the life of outstanding personalities. (45)

In order to project Sree Narayana Guru as a hero in the mould of earlier historical or mythological movies, the director deliberately excludes those parts of his youth that are the everyday experiences of a young man of the time. This exclusion of the private and an emphasis purely on the public makes *Yugapurushan* a transitional film in the evolution of the Malayalam biopic. Even a public event that portrayed Guru in a personal capacity was left out of the biopic to portray Guru as a purely public figure, a social reformer whose entire life was associated with caste reform, educational reform, and social reform in Kerala. This is precisely why a public event like Guru's Shashti Poorthi (sixtieth birthday), which all biographies agree was celebrated with great pomp, has been excluded from the movie. The Shashti Poorthi celebration portrayed Guru more personally than as a part of the public reform. This is precisely why it has not been included in the film, as it exemplifies the director's attempt to exclude everything personal. Even while strictly confining to Guru's

public life, the director chooses only a few of the eminent personalities associated with Guru. All the leaders who associated themselves with Guru could not be pictured in a feature-length movie. The inclusion or exclusion of other great leaders was the director's discretion rather than a structural requirement of the film to cast Guru in a specific way. Due to the film's two-and-a-half-hour runtime, notable individual figures, including Krishnan Vaidyar, Thycaud Ayya, and Swami Satyavrata, were likely left out.

Ajay S. Sekher, in his article "Ways of Seeing the Self, Subjectivity, and History: Filmic Autobiographies, Biopics, and Historicals" discerns *Yugapurushan* as "a remarkable attempt" because it is about the transformative subjectivity of a spiritual leader and social reformer; it is the public persona of Guru that is consistently reaffirmed in the movie with a radical exclusion of all private aspects of his life. Chosen as the first biopic of the present study, *Yugapurushan* is a connecting link between earlier hagiographic devotionals and historicals and the later biopics that adapt the private lives of public figures. It thus anticipates a movie like *Makaramanju* (2011), which, while focusing on the subject's life as a painter, incorporates the influence of certain private experiences he had on his public life.

CHAPTER III

MAKARAMANJU: TIMELESS HUES AND ENDLESS PASSIONS

The biopic, previously a sub-genre of historical films, has evolved into a distinct genre with diverse categories that intrigue the perception of the cinema-going audience. The artist biopic has evolved into a discrete sub-genre of the biopic at large, and it attempts to merge two divergent genres: biography and art.

Conventionally, artist biopics evince the artist at work to accentuate the creative genius of the subject, thereby revealing the inextricable liaison of the artist and his artworks. Unlike in India, there has been a voluminous production of artist biopics in the West, a few instances of which are *Rembrandt* (1936) on the Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn, *Lust for Life* (1956) on Vincent Van Gogh, *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965) on Michaelangelo, and *Frida* (2002) on Frida Kahlo. As David Bovey proposes in his thesis titled *The Artist Biopic: Historical Analysis of Narrative Cinema, 1934–2010*, "by 1993, there were already eighty-five films of all types, including documentaries, made about Vincent Van Gogh" (103). The exploration of artists' lives on celluloid is proportionately smaller in India except for a few films like *Nainsukh* (2010) on the life and works of Nainsukh, an eighteenth-century painter; *Rang Rasiya* (2014) on Raja Ravi Varma; and a few documentaries like *The Seventh Walk* (2013) on the charcoal drawings of artist Paramjit Singh and *A Far Afternoon: A Painted Saga* (2015) on landscape painter Krishen Khanna. In Malayalam, there have been only three biopics released based on the lives of painters: *Makaramanju* (2011), based on Raja Ravi Varma; *Clint* (2017), about the

child artist Edmund Thomas Clint; and *Padmini* (2018), about the prominent woman painter T.K. Padmini.

Directed by Lenin Rajendran, *Makaramanju* is based on the life of Raja Ravi Varma, hailed as the 'Painter of Colonial India'. Ravi Varma was born on April 29, 1848, in the small town of Kilimanoor as the son of Ezhumavil Neelakantan Bhattathiripad, a Sanskrit scholar, and Uma Amba Bai Tampuratty, a poet. Ravi Varma had no formal schooling, and conforming to the aristocratic tradition of the time, he was taught Malayalam and Sanskrit at home. Even as a small boy, his keen interest in drawing manifested on the walls of his home. Manu S. Pillai, in *False Allies*, writes about the artist thus:

Though established in India's collective imagination for his mythological paintings, the man was also a public figure whose career straddled princely India as well as those urban pockets that were home to the early nationalists. His lucrative portrait-making enterprise saw him wield the brush in service of the most iconic princes of the age as well as that first generation of Congressmen. In a career spanning over four decades, he produced paintings of everyone from Edward VII to some of the most trenchant critics of the same monarch's imperium. Indeed, through his art Ravi Varma captured a political universe itself, telling stories of the individuals who typified the age. (23-24)

Recent engagements with Ravi Varma's life through movies based on his life and art underscore his enduring grandeur and popularity as an artist. There have been two films on Raja Ravi Varma: *Rang Rasiya* (2008) in Hindi and *Makaramanju* (2011) in

Malayalam. The latter was dubbed into Tamil as *Apsaras* (2013) and into Telugu as *Ravi Varma* (2014). Melodramatic in tone, both the movies offer emotional drama interweaving the artworks of the painter.

This chapter seeks to exemplify the gradual shift from the public life of the central figure in the biopics to a greater fascination and accommodation of the private life. Unlike *Yugapurushan*, where the personal life of Sree Narayana Guru receives an understandably sketchy treatment, *Makaramanju* allows greater narrative and cinematic space for the personal life of the painter in question. The film's trajectory can be seen to originate from the depiction of the compositions of Ravi Varma, the timeless hues of which gradually get replaced by the endlessly passionate relations with women who posed as models for his paintings.

Lenin Rajendran, whose career in cinema began as an assistant to director P.A. Bakker, ventured to make his name as a filmmaker by creating his own poetic and aesthetic sensibility. From 2016 until he died in 2019, he was the chairman of the Kerala State Film Development Corporation. As a lover of literature, Lenin based many of his films on acclaimed pieces of literature, which won him various accolades. His filmography includes adaptations like *Daivathinte Vikrithikal* (1992), based on M. Mukundan's novel of the same name; *Kulam* (1997), attributed to C.V. Raman Pillai's novel *Marthanda Varma*; and *Mazha* (2001), adapted from Madhavikutty's "Nashtapetta Neelambari". Through his biopics, such as *Swathi Thirunal* (1987), which explores the life of Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma, the Maharaja of Travancore and a talented musician, and *Makaramanju*, which focuses on a specific period in the life of Raja Ravi Varma, a member of Kilimanoor Palace

and a close ally of the Travancore royal family, he pays homage to the history of the royal family.

Makaramanju: The Mist of Capricorn essentially depicts Raja Ravi Varma, the artist, and his passionate relationship with his model, which is defined by evoking the mythical tale of Urvashi, the celestial nymph, and Pururavas, the Chandravamsha King. Like some of his other movies, *Makaramanju* fights against the grim darkness of power that affects public life and personal relationships, showing the artist's moments of anguish and bliss. In the article "The Agony and the Ecstasy," Saraswathy Nagarajan quotes Lenin Rajendran on why he chose Raja Ravi Varma as the subject of his movie:

A few years ago, I had done a play on Ravi Varma for KPAC. During my reading and research on him, I was fascinated to know more about the man and the circumstances in which those works were created. Here was a prince who had paid a price for pursuing his passion for the arts. He faced hostility and criticism, but that did not put an end to his affair with brush and paint. Cases were filed against him but he fought against orthodoxy and won the right to express himself. I felt there was space for a movie.

Instead of a cradle-to-grave portrayal of Ravi Varma's life, Lenin chose to address the artist at work and selected a single work to decipher the artist's life and the era in which he lived. The movie's cinematographer is Madhu Ambatt, who has a close relationship with the director. While Santosh Sivan enacts the roles of Ravi Varma and Pururavas, Karthika Nair executes the characters of Sugandha Bai, the model, and Urvashi. Produced by A.M. Gopalan under the banner of Sree Gokulam Films,

Makaramanju won the Kerala State Film Award for second best film, the FIPRESCI Prize for the best Malayalam film, and the Kerala Film Critics Award for second best film in 2010.

Makaramanju begins with Raja Ravi Varma as a painter working on his *Sleeping Beauty*, soon followed by a song featuring some of his other paintings like *Fresh from Bath*, *Shakuntala Lost in Thoughts*, *Tilottama*, and others. It also introduces the characters of Ravi Varma's brother, Raja Raja Varma (played by Saiju Kurup), who is also a painter but chose to live in the shadow of his more famous elder brother and Ravi Varma's business partner, Govardhandas Makhanji (played by Jagathy Sreekumar). Ravi Varma's confidante, Madhav Rao, the Diwan of Baroda (played by Dinesh Panikkar), shows up on Ravi Varma's birthday to tell him that he has been appointed as the court painter of the kingdom of Baroda. While Raja Raja Varma is finishing one of Ravi Varma's paintings, an art critic praises the former and slams the latter for trying to copy the European style of painting. The Prince of Mysore, who wants Ravi Varma to do a few paintings for the Mysore King, is among the few people who gathered there on Ravi Varma's birthday. After the guests have left, Ravi Varma meets his brother, Raja Raja Varma, who is still at work on the painting and praises his acumen for painting. Raja Raja Varma talks about a letter from Ravi Varma's wife. Ravi Varma wants his brother to reply to the letter because he can already assume its content.

This scene cuts to a flashback where Ravi Varma's wife, Bhageerathi Bai Thampuratty (played by Lakshmi Sharma), complains about his constant absence. Their conversation leads to an episode about his painting, *Nair Lady Adorning Her*

Hair. A young girl who sneaks into Ravi Varma's Garden to pick jasmine flowers ends up being the painting's model. Ravi Varma and the girl, who is from a lower caste, share a bond of affection, and she leaves with a heavy heart once the painting is complete. One of the first notable works of Ravi Varma, *Nair Lady Adorning Her Hair*, wins the Governor's Gold Medal at the Madras Fine Arts Society Exhibition. As the family starts preparations to celebrate the grand success, Ravi Varma is seen to be grief-stricken; he believes the model who posed for the painting has a share of his success, but she is unacknowledged and potentially neglected. Even when his wife Bhageerathi Bai Thampuratty comes to revitalise him sensually, Ravi Varma continues to obsess over the "jasmine girl's" departure and her murder at the hands of nobles. Ravi Varma decides to take responsibility for his actions and departs for Bombay, where he meets Sugandha Bai, a dancer. Ravi Varma deems Sugandha apt for his portrayal of Urvashi; he approaches her mother, Ruku Bai (played by Chitra Aiyer), who lets Sugandha be his model. Sugandha is distraught to find herself nude in one of the pictures, and she decides to give up the task forever, at which point Ravi Varma apologises to her. Ravi Varma divulges his intent to portray Sugandha as Urvashi and recounts the mythical love story of Urvashi and Pururavas, on which his painting is based.

The movie moves the action to the land of Pururavas and includes stories about Urvashi, the celestial nymph, and Pururavas. Urvashi has come to earth at the request of the gods to seduce Pururavas and cause him to be damned. However, she falls in love with him unintentionally. According to the stipulation of the gods in heaven, Urvashi has to return to heaven if she sees Pururavas naked or if Pururavas

sees his child borne out of her. As she sees him naked in a lightning storm one night, she ascends to heaven, leaving Pururavas behind. Like a story within a story, the episode of Urvashi and Pururavas is concurrently arrayed in the movie, thus drawing a parallel to the relationship between the artist and his muse.

Ravi Varma is still working on the painting *Urvashi and Pururavas*. The idea of painting a half-naked portrait of Sugandha as Urvashi gives him trouble, but she convinces him to continue with the painting. Ravi Varma is then shown working in his lithographic press, where he prints the painting of Goddess Lakshmi. Makhanji, who accompanies Ravi Varma, is excited about the public demand for the painting and demands that Ravi Varma paint Goddess Saraswati also, which would generate a considerable profit. However, their partnership does not last long, and their confrontation culminates in Ravi Varma facing legal challenges. Provoked by Makhanji, a few Hindu fundamentalists threaten Ruku Bai with death if she does not keep her daughter away from Ravi Varma. They sue Ravi Varma because he hurt their religious feelings by using harlots as models for goddesses. They accuse him of spreading obscenity. Nevertheless, Ravi Varma, firm in his stance, is secure enough to defend himself in court. Ravi Varma, to whom Sugandha had confessed her love, is overwrought in her absence, which prompts Raja Raja Varma to visit Ruku Bai to meet Sugandha, but to no avail. Just as Pururavas loses Urvashi, Ravi Varma loses Sugandha Bai, and the movie ends with a lonely Ravi Varma beholding the portrait of *Urvashi and Pururavas*.

As an opening note to the movie, Lenin Rajendran declares his stance on the artistic license of the filmmaker in the treatment of his subject. It says, "When the art

of an artist and his artwork get transposed onto another canvas or genre, the commingling of fact and fiction is quite instinctive. Correspondingly, this movie too portrays fictitious characters and events" (Translated by the researcher). According to Blais Johny, "When a literary text undergoes inter-semiotic translation or is being adapted to a new medium, it is expected to imbibe the characteristics of the new platform" (51). By introducing such an opening note, the movie presents the life of Ravi Varma as an artist, especially when he is mulling over his *tour de force*, *Urvashi and Pururavas*. The title credits of the movie, illustrated with early drawings and other paintings of Raja Ravi Varma, suggest that the central concern of the movie is to discern the life of Ravi Varma as an artist. George Custen says, "Most biopics do not claim to be the definitive history of an individual or era but often the only source of information many people will ever have on a given historical subject" (7). Raja Ravi Varma's role is performed by the cinematographer and filmmaker Santosh Sivan, who makes his first appearance as an actor in *Makaramanju*. A non-actor like Santosh Sivan to play Raja Ravi Varma was a unique choice of Lenin, and his justification has been discussed in "The Artist and His Muse", "He could strike certain similarities between Ravi Varma and Santosh Sivan. He finds both men incredibly blessed, industrious, and obsessed with anything that is beautiful."

As the movie begins, Ravi Varma is seen to be engaged in painting his *Sleeping Beauty*, where he is shown to pay closer attention to details like lighting and mixing of colours. Paresh C Palicha in "*Makaramanju* is Intricate" comments on the opening scene, "It begins with the director establishing what a perfectionist the painter is by showing him adjusting a mirror so as to get the sunlight falling on a model at just the right angle". A ghazal that comes right after the first scene shows

that Ravi Varma has reached the highest level of success as an artist. The song depicts him painting *Fresh from Bath* and *Shakuntala Lost in Thought*; it also depicts Ravi Varma with a goldsmith who makes jewellery for his model, who poses as *Lady at the Ball Game* or *Tilottama*, and designing a saree for his model, who poses as Ahalya. It describes in greater detail Ravi Varma's corrections of the models posing for *Looks of Love*. The song also depicts a couple giving a dance rendition of his painting, *Nala and Damayanti*; the next shot shows the female dancer posing as the model for his painting *Hamsa and Damayanti*. With this song, the director demonstrates Ravi Varma's artistic prowess as a painter whose meticulous attention to even the tiniest details makes him the most sought-after artist in modern India.

Right after the song, the action shifts to a candle-lit chamber where Ravi Varma is shown writing a letter to a friend. The filmmaker describes his early years as a painter through his voiceover while he writes the letter:

VOICEOVER: You inquired about my guru. While I created charcoal sketches on the walls of Kilimanoor Palace, my uncle, Raja Raja Varma, who observed them and took me to the royal court of Travancore for drawing lessons, may have been my first teacher. Theodore Jensen introduced me to the world of oil paintings at the Royal Court. I had countless masters, whose names I cannot list, as I learned to paint more by observing other painters than from direct training from a guru. Though many have praised the artist in me, I have more detractors than admirers. (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 10:10 – 10:54)

After this scene, Madhav Rao, the Diwan of Baroda, a close associate of Raja Ravi Varma, is introduced. The Diwan comes on Ravi Varma's birthday with the surprise

news that Ravi Varma has been appointed as the court painter of the kingdom of Baroda. Through the dialogue between Madhav Rao and Ravi Varma, the movie indicates Ravi Varma's gratitude to the Diwan and alludes to the fact that both of them had to leave Travancore because of the present king, Visakhram Thirunal Rama Varma.

RAVI VARMA: I am indebted to only one person for my successes— you, who, like me, has been exiled from the native land. Sir T. Madhav Rao has always received my heartfelt homage.

MADHAV RAO: Initially, I was the miscreant in the eyes of King Visakhram Thirunal; now so, is Ravi Varma. You feel good about having left Travancore, don't you?

RAVI VARMA: You were the inspiration for that as well. (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 11:22 – 11:46)

Through this conversation, the film makes a passing reference to the rivalry between Ravi Varma and Travancore King Visakhram Thirunal Rama Varma while hinting at the character's rebellious side.

In the following scene, Ravi Varma's house is shown with his admirers and other artists from various places, including the Prince of Mysore, who has arrived to invite him to Mysore Palace. Govardhandas Makhanji tells him about their contract with Sayaji Rao, the king of Baroda, who wants to deck his newly built Lakshmi Vilas Palace with the paintings of Ravi Varma, only after which they can embark upon a new project. Makhanji promises the prince to present Ravi Varma before the

king of Mysore, but he needs more time. Though Ravi Varma was hailed as the 'Father of Modern Indian Art', he was not free from the accusations of art critics and other artists. Art critics like Anand K. Coomaraswamy disparaged Ravi Varma's paintings for their lack of imagination and Indianness and accused him of hopelessly emulating the European style of painting. To illustrate this, Lenin presents a nameless art critic in this scene who finds Ravi Varma's brother, Raja Raja Varma, a better painter than Ravi Varma. According to him, Ravi Varma could neither cross the limits of the Indian art legacy nor empower it. He feels Ravi Varma imitates the obsolete European style of painting, which is not beneficial to Indian art or painting. Ravi Varma, who refutes the criticisms of the art critic, staunchly defends his style of painting:

RAVI VARMA: Wall painting is not my forte. The paintings in palaces and temples, where commoners were not allowed, were created ages ago. Human beings form my topic of interest. I perceive God through human beings.

Through my paintings, they perceive their God. (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 14:53 – 15:10)

A part of Ravi Varma's public life was creating a certain kind of concretization of mythology or materialization of divinity and mythology for the general public. Ravi Varma gave Hindu gods and goddesses faces, making him a painter of significance. After Raja Ravi Varma, the Indian imagination saw the gods and goddesses of the Indian pantheon and the heroes and heroines of Indian mythology the way Ravi Varma portrayed them. Until Ravi Varma's time, the deities remained in the sanctum sanctorum of temples, where only the high-born tread, and it was only with the

advent of Ravi Varma's paintings that ordinary people could access gods and goddesses. Rukmini Varma, the great-great-granddaughter of Ravi Varma, claims:

Ravi Varma was the first of the artists in the country to depict beautiful gods and goddesses in human form with realistic proportions. This extreme beauty and aesthetic satisfaction resultant from its appreciation would cause not only an adulation of the divine, but also, at the same time, show the path to an accessible power. People were able to understand the gods, and therefore, themselves. (136)

Ravi Varma's paintings of goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati brought him much attention and a vast number of orders, which led him to start a lithographic press in Bombay. In a scene where Ravi Varma works in his press with other workers, Makhanji intervenes and applauds him for his work. A lithograph of goddess Lakshmi printed at the press is shown, which Makhanji predicts would decorate the puja rooms in the homes of even poor people. Makhanji, portrayed as a shrewd businessman, wants to sell Lakshmi at an enhanced price of four annas to sell lakhs of copies. He demands that Ravi Varma begin painting goddess Saraswati as soon as possible so that it will be on the market by the end of the month. Soon, Makhanji's greed leads to an altercation between the artist and the curator, which puts the former in legal trouble. In a scene where Ravi Varma is attending a kathak dance performance, Makhanji intervenes and reminds him of Sugandha Bai, the model for Ravi Varma's *Urvashi and Pururavas*. He tells Ravi Varma that people have started to discover that the goddesses and mythological heroines he painted were based on local women like beggars and harlots, which will have severe repercussions.

Makhanji urges Ravi Varma to resume work on the painting of goddess Saraswati and cease obsessing about Sugandha. After hearing Makhanji's statements, Ravi Varma strikes him in the face and then turns to leave.

Makhanji incites a few Hindu fanatics who become vengeful toward Ravi Varma, and they decide to take legal action against him for insulting their religious beliefs. In the next scene, the lawyer meets Ravi Varma in the presence of Madhav Rao. The lawyer informs Ravi Varma of the allegations against him, which he views as a serious offence. Ravi Varma is accused of hurting people's religious feelings by painting and printing images of Hindu gods and goddesses for sale, as well as promoting nudity and obscenity through his artwork. Widows and prostitutes are allegedly used as models for gods and goddesses by Ravi Varma. He cautions Ravi Varma that the petitioners will try to secure the harshest sentence possible for him by citing paintings like *The Suckling Child* and *Viswamitra and Menaka*, that will be displayed in court as instances of obscenity promoted by Varma. Ravi Varma refutes all these allegations against him. He feels equipped to contest the claims made against his paintings despite Madhav Rao's observation that the opposing solicitor is shrewd and deceptive.

RAVI VARMA: I do not fear legal consequences because I know I am not wrong. I accept the first allegation against me.

MADHAV RAO: Allegations should be refuted in court.

RAVI VARMA: Diwanji, in court, I will not utter an untrue word. I feel a sense of gratification knowing that most people denied access to temples can

perceive goddesses through my paintings. They allege that my gods and goddesses are modelled on local people including, harlots and widows, which I acknowledge. One becomes a prostitute or a widow, not because of their fault. It is their fate. The second allegation is that I offended gods and goddesses by painting their obscene pictures. If Viswamitra, Menaka, and Draupadi, whom I painted, are wrong, then it is not Ravi Varma who is to be punished but Vyasa, their creator. The profound bond of a mother-child relationship is portrayed in *The Suckling Child*, in which little Krishna suckles at Yashoda's breast. If beholders can see only Yashoda's breasts and not the little Krishna, then obscenity lies in their hearts and not in the painting. (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 1:50:56 – 1:52:03)

This scene is shot in low-key lighting, emphasizing the sombre tone of Ravi Varma's self-defence against the allegations of obscenity. A few of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings, including *Viswamithra and Menaka* and *The Suckling Child*, are displayed in the sequence; the latter is exhibited in an extreme close-up shot to enhance the special bond of love between a mother and her child, which Ravi Varma was referring to.

Makaramanju, an artist biopic, includes several of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings, some of which are simply exhibited in various scenes and others at a greater length, conveying information about the models he used for a few of his paintings. EMJ Venniyoor comments on Ravi Varma's choice of themes for his paintings and the models he used:

It is not on record if, in those early days, he engaged models in a formal way, but we know for certain that he chose carefully the type that approximated the nayikas, or heroines, of classical Indian poetry, more especially the neo-classical Manipravala School of Malayalam, in which the sensuous, even erotic, adoration of feminine charm is a dominant theme. He found the ideal amongst his own people, particularly in the matrilineal Nair community, from which men of the higher castes took their wives. He painted them in a great variety of moods: at their toilet, on the swing or at siesta, playing musical instruments or listening to gossip, at vigils, trysts and temples. (19)

In a scene at Ravi Varma's house in Bombay, Sugandha Bai finds the painting *There Comes Papa* hung on the wall, and she is astounded by the beauty of the lady in the picture. Ravi Varma explains that it is his daughter. Knowing that Ravi Varma has a daughter older than her surprises Sugandha. Ravi Varma describes:

RAVI VARMA: She is not the large woman in the painting. She shares my dark skin tone. However, for me, she is beautiful. I start by trying to find the soul of my painting in a model. Then, with the palette of hues, a different beauty is born, where a person transforms into an entirely different person.

(Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 1:29:26 – 42)

Sugandha teases him by joking that she has heard Ravi Varma enticing women by painting them exquisitely, which, in a sense, draws attention to his alleged relationship with his models. As Sugandha examines some of his other paintings, like *Kadambari* and *Viswamithra and Menaka*, Ravi Varma draws her attention to a non-mythological, non-royal portrait, *The Gypsies of South India*. It portrays an

impoverished gypsy woman singing with the accompaniment of a tanpura with a baby on her lap, and a desolate girl seated on the floor. Ravi Varma recounts the story behind the painting, “I witnessed this scene on the side of the road. This lady was singing brilliantly, yet her voice sounded like a cry of destitution. I brought the mother and kids home with me” (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 1:30:39 – 1:30:50). Pointing to his maid Kumudam, Ravi Varma reveals to Sugandha that Kumudam has been the inspiration behind *The Gypsies*. In the case of Ravi Varma, in both his public and private lives, a few episodes could not be distinguished, especially his relationship with the models. In another scene of the film, a nameless prostitute is seen posing as Ravi Varma's model. As she expresses annoyance at having to pose for him for hours, he informs her that she has been hired for the day by paying her mother. As per the deal with her mother, she must remain at Ravi Varma's beck and call, but she wants to return to her job since she must meet a client who is also her suitor. In addition to these female models who posed for Ravi Varma, the film depicts in detail his relationships with two women who appeared as models in his two portraits: *Nair Woman Adorning Her Hair* and *Urvashi and Pururavas*.

Regarding Ravi Varma, the private constantly impinges on public life because he has to use models with whom he inevitably tends to have a particular relationship that is not necessarily romantic, which inadvertently points to the ambivalent nature of his association with his female models. As the movie analyses his painting, *Nair Lady Adorning Her Hair*, it reveals Ravi Varma's association with the painting's model, whom he calls the 'Jasmine girl'. In the case of an artist like

Raja Ravi Varma, it is difficult to decipher the private in the form of his relationship with the models from his artistic achievements, where the models end up as paintings. This aspect can be discerned in his relationship with the Jasmine girl, who does not even have a name in the biographies or the biopic. It is not easy to discern whether the Jasmine girl's sequence in the movie is a part of Ravi Varma's public life or his private life.

The Jasmine girl's episode in the movie is shown through a flashback as Ravi Varma discusses with his wife why he left his native place. In the movie, the Jasmine girl is first seen sneaking over Ravi Varma's fence to pick flowers from the jasmine plant in his courtyard. Ravi Varma notices the young woman picking the flowers and starts to sketch her. She continues the action the following day too; when Ravi Varma unexpectedly appears, she flees. His artistic skill is emphasized by a close-up shot of Ravi Varma continuing to paint. The next shot shows the Jasmine girl inside Ravi Varma's studio in his house, where she finds her portrait. She meets Ravi Varma, who gives her the costume of a Nair lady to dress up as his model. The Jasmine girl dresses in the new costumes and approaches the artist, who sets her dress and posture. In an extreme close-up shot, Ravi Varma is shown applying kohl to her eyes, which underscores the meticulous artist in him and a certain intimacy between them. While he adorns her with a bindi and a necklace, she gazes at his face through the mirror in her hands. The action shifts to a rainy day when she runs to his house, drenched in rain. While Ravi Varma tries to dry her hair with a towel, she asks him not to touch her as her heart quickens. He asks her to change the dress as he has to resume painting. She comes again dressed as a Nair lady and is anxious

about how she looks in the portrait. In the course of the painting, she abruptly gets up to see the progress of the painting and demands that Ravi Varma paint the eyes of her portraiture soon. Ravi Varma continues painting. The following scene shifts to another day, and the Jasmine girl is astounded to find the painting wrapped in a cloth.

JASMINE GIRL: Why am I covered in a cloth? Is it to hide it from people, as they might kill me?

RAVI VARMA: This painting has been selected for the Madras Fine Arts Society exhibition: I am sending this painting because the governor, Sir Robert feels it will win a prize. If so, the victory is yours too. (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 29:40 – 30:14)

Saying this, he gives her the costume she used, but she declines it silently, her eyes filled with tears. She seems despondent at the prospect that she will never be able to return to him. As she leaves Ravi Varma, there is a thunderbolt in the background, which suggests an impending doom. As expected, the painting won a gold medal at the exhibition, and the preparations for the celebration of Ravi Varma's victory started in the palace. On the other hand, Ravi Varma appears to be upset, which is most likely because the nobles killed his muse, the Jasmine girl, and she is no longer with him. Ravi Varma feels that she is guiltless and that he should be held accountable and punished for whatever happened. As the Jasmine girl's story comes to a close, the ambivalent nature of their relationship becomes quite evident. It is impossible here to disentangle the private life of Ravi Varma in the form of his emotional attachment to his model from the public aspects in the form of the aesthetics of his art.

As a painter par excellence, Ravi Varma thoroughly colonised the Indian imagination through his vivid portrayal of scenes from the epics, thereby breathing new life into mythological figures. Niharika Dinkar believes that "[h]owever, what is distinctive in this public re-imagination of Ravi Varma is the manner in which he resurrected as the figure of the "Romantic Artist" – his life and work interwoven into a mythical narrative speaks of the arrival of modern Indian art into public consciousness (217). Ravi Varma's concretisation of mythology through his artwork is especially portrayed in the movie through the story of Urvashi and Pururavas, and in his real life, it is materialised in his relationship with Sugandha Bai. Through a vivid description of *Urvashi and Pururavas*, the movie renders a detailed portrait of Ravi Varma's aesthetics of art and his relationship with his model. The mythical tale of Urvashi and Pururavas has been deftly interwoven into the plot to form the movie's subtext. Niharika Dinkar claims that "the portrayal of Ravi Varma in contemporary cinematic representations conjoins art and artist" (222), which is apparent in *Makaramanju* as the director chooses the same actors to play both couples, that is, Ravi Varma and Sugandha Bai as well as Pururavas and Urvashi.

The story of the celestial nymph Urvashi and the king Pururavas is introduced in the film as Ravi Varma relates it to Sugandha Bai. He describes how a painful mythological scene in which Pururavas was destroyed and Urvashi's heart was broken has haunted him for a long time. He further narrates:

RAVI VARMA: Pururavas was the ruler of a princely state. By performing one hundred Ashwamedha yajnas (horse sacrifices) and becoming master of seven islands, Pururuvas rose to fame as a major king of the Chandravamsha

dynasty. The domestic animals in his domain outnumbered his subjects, giving them a higher status than human beings. The people of the kingdom resorted to farming on small plots of land and cultivated whatever they wanted. Pururavas was friendly to his subjects. Gods feared Pururavs, who loved birds and pets beyond measure. Karma, or action, is more potent than hard penance. Urvashi, who once happened to hear about the gods' anxieties regarding Pururavas, unknowingly began to harbour Pururavas in her heart. Even though Urvashi had charmed many men, Puruvas began to rule her heart. One day, while enacting a drama by Sage Bharata, Urvashi stumbled over words, and instead of saying “Purushothaman”, she said "Pururavas". The great dramaturge Bharata cursed Urvashi, exiled her from heaven and sent her to earth. Instead of moaning over the curse, she felt a mysterious joy in her heart and thanked Sage Bharata for giving her a chance to meet Pururavas. The gods were also happy to send Urvashi to earth so Pururavas would be intoxicated by her presence. Whenever he became sober, he would seek out Urvashi, which would gradually keep him away from his work. At last, he would lose himself. (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 44:10 – 47:27)

Pururavas's kingdom is shown in the next scene, where cattle are seen drinking water from a river on one side and women bathing and washing their clothes on the other. With a pan shot, Urvashi is shown as one of the ladies washing clothes in the river, glancing at Pururavas, who comes with a calf. She stares at him as he moves forward, tending cattle, and Puruvas suddenly notices her. As Urvashi seems new to

Pururavas, he asks who she is, and she replies that she is from a nearby village. He is surprised that he has not known a girl like Urvashi until then and asks her the way to her village. She gives him a confusing explanation of how to get to her house, causing him to become lost; he declares that he will locate it on his own. The other women who bathe in the river make fun of Urvashi and tease her about Pururavas's interest in her. Urvashi traverses the river as the scene ends.

On another day in Pururavas's kingdom, Urvashi is shown to be rowing a raft in a river while Pururavas crosses her in another raft. They exchange long glances, implying an imminent romantic entanglement between the two. He inquires how she avoided deadly reptiles and wild creatures while travelling to the village at the crack of the day. As she desired to meet him alone, she did not feel scared. This scene is shot in a rural setting with abundant natural flora, perhaps in contrast to Bombay, the metropolis where Ravi Varma and Sugandha's love story takes root. The scene cuts to a barn of cows, where Pururavas tends to the labour of a cow. He even suggests herbal medicines and orders the veterinarian to be with the cow until it gives birth. This scene takes us back to an earlier scenario where Pururavas stops animal sacrifice in his territory. The person who arranged for the sacrifice later becomes the veterinarian of his cattle. The following scene depicts Pururavas feeding pigeons while Urvashi joins them, underscoring Pururavas's love for birds and animals. As they spend time together, one of his wives, Vasundhara, arrives and laments his absence the previous night. Vasundhara is troubled by the growing intimacy between her husband and Urvashi. That night, Vasundhara visits Pururavas in his bedroom, and through their conversation, it is revealed that Pururavas has

more than one wife and that he previously wed Sunetra. Following their discussion of Pururavas's obstinacy in getting whatever he sought, they engage in sex.

Urvashi, afflicted by Pururavas' love, desires to remain in his kingdom, oblivious of her errand on earth. Ravi Varma's eye for detail is shown in the pedestal shot of Urvashi emerging from the river, where her figure is given the detailed treatment later shown in the close-up of the painting with precisely the same camera movement. Pururavas, who spots Urvashi in the river, shoots an arrow at her back, followed by scenes of their romance with the accompaniment of sensual background music. In another scene, while Urvashi is seen alone in the river, she has an aural revelation in the form of a voice that speaks to her:

VOICE: Urvashi, you frequently lose sight of your goals. You are faltering in your mission to seduce and subdue Pururavas.

URVASHI: Why should I ruin an innocent person like him who lives only for birds and animals?

VOICE: Now you are smitten with love, isn't it? Emotions like love and compassion are not in your destiny. You can possess only the spells of seduction.

URVASHI: I am a woman, too. Love flows into the depths of the soul from elsewhere. I am powerless to curb it.

VOICE: If you are in love with Pururavas, you can come back to heaven. There are still other women in heaven who are not fools like you.

URVASHI: Can you please grant me a few more days here on earth?

VOICE: Yes. But only on one condition. If you see Pururavas naked, or if he sees his child born from you, you will be called back to heaven—only you.

Do you agree?

URVASHI: Yes. I agree. (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 1:12:58 – 1:15:30)

The conversation between the two is followed by a song sequence that features romantic moments between Pururavas and Urvashi; as the song ends, Pururavas invites Urvashi to make love beside a river in the forest, which she refuses. However, she appears near his house at night and lures him into the night's darkness, leading him to a hut in the forest where they consummate their love. Towards the climax of the movie, Urvashi again comes near Pururavas's window during the night, and they sit on the banks of the same river, where she reveals her desire to give birth to his son and raise him away from Pururavas's sight. As they consummate their relationship in the same hut, they hear his cows mooing. He rushes out of the hut and, upon discovering that his cows are let loose, cries out loudly for help. Instantly, there is a flash of lightning and Urvashi sees Pururavas naked. Urvashi is ready to leave Pururavas, as she has violated the condition of the oracle. While Pururavas tries to stop her from leaving, she reveals her identity to him.\

URVASHI: I am Urvashi. The cows being stolen and the lightning and thunderbolt were all part of the treachery of the gods.

PURURAVAS: Even if it is the creator, Brahma, I will not let you go, let alone the gods.

URVASHI: Leaving you is like losing my life. But please let me go.

PURURAVAS: No. I will not give you up, no matter what happens.

URVASHI: I do not break my promises. If I am ever absolved, I will come back to you again. (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 2:02:13 – 2:03:05)

The movie incorporates the mythical tale of Urvashi and Pururavas to explore Ravi Varma's relationship with Sugandha Bai, as well as the entwined nature of the artist and his artwork. While discerning Sugandha Bai, Ravi Varma's muse for *Urvashi and Pururavas*, the director underscores their relationship, thereby showing how inextricably Ravi Varma's private and public lives have been intertwined.

The existence of a model named Sugandha Bai has always been a matter of much debate among the biographers of Ravi Varma. Whether there was an actual person named Sugandha Bai in Ravi Varma's life or whether she was a fictional person based on his model Anjani Bai, it is evident that there was a woman who was the muse of his art and with whom he had a passionate, emotional involvement. Whether the two were lovers or had a physical relationship is irrelevant to the fact that he was emotionally involved with this muse, who inspired many of his paintings. The character Sugandha Bai has been adapted for the movie from Desai's *Raja Ravi Varma: A Novel*, about whom its translator, Vikrant Pande, notes:

Ranjit Desai captures the relationship between Raja Ravi Varma and his muse and love, Sugandha, and does so with delicate compassion. I discussed the subject of Sugandha with Uma Varma, the great-great-granddaughter of the painter, and her daughter, Radhika Varma. Debates surround her very existence, and some other biographies of the painter have left her out completely. But the fact remains that Sugandha was a person in Raja Ravi Varma's life and was his model for many paintings in his mythological series.

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While EMJ Venniyoor refers to Ravi Varma's model, Anjani Bai, who claims Ravi Varma is one of the finest gentlemen she ever met, Manu S. Pillai, a noted historian and writer, who is not sure about Sugandha, also refers to Anjani Bai in an email to the researcher:

If my memory serves me well, there was no such person. However, he was friendly with Anjani Malpalekar, who is said to have even posed for some paintings. From what I know, this is what later got exaggerated into some grand romance with a Marathi woman called Sugandha.

In the movie, Sugandha Bai is treated as a vital presence both in Ravi Varma's public life and personal life, as the director attempts to synergise the artist and his art. Lenin Rajendran correlates the relationship of Sugandha and Ravi Varma with that of Urvashi and Pururavas in many instances thus, mythologizing their romance. Niharika Dinkar perceives, "However, what has been equally prominent in the reception of Ravi Varma has been the romantic mythologization of his persona"

(221).

The Urvashi-Pururavas-Sugandha Bai episode is set in Bombay, where Ravi Varma begins his life anew as a painter. The scene of his arrival in Bombay is shot as he stands before the Gateway of India, with the camera positioned at a low angle to emphasize his height of success as a pan-Indian artist. In the following scene, he is seen near the port with a camera, through which he gets a glimpse of Sugandha Bai for the first time. As she sees Ravi Varma trying to capture her with his camera, she flees, and the following song sequence introduces her to the audience as a dancer. After the dance performance, he meets Sugandha's mother, Ruku Bai, and seeks her approval to employ Sugandha as his model. When Sugandha arrives in his studio, she discovers some unfinished portraits, including her nude portrait. On seeing the portrait, she reprimands him in a roiling rage.

SUGANDHA: When have you seen me naked like this? My friends had warned me that you are an obscene painter. With the money you earn by drawing such pictures, you lead a pompous life. Now I understand everything. We are poor. But we are not so wretched that we have to sell nudity to make a living. (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 41:51 – 42:27)

Ravi Varma follows her to the cart as she storms out of his studio in a rage, inquires what upset her, and then apologises to her by outlining his plan to illustrate an epic scene. Sugandha feels that, as a dancer, he has taken her for a woman of loose morals; she wants to leave soon because if a drop of her tears fell on his ground, it would cause him distress. However, Ravi Varma pleads with her to listen to him and narrates the mythical story of Urvashi and Pururavas. In this scene, where Ravi

Varma narrates this story to Sugandha, the scenes depicting Pururavas and his domain are shown concurrently. By showing a close-up of Sugandha's face as she listens intently to Ravi Varma, the director shows her interest in Pururavas, thus connecting to Urvashi.

In the scene where Ravi Varma tries to drop Sugandha off at home in his car, she asks for the vehicle to be stopped and prefers to walk home. When Ravi Varma asks her about the location of her house, she confuses him the same way Urvashi confuses Pururavas about the road to her village and leaves. However, when Ravi Varma follows her, she claims that no one knows the purpose of her visit to his bungalow. Even if Sugandha divulges the truth, no one will believe her, and if her relatives learn about it, they will forbid her from visiting him. But before she departs, she promises to return because she has started to like Pururavas, inadvertently suggesting her attraction for Ravi Varma. In another scene, while Ravi Varma is painting, he narrates to Sugandha about Pururavas's amorous moments with Vasundhara. Sugandha kneels over, and when asked about this, she says she does not want to hear about Pururavas's romantic encounters with anybody other than Urvashi. As she cannot continue posing for the painting, she leaves, saying she will come the next day. This incident in the movie suggests that Sugandha has started to perceive herself as Urvashi, who feels insecure about Pururavas's encounters with other women, which is typical of a woman being possessive about her lover. The next time Ravi Varma tries to paint Urvashi, he seems immersed in some thought. Ravi Varma feels a vacuum in his heart and compares it to a blank canvas. Ravi Varma sets the painting on fire, claiming he cannot present Sugandha naked before

the public. Overwhelmed by Ravi Varma's concern for her, Sugandha hugs him. This scene validates Ravi Varma's growing interest in Sugandha as he begins to possess her in all senses.

The movie depicts a scene of an amorous encounter between Ravi Varma and Sugandha at his studio, which is shown alongside the sexual encounters of Pururavas and Urvashi, further demonstrating the indivisibility of the artist and his artwork. According to Dinkar, "Art and artist are bound together in a common goal – the pursuit of a freedom that necessarily transgresses the bounds of conventional morality" (222). Since this is a biopic of an artist, the director makes a painterly use of various hues as he demonstrates the lovemaking scenes of Ravi Varma and Sugandha, making the sequence reflect the paintings of Ravi Varma. They regret their action after having their relationship consummated.

SUGANDHA: Who am I to you? I know I cannot belong to you. Please tell me, who am I to you?

RAVI VARMA: You are my...

SUGANDHA: Please, no. You cannot be truthful in your words. Others see me just as a prostitute. I feel hatred for myself. Let me tell you, as I cannot forget you, please allow me to go. I will not come again.

RAVI VARMA: I should have controlled myself. You may leave and not come back again. I will stop painting that picture. Instead of bliss, my mind is filled with remorse. (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju*, 1:25:12 – 1:26:13)

He washes off the colours on the paint brushes in a glass of water, shown in an extreme close-up shot, suggesting a dissolution of his desires and dreams. As he turns back, he finds Sugandha posing as Urvashi, indicative of her intention to continue as Ravi Varma's muse and lover. Through the detailed execution of *Urvashi and Pururavas*, Lenin Rajendran attempts to radicalize Ravi Varma, who transgressed conventional codes of morality through his artistic creations. As Niharika Dinkar analyses the cinematic portrayal of Ravi Varma, she comments:

As my reading of the films will demonstrate, the artistic subject produced is not the isolated mad genius out of step with the world, but a creative visionary comfortable with the hurly-burly of modern life, who speaks in favour of sexual and imaginative freedom, invoking history and mythology to buttress his claims. (222)

Their love becomes intense as Ravi Varma and Sugandha proceed with the painting, which is illustrated in a scene where Ravi Varma puts sandalwood paste on her forehead after a temple visit. Sugandha further prompts him to apply sindoor on the parting line of her hair, which is customary in a Hindu wedding where the bridegroom puts sindoor on the bride's forehead. Though she removes it after a while, it is evident that she possesses Ravi Varma in her heart as her husband. In another scene, when Ravi Varma is working on *Damayanti Deserted in the Forest* with another model, Sugandha enters and, seeing this, becomes envious and demands that Ravi Varma send her away soon. Before long, Ravi Varma goes through a phase of melancholy that leads to a creative slowdown, illustrated through a scene where he destroys his paintings.

While Ravi Varma and Sugandha travel in a boat, she confesses her love for him despite knowing she can never possess Ravi Varma as her husband. She suffers from the pangs of love and does not want to get married to any other person. She suggests he finish *Urvashi and Pururavas*, believing it might help clear her mind. The scene shifts to Ravi Varma's studio, where he makes every effort to paint but fails; losing heart, he throws his paint brushes away, and as it ends, he lies down on the floor; an overhead shot suggests utter despair of the painter. Moreover, Makhanji's rivalry with Ravi Varma instigates him to threaten Sugandha Bai and her mother to leave the place. Sugandha's absence further depresses him, as shown in a scene where Ravi Varma waits for Sugandha even at night to complete the painting. He is so passionate about the painting and Sugandha that he expresses his desire to complete it, whatever happens, but Sugandha Bai never returns to him. The climax scene of the movie shows Ravi Varma sitting before the painting, shot in low-key lighting to suggest his desolation and with a spotlight on the painting to imply the permanence of art, which is ideal. The scenes featuring both pairs—Sugandha Bai and Ravi Varma and Urvashi and Pururavas—are so intercut that the two narratives alternate back and forth, emphasizing the entwined nature of Ravi Varma's personal and professional lives. The director draws an analogy between Ravi Varma's private life and his artistic creation, where both Ravi Varma and Pururavas are shown to have lovers outside of wedlock with whom they have physical relationships that culminate in a parting of ways.

When discussing *Makaramanju* as a biopic, it is evident that Lenin Rajendran tries to adapt a specific period in Ravi Varma's life as an artist and mainly

focuses on one big painting. Though he tries to deal with Ravi Varma's public life, the line between his public and private lives is blurred. *Makaramanju* is a step forward from *Yugapurushan* in terms of how it shows the private life of the subject. In the movie, the characters of Sugandha Bai and Ravi Varma's wife, Bhageerathi, come across as being part of his private life alone, though the former is a part of his public life too. Even Ravi Varma's brother Raja Raja Varma is portrayed as a part of his public life, where he assists Ravi Varma in completing his paintings, and as a part of his private life where, as a sibling, he takes care of Ravi Varma. But when it comes to Ravi Varma's wife, Bhageerathi Bayi Thampuratty, she belongs to his purely private realm. His troubled family life is a significant theme in his biographies, which the film also highlights. A man ahead of his time, Ravi Varma could not limit himself to the responsibilities of a spouse and left his family to pursue his passion. In *The Ivory Throne*, Manu S. Pillai states:

The marriage, then, was just another alliance between two leading families of the principality. But as fate would have it, the relationship was doomed to be unhappy from the beginning. For Ravi Varma was devoted to his art, with a vision that transcended the cloistered environs of feudal Kerala, looking out at the world beyond and all that it offered to a man of his creative temperaments. What Kochupanki, whose sex and circumstances precluded her from a broader worldview, desired on the other hand, was her own notion of a regular marriage and domestic fulfilment. (40)

He adds:

Ravi Varma's absences from Mavelikkara grew, and resentment and depression crept into Kochupanki's life. Reports of his activities in Bombay and other great cities, that she could only vaguely and incoherently have known about, reached Mavelikkara. Exaggerated by gossipmongers and delivered to jealous relatives, Kochupanki found herself facing a frustrating combination of embarrassment and anxiety, a husband whose personality she failed to fathom and whose intellectual spirit she could never match. (40-41)

Much discussed in his biographies, Ravi Varma's wife is given different names in different narratives. It was a time when people went by various names in various contexts, from their official birth names to the names their family members called them. Different biographers call Ravi Varma's wife by at least three names: Bhageerathi Bayi, Mahaprabha, and Kochupanki. In the movie, however, she is called only Bhageerathi. The reference to various names need not be a pointer to the fictionality of the person during that period. Raja Raja Varma, who informs Ravi Varma about a letter from Bhageerathi, first mentions her in the movie. In this particular scene, Raja Raja Varma is painting when Ravi Varma enters. In their conversation, Raja Raja Varma informs him about Bhageerathi's letter, which he has kept on the table in Ravi Varma's bedroom. Ravi Varma asks Raja Raja Varma himself to reply to the letter as he can anticipate its content:

RAVI VARMA: There is nothing you cannot read in Bhageerathi's letters to me. It might be full of complaints, accusations and repetitions. I would like you to reply to her letter to alleviate these grievances.

RAJA RAJA VARMA: We always try to justify our stance and not think from her perspective.

RAVI VARMA: I am often accused of being lured by Bombay City, its feudal lords, and the huge amounts of money they offer. But each time I receive an honour, I make a concerted effort to conceal the tears of a man ostracised from his homeland. (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 15:50 – 16:32)

This conversation cuts to a flashback scene set in Kerala, in which Bhageerathi expresses her displeasure at Ravi Varma both as an estranged husband and by his relationships with his models:

BHAGEERATHI: You need not bother about me, but don't you want to see our kids?

RAVI VARMA: Can't you accompany me, Bhagi? I often dream of sleeping between you and our kids. No, you will not come.

BHAGEERATHI: Have you ever really invited me?

RAVI VARMA: I would not have. But I am sure about one thing. You won't be able to stay there even for a single day. The very sight of my models would infuriate you, transforming you into a manifestation of the goddess Kali.

BHAGEERATHI: Bhadrakali! Thank you for giving me a new name. What has been destined for me? On almost all days of the year, you travel seeking

new sights. Heedless of the weather, you cross rivers and mountains and wander about in temples and streets crowded with harlots. I recently read in a newspaper that no one other than you have traversed the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent. This place is just a stopgap for a person like you, whose life is spent on joyful journeys with your compatriots, but you never failed to "gift" me a baby each time you visited me.

RAVI VARMA: I cannot lead the life of a husband who has sumptuous meals all day and waits for his wife's call to the bedroom. (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 16:34 – 18:26)

The scene is set in their bedroom with low-key lighting, suggesting the obscurity and gloom of this aspect of his life.

The first outstanding achievement in Ravi Varma's career was the gold medal he won for *Nair Lady Adorning Her Hair* at the Madras Fine Arts Exhibition, which is referred to in the movie too. In the scene that points to Ravi Varma's victory, Bhageerathi reaches his studio before the success celebrations begin and invites him for a carnal encounter as her gift. She leads him into another room, shuts the windows, undresses herself, and says he can use her as a blank canvas to paint his favourite colours. Saying this, she harkens back to the intimate moments of their wedding night. Nevertheless, he remains cold and insensitive because he is still brooding over the Jasmine girl, whose absence looms large on this auspicious day. Bhageerathi is highly annoyed at the mention of the Jasmine girl, with whom she believes Ravi Varma shared a bond of love. He discloses to her that he has come to know about the murder of the Jasmine girl on the command of the aristocrats.

After this incident, Ravi Varma leaves for Bombay and is later seen returning to his wife towards the end of the movie, where he is shown in a state of desolation. That specific scene, again set in Kerala, is the last scene where Bhageerathi appears. In an utterly devastated state, Ravi Varma seeks comfort in his wife's presence.

BHAGEERATHI: I have always been sad thinking about you. Now, our kids and I are scared because there are only enemies everywhere.

RAVI VARMA: I, who have perused the mythologies, found out a truth: there is not even a single person in god's creation who has not committed a mistake, at least in his or her heart. God, who created man in his own image, might have bestowed his fancies on him.

BHAGEERATHI: You are talking philosophical things while your adversaries stand with their swords drawn.

RAVI VARMA. I am not scared to die.

BHAGEERATHI: Why can't you give up on that miserable city and its people, at least now?

RAVI VARMA: I have not chosen anything for myself; it has been in my destiny. I will come back to the land that abandoned me. I will sleep peacefully in your arms, you who have forgiven me.

BHAGEERATHI: My kids and I pray that you should not remain there even for a minute.

RAVI VARMA: Incomplete pictures cause me great pain that no one can fathom. I do not want such a life, Bhagi. (Translated by the researcher, *Makaramanju* 1:52:06 – 1:53:14)

The marital discord of Raja Ravi Varma is explicated by historians like Manu S. Pillai, who believe that the greatest casualty of Ravi Varma's successes in the world of art is his family (40), which the director corroborates in the movie.

As has already been said, *Makaramanju* shows a specific phase in Raja Ravi Varma's life as a painter, imparting greater thrust on *Urvashi and Pururavas*. In his review of *Makaramanju*, Aamir Hamza feels that it is rather a chapter taken from the artist's life concerning one of his works. However, the chapter is enough to show the maestro's passion for the art, the difficulties, the hostilities he faced, and his pride. Excluding the private aspects of his life, like his childhood and old age, the movie mainly discusses the angst of Ravi Varma while painting *Urvashi and Pururavas*, which also creates an emotional impact on his personal life. As David Bovey observes, "the crucial feature within artist biopics compared to the standard biopic is, of course, the works of art themselves" (15). Whereas *Yugapurushan*, addressed in the preceding chapter, portrays its subject, Sree Narayana Guru, in a semi-divine light and only briefly touches on his private life, *Makaramanju* takes a more in-depth look at its subject, Ravi Varma, as an accomplished artist who creates marvels for the public out of the passions of the private. As Pramod K Nayar suggests, the biopic moves from the magical and miraculous to the marvellous, where the former is associated with the supernatural and the divine and the latter with human wonders (76). From *Makaramanju's* depiction of life through a static form like painting, *Celluloid* moves towards the wonders of a new technology to depict the world and confronts the complications that ensue both at the societal and the increasingly personal levels.

CHAPTER IV

CELLULOID: FILMIC DREAMS AND CINEMATIC LEGACY

An art form of entertainment and inspiration, cinema creates an expression of substantial impact while projecting itself as a reflection of society. It has evolved into a medium that openly renders real-life scenarios with a touch of imagination. With the steadfast expansion of the movie industry, myriad kinds of films began to take shape, including the cinema-within-cinema genre. With their innate quality of craft, there came films that held a mirror to themselves, attesting to the fact that stories of cinema are best depicted through cinema itself. According to Christopher Ames:

Films about filmmaking date from the silent era and include comic treatments of filmmaking by Mack Sennett, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd. The genre includes numerous stories of Hollywood hopefuls seeking fame and fortune, of stars encountering tragedy and decline, of producers and directors ruthlessly seeking success, of screenwriters struggling to make a living, of fans absorbed by the spectacle of cinema. Virtually all aspects of the movie-making industry have received film treatment at some time. (9-10)

In a way, it is a paradox when these kinds of films make the audience sympathise with or empathise with the stars they used to envy. By delineating a star on screen, such films create an amalgamation of fact and fiction that attempts to portray the real person behind the screen.

Movies about filmmakers accommodate manifold storylines and subplots that form the narrative pattern and reveal the operational challenges the directors face in carving out their film projects. Hollywood has many movies on moviemaking and its makers, some of which are credited as biopics of filmmakers. *Ed Wood* (1994) on the cult filmmaker Ed Wood, *The Aviator* (2004) on Howard Hughes' successful career as a film producer and aviation tycoon, and *Hitchcock* (2012) about Alfred Hitchcock during the making of his 1960 film *Psycho* are a few instances. The Indian film industry, a guild of different industries with different languages like Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam etc has also produced films about the movie industry. *Kaagaz ke Phool* (1959), for instance, revolves around the character of Suresh Sinha, a film director who falls from grace, and also attempts to give a realistic portrayal of the Indian film scenario in the 1950s. *Autograph* (2010) is a Bengali movie released as a tribute to Satyajit Ray's film *Nayak* (1966), and *Kaamyab* (2018) pays tribute to the unnoticed character artists who could never make a name despite their admirable performances. However, these movies can hardly be classed as biopics. The Marathi film *Harishchandrachi Factory* (2009) could well be classified as a biopic since it is about the Father of Indian Cinema, Dada Saheb Phalke, and the challenges he encountered during the production of his film *Raja Harishchandra*. The multi-lingual *Celluloid Man* (2012) is a film about cinema veteran P.K. Nair, the founder of the National Film Archive of India, but it falls into the genre of documentary.

Malayalam cinema, a regional film industry, is a powerful force in Indian cinema. Even though Indian cinema set itself in motion in the early years of the

twentieth century, Malayalam cinema had to wait until 1928 for the production of its first film. The chronicle of Malayalam cinema begins with *Vigathakumaran* (1930), directed by J.C. Daniel, who later came to be recognised as the Father of Malayalam Cinema. For quite a long time, *Balan* (1938) was deemed the first Malayalam film, as it was the first talkie in Malayalam, and it is only recently that *Vigathakumaran* and its maker, J.C. Daniel, received due recognition. John Paul writes, "We respect him as the state's first filmmaker, a title he actually deserves, because Malayalam has witnessed no such movie or attempt before, or if at all there were, they went unnoticed and undocumented" (13). *Celluloid* (2013), the movie discussed in this chapter, is a biopic of J.C. Daniel and his making of *Vigathakumaran*. A twenty-one-minute documentary on J.C. Daniel titled *The Lost Life* (2006), directed by R. Gopalakrishnan, was released much before *Celluloid*, which also gets a reference in the movie. *Celluloid*, directed by Kamal, primarily chronicles the journey of Dr J.C. Daniel as the first filmmaker in Kerala and the life of P.K. Rosy, the first heroine of Malayalam cinema, as its subplot.

The present chapter will analyse how Kamal carries forward the relatively recent directorial tendency to address the personal life of a historical subject, who in this case is JC Daniel. The film holds a unique place among the biopics in Malayalam since it has a person who has a special place in the history of Malayalam Cinema as its subject. *Celluloid* thus simultaneously becomes both a film about Malayalam Cinema, allowing the public spaces of cinema to be part of the narrative and a film about the private life of the first filmmaker of Kerala whose legacy has tragic overtones. The movement of *Celluloid* from Bombay and Madras to

Thiruvananthapuram and Agastheeswaram enacts the general tendency of the transition from the public to the private in biopics.

With a career spanning over three decades and 46 films to his credit, including one in Tamil and another in Hindi, Kamal is an award-winning director who works mainly in the Malayalam movie industry. A former chairman of the Kerala State Chalachithra Academy, he has produced several successful films, including *Unnikale Oru Kadha Parayam* (1987), *Kakkothikkavile Appooppan Thaadikal* (1988), *Ulladakkam* (1991), *Swapnakoodu* (2003), *Perumazhakkalam* (2004), and *Khaddama* (2011), the last two of which were based on real incidents. In Malayalam cinema, where the biopic is still in its infancy, Kamal has made two biopics: *Celluloid* (2013) and *Aami* (2018). He reveals why he chose Dr J.C. Daniel as the subject of his well-received debut biopic, *Celluloid*, in an interview with Asianet News:

J.C. Daniel, the director—or the artist—launched a revolution in motion pictures that neither Malayalam nor Indian cinema acknowledged. Before Daniel, films were based only on mythological themes. Even Phalke and directors in Tamil cinema thrived on mythological stories. It might be said that Daniel initiated social subjects in movies, which can be deemed a brave act at that point in time. I adore the filmmaker Daniel for the style of theme he used for his film, which, in a way, the most recent directors also follow. Daniel never ceased to haunt me because a man of incredible talent has gone unappreciated by the film fraternity. (Translated by the researcher)

As a biopic that explores J.C. Daniel's voyage in Malayalam cinema, which brought him nothing but a tragic end, it also reveals the unfortunate exit of the first heroine of Malayalam cinema, who led a life of oblivion.

Celluloid, as a tribute to the Father of Malayalam Cinema, is one of the highest-grossing biopics in Malayalam. In the movie produced by Ubaid and Kamal, cinematographer Venu and editor Rajagopal recreate the life of J.C. Daniel, the unsung hero of Malayalam cinema. With Prithviraj Sukumaran in the lead role, *Celluloid* has a big cast, including Mamtha Mohandas, Sreenivasan, Siddhique, Sreejith Ravi, Chandni, and T.G. Ravi. It garnered several awards, including the Kerala State Film Award for Best Film, the Kerala State Film Award for Best Actor, and the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Malayalam.

As the movie begins, J.C. Daniel (played by Prithviraj) is in Bombay in 1928, where he meets Dada Saheb Phalke (played by Nandu Madhav), the pioneer of Indian cinema, at his studio to learn more about movies. Returning to Travancore after learning the fundamentals of cinema, he introduces his wife Janet (played by Mamta Mohandas) to a film strip or celluloid he brought from Bombay. As Daniel explains the history of cinema to her, citing the Lumiere Brothers and Dada Saheb Phalke, he reveals his dream and unending passion to be a filmmaker.

The following day, Daniel meets with his friends Johnson (played by Jayaraj Aluva) and Sunderraj (played by Sreejith Ravi) to discuss making the first movie in Travancore. Daniel then travels to Madras to meet Nataraja Mudaliar (played by Thalaivasal Vijay) to learn about the equipment to be brought and the budget for making a movie. In Nataraja Mudaliar's studio, Daniel gets an opportunity to talk to

William Derek, Mudaliar's cameraman. Back in Thiruvananthapuram, Daniel, Janet, and his friends watch Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* at the Capitol Theatre. Daniel is seen talking to the operator about his upcoming film in the projection cabin. He imports various film equipment, like a camera from Calcutta, which he zealously explains to Janet and his friends. As they unpack the crates, Daniel declares his idea of making a social drama, unlike the mythological movies popular in Bombay and Madras. He establishes his film company, Travancore National Pictures, at the Saradavilasam building in Pattom, where he reveals the movie's title, 'Vigathakumaran', and narrates its theme to Janet and his friends. While discussing the movie's cast, Daniel recounts the dearth of female actors in Travancore. Daniel, who lands in Bombay in search of a heroine for his film, encounters Miss Lana, an Anglo-Indian actress. Owing to Lana's escalating expectations in Travancore, Daniel sends her back. Eventually, his quest culminates in Rosamma (whose name is later changed to Rosy), a kakkarissi player, as the heroine.

Rosamma (played by Chandini), who shares her reservations about acting as the heroine of the first movie made in Malayalam with her friend, finally arrives at Saradavilasam. Owing to her lower caste status, Rosy initially hesitates to be a part of the crew, but Daniel and Janet warmly welcome her. After Rosy dresses up as the heroine Sarojini, the shooting begins with other actors like Pillai (played by Ramesh Pisharady). As the shooting proceeds, Daniel recommends 'Rosy' as the new name for Rosamma, claiming that it is simple but pleasant to hear. Two other ladies join the shooting set to play the roles of Sarojini's mother and friend, but the upper-caste Pillai feels offended by their presence as they, like Rosy, are from a lower caste. The

landlord, Janardhanan Thampi, appears at Rosy's house to reproach Paulose, her father, who is also his tenant, for allowing his daughter to act in movies, which, according to the times, was a profession of low repute.

Due to Daniel's financial concerns about the shooting in Colombo, he decided to sell the coconut plantations at Agastheeswaram. With Rosy's schedule completed, the shooting at Saradavilasam ends. Sunderraj, who manages the finances, gives Rosy additional remuneration for her commendable acting, and Daniel invites her to the premiere of the movie. Returning the costumes and jewellery to Janet, Rosy leaves Saradavilasam with a heavy heart.

The second half of the movie begins in 1966 with Chelangatt Gopalakrishnan (played by Sreenivasan), a film journalist, encountering J.C. Daniel as an older man in a petty shop at Agastheeswaram. Chelangatt, who misses an opportunity to speak with Daniel, learns about him from the shopkeeper and begins investigating the first filmmaker in Kerala. Chelangatt, with a notice of *Vigathakumaran*, approaches the director-producer P. Subramaniam, who recollects the film's release being disrupted by the audience while remembering Daniel in the projection room, trembling with fear. However, he does not know about Daniel's present condition. Chelangatt sets out for Agastheeswaram, where, with the help of the locals, he locates Daniel's house. Though Chelangatt cannot meet Daniel in person as the latter is recovering from eye surgery, he speaks with Janet about *Vigathakumaran* and what transpired following its release. Janet recalls how the elite class revolted against a Dalit woman playing the role of an upper-caste Nair woman in the movie, disrupting *Vigathakumaran*'s premiere. She reminisces how the

presence of Rosy enraged the nobility and how she ultimately had to leave the theatre without watching the film. On returning home, Chelangatt writes an article on *Vigathakumaran*, which Daniel reads and desires to meet him again. Chelangatt, on his second visit to Agastheeswaram, has a long conversation with Daniel, who talks to him about Rosy's disappearance, about his new career as a successful dental surgeon, and also about his second attempt at cinema, which doomed him to depression beyond resurrection.

Chelangatt, who fathoms the deplorable condition of J.C. Daniel, sets out on a mission to earn Daniel the recognition he well deserves. As part of it, he meets M. Ramakrishna Aiyer, the cultural secretary, to report to him about the first movie made in Malayalam and its unheralded director, shrouded in obscurity. However, according to the official records, the cultural secretary, who claims T.R. Sundaram's *Balan* is the first Malayalam movie, demands *Vigathakumaran*'s print. After receiving a letter from Janet pleading for the government's help, which details their increasing misery and Daniel's paralysis, Chelangatt again meets Ramakrishnan through their common acquaintance, Vayalar Rama Varma. However, he repeats his demand for the movie's print and further asks him to seek the assistance of the Tamil Nadu government, as Daniel currently resides there.

Daniel is on his deathbed, where he has visions of *Vigathakumaran* being played at the Capitol Theatre. Janet sits by his side and comforts him while he breathes his last. The movie shifts to the year 2000 when Harris Daniel is on his way to attend the inaugural ceremony of R. Goplakrishnan's documentary on his father and on the way he witnesses the release of the movie *Narasimham* with great

pageantry. Chelangatt, who addresses the audience at the inauguration of R. Gopalakrishnan's documentary on J.C. Daniel, introduces Harris Daniel to them. As Harris Daniel speaks, he recalls his ignorance as a six-year-old boy, burning the film roll of the first movie made in Malayalam without comprehending its worth, and seeks pardon from his father and the entire Malayalam cinema.

Celluloid, released in the centenary year of Indian cinema as a tribute to the Father of Malayalam Cinema, is based on Chelangatt Gopalakrishnan's biography of Dr J.C. Daniel and Vinu Abraham's novel *Nashtanayika*, translated as *The Lost Heroine: A Novel*. As Mikhail Iampolski in *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film* states, "The semantic fullness of any text is surely the result of its ability to establish a connection with the texts that came before it and occasionally with those that came later" (8). *Celluloid* as a biopic follows the life of J.C. Daniel, from being the first director of Malayalam cinema through his life in obscurity and ultimately to his death. According to Dennis Bingham, "the majority of biopics don't include childhood scenes and aren't, in fact, birth-to-death chronicles. Biopics from all eras and phases of the genre's development generally open just before the moment when the subject begins to make his/her impact on the world" (236). The first half of the movie is a linear narrative of the making of *Vigathakumaran*. In contrast, the second half is a quest into Daniel's life through the eyes of Chelangatt Gopalakrishnan. In its first segment, *Celluloid* transports the audience to the early days of filmmaking and shows the actual process of making *Vigathakumaran*. It foregrounds Daniel's difficulties in learning about cinema, a novel art form then in Kerala, his efforts to

make cinema accessible with his limited knowledge, and how he made the film despite all the hurdles in his path.

While charting out the movement from the public to the private, two of Kamal's movies have a special place because in his first biopic, *Celluloid* (2013), the public sphere is prominently delineated, while the beginnings of a shift towards private concerns can also be observed. In contrast, in *Aami* (2018), which came after five years, the foregrounding of the private life is explicit, and the public life is noted only as the subject's achievement. *Celluloid* mainly deals with three principal themes: the difficulties JC Daniel faced in his public life as an emerging filmmaker; the story of P.K. Rosy, who, in parallel to the life of Daniel, acts in the first movie and goes into oblivion; and the rediscovery of J.C. Daniel and bringing him into the limelight, which is in the form of the quest narrative of a journalist. In all these cases, it is difficult to separate the public from the private, as the private tribulations are the result of the public exposure, both in the case of Daniel financially and in the case of Rosy because of her caste problems. In the previously discussed movies like *Yugapurushan* and *Makaramanju*, the private lives of the subjects were characterised by their home lives and especially their relationships with their wives and families. In this movie, such a distinction is difficult to make since J.C. Daniel involves his wife in every aspect of filmmaking so that there is no separation between the private life with the wife and kids and the public life as a filmmaker. Therefore, following the trajectory of Malayalam biopics that moves from the public to the private, it is evident in *Celluloid* that a clear demarcation between the two is complex, giving almost equal prominence to both.

The first part of the movie chronicles the public life of J.C. Daniel when he decides to make a movie and goes to Bombay to meet Dada Saheb Phalke. Even as the movie begins, it attempts to show the public life of a filmmaker in the way Phalke's office is decked out with still photographs of *Raja Harishchandra*, the different kinds of technical equipment, and the people engaged in different aspects of filmmaking. Through the portrayal of the studio, the actors involved, and the technique of film production, the movie attempts to focus on the public aspect of filmmaking. In a way, *Celluloid* features the initial phase of filmmaking in India in the way Phalke goes about his studio activities, which will be paralleled on a small scale when Daniel begins to shoot his own film. Daniel's public life, as portrayed in the movie, begins with his meeting with Phalke at the Hindustan Film Company. As Phalke is busy shooting his film, he asks Daniel to approach him later but allows him to watch the filmmaking process. Daniel, who intently observes the film cans arranged in the studio and the actors moving around dressed as mythological characters, gets an opportunity to be a part of the editing and preview of Phalke's movie in his studio. Through this episode, *Celluloid* marks the beginning of J.C. Daniel's relentless zest for the art of cinema.

Daniel's public education on cinema continues with his meeting with Nataraja Mudaliar, the pioneer of Tamil cinema. Daniel visits the shooting set of Nataraja Mudaliar in Madras, where he deliberates on the budget for moviemaking and the kinds of equipment needed. Mudaliar, who alerts him that cinema is not an inexpensive affair, entreats him to meet his manager for further inquiry. He also gets to meet William Derek, Mudaliar's cinematographer, who introduces Daniel to the

apparatus, such as the debris camera, which can be procured from Calcutta, where his colleague Samuel John would help him or get it directly from London. Daniel requests that Derek wheel the camera for his film. However, the latter dismisses it, stating that after the shooting of Mudaliar's film, he will return to London, and Samuel John will help him find a cinematographer. While these two episodes in the first half of the movie -Daniel's meeting with Phalke and Mudaliar - portray Daniel's exclusively public aspect, where he meets people whom he does not know to learn about cinema, they also signal the different stance that Daniel adopts in movie making. Essentially, the difference between Daniel's approach and Phalke's and Mudaliar's approaches is seen in the way the mythological movies are shot in Bombay and Madras. However, later, it can be seen that Daniel chooses a new arena based on the influence of Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid*, which is indicated in the movie itself. While contemplating the movie he wants to produce, Daniel has in mind a film with a social theme like *The Kid*, even though mythological movies were the norm then. Joe Varghese observes, "When we consider the basic theme and plot of the movie *Vigathakumaran* as shown in *Celluloid* and the basic theme and plot of *The Kid*, we find it similar, a child getting lost and then after a few years, the child is reunited with the family after a turn of events" (54). The international influence in his movie can be seen in how he tells the projectionist Moorthi while watching *The Kid* that he would make a social drama like this rather than a mythological movie. Though the first half of the movie solely dedicates itself to portraying J.C. Daniel as a public figure, the private elements of his life also gradually seep into the narrative.

As mentioned earlier, the trajectory of the Malayalam biopic shifts at large from the public to the private, but in *Celluloid*, it is not only difficult to distinguish them, but the public is partly private, and the private is partly public. While in the previously discussed movies, the subject's private life is a delineated space dominated by the wife and family, here, the wife is an equal partner in the public life of a filmmaker. Despite the difficulty of separating the public from the private, most of the movie's action until the release of *Vigathakumaran* is, of course, public. By the time Daniel returns home after meeting Phalke and Mudaliar, the demarcation between his public and private lives becomes blurry since his wife, Janet, also becomes a part of his venture and is involved in almost all aspects of film production. Janet, a crucial link in bridging the public and the private, adopts a role in the production of *Vigathakumaran* that is almost as important as Daniel himself. Apart from Janet, Daniel's friends Sunder Raj and Johnson, who are so much a part of his private circle, also play a decisive role in making *Vigathakumaran* by assisting him in various enterprises regarding moviemaking. The private begins to impinge in the form of his friends, with whom he discusses the idea of producing a film, and Janet, with whom he collaborates while making the movie.

What makes it difficult to see whether Daniel has a private life at all is that Janet is present with him throughout the filmmaking. Janet's presence during the filming of *Vigathakumaran* frames her as much of a significant figure as Daniel in the scenes, illustrating the actual production of the movie. It is with Janet that Daniel initially discusses his idea of making a film and refers to the Lumiere Brothers movie as well as Phalke and Mudaliar, who have made movies in Bombay and

Madras even though cinema had not taken root in Kerala. While he reveals his ardent desire to become the first filmmaker in Kerala, a close-up shot reveals his tenacity in pursuing his dream. Janet, a pragmatic wife, expresses her reservations regarding the financial challenges. Their discussion of the financial aspects of filmmaking, which involve the sale of coconut plantations at Neyyattinkara and Agastheeswaram in the initial phase of shooting and how, as the shoot progresses, he plans to sell the remaining plantations at Agastheeswaram, and about a few affluent men who might acquire the shares of Travancore National Pictures once it becomes a limited company, indicates Janet's involvement in *Vigathakumaran's* production even at its outset. It is the financial loss after the release of *Vigathakumaran* that leads to Daniel's mental collapse and his becoming a purely private person. Hence, it obviously becomes difficult to differentiate between the public and private aspects of a filmmaker when finances are involved.

As suggested earlier, though the first half of the movie records the making of *Vigathakumaran* and J.C. Daniel's public persona as the first filmmaker in Kerala, it correspondingly details Janet's role in the film's making. Several sequences feature Janet, but they do not depict their relationship as private between a husband and wife but as both equally involved in the making of *Vigathakumaran*. As Daniel ruminates on the theme of the movie as a social drama, Janet concurs with his proposal of making a film like *The Kid*, while his friend Johnson prefers a biblical theme. The scene that delineates the delivery of various kinds of equipment required for shooting is marked by the presence of Janet, along with Sunder Raj and Johnson, thereby highlighting the permeation of the private into the public. Daniel checks the

equipment, including the camera and tripod, as they unpack the crates against the inventory. Daniel, who mounts the camera on the tripod, places his son Sundaram in front of the camera but finds him standing upside down as he looks through the viewfinder. The perplexed Daniel asks Janet to look through the lens, and she also finds Sundaram standing on his head. While this scene demonstrates the ineptitude of a novice director, it also reveals the extent to which Janet is a part of his public life, where she is more than just a homemaker; instead, she is more like an associate in his endeavour of filmmaking.

As Daniel procures the devices needed for shooting, he attempts to acquire a studio like the ones owned by Phalke and Mudaliar. Sunder Raj assists him in locating the Saradavilasam building at Pattom, which is assumed to be the first-ever film studio in Kerala. The shot portrays Janet and Daniel's friends who witness the founding of Travancore National Pictures in Saradavilasam. The individuals who are a part of Daniel's private circle infiltrate into his public life as a filmmaker, thus making his journey as a budding director less strenuous. The movie illustrates the title and characters of *Vigathakumaran* through Daniel, who explains them to Janet and his friends. As Sunder Raj is curious to know the title of Daniel's movie, the latter reveals it as 'Vigathakumaran', which translates as 'the lost child', since it deals with a boy who goes missing. While Daniel proposes Sundaram as the lost child, he plays the hero Jayachandran, and Johnson plays the kidnapper Bhoothanathan. At this juncture, Janet poses an inquiry about the female lead of the movie. Janet, though a member of his most private guild, has her unmistakable perspectives regarding each aspect of filmmaking, making her an indispensable factor in his

public life. Sunder Raj recommends Janet play the heroine Sarojini's role, but she declines the offer outright for fear of the conservative society that will judge her; in those times, female actors were stigmatised as having slack morals. Daniel, who claims finding a heroine is the biggest challenge, travels to Bombay to get a heroine for *Vigathakumaran*. While Daniel is away on the quest for a female actor, Janet administers the shooting set, looking into the availability of food for the crew members and the heroine's costumes. In Bombay, with the help of Nathuram, Daniel meets Lana, a haughty Anglo-Indian actress with high demands, whom he brings to Travancore. However, in Travancore, nobody approves of her as the heroine owing to her arrogance, especially Janet, who compels Daniel to send her back to Bombay as her demeanour does not suit the heroine's character, Sarojini. Janet is so assertive about her opinion of Lana that Daniel finally sends her back. Being equally annoyed at Lana's temperament, Johnson promises Daniel to find a female actor from their locality, ultimately culminating in finding Rosamma or Rosy.

As Rosamma arrives at the shooting set with Johnson, Daniel and Janet, usher her into the Saradavilasam building. The actual shoot of *Vigathakumaran*, as shown in *Celluloid*, commences with Rosy's arrival. The movie maintains how the private constantly impinges on the public through Janet's presence, even while Daniel, as the director, gives instructions and explanations to his actors. Daniel clarifies to Rosy how he intends to finish her schedule within ten to twelve days by shooting one or two sequences daily. As Daniel explains her role as Sarojini, a Nair woman, and the plot of *Vigathakumaran*, the shot is captured at a wide angle, thus incorporating the other crew members involved in the making of the movie.

DANIEL: Rosamma is a Nair girl in this story whose name is Sarojini.

Sarojini has a brother. When the story begins, they are kids. Bhoothanathan, an estate worker in Colombo, accidentally meets a little boy of around five years old playing in the courtyard. The cruel Bhoothanathan kidnaps the boy and leaves for Colombo. Johnson plays the role of Bhoothanathan. In Colombo, he tortures the child by making him toil on the estate. Years pass by. Now, the sister, Sarojini, is a young woman and whose role starts there. A young native man is after Sarojini, intending to marry her. Pillai plays the role of that man. Meanwhile, a man named Jayachandran comes to stay in her neighbourhood. Jayachandran and Sarojini meet often, and they fall in love.

JANET: Daniel himself plays Jayachandran's role.

DANIEL: Yes. It is then that Jayachandran decides to go to London for work. He has to travel to England via Colombo. Bhoothanathan and his companions rob him in Colombo. When Jayachandran, whose journey is interrupted, stays back in Colombo, he meets Chandrakumar. One day, both Chandrakumar and Jayachandran escape from Bhoothanathan and return to their native place. Bhoothanathan comes in search of them. A fight ensues between them on the road. When the fight ends, Jayachandran and Chandrakumar reach Sarojini's neighbourhood. Sarojini meets Chandrakumar. Sarojini accidentally notices the black mole on Chandrakumar's back and identifies him as her long-lost brother.

Jayachandran marries Sarojini, and everybody lives happily. (Translated by the researcher, *Celluloid* 46:38 – 48:31)

Following Daniel's plot narration, *Vigathakumaran's* production, extensively portrayed in the movie, begins at Saradavilasam, thus highlighting Daniel's public life as a film director.

Janet's role in the production of *Vigathakumaran* gets increasingly conspicuous with the sequences involving Rosy. Kamal underscores Janet's contribution to the entire process of filmmaking, making her a significant part of Daniel's public life. Janet, who finds Rosy's attire inappropriate for Sarojini's character, gives her a set of costumes usually worn by upper-caste Nair women. Apart from the costumes, Janet gives Rosy her jewellery and attends to her make-up done by the make-up artist. *Celluloid*, while focusing on the public life of Daniel, dexterously weaves into the plot the shooting sequences of *Vigathakumaran*. Janet's presence in the entire filming process of *Vigathakumaran* draws particular attention, as, for instance, Daniel seeks her opinion while he decides to rename Rosamma as Rosy while the shooting proceeds. At Saradavilasam, Daniel shoots the first scene, which begins with Rosy approaching the courtyard of the house holding a lamp and ends with Daniel entering the frame as Jayachandran. As the director, Daniel has concerns regarding the acting skills of the two fisherwomen who have recently joined the set of *Vigathakumaran* to play the roles of Sarojini's mother and friend. Another scene of *Vigathakumaran* depicted in the movie features Rosy as Sarojini playing veena in the living room with her mother and friend beside her, while the elderly actress who plays her mother spits in the courtyard amidst the shooting.

Daniel, also in the frame, rebukes her for the uncivil gesture. By delineating scenes with such intricacies, the director attempts to highlight the challenges filmmakers faced in the formative years of cinema. As *Vigathakumaran*'s shoot progresses, it introduces characters like Viswamohan Thampi, Sarojini's suitor, played by the Kathakali artist Pillai, who is a fictional character introduced in the movie to illustrate upper-class follies and prejudices, creating brief episodes of humour. The review of *Celluloid* in *Indiaglitz* by an unsigned author comments:

The highlight of the movie is that even while remaining true to history, chronicling its facts, the director also gives some dramatic and creative touches to the narrative, making it palpable and enjoyable even for the ordinary folks.

Apart from the scenes shot at Saradavilasam, *Celluloid* exemplifies the outdoor shooting sequences of the movie, which include a romantic scene between Jayachandran and Sarojini and a fight scene involving Jayachandran and Bhoothanathan. The movie portrays Daniel as an adept director through sequences where he introduces his actors to the concept of cinema, explaining that they must act as though they are conversing with one another even though their dialogues will not be heard and also making references to the advent of talkies in America, which are still foreign in India. Daniel's life as a filmmaker wraps up with the first half of the movie, which centres on his public life, where he confidently believes that just as Phalke did in Bombay and Mudaliar did in Madras, he will make a mark in Travancore. Unfortunately, a reversal of fate leads him into nothing but desolation, which forms the crux of the second half of the movie.

An integral link between Daniel's public and private lives, Janet, supports him as a dutiful wife in his private life as he metamorphoses entirely into a private man. Jayanthi J, his close relative in her biography states:

The Father of Malayalam Cinema who had begun the battle with colourful dreams, searing energy and unwavering confidence now encountered dark days ahead. His relatives and some of the family members blamed him for the loss of his fortunes except Janet who accepted the defeat in silence. She always stood beside him and moved as he directed. (52)

As Chelangatt unleashes Daniel's private life after *Vigathakumaran's* release, it is evident that only Janet stays with Daniel through thick and thin. Janet takes care of Daniel as he recovers from eye surgery. When he becomes paralysed, she writes a letter to Chelangatt requesting the help of the Kerala government for their sustenance, which is presented in the movie with an overlap of her voice:

Dear Mr. Gopalakrishnan, we are happy to receive your book, *The History of Malayalam Cinema*. As my husband is blind, I read it for him. Now, his illness has become so severe that he cannot sit, stand, or lie down on his own. We have a depressing existence. If you could do something to aid us, that would really be appreciated. With tears in my eyes, I plead with God.

(Translated by the researcher, *Celluloid* 1:53:17 – 1:53:50)

Kamal, in one of the conversations with the researcher, remarks that the words in the letter were originally written by Janet, and the letter is currently in the possession of Chelangatt Gopalakrishnan's son. Daniel's life after *Vigathakumaran* has been one of

trauma and depression, making him an absolutely private person. His private life after the production of *Vigathakumaran* shows his decline into obscurity and financial disaster and concludes with his death as a lonely person. With his death, the private aspect of what happened to him is revealed in its entirety. In contrast to the already discussed biopics that fail to portray the death of the subjects, *Celluloid* portrays the subject's death. Here, the hero's death is not seen as a public event but a private event where he passes away as an unsung hero. The movie portrays Daniel's death in an elaborate scene that is shot with low-key lighting in his room in his house at Agastheeswaram. While Janet laments the absence of their children at such a crucial juncture, Daniel has visions of the Capitol theatre. Daniel, on his death bed with a fixed gaze on the opposite white wall, hallucinates the scenes of *Vigathakumaran*, indicating his undying passion for cinema. With the camera positioned at a high angle, the director captures the final moments of J.C. Daniel, who embraces death as a purely private person. Before the death scene fades out, the screen projects, "1975, April 29, J.C. Daniel passed away". However, the movie does not end with Daniel's death; instead, it seeks to map the transition in Malayalam cinema since the release of *Vigathakumaran*.

A secondary theme of *Celluloid* is the story of P.K. Rosy, the first heroine of Malayalam cinema, which parallels the rise and fall of Daniel himself. While paying homage to JC Daniel through *Celluloid*, Kamal does not overlook the life of Rosy, an unrecognised but truly prominent figure in the history of Indian cinema. PK Rosy ventured into the field of cinema at a time when social norms and conventions kept women from acting and cinema. By interweaving the story of Rosy into the narrative,

it becomes a mini-narrative or a subplot of the movie, which adheres to the new practice of introducing micro-biographies, which Belen Videll describes in the 'Introduction' to *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*:

Holmes writes that, in contemporary biographical practice, "the "monolithic" single Life is giving way to biographies of groups, friendships, of love affairs, of spots of time' (micro biographies), or of collective moments in art, literature or science" many concerning "those held together for an historic moment by a common endeavor, place or ideal". (10)

Rosamma, whose name Daniel later changes to Rosy, experiences double oppression owing to her caste as well as her gender and has little agency in the movie.

Chelangatt Gopalakrishnan perceives:

The hardship Rosy had to face to act as the heroine of *Vigathakumaran* is essentially implausible, like a film story. Even in 1928, women dared not act in a play or a film. Men dressed up as women performed the female roles then. It was a common misconception then that if a woman acted in a drama or film, she would have to compromise her morals. In such a period, J.C. Daniel, a native of Agastheeswaram, decided to produce a movie like *Vigathakumaran*. (11; Translated by the researcher)

Celluloid portrays Rosy during *Vigathakumaran*'s production and release, and later, in the second half of the movie, Chelangatt Gopalakrishnan pieces together what happened to her as part of his investigation.

Rosy, introduced in the movie as performing kakkariissi natakam (a folk art form in Kerala) at a temple festival, emerges as the heroine of *Vigathakumaran* when Daniel approves her as Sarojini, the heroine. The movie hints at her background through a conversation involving Rosy, her father Paulose, and master Govindan Asan, implying the family's conversion to Christianity owing to the brutalities of elite Hindus. Rosy is seen beaming as Johnson wins Paulose's approval to cast her in Daniel's film. On the other hand, Rosy's mother, Kunji, who is already apprehensive of Rosy performing kakkariissi, does not approve of her career in cinema for fear of conservative society. The movie employs a song sequence featuring Rosy and her friend Mala to exemplify her zeal and concerns about being the first heroine of Malayalam cinema. Manju Edachira reflects, "... in the beginning of the song, Rosy looks at herself in a broken mirror. It suggests a discourse on reflexivity, a distorted, broken reflection, perhaps (36).

Caste is a recurring theme of the movie, which at large is responsible for the ultimate doom of both the first filmmaker and the first heroine of Malayalam cinema. The question of caste hierarchy begins to take shape with the introduction of Rosy into the narrative, and it proves to be the root cause of the tragedy in the movie as a whole. The scenes from the beginning of *Vigathakumaran's* shooting through the disappearance of Rosy into oblivion establish how her caste has been held against her. As Rosy and Johnson reach the Saradavilasam building, she hesitates to enter because of the pervasive caste hierarchies that forbid lower castes from sharing space with upper-class people. Daniel introduces Rosy to the crew members, including the cameraman Lala, who has reservations regarding a dark-skinned girl

like Rosy playing the role of an upper-caste girl. Rosy's caste consciousness looms large right from her arrival on the shooting set to her departure into obscurity. In the scene where Daniel invites her inside the room to explain the shooting schedule and the movie's plot, she chooses to sit on the floor rather than in a chair. Caste and class remain significant concerns in the movie, which sheds light on the untouchability that dominated during those times. Uma Chakravarti remarks:

To understand the relationship between class and caste it is therefore important to recognize that two hierarchies are operative in Indian society: one according to ritual purity with the brahmana on top and the 'untouchables' at the bottom. The first corresponds to the formal representation of society, the second to the reality – together they make for the unique form of inequality that caste represents. (12)

Even after her conversion to Christianity, the tenets of the caste system prevalent in the Hindu religion continue to haunt her, making her inferior to the other crew members on the shooting set. Rosy is initially hesitant to wear the clothes of an upper-caste Nair woman and Janet's jewellery owing to her inferior caste. She hardly identifies herself as an actress or as the heroine when she opts to have lunch in a corner of the backyard while the rest of the crew have lunch at the dining table. It is her profoundly ingrained caste consciousness that prompts her to politely decline Janet's invitation to have lunch with them. Rosy even goes to the extent of washing the dishes with a maid. A. Sreedhara Menon believes the chief characteristic of the then-Kerala society was the deep chasm that separated the high castes from the low castes (306). Daniel, in a way, renames her Rosy in view of reconstructing her

identity, thus giving her the impression that, at least until the shooting is over, she is not a lower-caste girl. Meanwhile, the landowner Janardanan Thampi, who learns about Rosy acting in a movie, bawls out at Pauolse, reminding him that their conversion to Christianity does not grant them the liberty to lead a 'licentious' life, and threatens that if Rosy pursues acting, her life will be at stake. However, Rosy successfully completes her portions of the movie, after which she resumes her life as a casual labourer. As the shooting ends at Saradavilasam, she removes her make-up and attire, returns them to Janet, and gets her wages from Sunder Raj, who deals with the financial matters. Rosy even gets extra payment of five rupees for her commendable portrayal of Sarojini, while Daniel extends her an invitation to the premiere of the movie. Rosy leaves Saradavilasam, and the scene fades out as she passes by the Capitol Theatre. As the first half of the movie concludes with this shot, the linear pattern of the plot also draws to an end. Darshana Sreedhar and Vinu Abraham observe:

For Rosy, too, 'Vikatakumaran' changed the trajectory of her life to a point of no return. Disowned by her community and under the double ostracism of caste and gender, she fled her home town, Thiruvananthapuram, to take refuge in a remote part of Nagercoil in present-day Tamil Nadu where she remained under the alias 'Rajamma until she died. Inadvertently the film's title, 'Vikatakumaran' (The Lost Boy) thus became an evocative marker for a string of losses – Daniel's financial losses, the loss of Rosy's narrative in public memory and the subsequent 'loss' of the film's print. (341)

In one way, the movie climaxes with the release of *Vigathakumaran*, after which there is a decline in the fortunes of Daniel as well as Rosy, which is explicitly portrayed in the latter half.

Another central theme that *Celluloid* discusses is the exploration of the history of Malayalam cinema through the quest of a film journalist, which forms the major portion of the second half of the movie. Here, it is also quite challenging to discern the difference between the public and the private because, as a journalist, Chelangatt Gopalakrishnan is on a very public mission to learn the truth about the first filmmaker in Kerala. Nevertheless, in the process, what he uncovers is the private nature of what happened to Daniel as well as to Rosy. As discussed before, in the movie's first half, the private intrudes into the public, making it difficult to distinguish between them. In contrast, in the second half, the subject becomes an utterly private person, and Chelangatt's investigation seeks to make what is private public. Darshana and Vinu contemplate, "In the film, Chelangatt Gopalakrishnan becomes the 'creative historian', invested with the task of conjuring apparitions from the past to enter the present "(342). The later drawing out of the actual saga of Daniel is shown from multiple perspectives, which heightens the intricacy of his life. Before Chelangatt meets Daniel in person, there are a series of encounters with others, like the shopkeeper, a few villagers, Daniel's neighbour, and Janet. In a certain sense, *Celluloid* is structured around the constant circling of secrets or mysteries about the lives of Daniel, Rosy, and the print of *Vigathakumaran*. There is a circular motion around which the audience gets the stories about Daniel, just like a secret being cautiously revealed.

Chelangatt first gets an introduction to Daniel as a yesteryear filmmaker from the shopkeeper at a petty shop in a remote village in Trivandrum. As the shopkeeper faintly remembers his name as "Daniel," Chelangatt recognises him as J.C. Daniel, the first filmmaker of Kerala. Though he hurried to meet him, Daniel had already left in a rickshaw. It is this brief episode that instigates Chelangatt's mission to know more about Daniel, which takes him to Daniel's native place, Agastheeswaram. At Agastheeswaram, the people Chelangatt encounters do not identify Daniel as a filmmaker, while one of them identifies him as a dental surgeon. With the aid of a few villagers, he reaches Daniel's house, which is in an isolated and dilapidated state with its door locked from outside, where he meets Chellakkannu, Daniel's neighbour. It is through Chellakkannu's narrative about Daniel that his private life, which is in a sorry state, is first exposed to the audience. Pramod Nayar observes, "The star as a public figure lets us into the private sphere of their home and family. Central to the celebrity, as critics have argued, is the splicing of the public and the private" (69). Chellakkannu divulges to Chelangatt that the house originally belonged to Daniel's brother, who now resides in Madras, and that Daniel has two sons and three daughters, of whom one has settled abroad. The others are in Salem, Madurai, and Trivandrum. Nevertheless, none of his children ever visit them; all they have to thrive on is the occasional money order from their youngest son, who resides in Salem. While the movie sketches the thoroughly distraught condition of Daniel towards the end of his life, Jayanthi J, in a conversation with the researcher, disputes this aspect delineated in the movie:

To a certain extent *Celluloid* was a good film, as it gave the public, especially Malayalis worldwide, a better view of the great legend Dr J.C. Daniel, the Father of Malayalam Cinema, on a large screen. At the same time, it is unfortunate that the movie overlooks Daniel's childhood days and imparts wrong information regarding his final days. Though he died more or less penniless, his ancestral house, where he breathed his last, was a huge mansion, unlike the ruined house shown in the movie. It is, to a great extent, an unpardonable mistake on the part of the director.

In view of heightening the tragic effect, it is evident that the director has portrayed Daniel as a wholly lost man as he explores Daniel's private life, especially his final days. In agreement with Bingham, "At the heart of the biopic, there is an urge to dramatise actuality and find in it the filmmaker's version of truth" (10). Finally, when Chelangatt reaches Daniel's house, the latter has already become an insular person who is resting after eye surgery. Daniel refuses to talk to Chelangatt about his public life as a filmmaker. The first conversation between Chelangatt and Daniel reveals how, from a person who wanted to be a public figure more like a Malayalam equivalent of Phalke, he has changed to an utterly private person confined to a dark room. Chelangatt, who stands outside Daniel's house, tries to initiate a conversation with Daniel:

CHELANGATT: Daniel sir? I am Chelangatt

Gopalakrishnan. I come from Cherthala.

DANIEL: What do you want?

CHELANGATT: I would like to meet you.

DANIEL: I am resting after an ophthalmic surgery. I do not feel well. My wife has gone to Nagercoil to get my medicines. After the surgery I have poor vision. That is why she has locked the door. What is the matter? ... You did not tell me who you are.

CHELANGATT: I am a journalist who writes about film professionals.

DANIEL: But I'm not a film professional.

CHELANGATT: You've been once, and I am here to talk about it.

DANIEL: I do not remember anything. It happened long before. Moreover, what good does it do to think back on all those things? (Translated by the researcher, *Celluloid* 1:15:18 – 1:16:55)

From Chelangatt's point of view, the camera pans into the room, where a hazy figure of an old man lying on a bed is shown. Chelangatt, perceiving Daniel's hostile attitude, waits for Janet, from whom he learns what actually followed *Vigathakumaran's* production.

In the second half of the movie, which delves into Daniel's private life, his public life comes up again while Janet reminisces about the fate of *Vigathakumaran*, thus making the narrative again partly private and partly public. Ironically, it is Janet who brings Daniel's public life to Chelangatt; a paradox here is that the private reveals the public. By employing the flashback technique, the movie renders Janet's recollections of *Vigathakumaran's* release and the ensuing issues. She recalls how, as

the director of the movie, Daniel made arrangements on the previous day of the movie's release at the Capitol theatre and how Ponnappan, the announcer, extends Daniel's special invitation to the premiere of the movie to Rosy when he finds her working in a paddy field. The day of *Vigathakumaran's* release is explicitly delineated in the movie, where Advocate Malloor and a few upper-caste men arrive at the Capitol to inaugurate the premiere while they find Rosy accompanied by her father and her friend. As they decide to quit the event owing to the presence of Dalits like Rosy and her father, Daniel requests that Rosy wait until the inaugural show is over. Rosy reluctantly complies with Daniel's plea and waits outside the theatre while the film's projection begins inside the Capitol. As the movie proceeds, there is an unanticipated ruckus owing to intolerance of the aristocracy that results from a lower-caste girl like Rosy assuming the role of an upper-caste Nair woman in the film; they storm out of the theatre in a fitful rage, yelling at Daniel. Thus, by virtue of the social stratification and dreadful caste system, the first-ever movie produced in Kerala suffers an early death. In an uproar, the aristocracy finds Rosy outside the theatre, and Thampi, who is in the throng, commands others to grab hold of her as she flees in fear. The aristocrats are seen attacking Rosy and her family and even setting fire to her hut; a few of them dragged her as she fled into the darkness of the night. Thus, Chelangatt gets the first glimpse of *Vigathakumaran* and Rosy's fate from Janet, who was a part of all the incidents related to *Vigathakumaran*. Chelangatt, in a later scene, writes about Rosy, which is presented in the movie with an overlap of his voice:

CHELANGATT: They branded the first heroine of Malayalam cinema a whore and banned her from entering the theatre. Rosy fled for her life out of terror, never having the opportunity to see her movie or even her face on the screen. Rosy thus became immortalised in the history of Malayalam cinema as the eternal tragic heroine. (Translated by the researcher, *Celluloid* 1:28:20 – 1:28:42)

According to Chelangatt's narration, what happened to Rosy after the assault is mysterious, but he does not cease his endeavour to resolve the enigma regarding her.

As a journalist, Chelangatt strives to make everything public that the private refuses to reveal on its own in the movie. In the constant circling of the story, when he finally meets Daniel, Rosy herself eludes his grasp, and there are only rumours about what happened to her. In his second visit to Agastheeswaram, Chelangatt learns about Rosy's plight after *Vigathakumaran's* release, consequently splicing together the life of the first heroine of Malayalam cinema, which is still under speculation.

CHELANGATT: Do you know where your movie's heroine is right now?

DANIEL: Those monsters of caste exiled that poor soul. She was so unfortunate that she could not see herself on screen. Later, I learnt that while fleeing the hideous nobles, she landed in front of a truck heading to Nagercoil and that the truck's driver, Keshava Pillai, saved her. Johnson once told me that she had married Keshava Pillai, adopted the name Rajammal, and thereafter lived in Nagercoil. This incident happened long ago. I have no

idea if she is still alive. (Translated by the researcher, *Celluloid* 1:32:23 – 1:33:11)

The director seeks to resolve the enigma about Rosy this way, though there is no factual evidence of what Daniel knows about her.

The investigation by Chelangatt in the second half of the film shows Daniel's private life, which is a succession of mishaps. Chelangatt's quest to solve the mystery of the inconspicuous life of Daniel comes full circle with his conversation with Daniel on his second visit to Agastheeswaram. The distraught Daniel recounts to Chelangatt the disastrous fate of *Vigathakumaran*, which only served as a financial loss, forcing him to sell the remaining property and his house in Trivandrum and relocate to Agastheeswaram. In another flashback, through a song sequence, Kamal portrays Daniel rebuilding his life as a successful dental surgeon in Madurai and Pudukottai. However, things soon go awry with the popular Tamil actor Chinnappa's arrival in his dental clinic as a patient, who again lures him to the world of cinema. Daniel recalls how, disregarding Janet's words, he packed all he had acquired from his years as a dentist and headed to Madras to try his luck in cinema for a second time. As fate would have it, Chinnappa and his cronies betrayed Daniel in Madras, leading to his ultimate doom, which kept him away from his family for two years. Though he tried resuming his life as a dentist, he could not succeed, and amid this chaos, he lost track of his children, who now live separate lives in different places, and is now left alone with Janet, who puts up with his shifting emotions of love, hatred, and grief. As a melancholy man, Daniel descends into gloom and obscurity, leading an anonymous private life far from being identified as the first

filmmaker in Kerala. In a telephone conversation with the researcher, Harris Daniel defined his father as a "rolling stone" who lost himself without preserving constancy in life. When Chelangatt inquires about the movie's print to publicise the first film and its creator, Daniel plainly states that the print has been destroyed. While the mystery of Daniel's life slowly comes to light, the movie next seeks to uncover the secret regarding *Vigathakumaran's* print.

However, Chelangatt resolves to work towards gaining Daniel his long-due recognition, and he meets the cultural secretary to inform him about the first filmmaker in Kerala. Again, the rigid caste structure plays a decisive role in not recognising Daniel, a Nadar by birth, as the Father of Malayalam Cinema. The caste hierarchy that destroys Rosy is paralleled by the fact that things have not changed in Kerala, which becomes evident in the scene where Chelangatt first meets P. Subramaniam to learn about Daniel and his movie, who reminisces about the disrupted show of *Vigathakumaran* at the Capitol and Daniel ducking in terror in the theatre's projection room. However, as Chelangatt claims that *Vigathakumaran* is the first movie and that Daniel is living an anonymous life, Subramaniam dismisses him by affirming that T.R. Sundaram's *Balan* is the first Malayalam movie, obviously pointing out Subramaniam's indifferent attitude towards Chelangatt's proposition. The situation is not much different when Chelangatt meets M. Ramakrishna Aiyer, the cultural secretary, to claim Daniel's long-overdue recognition as the first filmmaker in Kerala. The scenes involving the interaction between Chelangatt and Ramakrishnan reveal how caste works in the destruction of Daniel, as it did in the case of Rosy. Ramakrishnan, an upper-caste Brahmin, refuses to be convinced that

Vigathakumaran is the first movie and asserts that, according to the official records, T.R. Sundaram's *Balan* is the first Malayalam movie. Ramakrishnan constantly asks Chelangatt about the print of *Vigathakumaran*, which itself has disappeared and remains a mystery until Harris Daniel, JC Daniel's youngest son, reveals it in the climax scene. He even refuses to procure the Kerala government's financial assistance for Daniel, as he is currently a resident of Tamil Nadu. As Chelangatt, in this episode, accuses Ramakrishnan of favouring *Balan*, a movie made by an upper-caste Brahmin, it reveals how, decades after Rosy's banishment, caste hierarchies still ruled society. Caste remains an essential aspect of how Daniel's name suffered in the same way that Rosy suffered, as evident from the above-mentioned episodes.

Celluloid's script is largely aligned with mystery and history. As Chelangatt seeks to resolve the mysteries around Daniel, Rosy, and the print of *Vigathakumaran*, he tries to trace the history of Malayalam cinema. Darshana and Vinu observe:

Celluloid does not limit its concerns to J.C. Daniel and Rosy, but uses their story as a peg to trace the trajectory of Malayalam cinema to the early 2000s. Chelangatt Gopalakrishnan's quest for the lost history of *Vikatakumaran* becomes the backdrop for the narrative to explore the journey Malayalam cinema underwent from the 1930s onwards (342).

While the movie's latter half ventures to make the private life of the subject public, it simultaneously attempts to retrieve the history of Malayalam cinema. So Chelangatt's quest into J.C. Daniel's life is, in a way, a quest for the history of Malayalam cinema, with one of its outcomes being the discovery of the print of *Marthanda Varma* (1933), the second silent movie produced in Kerala. Manju

Edachira points out, "It stores both the past and present for the future, thereby constructing an archive of cinema through cinema" (36). As a part of his investigation, Chelangatt meets Sunder Raj, the producer of *Marthanda Varma*. Through the old and desolate Sunder Raj and his sons Chelangatt learns about the movie's print in the room of a lodge, formerly the Kamalalya Book Depot. Chelangatt successfully transferred it to the Pune Film Archives for custody and preservation.

As the movie draws to an end, it traces the progression of Malayalam cinema from the obscurity and non-release of the first movie to the blockbuster release of the superstar movie, showing the trajectory of Malayalam movies from *Vigathakumaran* to the movies of the twenty-first century. As Harris Daniel goes to attend the inauguration of R. Gopalakrishnan's documentary on his father, he witnesses the release of the blockbuster *Narasimham* (2000) with whoops and hollers in the background, indicating the growth of Malayalam cinema. Manju Edachira states, "Ironically, the wonderful present is portrayed with the success of *Narasimham*, a movie known for its celebration of upper-caste masculinity" (37). The movie's final scene opens in an auditorium filled with dignitaries of Malayalam cinema. Darshana and Vinu observe:

While Malayalam cinema is projected to be reckoning with such an influx in productive ways, the production of *Celluloid* is shown as an instance which carries the spirit of such an endeavour. Another instance of such a movie is presented towards the end of the film when we see simulated shots of the documentary filmmaker R. Gopalakrishnan (in real life, the maker of an award-winning film on the life of J.C. Daniel) being facilitated in the

presence of past and present directors and producers. Both R.

Gopalakrishnan and the ensemble audience are played by their real-life personas. In our analysis, this ensemble is created in order to illustrate how far Malayalam cinema has moved from Daniel's disrupted exhibition at the Capitol theatre (342).

The climax scene of the movie is a complete retrieval of what has gone into obscurity and reveals what has happened to the print of *Vigathakumaran*. As Chelangatt addresses the audience at the function, he states the repudiation J.C. Daniel faced while he was alive, reminding them about the anonymous lives led by the Father of Malayalam Cinema and the first heroine, and invites Harris Daniel to address the audience:

HARRIS DANIEL: I am at a loss for words when you give such rousing applause in honour of my father. I am the youngest son of J.C. Daniel, and I was not born while *Vigathakumaran* was made. I can only recollect that image of my father retreating to a corner of the house after giving up cinema and dental practice. I do not know why, but I have always chosen to stay away from my father and have never tried to understand him. If at least a single strip of the movie remained, as Chelangatt sir said, the world would have acknowledged him when he was alive, and even I would have known his worth. But just as I did not try to understand my father, I, as a six-year-old boy, could not comprehend the value of the film. I bear the blame for destroying the film's print, not my father or anyone else. (Translated by the researcher, *Celluloid* 2:01:50 – 2:03:27)

Harris Daniel's final speech is the logical conclusion of Chelangatt's investigation, where Daniel's son comes to reclaim his father's name, something that he himself had not been aware of. According to Edachira, "the success of Malayalam cinema would have made him contemplate over his father's attempt and also made him guilty for destroying the film's print forever" (37).

Celluloid, more or less in the film-within-film pattern, attempts to retrace the lost history of Malayalam cinema, which is essentially the history of *Vigathakumaran* and its maker, J.C. Daniel. As a visual homage to the Father of Malayalam Cinema, the movie traces Daniel's life, not just in terms of his achievements but much more than that, where, facing the odds of his life, he resigns to his fate with calm acceptance just as any other man would and passes away as an unheralded hero of Malayalam cinema. Unlike the hagiographic portrayals in the early biopics, the new audience prefers a warts-and-all depiction of the subject, as Rick Altman believes, "the film industry responding to audience desires initiates clear-cut genres that endure because of their ability to satisfy basic human needs" (29). By the time *Celluloid*, as a biopic, enters the trajectory of the evolution from the public to the private, the latter gains increased attention, which involves both the virtues and vulnerabilities of the subject. Apart from being a biopic solely devoted to the Father of Malayalam Cinema, *Celluloid* maps the evolution of Malayalam cinema. As *India Glitz* observes, "On a sprawling canvas, Kamal diligently recreates an age and fills it with characters who go on to become iconic figures in the history of Malayalam cinema."

CHAPTER V

ENNU NINTE MOIDEEN: CONFINED DESIRE AND UNFATHOMED DESTINY

Cinema, the largest entertainment sector in India, has undergone a transformation from black-and-white silent films to vibrant talkies treating myriad themes. With its several forms, Indian cinema ranges from art house or parallel cinema to commercial cinema, the latter forming a substantial proportion of regional cinema. The early biopics, mainly categorised as mythological and historical, conformed to the hagiographic treatment of the subject, in which he or she stood for virtue and modesty without any form of critical treatment or controversy. There has been a departure from this trend with the economic liberalisation of 1991, which sparked sudden shifts in the social scenario, leading to the rise of the new middle class, which constituted the key audience of cinema for whom films were mainly produced, and they became the largest consumers of cinema in India. Films based on actual events that focused on the lives of recent personalities rather than historical personae replaced mythological and historical biopics.

Real-life stories portrayed in the films then used fictitious names for the characters, though they could be readily identified without their real names. *Aandhi*, a 1975 Bollywood movie, was allegedly based on the marital relationship of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her husband Feroze Gandhi, and *Lal Salam* (1990), a Malayalam film, tells the true-life stories of Communist leaders like T.K. Varghese Vaidyan and K.R. Gowri Amma while keeping their real names hidden. In consonance with the movies based on political leaders, movies based on the lives of

film actors became a source of interest among the audience, like *Dirty Picture* (2011), inspired by the life of Silk Smitha as well as her contemporaries who played erotic roles in films; *Lekhayude Maranam Oru Flashback* (1983), and *Thirakkatha* (2008), both released in Malayalam, which ostensibly inspect the lives of yesteryear actresses Sobha and Srividya, respectively. If the characters had been given their real names in all the aforementioned movies based on real-life stories, they would have become biopics. The grounds for not doing so, according to Rachel Dwyer, are "respect for the family of a biopic's hero [is often cited] along with the threat of legal action and censorship, as either of these could delay a film indefinitely and be extremely costly" (228).

The expanding societal changes in India, where the audience awaited more original storylines and realistic portrayals in cinema, signalled a change in how the themes of films were treated. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the intellectual ambience of the country had experienced a change, with a broader acceptance of the representation of private lives on screen. In the early biopics, the makers hardly addressed the private lives of the protagonists, believing it to be anathema in the Indian scenario. Holding fast to freedom of expression, the neoteric filmmakers pushed for a more honest and dauntless rendering of real-life individuals in biopics, which in turn won public acceptance without much hassle. The new pattern that evolved out of the shift in the intellectual milieu promoted the deliberation of the private lives of public figures, which reaped broader recognition in literature and cinema in the last two decades. *Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire* (2007), a historical account by Alex von Tunzelmann, for

instance, explores the love affair between Jawaharlal Nehru and Edwina Mountbatten, the wife of the last viceroy of India. While discussing the recent biopics in India, *Thalaivii* (2021), based on the life of the actress turned politician J. Jayalalithaa, could be cited as an instance since it highlights her contentious love affair with M.G. Ramachandran, an actor and politician who was already a married man. In the early real-life movies, the love stories of public figures were also portrayed, though in a fictionalised manner, but fictionalised portrayals of historical characters cannot be designated as biopics.

Recently, a distinctive trend has emerged in Indian biopics that favours incorporating more of the subject's personal life into their plots. R.S. Vimal's *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (2015), analysed in this chapter, establishes it as a paradigm of the apparent change previously discussed. While tracing the evolution of the genre, the incremental and steady incorporation of the private lives of public figures is quite evident. In contrast to the movies discussed in the previous chapters, the narrative of *Ennu Ninte Moideen* predominantly explores the subject's private love story rather than his public life, consequently turning his public life into a private one. B.P. Moideen, in real life, was a local celebrity who lived in the 1960s in Mukkam, an erstwhile hillside village thirty kilometres east of Kozhikode. He was a politician, a social activist, and an arts and sports enthusiast. Moideen was born into an affluent and influential family in Mukkam, where he lived like a prince until his death. A relative of Moideen, Hameed Chennamangalloor, writes about his family in *Ivan Njangalude Priya Moideen*:

Unni Moyin and Fathima were blessed with two boys. The elder one was named after his maternal grandfather, Kutti Hassan. The younger one was named after his paternal grandfather, Moideen. Kutti Hassan lost his life as a child. Thus, Moideen, born on November 25, 1939, became the one and only son of the Unnimoyin-Fathima couple. Moideen, as the only child, received boundless love and care from his parents. (13-14; Translated by the researcher)

Even though Moideen belonged to a wealthy family, he countered the inequalities prevalent in society and propounded socialist ideals. *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, on the other hand, deliberately discounts his public life since it does not support or enhance the private love affair, which forms the movie's primary focus.

In contrast to the protagonists of the previously discussed biopics, B.P. Moideen is not a national figure but only a person of regional fame in Mukkam. Like any other social leader, he was a significant presence in Mukkam, yet his public endeavours are set only as a background to his love story in the movie. Moideen's fame reached all quarters only after the movie's release, before which his popularity rested only in his hamlet. Essentially a tale of romance and bereavement, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* became an archetypal romantic trope with its enormous success. The title, "Ennu Ninte Moideen," translated as "Yours truly, Moideen," indicates the theme of love that dominates the narrative, which corroborates Silverblatt's view that "titles can also be revealing" (35). The initial success of the movie was not as a biopic but as a classic love story between two individuals from different communities. *Ennu*

Ninte Moideen's success, consequently, resulted in a spate of biographies about Moideen, which demonstrated how important he was in his area as a social figure.

This chapter, as the title indicates, examines how the public life of the eponymous hero becomes a casualty in the increasing desire to portray the private lives of the central characters in biopics. Spaces of desire become increasingly and narrowly defined as private spaces, literally and figuratively. The public life of the historical figure has only marginal representation in the biopic in question, arguably the result of the demands of romance between Moideen and Kanchanmala, which is given a narrative closure in the unfathomable depths of Iruvazhinji river in Mukkam. Confining desires find their tragic climax in the suffocative depths of the destiny of which the river becomes an apt symbol.

A former journalist, RS Vimal marked his entry into Malayalam cinema with his directorial debut, *Ennu Ninte Moideen*. As a journalist, he produced numerous short films and documentaries, including those on Karinthandan, the tribal chieftain of Wayanad, and Rukhiya, the only female butcher in Kerala. Vimal's award-winning documentary *Jalam Kondu Murivettaval*, released in 2006, constitutes the framework of *Ennu Ninte Moideen*. Shibu T Joseph et al. write:

Vimal's camera followed the Moideen-Kanchanamala romance, which culminated in the documentary titled *Jalam Kondu Murivettaval*. However, Vimal's conviction that the unique love story should not be confined to a documentary eventually led to the release of *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, a movie passionately received by the audience in Kerala. (90; Translated by the researcher)

Recently, Vimal produced the movie *Sashiyum Sakunthalayum* (2023), and his other movies, like *Mahavir Karna* and *John Kennedy*, both in Tamil, are yet to be released. In an interview with Kappa TV, Vimal explains why he chose the subject's love story as the crux of *Ennu Ninte Moideen*:

We are familiar with various kinds of myths, fables, and legends but the tale of Moideen and Kanchanamala is so unique that it astounds the world. This story is the most exciting one I have ever heard, and I believe it has no parallels in real life or literature. The saga of a Muslim youth and a Hindu girl whose love fails because the former dies and the latter waits reads like a typical love story. However, the intensity of their love and the series of events pertaining to their lives compelled me to make a movie about it.

(Translated by the researcher)

Ennu Ninte Moideen, based on the life of B.P. Moideen, a social leader in Mukkam, and his affair with Kanchanamala, the daughter of a Hindu landlord, is claimed to be one of the best love stories made in Malayalam cinema. According to Anu James in her article on the top Malayalam movies in 2015 in the *International Business Times*, "Prithviraj's *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, which narrates the real-life love story of B.P. Moideen and Kanchanamala, ruled the box office with more than 50 crore collections." (sic). Along with Prithviraj as B.P. Moideen and Parvathy Thiruvoth as Kanchanamala, other actors who appear in the movie are Saikumar, Lena, Tovino Thomas, Sudheer Karamana, Bala, Sudheesh, and Sivaji Guruvayoor. While Jomon T. John conjures up Moideen's life on camera, Mahesh Narayanan takes on the role of editor to present the classic tale of romance under the banner of

Newton Movies. *Ennu Ninte Moideen* won multiple awards, including the Kerala State Film Awards in the categories of Most Popular Film, Best Actress Award for Parvathy and Best Cinematography; Asianet Film Awards for Best Film, Best Actor Award for Prithviraj and Best Actress Award for Parvathy.

Set in Mukkam, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* begins *in medias res* with a car heading to the Mukkam police station, where Unni Moyin Sahib (played by Sai Kumar) surrenders himself with a knife after stabbing his son B.P. Moideen (played by Prithviraj). Maniyamma, the maid (played by Surabhi Lakshmi) at Kanchanamala's (played by Parvathi Thiruvoth) house, gives Moideen's mother, Pathumma (played by Lena), a letter that Kanchana has written to Moideen, which she gives to Moideen, who is admitted to the hospital with severe injuries.

The movie introduces Moideen scoring a goal in a football match that leads to his team's victory, which includes Kanchanamala's brother Sethu (played by Bala) and her cousin Perumparambil Appu (played by Tovino Thomas). Kanchana is introduced in her hostel as abstaining from the evening prayer at the convent owing to the inequitable treatment meted out to the inmates based on their socioeconomic status. Meanwhile, there is a festival at Kottattil Temple, home to their family deity, where Unni Moyin, a close friend of Kanchana's father, Kottattil Madhavan (played by Sasi Kumar), also participates.

While his father attends the Kottattil festival, Moideen, a socialist, convenes a meeting of the Praja Socialist Party against the policies of Indira Gandhi, in which he plans a black-flag protest against her the following day. Unni Moyin, who enters the house, interrupts his speech, and an altercation ensues between the two.

Kanchana returns to her college after the vacation and is summoned to the warden's room, where she receives a parcel without the sender's name. When the warden inquires about this, she claims to know nothing about the whole matter. And that night, when Kanchana opens the parcel, she finds a book of poetry in which certain words are highlighted. Meanwhile, Kanchana's cousin Appu is also in love with Kanchana but does not get a chance to confess his love to her.

At Ballyamprapottattil House, Unni Moyin arranges a wedding proposal for Moideen with Sufi Haji's daughter without Moideen's consent. As Moideen returns home, he does not accept the wedding proposal and reveals his love affair with Kanchanamala to his family. Unni Moyin hits Moideen and banishes him from the house. Moideen, who moves into his uncle's house, continues to pursue his social activities and his love for Kanchana.

At his uncle's house, Moideen writes a letter to Kanchana revealing the incidents that happened, but unfortunately, Kanchana's uncle confiscates the letter from the errand boy. Her brothers bring her back from the college to Kottattil House, where she is locked up in a room, thus suspending her studies. While under house arrest, Kanchana's uncle arranges a wedding alliance for her. Moideen's letter again gets confiscated, this time by Sethu, who questions Maniyamma, who has another letter with her. Since their letters are frequently intercepted, they develop alternative modes of communication to sustain their love.

In the meantime, Moideen contests the Mukkam Panchayat election as the candidate of the Praja Socialist Party. He publishes 'Sports Herald', the first sports magazine in Kerala, and establishes the KKM drama club. As Moideen returns after

the play staged by the KKM drama club, there is an encounter between Sethu and Moideen, where the former attempts to shoot the latter. Moideen's strategies successfully seal the fate of another marriage proposal for Kanchana; this time, the groom's party sees a photograph of the couple, which infuriates her uncle, who severely assaults her. Nevertheless, Kanchana is bent on marrying Moideen and even confides in her mother that she is prepared to hold off moving in with Moideen until her siblings are settled in their lives.

After a decade of separation, Moideen and Kanchana meet near the Iruvazhinji River, where they plan to elope that night. However, as fate will have it, on his way back, Unni Moyin stabs him, inflicting severe wounds. He is then taken to the hospital. Indignant at Unni Moyin's heinous deed, Pathumma stomps off to her house, showering curses on him. Moideen saves his father during the trial at court, claiming that he was injured when he slipped on a sharp tree stump on that wet day. Unni Moyin, who now regrets his action, meets Pathumma to ask her to return to his house along with Moideen, but he passes away before the next dawn.

Moideen seizes an opportunity to meet Kanchana at a theatre, where she accompanies her family to a movie. In their brief conversation, he divulges his plan to take her away that night, but their plan falls through with the news of her brother Ramachandran's death. After a few days, they meet at Mukkam Bhasi's (played by Sudheer Karamana) house, where they plan to relocate to America. Moideen boards a crowded canoe on his return after collecting their passports, which capsizes in the river due to unsettled weather. Moideen sacrifices his life while trying to rescue his fellow passengers. Unaware of this, Kanchana prepares to join Moideen and live his

wife. Later, on learning about Moideen's death, Kanchana tries to commit suicide, leading her to the hospital, where Pathumma encounters her and takes her home as her daughter-in-law.

While discussing *Ennu Ninte Moideen* as an adaptation of B.P. Moideen's life, it is to be noted that the movie has overlooked several traits of his multifaceted personality. Moideen's life was so much more public than this movie suggests that everything has been sacrificed to manifest this as a great love story. The director's decision to deliberately exclude Moideen's public aspects to portray this as a private love story is a crucial turning point that marks a change in the trajectory of biopics from the public to the private. Consistent with the earlier biopics, the movie does not address the childhood of the protagonist, B.P. Moideen, who, as a child, led a fortuitous life, being born into an affluent family and getting whatever he desired. A politician and an active member of the Praja Socialist Party, Moideen, even as a teenager, supported the liberation struggle against the communist ideologies propounded under the leadership of EMS Namboothiripad. According to Hameed Chennamangaloor, Moideen was a dedicated worker of the Independent Student's Organisation, which was the student wing of the Praja Socialist Party (19). Moideen, as an active member of the People's Socialist Party, was under the profound influence of its leaders like Arangil Sreedharan and P.I. Ittoop, who hardly got a reference in the movie. Though the movie moderately discusses Moideen's social commitment, it has overlooked many instances where he fought for the indigent. Giving thrust to the Moideen-Kanchanamala love story, the movie only partially hints at his multifarious social activities and his inclination to fight against injustice

in society. Muhamed Sadik refers explicitly to the free eye-testing camp headed by the eminent ophthalmologist Dr. Modi, which Moideen organised. Through several such free medical camps, Moideen ensured medical aid to the poverty-stricken people of Mukkam. Muhammed Sadik writes:

In a relentless fight against the injustices and vices that prevailed in society, Moideen often confronted someone or another. The spirit of adventure was his constant companion; at times, he was a bit naughty too. He never hesitated to intervene in any issue. But Moideen had a fear of being murdered by someone. In their last meeting, he hinted about it to Kanchana. (33; Translated by the researcher)

As a social activist, Moideen fought for orphans in orphanages, which in reality were slave houses. Hameed Chennamangaloor recounts how Moideen spoke up for their rights, “Moideen never wavered to openly proclaim that the orphanage administrators should have the awareness that the orphaned children had the same rights as those of the children living with their parents” (49). Hameed also recollects how Moideen sheltered Velayudhan and his mother, the children of the streets, in his house near Mukkam town (50). Though Moideen was renowned in Mukkam for his social and political activities, he faced protests from a sect of people. There was a protest rally against Moideen for misbehaving against the Head Master of Mukkam High School, which he enthusiastically shot on his camera.

Just as Moideen was engrossed in social activities, he was passionate about literature and arts. A voracious reader and writer, Moideen had written several newspaper articles, stories, and even a book on C.H. Mohammed Koya. However, he

excelled in sports articles, regarding which Shibu T. Joseph et al. note, “Moideen, a disciple of the famous sports journalist Vimcy, had written myriad sports articles. He would watch live matches in Bangalore and Madras and wrote sports reports in the *Mathrubhumi*” (39). Moideen’s oratory skills were so exceptional that he became a popular leader among the students of Kozhikode, but the movie fails to encompass them on a larger scale. Moideen had organised literary camps at Mukkam, a humble village then. Hameed Chennamangalloor recollects:

The first literary camp at Mukkam was organised under the leadership of Moideen. The camp was conducted in collaboration with the Kerala Sahitya Samithi. Several writers, including S.K. Potekatt, N.V. Krishna Warriar, Cherukad, Kunjunni, Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri, and K.V. Ramakrishnan, attended the camp. (33; Translated by the researcher)

Moideen's passion for cinema is another aspect left unmarked in *Ennu Ninte Moideen*. Moideen, who could not become an actor owing to Kanchana's displeasure, became a film producer. Chennamangalloor reflects:

Moideen's zeal for literature, drama, and cinema brought him close to the film industry. He had a close affinity with film personnel inside and outside Kerala. On the strength of that, he also tried his hand at film production. *Nizhale Nee Sakshi* and *Abhinayam* are the films produced by Moideen. Seema, a prominent star, was introduced through *Nizhale Nee Sakshi*. Unfortunately, the film could not be released. (33-34; Translated by the researcher)

Moideen used to arrange shooting sets for films and even shot films like *Aadyakiranangal* in his own house. He used to elucidate these details in his letters to Kanchana. Moideen wished to make a film about his own life with actor Jayan in the lead role, but his wish remained unfulfilled until R.S. Vimal produced *Ennu Ninte Moideen*.

Moideen, in his biographies, is presented as a sociable and gregarious person who made friends with everyone he encountered. However, the movie features only Mukkam Bhasi as Moideen's bosom friend. Apart from his many friends, including Kunjiraman and P. Siyyali in Mukkam, he maintained close camaraderie with celebrities in the fields of literature, politics, and cinema. According to Shibu T. Joseph et al., "Moideen's relationships in the media-cinema-political circle are quite famous. He has a special talent for getting acquainted with celebrities and winning their friendship. He knows how to use those relationships when in need" (39; Translated by the researcher). He had met V.V. Giri, the then President of India, who promised Moideen to visit Mukkam. He had a close liaison with C.H. Mohammed Koya, the former Chief Minister of Kerala. Moideen, an ardent admirer of Subhash Chandra Bose, deeply desired to enlist in the Indian Army. Sadik reminisces about Moideen's reference to Bose in one of his letters to Kanchana: "Netaji. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose is my favourite person. I love Netaji more than you, more than anything else in this world" (87; Translated by the researcher). Later, when Subhash Chandra Bose's daughter Anita Bose visited Kerala, Moideen made friends with her and accompanied her during her visits to various places in Kerala. Sadik recalls:

When Netaji's daughter came to Kerala, Moideen accompanied her. When he established a children's club for the children of Mukkam as a souvenir of his love for Netaji, he named it after Netaji's daughter Anita. Anita Children's Club had branches in different places. Later, they started the Anita Tailoring class. Moideen also worked for women's empowerment and Mochana Women's Club became its platform. (87; Translated by the researcher)

The Anita Children's Club is scarcely shown in the movie, excluding the details relevant to the activities and other particulars of the club. Despite the extensive discussions of Moideen's public life in numerous sources, including articles and biographies, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* fails to reflect them in the movie. Mukkam Bhasi, who himself forms a character in the movie, remarks:

Even with its flaws, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* is a timeless work of art that gives viewers a heart-wrenching experience of the Moideen-Kanchanamala love! I feel his social activities could have been given more prominence in the movie. The only target of the director was to propose the enduring love story of Moideen and Kanchanamala to the audience. The rush of the audience to theatres is valid proof that the director has emerged to be successful in his venture. Moreover, the movie's success has been the reason for thousands of admirers still visiting the real-life heroine. (64; Translated by the researcher)

Bhasi's remark provides enough justification for the recently emerged fascination with the private lives of notable personalities. In this movie, B.P. Moideen's eventful public life is relegated to the background in favour of his private love affair, which gains prominence throughout the plot.

As seen in the previously discussed biopics, the public and private lives of the subjects are more or less demarcated. Though Moideen was a versatile political activist and a public figure in Mukkam, his biopic is more identified as an inter-faith love story. Despite his proximity to national and state leaders, he remained a local figure, participating in or organising local events, and was hardly known outside Kozhikode. However, when it comes to the movie as a biopic, it tends to concentrate exclusively on the love affair between BP Moideen and Kanchanamala, showing his public life only as a background to his private life. However, the movie is less of a biopic in the vein of the biopics of heroic figures and their public lives, and it more or less identifies with the genre of a doomed love story. In general, the movie incorporates the hero's public life as a setting for the entire action of the movie. In a telephone conversation, R.S. Vimal accounted for his emphasis on the love affair rather than Moideen's public life in the movie: "I wanted to lay before the public the eternal love story of Moideen and Kanchanamala, which was not known to many, rather than portraying Moideen's public life; it is a real-life story of a woman who chose to live as an unmarried widow, waiting for her lover even after his death, which according to me is unique". *Ennu Ninte Moideen* is not only a private love story but a classic love story of people who have suffered the angst of separation in love. The template of the biopic changes to the usual accursed love affair of star-crossed lovers belonging to different factions and forms the main trajectory of the plot. The paradigm of the biopic is less historical or political than a typical 'Romeo and Juliet' story of ill-fated lovers ending in doom. So, the movie forms a hybrid of the biopic genre as well as the genre of a tragic love story.

Here, the attributes of the public figure are revealed as crucial in the evolution of the love story, where traits like his obstinacy and political rivalry with his father are linked to his private life rather than to public events. With the basic thrust on the public features of the biopic subject channelled into his private life, his life is transferred into a different genre of love story. Moreover, the characteristics of the hero and his lover are directed towards their private lives. Moideen, who is primarily a politician, believed in socialist ideologies as opposed to his father, Unni Moyin, who is an ardent follower of the Indian National Congress. The movie tries to capture Moideen's political philosophy in one of the early scenes, where he plans a black-flag protest against Indira Gandhi after a meeting with his party members. The movie seeks to convey his political views in the scene as Moideen addresses the gathering of the party members:

MOIDEEN: Even now, after a quarter century of gaining independence, the number of jobless, impoverished individuals is increasing. Is this the independent India of our dreams? As socialists, it is our responsibility to promote the ideals of democracy, equality, and fraternity to the public. Nehru, as an architect of our nation, believed in democracy, but his daughter Indira does not. (Translated by the researcher, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* 14:42 -15:09)

The scene further presents the rivalry between the father and the son as the former intervenes in the meeting, leading to a verbal argument between the two. Unni Moyin, an ardent follower of Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, cannot stand Moideen's stance against the Congress party and cautions him against it after learning of his plans for a black-flag protest against Indira Gandhi. The basis for

Moideen's conflict with his father is established in this scene, which is heightened by Moideen's romance with Kanchanamala.

The movie presents the whimsical side of Moideen as a politician when he pretends to be harmed by the police during the black-flag demonstration. In the scene, socialist party members are seen hoisting him onto a chair and escorting him home while chanting praise for his deed. Unni Moyin, who watches this, remarks that such individuals should be murdered rather than hurt, clearly suggesting his derision for his son. At his house, Moideen tells Mukkam Bhasi that the injury is merely a charade he made to gain more support in the upcoming panchayat election. Scenes where Moideen does not budge in the face of threats from Unni Moyin demonstrate his obstinacy and resolve to combat injustice. As a tenacious person, he stands up against the unfair policies of his powerful father. Moideen, as part of his election campaign, confronts Unni Moyin in the Mukkam Market about his detrimental acts as the Panchayat president. In the specific scene, Moideen meets Unni Moyin at the Mukkam crossroads, where he questions his father about changing the Panchayat road's layout for personal gain in order to protect his land. Unni Moyin threatens to kill Moideen at the latter's adamant opposition to his intention to clear the trees off the Puttekat road. Except for a few scenes like these, traits like his persistence are not employed to further his political objectives but to lead to his romantic relationship.

Despite being ostensibly a political campaign, the movie emphasises the election campaign as a channel of communication between Moideen and Kanchanamala. Moideen's participation in the Panchayat election is a key event in

his political life. However, in this movie, what should have been a momentous occasion in a politician's career is instead used as a means of communication between lovers. For instance, in the specified episode, as Moideen's jeep approaches Kanchanamala's house, he stops it and tries to communicate with her under the pretext of the campaign. With the camera set at a low angle, Moideen is seen announcing the secularist principles of his party, which also hints at their relationship. Kanchana, under house arrest, rushes to the balcony as she hears Moideen's voice. Moideen sarcastically talks against treating women as a weaker sex, which intentionally points at Kanchana's family for terminating her education and detaining her in the house. He further tries to communicate with her about his journey to Delhi and Kozhikode for the release of the first sports magazine in Kerala, the *Sports Herald*. The magazine's release by then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is not portrayed as a public event but is sparingly referred to in a few scenes. In one of the scenes, Kanchana's brothers see the news article and a photograph of the magazine's release, and the subsequent shot presents Appu, who arrives at the Kottattil house and shows the magazine itself, which has articles written about Appu and Sethu. This scene substantially validates the director's choice to augment the love story rather than the public persona of B.P. Moideen.

In the film, Moideen's political philosophy, which defends secularism, is displayed less in the public sphere and more through a romantic relationship between two individuals of different religions. Shibu T. Joseph et al. record Mukkam Bhasi's memories of Moideen as a socio-political activist: "Moideen, who constantly tried to fracture the fences of religion, was always in the vanguard helping others"

(46; Translated by the researcher). However, the film uses secularism as his political ideology regarding his love affair with Kanchanamala, which is demonstrated in the scene where Moideen's KKM Drama Club performs its debut play, "Velicham Vilakk Anweshikkunnu". In this scene, Moideen announces that they present the play for the people who disregard their conscience for the sake of caste and religion. Sethu and Appu are among the audience, and while Sethu expands KKM as Kerala Kala Mandir, Appu corrects him by adding that KKM stands for 'Kottattil Kanchanamala'. They are both irritated when another man in the audience corrects them and says it is not 'Kottattil Kanchanamala' but actually 'Kottattil Kanchana Moideen'. The play's plot has two lovers from different factions, and it has a lot in common with Moideen and Kanchana's love story where the heroine's brother plays the villain, and she has an abusive uncle. The movie, at large, uses Moideen's ideological ends to further his private love affair, pushing his public life to the background.

As already discussed, the aspects of Moideen's public life are primarily linked to his private life, which mainly encompasses his love affair. Moideen's unflinching attitude in his political combat with his father, in a way, foretells his perseverance in his love for Kanchana. Unni Moyin, a hefty man of power and politics who is the Panchayat president of Mukkam, has been portrayed as the Sultan of Mukkam. Hameed Chennamangaloor has contradictions as regards the portrayal of Unni Moyin in the movie:

A movie based on the love affair of Moideen, titled *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, has been released recently. The film portrays Moideen's father as a conventional

Islamic preacher, complete with long hair, a turban, and a cassock-like outfit. There is no resemblance between this appearance and that of Moideen's father in real life. He had neither a long beard nor a turban, but Ballyambra Pottattil Unni Moyin wore only a khadar dhoti, and a half-sleeve shirt was his usual attire. He would only wrap a silencer around his head during the winter. (15; Translated by the researcher)

In addition to having various political differences with his son, Unni Moyin is adamantly opposed to Moideen's relationship with Kanchanamala. However, Moideen, who is unwavering in his love, ignores his father's objections and is insistent on marrying Kanchana. In a scene, Unni Moyin arranges a wedding proposal for Moideen with Sufi Haji's daughter without Moideen's consent. Moideen, who returns after meeting Kanchana, witnesses the discussion regarding his wedding, which he ends by revealing his love for Kanchana:

MOIDEEN: If there is a woman in Moideen's life, it will only be Kanchana. It is a word of promise I have given to her, myself, and God.

UNNI MOYIN: Which Kanchana?

MOIDEEN: Kanchanamala of Kottattil House. (Translated by the researcher, *Ninte Moideen* 49:27– 49:42)

On hearing this, Unni Moyin hits Moideen and even points his gun at him, but indomitable in love, Moideen questions his father's hypocrisy regarding religious tolerance. J. Devika claims that the love story portrayed in this movie is an antithesis to the stereotypical representation of a Hindu-Muslim romance:

Of course, Hindu-Muslim romances are not unknown on the Indian screen.

But this story reverses narratives in which the hero who represents resistance to communalism and secularism is almost always Hindu and the heroine who the hero must 'rescue' is most frequently non-Hindu.

Unni Moyin, who fears Moideen's affair with his friend's daughter will cause deep trouble, casts him out of the house. Without succumbing to his father, Moideen seeks refuge in his uncle's house and continues his affair with Kanchana. In stark contrast to the events depicted in the film, Chennamangalloor notes Moideen's nikah with a Muslim girl to save his father's pride, but they later divorced for the sake of his love for Kanchana (24; Translated by the researcher). The director presumptively erases the episode from the movie as it might tarnish the protagonist's image and also vitiate the quality of the narrative. The scene in which Unni Moyin stabs Moideen further exemplifies Moideen's tenacity in love. In this specific scene, Unni Moyin meets Moideen by the side of the Iruvazhinji River and asks if it is time for him to end his wantonness. Moideen, in an assured tone, divulges his plan to marry Kanchana the next day. Unni Moyin challenges him, saying he will not allow that to happen if he is alive. However, Moideen does not give in and challenges him, saying that if he is alive, he will marry her, and they will live together. Unni Moyin threatens to kill Moideen if he dares to do so.

MOIDEEN: Even if I die, Kanchana is my girl.

UNNI MOYIN: Are you sure?

MOIDEEN: I have no doubt who my father is. I have only one word.

(Translated by the researcher, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* 1:50:54 – 1.50.09)

Unni Moyin stabs Moideen with his knife out of fear that the union of Moideen and Kanchana will damage the reputations of the two families. An extreme close-up view of Moideen's blood dripping from the knife serves to magnify the brutality of the father's assault on his son. In order to emphasise Moideen's tragedy, the director makes another deviation from the truth in this instance. Hameed Chennamangalloor, who claims to have seen Unni Moyin stab Moideen, disputes the commonly held belief that Moideen's relationship with Kanchana was the motivation behind the heinous conduct. He asserts that the incident occurred because of an argument between the two about hosting a teacher from Mukkam High School at Unni Moyin's house. He describes how, during their furious dispute, Moideen throws a stone at Unni Moyin, who then stabs him with a knife out of self-defence (39). Hameed Chennamangalloor believes that the director fiddles with the truth, referring to this particular incident:

It is almost six or seven years after the uproar wreaked by his love, his nikah, and his divorce that this awful event takes place. It has nothing to do with the love affair between Moideen and Kanchanamala. But in the recently published features, the writers imaginatively recreated the stabbing episode as an aftermath of their love affair. In R.S. Vimal's movie *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, the stabbing episode and the love affair have been demonstrated as interrelated. (37-38; Translated by the researcher)

In view of retaining Unni Moyin's heinous disposition, the movie does not include the father visiting his son at the hospital after stabbing him, which Moideen's biographers like P.T. Muhammed Sadik record (64). In his ongoing endeavour to effectively portray the poignancy of the star-crossed lovers, he channels the traits of the subject into his personal life. Moideen's unwavering and tenacious personality as an all-rounder in various activities of Mukkam is limited to the quality of an ardent lover.

Ennu Ninte Moideen is not just the biopic of Moideen but is essentially the story of Kanchanamala, from whose perspective the story is primarily told. Kanchanamala is portrayed as a fighter, like Moideen himself, whose wilful nature is grooved into her love affair with Moideen without compromise. As a student, she fights against injustice at her college hostel, but her determination is only partially shown in the public aspects of her life; instead, all these characteristics become a part of their love affair, where she shows the same kind of determination to choose her way of life and to fight against the injustice that her family shows towards her. The movie introduces Kanchana in her hostel room, where one of the nuns finds her abstaining from the evening prayer. When the nun inquires why she refrains from the prayer while every other student does, she says that equality exists only when it comes to things of God, not at the dinner table. The inequity shown towards the students is so harsh that the affluent students receive A-class food, the middle-class students receive B-class food, and the poor ones receive only C-class food. Kanchana, who stands up against the unjust practice, even threatens the nun to resolve the issue before they return after the vacation lest they face dire

consequences, and along with her friends, she starves that night. She wins the battle against this injustice when she returns to the hostel after vacation. In the same spirit, Kanchana seems unwavering when the hostel warden probes her regarding the anonymous parcels she receives at the hostel. These incidents at the college hostel portrayed in the movie's opening sequences demonstrate Kanchana's fortitude, which she upholds as she protects her love for Moideen against all circumstances and chooses to stay in love even after he has passed away.

As a typical tragic love story, the movie constantly highlights the pain of love, where the heroine holds fast to her lover at all odds. More than a biopic, it tends to delve into the pangs of the separated lovers. Kanchana, who stays steadfast in her love, endures physical and mental torture at home without giving up on Moideen. She is resolute even with Moideen when he invites her into his life after she is locked up in her house. Kanchana resists his proposal, fearing their fathers' friendship will become strained. When Moideen insists again, she expresses her concern for her siblings, whose futures will also be affected. She is particular about not a single drop of blood being shed when they unite, and she is adamant about continuing her life within the walls of the Kottattil House. The family is outraged by Kanchana's relationship with Moideen, and her uncle, who fears that her sisters will also follow in her footsteps, attempts to terminate their education. Kanchana speaks up for her sisters despite being imprisoned in her house.

KANCHANA: Uncle, you have already ruined my education. Please do not punish those who have done nothing wrong.

UNCLE: You just shut up! They can attend school if you are willing to make amends for your mistake. Otherwise, their lives will also be ruined, like yours.

KANCHANA: I do not think that I have made a mistake by falling in love with Moideen. (Translated by the researcher, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* 1:03:59 – 1:04:14)

Kanchana, a devoted lover, battles all obstacles and endures the angst of separation for ten years. In the scene where Kanchana's mother pleads with her to forget Moideen, at least for the sake of her father, who suffers all this in silence, and her siblings, whose lives will also be affected if Kanchana goes with a Muslim man, she remains steadfast in her love:

KANCHANA: If I ever have a life, it will be with Moideen. Let them all get married and be saved. But after all that, when I am the last one left, I will go with Moideen. I will go with him, for sure. I am ready to wait for that, even if it takes ages. On that day, even if you don't bless me, please don't forbid me from going with him. (Translated by the researcher, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* 1.36.02 – 1.36.35)

In the following song sequence, she weeps and looks out her window at the pouring rain, delineating the anguish of love and separation. Along with passing time, the song also features her sisters' weddings and how the lovers create an encrypted language for their communication. Even though Kanchana leads a dreary existence inside the four walls of her room, she cannot think about anyone but Moideen. Appu, who cannot endure Kanchana's life being ruined inside the house, expresses his desire to marry Kanchana to Sethu. In the particular scene in which Appu and his

parents are at Kottattil House to formally request Kanchana's hand, he desires to talk with Kanchana, where he expresses his long-preserved love for her.

APPU: I had no intention of making a sacrifice when I came here. They will not ever permit you to wed Moideen. My conscience forbids me, Kanchana, from witnessing you squander away your life in this manner. I love you more than anything else in this world.

KANCHANA: I'm aware of it. But I love Moideen a thousand times more, and Moideen loves me ten thousand times more. If you insist on this marriage, you will tie the knot with my corpse. I would gladly endure a thousand more years of suffering, even if it meant my death, for Moideen's sake. I have spent all these years in this pit of misery, thinking solely about him and reading his letters. Do you think you can tear our hearts apart? Tell me, can anybody in this world do that?

APPU: There is no other woman like you in the whole world, Kanchana. You are a blessing in his life. One day, the world will honour your love. I swear. I am sorry for my desire; please forgive me. (Translated by the researcher, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* 2:21:35 – 2:22:58)

Kanchana, who defends her love with all her might, finally has to give up her lover to fate, which snatches him away in the form of death. As a talisman of true love, Kanchana decides to live for Moideen without thinking about a life with any other man.

Ennu Ninte Moideen, crafted in the template of a quintessential love story, incorporates romantic moments between Moideen and Kanchana, which obviously highlight Moideen's personal life. One of the initial scenes depicts Moideen as a

typical lover who sends anonymous parcels to Kanchana. In the scene where Kanchana opens the parcel, she discovers a copy of Changampuzha Krishna Pillai's poetry collection, *Raktha Pushpangal*, with a few words highlighted. She rewrites the words that have been underlined on a notepad, and it appears to be a love note. When Kanchana fails to decipher the sender's name, she is suddenly reminded of the newsletter previously received, with a few letters randomly highlighted. Upon opening it, she writes the highlighted alphabets into the notepad, revealing the name 'Moideen'. As Kanchana figures out Moideen's name, the scene cuts to the bus journey, which is simultaneously shown, during which she catches Moideen gazing at her through the front mirror of the bus. During the bus journey, she sees a pair of hazel eyes looking at her through the mirror, and when she turns back, she sees Moideen smiling at her. He playfully covers his face when she turns to gaze at him on the bus, and they exchange glances again. Following this initial encounter on the bus, the movie presents a montage of their subsequent rendezvous, accompanied by a romantic background score that culminates in their meeting at a chapel. As Kanchana sits in the chapel listening to a girl recite the Bible verses, a wide-angle shot captures Moideen approaching Kanchana. He sits beside her on a bench and invites her to enjoy the rain outside, leading to a song sequence that renders the blossoming of their love. Moideen, dominantly presented as a devoted lover, promises his love to Kanchana when she is apprehensive about the future of their love affair:

KANCHANA: Won't the ground we stand on crack open and engulf us? Will people accept this relationship? Do you intend to stir up trouble in Mukkam?

MOIDEEN: If we follow this river, we will reach the Arabian Sea. The Iruvazhinji River will eventually reach the Arabian Sea, no matter how many times the ferryman tries to stop it. If Iruvazhinji belongs to the sea, Kanchana belongs to Moideen.

It is my word of honour. A word of honour is the ultimate truth. (Translated by the researcher, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* 44:21 – 44:57)

Apart from this, throughout the movie, there is a concerted effort to show Moideen as a romantic hero with miraculous powers. In the scene where the Ayurvedic physician fails to fix Sethu's dislocated arm, Moideen realigns it with the extraordinary image of a superhero. Pramod K. Nayar observes that "the slightly melodramatic biopics, therefore, portray ordinary people who do extraordinary things" (77). Moideen, who has been brutally stabbed by his father, miraculously escapes by reading the letter Kanchana sent to him while he is in the hospital bed. Moreover, in the courtroom scene where Unni Moyin's trial for his attempt to murder Moideen unfolds, Moideen absolves his father and forgives him. During the trial, to everyone's surprise, Moideen saves his father by stating that it was just an accident:

MOIDEEN: It was raining heavily on July 12. I got out of the riverfront, and I was walking along the road. I slipped into a pool of water and fell sideways. I fell right on top of the stub of a tree, which was as sharp as a sword. I tried to get up three times, but the third time, my hand slipped, and I sank into unconsciousness. When I became conscious, I found myself in Beach

Hospital. (Translated by the researcher, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* 2:05:06 – 2:05:31)

Unni Moyin thus, for the first time, accepts failure in his life and visits his wife and son to call them back to his house, but as fate will have it, he passes away that night.

The bulk of the movie centres on a girl placed under house arrest whose lover is continuously attempting to contact her despite the obstacles. These sequences have little to do with the hero's public life, which does not even appear as a backdrop. In a sense, this could have potentially been a relationship between any boy from the Muslim community and any girl from the Hindu community. Despite their struggles to be united in life, fate betrays them, thus ending a tragic love story. Moideen and Kanchana face serious consequences since the day they proclaimed their love for each other. As already said, Unni Moyin disowns his son Moideen when he learns about the latter's affair with Kanchanamala.

However, things worsen when Kanchana's uncle confiscates Moideen's letter from the errand boy, causing a string of tragedies for Kanchana. Kanchana's brothers reach her college and take her back home, thus leading to the termination of her education. At home, her uncle and brothers force Kanchana to read the letter aloud, and as she finishes reading it, Sethu slaps her, and she falls. When the uncle inquires about the truth of the letter, Kanchana acknowledges that they are in love. Even though her mother tells her to forget about Moideen, Kanchana insists she has already made a vow of love to him. When her elder brother Ramachandran threatens her with religious disputes in Mukkam, she retorts, saying their father will not oppose her relationship with Moideen, citing his secularist beliefs. Incensed by

Kanchana's retaliation, Ramachandran strikes her, while the uncle warns Sethu about the repercussions of letting her leave the house. Sethu locks her up in that room as everybody leaves. As Mythili Ramachandran observes, "Their fathers were close friends too. But their love was frowned upon, and she was kept under house arrest for ten years by her family. During this period, the lovers only communicated through letters. Today, Kanchanamala calls herself the unmarried widow of Moideen". Even after being kept under house arrest for many years, the passionate lovers resisted all sorts of hurdles that came their way.

One of the greatest challenges in their love is the great deal of physical violence that Kanchana has to endure to safeguard her love for Moideen. Every time she rejects the marriage proposals her family has made for her, she is forced to endure the shock of violence. To save the family's reputation, the uncle discusses a wedding proposal for her with Kanchana's brothers. Overhearing their conversation, Kanchana writes a letter to Moideen informing him about her family's decision to get her married. In Moideen's reply to her, he instructs her what to do when the prospective groom and his family arrive to meet her. In that scene, Kanchana's mother gives her a silk saree and a few accessories to adorn herself to meet the groom. However, she chooses to drape herself in a white saree—the attire of a widow—as instructed by Moideen, which is displayed in a pedestal shot to emphasise Kanchana's revolutionary action against her family. Her mother, startled to see this, questions her action; she assertively states that she is Moideen's girl, and if the prospective husband is willing for a second marriage, she is also ready for it. Saying this, she heads to the living room to serve tea to the visitors, who mistake her

for a widow. Hurling insults at Kanchana's family and the matchmaker, the visitors stormed out of the house. This incident leads to another bout of physical assault where the uncle thrashes her for bringing disgrace to the family. He asserts that even if Kanchana dies, she will not be allowed to live with Moideen, and if she intends to ruin the family's reputation, she will be exterminated. A similar episode where Moideen interferes with another wedding proposal for Kanchana leads to one more round of physical abuse. This time, Moideen sends a still photograph of Moideen and Kanchana through a small boy to the potential groom and family. Appu, who gets this photograph, gives it to the uncle, who, in his fury, assaults her. In this specific scene, the uncle emerges from Kanchana's room, wiping off blood from his finger ring, which overlaps with Kanchana's loud cry, implying that the physical assault happened inside the room. Moideen, too, has not been spared from physical violence only because of his relationship with Kanchana. The movie depicts a scene where Sethu attacks Moideen as they return after the KKM Drama Club's first performance. In their physical combat, Sethu points a gun at Moideen and even fires it, but the latter grabs it and keeps it with him. Before leaving, Moideen reveals his love for Kanchana to Sethu, adding that he had once assured Kanchana that Sethu would support their relationship even if the entire world turned against them, which has been proven wrong. Moideen, as suggested earlier, almost faces death at his father's hands for being in love with Kanchana.

The intermittent seizure of Moideen and Kanchana's letters makes communication between them increasingly challenging. In one of the scenes, Sethu sees Moideen's letter on the table, which he confiscates. Assuming Maniyamma to

be their messenger, Sethu meets her by the paddy field in the next shot, where he seizes another letter from her. As their letters are continuously seized, they invent new ways of communicating with each other. Using Mukkam Bhasi's voiceover, the director narrates how Moideen and Kanchana overcome the impediments of love by inventing novel ways to exchange their hearts, which surprised even others. To ensure that no one can decipher the contents of their letters, they start to use coded writing. An unsigned article in the *News Minute* quotes Kanchanamala's recollections about this new kind of personal encoded language, "It was I who developed the language in my free time at home using the Malayalam alphabet. The vocabulary was created by misspelling common words. With the help of supportive servants at home and on the estate, I sent him basic concepts of the code language". Maniyamma takes Moideen's letters that arrive at the Kottattil premises as paper planes to Kanchanamala in a lunchbox. In one of such letters, Moideen informs her about the new mode of communication of blaring the horn of his car to notify her about his location. If he honks once, he is at Mukkam; if he honks twice, he is at Kodyathur or Chennamangallur; if he honks three times, he is in Kozhikode; if he honks four times, he has not left the district; if he honks from five to nine times, he is not in the district and may even be in Delhi. The movie features Kanchana's responses to the honking of his car and the responses of others who, over time, understand the meaning of the number of honks.

After going through many trials and tribulations, Moideen and Kanchana get an opportunity to meet each other after a decade, and at the reunion, they decide to live together. As fate will have it, the union of the tragic lovers is thwarted each time

they plan to start to live together. The movie explicitly depicts the scene in which Moideen and Kanchana finally cross paths after ten long years, evoking the poignancy of the sorrow of the doomed lovers. Moideen walks through a windy pathway dressed in white and waits for Kanchana, who is also clad in white and is seen coming from the opposite direction. They approach each other with melancholy music in the background, and she collapses at his feet in tears. With an extreme close-up shot of their eyes looking at each other, the movie captures their longing for each other. In a quiet place near the river, they sit beside each other while Moideen takes her hand in his; her hand with bulging veins being focused implies the lovers are getting older over time. Both of them, with tear-filled eyes, share the excruciating pain of being apart, which they can no longer endure. Moideen is disheartened to see Kanchana leading a lonely life while all her sisters are married and settled.

MOIDEEN: Why are we waiting like this?

KANCHANA: I, too, cannot bear this, Moideen.

MOIDEEN: Everyone has happily settled into their lives. Shouldn't we start a life of our own, at least now?

KANCHANA: We must. I want a life with you. (Cries)

MOIDEEN: Don't cry. You have cried for ten long years. I will not let you cry any more. You remember all that I wrote to you? Tomorrow morning, I will come to Kottattil House. You should come out.

KANCHANA: I will come. Where shall we go?

MOIDEEN: I have not decided. But I do not want us to start a new life at Mukkam. (Translated by the researcher, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* 1:45:40 – 1:47:10)

Here, fate interferes in the form of Unni Moyin, who nearly stabs him to death on the day before they plan to elope. After recovering from the fatal injury, Moideen communicates with Kanchana by projecting a love note onto the cinema screen when she arrives with her family to watch a movie in her family-owned theatre. In the specific scene, Moideen is seen in the operator's room, where he projects a love note in their encoded language onto the screen to keep Sethu away. Sethu, upset by this, searches for Moideen in the projection room and outside the theatre. In the meantime, Moideen enters the theatre and sits beside Kanchana to inform her that he will arrive at the field close to Kottattil House at 2 a.m. and will signal for her by turning the car's light three times. The shot shifts to Kottattil, where Kanchana is preparing to accompany Moideen. At the same time, the camera pans over to the premises of Kottattil House, showing people hurrying there to break the news of Ramachandran's death in Coimbatore. The sudden passing of Ramachandran, which comes as a tremendous shock to the lovers, forces them to wait for another opportunity to leave the place and begin living together. Against the backdrop of Mukkam Bhasi's son's twenty-eighth-day celebrations at his home, the film depicts their final attempt to devise a plan to flee and live together. Kanchana arrives at Bhasi's house disguised as a maid to avoid being noticed by others. In a room upstairs, Moideen and Kanchana meet and discuss their plan to migrate to New York. While Kanchana is apprehensive about going to a faraway place, Moideen reassures

her that wherever they are on earth, they are beginning a life together and puts his ring on her finger. Nevertheless, this time, destiny, in the form of a boat accident, takes away Moideen's life, leaving Kanchana in a state of perpetual despair.

The death of the lover or the lovers typically forms one of the most emotionally overwhelming scenes in tragic love stories. In this movie, as part of the doomed love story genre, there is a very extended portrayal of around seven minutes of the boat wreck, Moideen's attempts to rescue fellow passengers, and finally, his death. On the one hand, Moideen is portrayed as a deeply socially committed person. However, on the other hand, the entire episode aims to reveal the cosmic irony where lovers on the verge of union are thwarted by fate. In this particular sequence, Moideen returns to Mukkam and embarks on a slightly crowded canoe to his house after obtaining their passports from his friend Jamal at the passport office, while Kanchana dressing up in her room is simultaneously shown. The canoe begins to sway as the wind picks up and the sky grows gloomy; eventually, it capsizes in the rain. Unaware of all this, Kanchana is enjoying the rain and daydreaming about her eagerly anticipated future with Moideen. Moideen is seen rescuing his fellow passengers in the river from drowning, even while the crowd, including Bhasi, yell at him to get onto the riverside. In the meantime, the police and other rescuers arrive at the location to transport the survivors to the hospital. The indomitable Moideen, who keeps transporting the victims to the rescue boats, gets fatally trapped in a maelstrom, in which he loses his life. The director adopts variation at this juncture, where Mukkam Bhasi is shown to be present on the banks of Iruvazhinji while Moideen loses his life. However, Bhasi, in his memoir, reminisces about Moideen's

death as reported to him by Ashokan Master (17). Such disparities in the script of the movie attest to the filmmaker's decision to intensify the tragic death of the subject as well as the artistic licence he takes that does not significantly alter the truth.

Including Moideen's stepbrother B.P. Rasheed's validation of the film in the title credits, "The story of my brother whom I have known," renders the script's discrepancies largely insignificant or invalid. Seeking refuge in creative liberty, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* weaves an all-consuming love story where the lovers never give up on their love, even in the face of religious, familial, and societal obstacles. Approaching the biopic as an adapted text, Marta Minier and Maddalena Pennachia perceive:

It is a life, the story of a life, but in what format is that encountered by the makers of the biopic, or – in other words- what are the ‘sources’, what constitutes the ‘original’ of the biopic as an adaptation? As the written biography (often placed on the borderline of history and literature), screen biographies also mix the factual and the fictitious. (7)

The torrential rain in the boat wreck sequence is seen to continue until Pathumma, who reaches the spot, is left alone on the banks of the Iruvazhinji, crying out aloud for her lost son. While describing the various phases of the Moideen-Kanchanamala love story, the movie consistently incorporates water imagery, with rain serving as a metaphor for their emotions. Gokul Nair comments:

It rains cats and dogs throughout the film, providing enough liquid to feed Moideen's pens and a million more letters, if he ever chose to write using transparent, watery ink... While paying homage to every single rain romance

in history, it also represents the stages of the characters' love. It is a pleasing light shower in the early parts of the movie, illustrating the sweetness of romantic desire, and gradually gets heavier and heavier, concluding as a torrential downpour that conspires with the mighty Iruvazhinji River against Kanchana and Moideen by snatching the latter away in a heartbreaking climax (ending an illustrious man's life as a politician, producer, writer and erstwhile football player). It rains from the very beginning of the film—perhaps an indication of the incoming tragedy. May be the raindrops symbolize Kanchana's tears as she reminisces about her life and her loss, even today.

As the sequence of Moideen's death culminates, the desolate Mukkam market is portrayed only with Bhasi's voiceover intimating his friend's sad demise.

As an epilogue to this ill-fated love story, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* shows how Kanchanamala's life after Moideen essentially has been; after initial attempts at suicide, she makes herself a memorial to Moideen by deciding to live as Moideen's unmarried widow. Kanchana is admitted to the hospital after making repeated suicide attempts. Accompanied by Mukkam Bhasi's voiceover, it is revealed that she intended to end her life by drinking the same water that Moideen last drank from the Iruvazhinji River. Kanchanamala, in an interview with the researcher, recounts her life after Moideen's demise, which has not been elaborated on in the movie:

After Moideen's death, I attempted to hang myself in the bathroom, but our maid intervened and saved me. Then, I searched for poison and sleeping pills

to help me end my life, but I could not even find a blade. After days of starvation, which worsened my condition, I was finally rushed to the hospital.

The movie features only the sequence where Kanchana attempts to kill herself with sleeping pills, in which Sethu, Appu, and her mother try to stop her from doing it. Pathumma, who appears there, hugs Kanchana and persuades her to live for Moideen instead of dying for his sake. Saying this, she extends an invitation to live with her as her daughter-in-law, and they both walk away. As Pathumma and Kanchana enter Ballyampra Pottattil House, Kanchana envisions Moideen standing at the gate and smiling at her. Custen in *Bio/ Pics* opines:

The death scene itself could be omitted to spare the viewers a depressing finale, but a monument or commemorative icon, the token of life after death – at least in terms of fame- often concluded the biopic. A monument or monumental depiction is a reminder of the veneration the hero has earned in the living narrative just seen. (153)

The movie's climax shows Bhasi writing a diary, along with his voiceover referring to Kanchana, who in real life still lives with Moideen's memories intact, “Even though they could not live as husband and wife, Kanchana lives as Moideen’s unmarried widow even today, with fond memories of Moideen” (Translated by the researcher, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* 2:44:44 – 2:44:54). While analysing the movie, it becomes evident that the emphasis has shifted from the public to the private, which alludes to the tendencies of the new directors, who cater to the audience's desire to learn more about the subject's private life.

As a biopic, *Ennu Ninte Moideen* highlights the subject's private life, specifically his love affair, turning it into the matrix of a classic love story. The movie has even twisted specific facts and overlooked the social and political commitments regarding Moideen's life to make it a private love story. "Discussion of the biopic as a historical artefact," according to Custen, "hinges upon some issue of how true it is and how the process of creating a film or video invariably alters the truth and accuracy of telling history" (9). The movie apparently calls attention to the shifting trend of biopics and the audience's newly emerged interest in the private lives of public figures and even in the lives of lesser-known personalities. As a part of the changing milieu, the new biopic directors not only contemplate privatising the subject's public life but also convert the subject's private affairs into public events. The demarcation of the public and private domains of the protagonist's life seems increasingly blurred in some of the recently released Malayalam biopics, like *Aami*, which is examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER VI

AAMI: BARED WORDS AND UNVEILED DESIRES

Indian cinema, a potent and prominent medium of entertainment, has been experimenting with a wide range of genres to accomplish a winning formula that gratifies the audience, thereby making a mark at the box office. As a recent trend, the biopic has carved a niche for itself by captivating the interests of film viewers with its realistic representation of real-life individuals. Initially a subset of historical movies, the biopic has evolved as a significant genre with its subgenres, the literary biopic being one of them. The literary biopic, which addresses the lives of authors, is still in its infancy in the Indian film scenario, in contrast to the biopics of sports stars, politicians, film actors, and even gangsters. Among the few literary biopics released in India are *Kaviratna Kalidasa* (1983), about the Sanskrit poet Kalidasa in Kannada, *Bharathi* (2000) on the Tamil poet Subramania Bharati in Tamil, and *Manto* (2018) on the author and playwright Saadat Hasan Manto in Hindi. Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Mathilukal* (1990), based on Vaikom Mohammed Basheer's autobiographical novel by the same name dealing with the prison life of Basheer and *Ivan Megharoopan* (2012), on the life of the Malayalam poet, P. Kunhiramaran Nair, could be cited as examples while discussing Malayalam films based on writers, though neither of them are biopics in the strict sense. *Aami* (2018), delineating the life of the poet, short-story writer, and novelist Kamala Das, and *Gramavrikshathile Kuyil* (2022), based on the life of the Malayalam poet Kumaran Asan, are two recent literary biopics in Malayalam, with the former serving as the focus of the present chapter.

Kamala Das, otherwise known as Madhavikutty and Kamala Suraiyya, was born at Punnayurkulam in Kerala to V.M. Nair, managing editor of the Malayalam daily Mathrubhumi, and Balamani Amma, a distinguished poet. Besides her mother, Balamani Amma, her grand uncle Nalapat Narayana Menon was also a renowned writer in Malayalam, whose oeuvre includes poems, drama, and translations. Kamala Das's writing, by and large, mirrors her emotional inner life and makes it challenging to differentiate between her public and personal lives. Her public life is her writing, which originates in private emotions. As a prolific bilingual writer, Kamala Das moved fluidly between memoir, poetry, and fiction, immensely contributing to Indian English literature and Malayalam literature. Although she was from a highly regarded literary family in Malabar, the Nalappat family, and already a published poet, she rose to a mixed kind of fame with the publication of her autobiography, which scandalised Kerala society. The extensively debated autobiography of Kamala Das, *Ente Kadha*, translated as *My Story* in English, was extremely controversial as it, in a confessional tone, explicitly examined her failed marriage, lust, loneliness, and nostalgia, which eventually labelled her as a writer of obscenity. Though she later claimed it to be part real and part imaginary, the book stirred up the reading public when it was published. As a writer without a formal university education, she composed her works guided by instinct and inherent talent. Anisur Rahman, in the Preface to *Expressive Form in the Poetry of Kamala Das*, observes:

What is more remarkable in Kamala Das is that her poetry mirrors her life in all its nakedness- the oft-experienced horrors and the rare joys of love. Her

life itself violates the chiselled, systematic and traditional norms and values and she affirms a form of life which is characterized by the unconventional and extremely modern point of view. This form of life is truly reflected in the form she achieves in her poetic practice. (2)

Kamala Das has more than twenty books to her credit, which include several short stories, poems, six novels, and three volumes of memoirs. In her later years, she wrote a syndicated newspaper column. Kamala Das lived ahead of her time. At a period when society was reluctant to accept change, she wrote fearlessly about love, desire, independence, and sexuality. Jimly P., in her doctoral thesis, writes, "She was an iconoclast of her generation who spoke unabashedly about Indian women's sexual desires. She exposed the hypocrisies of a society living in an illusory world of pseudomorality and oblivious to the stark realities around" (61). In her works, there is an intentional defiance of societal conventions and practices; through her works, she challenges preconceived ideas about relationships and sex. Kamala Das is the only Asian writer in the Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar-edited *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. Often considered on par with writers like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Kamala Das, who is intensely passionate and confessional in her literary endeavours, is intricately linked to India's first and probably the most prominent feminist movement. Though many consider her a feminist because of her candid portrayal of women's desires and physicality, she has never identified herself as a member of any feminist movement. Kamala Das has always been in the public eye more than any other literary figure in Kerala, especially for her unreserved mode of writing and her controversial statements. In addition to receiving numerous

honours, including the PEN Poetry Prize and the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award, Kamala Das was a Nobel Prize nominee in 1984. Her short stories like “Rukminikkoru Paavakutty” and “Nashtapetta Neelambari” have been adapted for the screen as *Rugmini* (1988) and *Mazha* (2000), respectively. Kamala Das, who lived in multitudes, always marked her presence in the public through interviews and lectures and stayed in the limelight till her death in 2009.

The penchant for biopics in Malayalam cinema dawned with the success of movies like *Celluloid* and *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, which eventually paved the way for an array of biopics: a couple of *them* released, some in the making, and a few lined up for release. Though a paratext to the lives of real-life characters, recent biopics also tend to reinforce the commercial rationale where the filmmakers opt to offer warts and all portrayals of the subjects rather than the former hagiographic ones. Luciano Mariani states, "A genre film may reflect not only the audience's hopes and fears but the filmmakers' guess about what will sell" (14). The latest biopics, serving the demands of the new audience, explore the subjects' inner lives and private emotions rather than glorifying their achievements in public life. As claimed by Art Silverblatt in *Genre Studies in Mass Media*, "In the market-driven media industry, profit is likely a driving underlying function. This economic imperative has an influence on the content of generic programming" (9). As a prototype of the 'new' biopic, *Aami* is an amalgamation of the subject's virtues and failings rather than imparting a deferential portrayal.

This chapter attempts to explore how the preoccupation with the private life of public figures finds expression hitherto underrepresented or unrepresented. The

confessional mode meets a feminist mode of articulation. The takeover of the public life by the private is complete in *Aami*. Public events do not affect the narrative in a significant manner, nor do they alter the final impression the movie creates. The unveiling of desires, the act of baring them, is simultaneously an act of baring words. As in her life and writing, the emphasis falls on the action, which is the heart of the movie's narrative. The baring and unveiling both push the limits of the expression of the private to unprecedented levels, completing the gradual displacement of the public from the narrative drift of the biopics in Malayalam cinema that fall within the scope of this thesis.

While the biopic is still a relatively new genre in Malayalam cinema, Kamal, one of the most prominent directors, Kamal, has two biopics to his credit. In contrast to his first biopic, *Celluloid* (2013), which explores the life of a regional figure like Dr. J.C. Daniel, the second one, *Aami* (2018), examines the life of Kamala Das, an acclaimed writer with an international reputation. When Kamal adapted the life of a controversial writer like Kamala Das into a movie, it was not immune to contentions as it preponderantly dealt with her private life. In a session on biographical films in Malayalam at the Kerala Literature Festival, Kamal revealed the choice of the subject in the biopic:

Through *Aami*, I wanted to lay bare before the public not the Madhavikutty portrayed in *Ente Kadha/My Story* but the real Madhavikutty who wrote the book, which includes her privacy, perspectives, and dreams. Though *Ente Kadha* is branded as Kamala Das's autobiography, she later claimed it to be a fanciful portrayal of her dreams and fantasies. (Translated by the researcher)

While Kamal attempts to render the different stages of the writer's life in *Aami*, giving prominence to the emotional and intensely personal attributes of her persona, he attempts to portray Kamala Das's version of her life rather than an objective portrayal where the views and opinions of others could also have entered the picture. Anne Scholz deems, "In this struggle to establish something 'new' in relation to the previous text, a certain history is created; a text in a new medium writes a new history" (677). Even though the writer is known by numerous names like Kamala, Kamala Das, Madhavikutty, Kamala Suraiyya and Aami, the director titles the movie 'Aami', the name that was used only among her close circle of family and friends, which subsequently indicates the private nature of the movie. She had many personas: she was known as Kamala Das at the national and international levels, as Madhavikutty in Kerala, and later as Kamala Suraiyya, but the one name that the public never called her was Aami. As regards a person like Kamala Das, the line between truth and fantasy is blurred, which is reflected in her autobiography, too. The Madhavikutty in *Ente Kadha* was a public figure and not her authentic self, which shows a variance between her autobiographical self and her actual self. Except for a few brief scenes, the much-celebrated writer's public life remains in the background, and the movie's plot thrives more on her consciousness and personal relationships.

Kamal, through *Aami*, attempts to unearth Kamala Das's private life, hinging on the series of affairs, her delusions, and her fantasies, whereby her public role is almost relegated to shadows. As Kamal says in the discussion at the Kerala Literature Festival:

Madhavikutty wrote her autobiography *Ente Kadha* at thirty-eight, when she was not seasoned enough to write an autobiography, as believed by herself and her readers. Madhavikutty wrote the book when she was seriously ill and thought she would die soon, so she wished to record her life and experiences. Nevertheless, Madhavikutty lived among us for seventy-five years, during which she went through various realms, experiences, and controversies. So, I believe that Aami, or Madhavikutty, should not be limited to the Aami portrayed in *Ente Kadha*. Moreover, Madhavikutty, later in her life, concedes that her autobiography was not a completely truthful account of her life but a design of her dreams and fantasies. (Translated by the researcher)

Kamala Das's life and interviews always problematized the relationship between the private and the public. In her case, she constantly recreated herself in the public eye and often changed the narrative over time, which made it difficult to distinguish between the public and the private. Dhanya S. writes in her doctoral thesis, "When she discusses intensely private matters through her writings, she breaks the dichotomy between public and private, or home and society." (74). However, in *Aami*, Kamal resolutely tries to manifest the private and sees the public as a constructed narrative, even when Kamala Das herself made the construction. Just as the central theme of her works is love, so is the theme of the movie, which portrays her desire to be loved, in which she is continually disappointed.

Kamal attempts to portray Kamala Das as a private person instead of her public persona projected in the interviews and other public spaces. For instance, *Ente Kadha* claimed to be a frank and confessional autobiography at the time of its

publication, but later, she declared it partly imaginative. With an impulsive and adolescent quality throughout her life, Kamala Das led a controversial life until she breathed her last. In none of her interviews did Kamala Das reveal that she embraced Islam to marry her lover, but Kamal demonstrates that the sole reason for her conversion was to get united with her young Muslim lover. Maintaining a mercurial nature, Kamala Das constantly constructed her personas throughout her life, including the re-evaluation of her autobiography. Therefore, adapting her life to the screen is problematic when Kamal seeks to highlight her private life, for which he chooses 'Aami' as the film's title. Produced under the banner of Reel and Real Cinema, Madhu Neelakandan's frames and Sreekar Prasad's editing revive the emotional life of Kamala Das on the silver screen. *Aami* has won several awards, including the Asianet Film Awards for Best Actress and the Filmfare Awards South for the same category. With Manju Warriar as Kamala Das, the movie's cast includes actors like Tovino Thomas, Murali Gopy, Anoop Menon, and Vinaya Prasad.

Aami begins in Bombay in 1971, and Kamala Das (played by Manju Warriar) is admitted to room no. 565 in Holy Spirit Hospital. Following this establishing scene, a flashback introduces Kamala as a little girl, perhaps five or six years old, enjoying a vacation at Nalapat House, where, in the courtyard, she relishes the Neermatala tree (Caper tree), especially the flowers, which later become a significant motif in her writings, and the company of her grandmother Kochukuttiyamma (played by Sreedevi Unni) and her grand uncle, Nalapat Narayana Menon (played by Thrissur Balan), a prominent literary figure. V.M. Nair (played by Anil Nedumangad), Kamala's father, arrives at Nalapat to take his wife

and kids to Calcutta the next day, as Kamala has to join the English school soon. However, Kamala, who longs for the house and her grandmother's company, shares the pain of leaving Nalapat with her equally sad grandmother. Switching the narrative to Calcutta in 1939, Nair appoints a British teacher to teach her English. However, Kamala shows little interest in the subject and asks the teacher if she knows Guruvayurappa or Lord Krishna. Kamala first experienced visions of Lord Krishna (played by Tovino Thomas) while she fell ill in Calcutta, which she recounts to Krishna in the hospital room.

As Kamala approaches adolescence, her father assigns Hussain Ansari, an art tutor, to teach her painting, with whom she has an infatuation. Against the backdrop of Indian independence and the ensuing partition, Ansari, who sows the first seeds of love in her heart, departs for Dhakha, which causes her a great deal of anguish. Back in Nalapat, when Kamala is fifteen years old, Nair and Balamani Amma discuss her marriage, and he suggests Madhava Das (played by Murali Gopi) of the Ambazhathel family, who is an employee of the Reserve Bank, as the prospective groom. On her wedding night, she envisions Krishna among the audience as she waits for Madhava Das, who is watching a Kathakali performance held at Nalapat. Madhava Das shows up as she ventures out of the bedroom to meet Krishna. After the flashback, as the narrative shifts back to the Holy Spirit Hospital, Kamala expresses her concern about the enormous hospital bill to Das, who hints at her autobiography, which will likely help her make money. S.K. Nair, the chief editor of *Malayalanadu Weekly*, reads *Ente Kadha* and has a conversation with his associate regarding its confessional nature, doubting its authenticity. With Madhava Das by

her side, as they travel back from the hospital, Kamala muses about her loneliness, unattended by her husband. With the release of *Ente Kadha*, her relatives get agitated at the contentious nature of the book, which brings disgrace to the entire family.

In a flashback set in 1949 Bombay, during the early days of their marriage, Madhava Das, owing to her naivety in bed, brings home a sex worker from Red Street to educate her on carnal encounters. Madhava Das sees a changed Kamala that night, behaving as instructed by the sex worker. The following year at Nalapat, she gives birth to her son Monu, after which she remains there for about one and a half years. Kamala Das returns to Bombay in 1952, where she learns about Das's romantic involvement with a young man who has been residing with him in her absence. She becomes so shattered that she contemplates suicide by jumping off the terrace, but Krishna intervenes to save her. Soon, a psychiatrist visits her and advises a relocation of the family to bring back her sanity. They leave for Lonavala, where Das begins to take care of her. In the meantime, her grandmother passes away. The arrival of her penfriend, Carlo, aids in her recovery from both the depressive phase and her grief over her grandmother's loss. Owing to Das's transfer, they shift to Calcutta, where she regains joy and peace of mind.

In 1971, S.K. Nair (played by Ranji Panicker) meets Kamala at her residence in Bombay, and he irks her with his flirtatious undertone to the point where she decides to stop publishing *Ente Kadha* in Malayalanadu. Following his retirement, Das and Kamala relocate to Trivandrum with their children. In Trivandrum, Kamala enters politics and contests unsuccessfully for the Lok Seva

Party from the Trivandrum constituency in the Parliament elections. While in Trivandrum, she receives the news that she has been shortlisted for the Nobel Prize. In 1992, Das passes away, which creates a void in her heart, and she believes that becoming a widow signifies the end of a woman's first life. There are deliberations about selling the Nalapat House, where Kamala asserts that the snake shrine and the Neermatala tree should be retained to keep the memories of Punnayurkulam alive.

As she bears the lousy omen of widowhood, Akbar Ali (played by Anoop Menon), a young Muslim scholar, enters her life and entices her to the point of having a physical relationship with her. At his residence, he promises to marry her and names her Suraiyya, after which she declares her decision to embrace Islam. The Hindu fundamentalists create a ruckus and even pose death threats to Akbar Ali, which makes him retreat from the affair, fearing a communal riot. Nevertheless, Kamala, who decides to remain a Muslim until her death, has to face issues both in her public and private lives. Evading all protests with the assistance of the police, Kamala visits Nalapat House in 2007 and sits beside the Neermatala tree, where she renounces her ultimate lover, Lord Krishna. When the movie comes to a climax, Kamala Das is on her deathbed at her son Jayasurya's house in Pune.

Examining *Aami*, it becomes readily apparent that her private life dominates her public life, ignoring a few significant facets of her life. Hailing from the prestigious Nalapat family that supported Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian independence movement, Kamala Das is acknowledged for her public commitments, which find little scope in the movie. She had been the poetry editor of the Illustrated Weekly of India, president of the Kerala Children's Film Society, chairperson of the

Kerala Sahitya Akademi, and held other important positions. During her childhood, she participated in theatrical activities, which she documents in *My Story*:

My brother and I, with the help and cooperation of our friends, began a theatre movement, calling our group the Vannery Children's Dramatic Society and staged each of our productions on the multilevelled patio of the Nalapat House, hiring gaudy curtains, costumes and the stagehands from the nearest town. (34)

Later in life, she became the president of the Jyotsna Arts and Education Society. She desired to start a residential school hiring teachers from various countries. She used to write poems for the Illustrated Weekly under the name K. Das, and writing became her hobby. She won the PEN Prize in 1963 and could start a bank account in her name. A winner of numerous other accolades, including the Ezhuthachan Award, Vayalar Award, Sahitya Academy Award, Asian Poetry Prize, and Kent Award, she became an outstanding figure in Indian English literature. However, the director ignores these aspects of her life to concentrate exclusively on her personal life, which reflects the shift in biopics from public to private. According to Ellen Cheshire, "It is hard to make the act of sitting and writing in a room visually or emotionally engaging. Hence, the act itself is largely ignored in favour of the complex emotional lives of the writers" (9). Das's first book, *Summer in Calcutta*, a collection of poignant poems, gave her the voice of a reputable poet. The publication of *Summer in Calcutta*, Merrily Weisbord believes, "made her an artistic celebrity, with liberty beyond that of a middle-class housewife" (36). As a member of several

literary clubs, Kamala Das once had to bear the brunt of the government during the 1976 Emergency Period in India. Kamala narrates to Merrily:

By 1976, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's Emergency Act was entrenched, and it became almost impossible for me to hold the conferences," she says, explaining that Gandhi had responded to the movement against corruption and inflation by suspending the constitution and arresting opponents. Nobody was allowed to criticize the government, and yet some of the younger poets in my group began to write lines opposing Mrs Gandhi. (222)

This instance culminated in the secretary of the Prime Minister warning Kamala that the police would arrest her if she continued with the Bahutanrika club, an organisation of young artists and writers, a few of them associated with the Naxalite Movement. A paramount event in Kamala Das's life, where she believes herself to be a victim of an emergency, has not been recorded in the movie. She launched the Lok Seva party, which, according to Joginder Paul, aimed to provide asylum to orphaned mothers and promote secularism (5). In 1984, Das unsuccessfully contested the Parliament elections from the Trivandrum constituency, which, as an exception, has been scantily addressed in the movie.

As a literary celebrity, Kamala Das visited foreign countries like Canada, Columbia, and Qatar. She gave lectures at Concordia University on 'writer as an emotional revolutionary' and also appeared live on Canadian public radio. Merrily recalls, "Kamala address [d] the Writer's Union of Canada, Concordia University's Department of Education., and the South Asian Women's Association" (73). In Columbia, she recited her poetry in a literary gathering that included writers

like Meena Alexander and Amitav Ghosh. An active literary figure, Kamala Das addressed conferences and gave interviews in the media regarding her views on life and writing, which are excluded in the movie.

Aami, as a literary biopic, sets itself in motion with a few lines from Kamala Das's autobiographical verse 'An Introduction' presented with a voice-over:

I am Indian

Very brown

Born in Malabar

I speak three languages

Write in two

Dream in One...

Kamal establishes the subject as a poet by employing these lines, which mirror the poet's self-identity. Replete with voiceovers and flashbacks, *Aami* sets up the protagonist's life in three stages. George F. Custen, in *Bio/Pics*, estimates that "one of the most conventional structures of a life is its division into stages" (150).

Though the movie alternates in time and location, the narrative is meticulously divided into different stages of Kamala Das's life, which, according to an unsigned review in the *Deccan Chronicle*, are, "The first part has what she herself introduced to us – the litterateur's family of Nalapatt, the unadulterated charm of Punnayurkulam, her childhood, early marriage, husband, kids, her eternal lover Lord Krishna, her emotional conflicts and all. The second half runs into a Kamala Das post widowhood, her finding a new love, assuming a different identity, faith and her

life turning topsy-turvy". In contrast to the previously discussed biopics, *Aami* sets forth the childhood of the biopic subject, which is significant enough while adapting the life of a person like Kamala Das into a movie. As the movie traces different stages of her life, from childhood to her death, it ventures to delve deep into the most intimate aspects of her life.

Set in Punnayurkulam, Bombay, and Calcutta, the movie goes back and forth in time and location. *Aami* introduces Kamala Das's childhood at Nalapat House in Punnayurkulam in 1939, where she spends her vacation with her mother and siblings. As a five-year-old girl, Kamala is seen near the Neermatala/Caper tree in the precincts of the ancestral house, where she picks up the flowers that have fallen on the ground. 'Neermatala' being a recurrent motif in Kamala Das's writings, indicates a sense of nostalgia; for Das, the fragrance of the flower conjured up her childhood memories, which eventually inspired her legendary autobiographical novel "Neermatalam Pootha Kalam" in Malayalam. In *My Story*, Kamala Das recalls her childhood, "Near the snake shrine was the rare Nirmatala tree, which burst into bloom every summer with large butter-coloured flowers that filled even the inner rooms with perfume" (13). The same sequence presents her grandmother, her Ammamma, with whom she shares an eternal bond of love, which turned out to be a focal point in many of her works. In her memoir, *A Childhood in Malabar*, she writes, "I could not bear to think of a time when I would no longer love Ammamma. It was her love that nourished my life" (202). In the initial sequences, *Aami* establishes the bond of love shared by Kamala and her *ammamma*/grandmother. The grandmother calls for the goldsmith Narayanan to make her a pair of earrings, from

whom Kamala learns about the Nalapat women who gave up their gold ornaments for the sake of Indian independence. The subsequent shots portray how the grandmother oils Kamala's hair, bathes her, serves her food, and puts her to sleep, which, in a way, suggests that Kamala received motherly love from her grandmother rather than from her mother.

As a biopic that explores the inner conflicts and private domain of the subject, the director tries to portray the insecurities she experiences, even as a child. In one of the scenes, in a conversation with her grand uncle, Nalapat Narayana Menon, little Kamala is apprehensive about whether the family would disown her just as the Nalapat women gave up on their gold ornaments:

KAMALA (doubtfully): Will you give anything to Gandhi if he asks?

NARAYANA MENON (laughs): Indeed. We will give. We will even sacrifice our lives to ensure India's independence.

GRANDMOTHER (enters): Don't disturb your uncle, and come to take a bath.

KAMALA: So, if Gandhi asks, will you give me up also?

GRANDMOTHER: No. We will not give Kamala. Even if Lord Almighty Guruvayurappan asks, I will not give you up, let alone Gandhi. (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 11:48 – 12:09)

The sense of security and assurance that she feels in her grandmother's presence is so strong that she does not want to leave with her parents for Calcutta. Kamala

enjoys the company of the inmates of the Nalapat House, including the maids like Valli. Though caste hierarchies were prevalent then, Kamala was hardly aware of the differences and mingled with the maids at the house. Listening to their discussions and debates, she would hover around them and even try to emulate their practices.

As her father arrives in Nalapat to take her back to Calcutta, the movie shows Kamala's longing for Nalapat intensifying. When Balamani Amma tells him that Kamala is reluctant to travel to Calcutta, the latter is determined to take them back because Kamala must enrol in an English school shortly. The night before Kamala departs for Calcutta, she expresses to her grandmother her desire to have been born as Valli, the household maid, enabling her to stay at Nalapat forever. The following scene captures Kamala's eyes in a close-up shot to enhance her grief and longing for the house and its inmates. The loss of a sense of love and security that she always enjoyed at her grandmother's remained one of the central themes of her writings. In this phase, the movie also attempts to represent the literary heritage of the family with scenes featuring the literary veterans of the time like Vallathol Narayana Menon, P.C. Kuttikrishna Marar, and Changampuzha paying visits to Nalapat Narayana Menon and Balamani Amma. A review of *Aami* in the *Times of India* by Sujit Chandrakumar observes:

Though the director goes back and forth in time while depicting this exhilarating tale of a contemporary and complex character, the narrative is largely simple and straightforward. He begins his tale by tracing Madhavikutty's literary lineage and recreating a bygone era. The story shifts to Kolkata and Mumbai as she grows up.

The film shifts its location to Calcutta to depict the rest of Kamala Das's early years and school days. Even in Calcutta, Kamala is seen among maids like Parukutty and Tripura, with whom she shares her doubts, thoughts, and concerns. In one of the scenes, she confides with Parukutty about her dark skin tone, accusing the cruel God who smeared mud on their bodies. The movie delineates how, as a child, Kamala keeps an emotional distance from her parents—the strict father who followed English customs and etiquette and the mother who pursued her literary career—as they seldom express affection towards her. Although Kamala is least interested, V.M. Nair assigns a British teacher to teach her English. In this particular scene, when the teacher asks her questions like the author of *Romeo and Juliet*, she responds by asking the teacher if she knows Lord Krishna. The film tries to portray Kamala Das as having a distinct personality, even as it attempts to represent her early years.

As *Aami* examines Kamala Das in her teenage years and youth, it switches back and forth in time and setting again. The director, who places more emphasis on the subject's inner life, employs her relationship with her art tutor to portray the start of her adolescent years. During her days in Calcutta, V.M. Nair assigns Hussain Ansari, a Bengali youth, to teach her painting, to whom Kamala takes a fancy. In *My Story*, she recollects, "When I was fourteen, my father arranged for me to have an art tutor. He was twenty-nine, pale-complexioned, and tall. He wore the loose, clinging dress of a rich Bengali" (67). The movie captures this fleeting episode of her love against the backdrop of Indian independence and the subsequent partition. The specific sequence illustrates the commotion and unrest associated with the partition, with a sect of people leaving the country. Due to the social upheaval in the city,

Ansari does not turn up, which disturbs Kamala. In the rain, she sets out in search of him, and when she meets him, he dries her hair and gets her back home. As he leaves, he tells her that he is relocating to Dhaka and will not return, which leaves Kamala heartbroken. She runs to the balcony to see him moving away in the rickshaw, which overlaps with Kamala's voice, "I never again saw that man who sowed the first seeds of love in my life. Like a hazy dream, he disappeared from my life forever" (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 36:44 – 37:02). Through Hussain Ansari's character, the director begins to probe into the private emotions of the subject, who in real life blurs the line between the public and the private. After Hussain Ansari's episode, the movie shifts to Nalapat House, where V.M. Nair introduces Madhava Das as Kamala's prospective groom, "Madhava Das is from the Ambazhathel family, a more reputable family than Nalapat. They are wealthy. He is a rank holder from Presidency College, Madras, and he is currently working at the Reserve Bank" (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 37:05 – 37:17).

The sequence that shows Kamala's wedding portrays Nair as having high regard for Madhava Das. At the same time, Balamani Amma is apprehensive about the considerable age gap between Kamala and Das, which suggests how the director appeals to the subtleties of her private life. Even the maids of the house share their happiness about Kamala getting married to an astute, educated man.

The wedding that takes place in all splendour and grandeur is followed by a Kathakali performance at night, as has been suggested in *My Story* as well, "The Kathakali started after everyone had had dinner and the moon was right above our house, circular and blazing" (84). The movie sketches the intimate scenes on their

wedding night, where Kamala, still a teenager, stays oblivious to Das's sexual advances. The director delves more into her privacy as the plot develops and includes intimate scenes. While analysing the transition from the public to the private in the biopics chosen for the study, the considerable increase in bedroom scenes is quite apparent; the lives of the biopic subjects are shown to move from outside the house to inside the house. In her conversation with Merrily Weisbord, Kamala retrieves her memories of the wedding night:

I was too young. I was excited about the new clothes, jewellery. I was not sad at my wedding. But on the wedding night, I was sad, shocked, grieved. I did not expect such things. I had not even dreamt such physical brutalities would take place. Someone should have taught me the facts of life. Then I wouldn't have hated sex so much. (19)

The movie continues to deliberate Kamala Das's drudgery in a lovelorn marriage where she was deemed only an object for sex. From the point of view of Dennis Bingham, "Female biopics play on tensions between a woman's public achievements and women's traditional orientation to home, marriage and motherhood. In consequence, female biopics often find suffering and therefore drama in a public woman's very inability to make her decisions and discover her own destiny" (213). There is even a scene where Madhava Das hires a sex worker from the red street in Bombay to instruct Kamala on how to behave in bed. Navamy Sudhish, in the review titled '*Aami*: A Pretentious Biopic of Kamala Das' in *The Hindu*, observes, "The scene in which Madhava Das brings a sex worker to groom his teenage bride and the consequent striptease is nothing but cheesy". All through her life, she pined

for love sans sex, which she never received from her husband. Cheshire discerns, "For the women, the films dwell on their victimhood, exploiting their tragedy to a greater degree than their male counterparts..." (8). The film traces Kamala and Madhava Das's private moments in several scenes where she is shown to be cold and detached while he physically dominates her. Kamala Das, in her conversation with Merrily, unfolds the humiliations and tortures she survived in her marital life:

Every night this digging went on and on, and I almost thought he was burying a body every night. No tenderness there was. No preliminaries, nothing. Probably he couldn't love me. At the moment of sexual intercourse with him, I wish he would gather me in his arms after the act. Had he caressed my face or touched my belly, I would not have felt the intense rejection I felt after each union. Then again, he would want. After about fifteen minutes the man gets up again. Bury. Shovel. I felt rotten, like a corpse was within. When I felt his semen in me, I just wanted to wash it out.

(84)

In contrast to the previously examined biopics, *Aami* emphasises the strictly private aspects of the subject through various scenes, especially inquiring into the passionless wedlock and the accompanying monotony.

As the movie advances into Kamala Das's young adulthood, it makes references to her pregnancy and childbirth. In a scene that portrays Kamala's days after the delivery of her first son, she admits to her friend Malathi her desire to be at Nalapat rather than being with Madhava Das in Bombay and that she even forgets that she is married, which, according to her, is bliss. As a movie that attempts to scan

Kamala's private life and inner recesses of her mind, it addresses sensitive and personal issues like Madhava Das's homosexuality, which aggravates the trauma of her passionless marriage, subsequently leading to a bout of depression. Kamala Das in *My Story* hints about Madhava Das's homosexual traits, which she later confirms with Merrily, "My husband was a homosexual, you know" (32). The movie depicts Das and his young boyfriend living together in Kamala's absence and behaving as lovers in her presence. In the scene where Kamala and her son arrive in Bombay after her delivery, she spots a young man in the car whom Das introduces as his friend. As they reach Madhava Das's apartment, the young man runs inside, packs his baggage, and exits, leaving an amorous look at Madhava Das. A subsequent scene portrays them as lovers locked in an embrace where they even ignore Kamala's presence, which devastates her. Slowly plunging into depression, Kamala feels unwelcome in Das's life and even meditates on suicide. The inner voice and contemplations of Kamala's mind, in many instances in the movie, are conveyed through the technique of voiceover, a significant attribute of biopics.

KAMALA (VOICEOVER): I hated all men at that moment. I began to realise that my hopes and dreams of married life were in tatters. I wonder why I cannot go back to my home or leave Das alone. I started to retreat into a shell of my own. I lost my charm entirely. Why could not I muster the courage to commit suicide, though I had brooded over it many a time? My husband did not notice me. He looked at me with disgust. Often, he commented that I was insane. (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 57:55 – 58:59)

The film chronicles Kamala's depressive phase and shows her experiencing hallucinations of Nalapat women and a mysterious young man haunting her. A psychologist who arrives to treat Kamala diagnoses her mind as an amalgamation of reality and fantasy and recommends a relocation to calm her down. On account of his suggestion, the family moves to Lonavala. A medium shot showing Kamala Das against a new seaside house reveals a new *Aami* in a new setting. A song sequence that follows features Kamala's mental delusions and her second pregnancy, along with a changed attitude in Das. In a bizarre state of mind, Kamala has a dream of her grandmother's demise, which proves to be true when she receives a telegram the following day. Through the integration of such personal particulars into the plot, the director continues to attend to her personal ties, making it a biopic of a very private nature. The movie, in a sense, centres on the various relationships that Kamala Das had, of which the one with Carlo is of certain significance as she herself seems confused about the nature of their relationship. *My Story* refers to the arrival of her Italian pen-friend Carlo, which has been partly adapted into the movie:

One day, when I opened the door, there stood, like a short-statured god, a stranger dressed in off-white linen wearing a flat Italian collar. 'I am Carlo,' he said. 'I am your pen-friend...'

I had stopped writing to all my friends after marriage and so felt greatly surprised to see him. He had glossy, straight hair and thick red lips. His hooded eyes gave him enormous sex appeal, but I did not feel attracted to him physically. (113)

The movie sketches scenes where Carlo expresses his love for Kamala; he imagines Kamala as his future wife and wants Kamala to desert her family to leave with him for Italy. Though Kamala is confused about her relationship with Carlo, she soon harbours a repulsive attitude towards him. Meanwhile, Das gets a transfer to Calcutta, where she finds peace, and her mind is absolved of all misgivings. The movie's setting shifts to Calcutta, where Kamala, in a better state of mind, has a period of literary outpouring.

KAMALA (VOICEOVER): It was a time when the dark clouds left my mind. I began to treat my husband with more love. I do not remember my mother pampering me, but I greatly loved my children. In the next two or three years, I wrote many stories, including “Pakshiyude Manam” and *Summer in Calcutta*, which made me a renowned writer. (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 1:15:50 – 1:17:11)

Kamala Das's literary oeuvre, a part of her public life, has largely been overlooked in the movie's script, probably to preserve its private nature. The movie includes only a few shots of Kamala Das engaged in the act of writing her popular works, “Nashtapetta Neelambari” and “Neermatalam Pootha Kaalam”. In another scene where a few students and teachers visit Kamala while she is in Trivandrum, they refer to her works like “NeyPayasam” and “Rajavinte Premabhajanam” in their conversation. *Aami*, classed as a literary biopic, makes only partial references to her canon apart from *My Story/Ente Kadha*, the publication and the ramifications of which are approached in substantial detail.

Though the opening scene of the movie is based on the introductory chapter of *Ente Kadha*, director Kamal maintains that the film is not an adaptation of the autobiography. He feels that this is the most appropriate approach to begin the literary biopic and that he could not have started the film any other way. This scene, set in room 565 of Holy Spirit Hospital in Bombay in 1971, features an ailing Kamala. Anna Vetticad's review of *Aami* in *First Post* states, "*Aami*'s opening scene shows a woman on a hospital bed in 1971, Bombay. Kamala Das, star of the Indian literary firmament, iconoclast, and thinker, is lost in musings that will persist through this 155-minute-long film." As Kamala travels back home from the hospital in a car with Madhava Das, she ruminates on her loveless marriage, accompanied by a voiceover stating, "I have always been an orphan, both emotionally and spiritually. Although I loved my husband deeply, he could never love me. I have never met a man who knows how to love" (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 43:38 – 44:00). Through various voice-overs in the narrative, the movie's title character reiterates the echoes of the passionless marriage with her unending search for pure love, reinforcing the private nature of the biopic. Her autobiography, which deliberates her private attributes, gets ample reference in the movie, which is a part of both her public and private life.

My Story, initially published as *Ente Kadha* in Malayalam, is an outspoken autobiography reflecting Kamala Das's unhappy marriage, loneliness, desire, and relationships with other men, reaping controversies that stirred the reading public. In Linda Anderson's view, autobiography, as a distinct genre, "becomes a site for controversies on a range of ideas, including authorship, selfhood, representation, and

the division between fact and fiction (1-2)". Even though Kamala Das's autobiography is problematic due to her conflicting and paradoxical ideas, the film attempts to include certain aspects related to it. *Aami*, in one of the scenes, presents SK. Nair, the chief editor of the *Malayalanadu* weekly, which serialised *Ente Kadha*, discusses the contentious content of the autobiographical series with V.B.C. Nair, his associate, who feels that it will only help to increase their weekly circulation. As he reads it, he expresses his reservations about its veracity to V.B.C. Nair and wonders if it is a faithful narrative of her life or a work of fiction. However, the latter is concerned only about the weekly's readership.

Regarding Kamala Das's career as a writer, the film extensively examines her controversial autobiography, with repercussions that also affect her personal life. In a scene, an elderly relative arrives at Sarvodayam House with a copy of *Malayalanadu*, pointing out to Balamani Amma how controversial her writing is and how it will bring disgrace to the Nalapat and Ambazhathel families. However, Balamani Amma refuses to acknowledge it, saying Kamala writes what she thinks is right and can hardly be questioned. In response to Sulochana, Kamala's sister, warning her that the readers may misinterpret her, Kamala says that she wants people to read and appreciate it, which suggests her unwavering nature as a writer. The same scene depicts Das introducing his friend Purusottam Rege, a Marathi poet, to Kamala, who wants her to read and translate *Ente Kadha* for him. When Das implores her to read it for him so that he can also enjoy their 'bedroom secrets', she is infuriated and dismisses Rege, saying, "Let him learn Malayalam first and then enjoy the book on his own". In another scene, a Malayali couple meets Kamala at

Sarvodayam house, where the husband is furious with his wife for her unquestioning love for Kamala Das after reading *Ente Kadha*. The wife is so enthralled by the book that she tries to emulate the ways of Madhavikutty, as portrayed in the autobiography. He says his wife has read the book more than fifty times and does not need him anymore and falls for any man she meets; he claims Kamala is insane, which also affects his wife. Annoyed by this, Kamala advises the woman to burn the book and to read the works of Ezhuthachan and Kumaran Asan. The wife, in a state of exhilaration, draws a comparison between herself and Kamala Das, claiming that both of them have hearts yearning for love and inquires why Kamla does not abandon Madhava Das, which enrages her, “Who told you that I wanted to abandon my husband? What I write is not just about life alone. There is an element of imagination interspersed in it. Madhavikutty will write as she pleases” (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 1:27:00 – 1:27:12). Through this dialogue the director exposes the partly fictional nature of the book, which has been a matter of dispute in literary circles, which the author herself later validated. Sujith Chandrakumar writes, “More than once, the filmmaker makes his protagonist assert that what she wrote in *My Story* as well as her other literary works were her life experiences enhanced with imagination.”

My Story was an exceptional autobiography of the times for its explicit and confessional nature, which tagged Kamala Das as a writer of obscenity and even questioned her morals. S.K. Nair, in a scene, divulges to Kamala about the rising demand for his weekly for the sake of *Ente Kadha*. In the same scene, he tries to be flirtatious and indecorous with her; at this point, she resolves to discontinue its

publication in *Malayalanadu*. She receives piles of letters regarding *My Story*, in which the readers express their displeasure at the abrupt suspension of the series. Among the myriad letters, one of them distressed her mind, which has been primarily adapted from *The Love Queen of Malabar*:

Dear Madhavikutty,

I bought *My Story* and was reading it when my father came in the room and saw me. He grabbed it out of my hand saying Kamala Das was a hussy, an evil immoral woman, and he was going to immediately burn the book.

Several weeks later, I went into my parent's room. My mother was asleep and my father was on his side holding the book and gazing at your picture.

My father saw me seeing him. That night he swallowed something and the next morning he was dead. (123)

While the letter unsettles Kamala, Madhava Das calms her, asking her to compose herself, as the readers do not know that the Madhavikutty who lives with him and the one in her imagination are two different entities. The given scene is again the director's attempt to showcase that the Kamala Das he portrays in his movie and the persona she fabricates in her autobiography is entirely different. As the movie progresses, there is a conspicuous change in the treatment of the character of Madhava Das, who eventually becomes Kamala's greatest source of support. In a discussion on *Aami* at the Kerala Literature Festival, Indu Menon, a novelist and short story writer, felt that Kamal has philosophically dealt with *Aami* and tried to bring Madhava Das to the forefront. In a scene, Das calms her baffled mind and

encourages her to write what she feels and not to pay heed to people's comments on her writing.

KAMALA: Why don't you despise me?

MADHAVA DAS: Why should I? The author, Madhavikutty, is a stranger to me. I know only Aami of Nalapat, the mother of my three kids. (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 1:24:37 – 1:24:49)

In her conversation with Merrily Weisbord, Kamala Das indicated the change in Das's attitude toward her: "When I was famous, he respected me, hugged me, and massaged my feet. Life became quite blessed after that" (86). The movie begins to treat Madhava Das with a changed attitude, showcasing his transformation from an indifferent husband to an affectionate partner.

With its location shifted to Trivandrum, the film delves deeper into the lives of Madhava Das and Kamala upon the former's retirement. It shows Madhava Das as a transformed husband who becomes more concerned about Kamala's privacy and well-being. In a scene, he suggests a room upstairs of their new home in Trivandrum where Kamala can stay away from the distractions of guests. Here, the director also attempts to draw attention to the benevolent nature of Kamala through a scene in which a poor farmer and his daughter, a budding poet, visit her, and out of compassion, she gives the scrawny girl her gold bangles. At this point, the movie partially addresses her public life, with two instances: her entry into politics and her nomination for the Nobel Prize, which are shown simultaneously. In the scene, a group of socio-political activists assembled in Kamala Das's drawing room proclaim

that Kamala Das's absence was a loss regarding the cultural sphere of Kerala and that she ought to be a prominent presence in the state's socio-cultural affairs. After Kamala's initial protests about the proposal to join their political party, she ultimately decided to contest the parliament elections after giving it much thought. Das, concerned about her health, intervenes, saying that she needs rest, but later, he also concedes to her decision to join politics. As an independent candidate representing the Lok Seva Party, she contests the 1984 Lok Sabha election but loses badly, forfeiting her deposit money. The movie features the election campaign and its results being declared through the radio while Kamala and her family are eagerly waiting for it. In the same scene, they receive a phone call informing them that Kamala Das has been shortlisted from India for the Nobel Prize for her collection of poems. In fact, the Nobel Committee never publishes a list of nominees, but apparently, someone had nominated her, and she had been informed privately about the nomination. The subsequent scene illustrates a press conference where the journalists ask her questions about being nominated for the Nobel Prize and the Parliament election results. One of the questions concerns the number of her lovers, indicating that the public has always been interested in learning about Kamala Das's personal life.

Meanwhile, Madhava Das passes away. In this particular scene, the camera pans over the sky with dark clouds, followed by a downpour, which signifies the end of a phase in Kamala Das's life. As she desires absolute privacy with her husband's body before his funeral, so does the movie attempt to delve deeper into Kamala Das's private persona. In this scene, as she lies close to his body, she summons up

the memories of Das and his parting words to her, “I am glad, Aami. You have lived with me for so long by enduring my ways. You have taken good care of me, raised our children well, and given me more than I wanted. I am happy” (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 1:43:41 – 1:44:08). While delineating Das's parting words to Kamala, the movie attempts to portray Das from a sentimental perspective that differs from the initial sequences, examining the intensely personal particulars of the biopic subject. As the scene ends, Kamala turns out the lights one by one and lies by the side of his body, where the low-key lighting denotes the pervading gloom and despair. She ruminates, “A woman's first life ends as she enters widowhood. After that, it is her second life” (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 1:46:55 – 1:47:04). This voiceover inadvertently suggests another phase of her life, which wreaked havoc in her public and private lives.

While the movie advances to analyse Kamala Das's later years, it gets increasingly private as it tries to ferret out the most controversial and conflicting aspects of her life. In response to the public's need for a realistic, warts-and-all portrayal of the protagonists, biopic filmmakers nowadays have been known to depart from the adulatory trend to convey an accurate picture of their subject. After Das's demise, the film depicts Kamala Das moving to an apartment in Ernakulam, where she meets Akbar Ali. The movie, now set in 1999, presents Akbar Ali as a thirty-eight-year-old politician, professor, Islamic scholar, and great orator. 'Akbar Ali' is a fictionalised name to avoid legal confrontations and more controversies, as Kamala Das's relationship with this man is still a matter of debate on various media platforms. Her love affair with Akbar Ali has not been publicly acknowledged by his

original name. However, it is mentioned in *The Love Queen of Malabar* as Sadiq Ali, which is also fictional. Merrily acknowledges, "At Kamala's request and my discretion, I have changed names that are irrelevant to understanding Kamala and her work" (271). Merrily records Kamala's letter to her, in which she mentions Sadiq Ali, "Life has changed for me since Nov. 14, when a young man named Sadiq Ali walked in to meet me. He is 38 and has a beautiful smile. Afterwards, he began to woo me on the phone from Abu Dhabi and Dubai, reciting Urdu couplets and telling me of what he would do to me after our marriage" (142). The affair with Sadiq Ali (Akbar Ali in *Aami*) is the most vital romantic entanglement of her later life.

However, open debates have always skirted around the issue due to its explosive nature and public ramifications. Kamala Das has never publicly divulged the actual name of the person, nor has it been published anywhere in the mainstream media, but it has been ingeniously featured in the movie. Although the lover's name has been changed, the actor Anoop Menon has been made up to look remarkably like the alleged person. Sujith Chandrakumar reflects:

This episode of her life, though well-known and spoken about in hush-hush tones, was never really documented for posterity, except perhaps being mentioned in passing by some writers and journalists. It is this bold task that Kamal undertakes knowing full-well that it is fraught with risk. He changes the name of her suitor but goes the whole hog by showing that it wasn't merely at the platonic level.

A man of great erudition, Akbar Ali is initially portrayed as an admirer of Kamala Das, who later plays a decisive role in her life, which even leads to her conversion to

Islam. The unsigned review in the *Deccan Chronicle* points to how Kamal has managed to circumvent libel laws by not naming the politician, "The still disputed 'man in her life' draws too much resemblance to the alleged person discussed and debated post-Kamala Suraiyya's death". The movie strives to delineate their trysts and conversations in a fairly elaborate way while probing into her exceptionally private life. The movie presents the first meeting between Kamala Das and Akbar Ali in her apartment:

KAMALA: I have heard a lot about you, though I am meeting you for the first time.

AKBAR ALI: I have been an admirer of yours for many years. In my opinion, this rendezvous is a gift from the gracious Lord Allah. (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 1:50:57 – 1:51:18)

Akbar Ali goes on to enchant her, quoting a few lines from Urdu verses that praise her smile, which, according to him, is as graceful as her creative endeavours. In their first meeting, he prefers to sit beside her feet, as he feels it is like surrendering his heart before his deity. After leaving her house, Akbar Ali rings her up to tell her that she continues to follow him as a beautiful poem. The movie's review in the *Deccan Chronicle* comments about Akbar Ali's presence in Kamala's life, "He arrives as an ardent fan of the writer, breaks into her solitude, and finally seduces the woman double his age. By the time he leaves, she has got into the skin of Suraiyya." When Akbar Ali calls over the phone on her birthday, she invites him for lunch with her. He gifts her a saree of her favourite shade and his translations of Urdu poets Iqbal and Mirza Ghalib.

In one of their conversations, Kamala narrates an incident at the temple she visited on her birthday and grieves the resentment a Hindu widow has to suffer as a bad omen on auspicious occasions, to which he comments that Islam has high regard for women. The movie hints at the marital status of Akbar Ali when Kamala inquires about his two wives and is doubtful whether love can be shared between two wives.

He vindicates it by saying:

AKBAR ALI: According to the doctrines of Islam, in exceptional situations, a man can marry more than once if he is capable enough to protect and satisfy both women equally. (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 1:59:45 – 1:59:55)

He further expresses his notion of love:

AKBAR ALI: I believe love is like a wild stream that can flow in any direction. We should just direct it as our hearts guide us. (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 2:00:09 – 2:00:20)

These conversations, in a sense, imply the imminent love affair between them, which leads to nothing but anguish and betrayal. Concurrently, Kamala starts to fall for this man, who cajoles her with his soft words and songs. She enunciates her feelings for him in a voiceover:

KAMALA: This young man greatly attracts me—his eloquence, wisdom, songs, and innocent smile—everything about him entices me. It is absolutely a new experience. Unaffected, even by the stress of my age, deep within, I

feel a new, complete woman being born inside me. (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 2:01:04 – 2:01:34)

In a scene where Kamala is seen painting a portrait, Akbar Ali expresses his desire to touch her fingers, which are blessed with expertise in writing and painting, and she grants his wish. Akbar touching her fingers is shown in an extreme close-up shot, which inadvertently denotes the budding passion and romance in the offing. With Akbar, she feels that she is neither Kamala nor Aami but a completely different entity. Their camaraderie becomes so intimate that he extends an invitation for her to stay at his house, which is situated on the bank of a river, sequestered by trees, with frequent fresh breezes—an ideal setting for her to read and write. The movie adapts the scene from *The Love Queen of Malabar*, “I took my nurse Mini and went to his place in my car. I stayed with him for three days. There was a sunlit river, some trees, and a lot of laughter” (142). She receives a warm and cordial welcome at his house, where his wife and the chef, Kuttியamma, are also Kamala Das’s admirers. Akbar, who returns after leaving his wife at her house for a family function, sees Kamala sitting alone by the riverside, which leads them to a romantic encounter. Though the movie refrains from explicitly sketching their amorous encounter, it has been hinted through a dialogue between them:

AKBAR ALI: If you consider this night and these past moments my wantonness, how should I atone for them? If your age is not a barrier and nothing else impedes you, we will be in this house for the rest of our lives.

KAMALA: But won’t you lose many things? Your reputation in society, family, and the like.

AKBAR ALI: I believe in Allah. If He wills, I am not bothered by any kind of loss.

KAMALA: Won't people make fun of us, Akbar?

AKBAR ALI: People identify Madhavikutty as a person who does what she feels is right.

KAMALA: I feel that to get rid of the stigma associated with widowhood, it is better to live as a Muslim. (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 2:12:45 – 2:13:55)

That evening, he names her 'Suraiyya', which translates to "the morning star," and Kamala resolves to embrace Islam. When woven into the narrative, these kinds of intimate moments fortify the director's position on the politics of the biopic, in which he digs out the subject's private domain. However, Kamala Das's intimacy with Dr Hussain, who is presented as her suitor in *The Love Queen of Malabar* after the departure of Akbar Ali, is elided in the movie, probably not to bring in an element of promiscuity.

Kamala Das's conversion to Islam was an extremely controversial event, the speculations of which are still rampant; its depiction in *Aami* inadvertently suggests the dauntless attitude of the recent biopic makers to allude to private and debatable issues in their films. The conversion of a Hindu literary luminary into Islam was not immune to serious repercussions, which Kamala refers to in her conversation with Weisbord:

The Hindu fanatics, Shiv Sena and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) pasted posters all over the place, “Madhavikutty is insane. Put her to death.” I refused the eight policemen sent to protect me. There are young men, all Muslims, now occupying the guest flat and keeping vigil twenty-four hours a day. I have received court orders restraining me from going out or addressing more than six people at a time. Among the Muslims, I have become a cult figure, all dressed in black purdah and learning Arabic. (142)

In the movie, Kamala Das announces her decision to embrace Islam while attending the Library Council seminar at the Press Academy with students of journalism, representatives of the press, and media personnel as the audience. Addressing the audience, she claims that choosing a religion is as facile as choosing an attire, and as for her, she would visit the mosque instead of going to temples. She declares that henceforth, she is not Kamala Das but Kamala Suraiyya. The movie frames scenes where Kamala gets acquainted with the new religion, learning and practising the customs and rituals of Islam. Though she receives support from her family, various Hindu organisations raise their dissent against her conversion. Muslim leaders who came in favour of Kamala later started to dictate the style of her writing; they disapproved of her confessional mode of writing.

Meanwhile, Akbar Ali, threatened by Hindu zealots, is apprehensive of communal riots. In the scene portraying their last meeting, he shares with Kamala his idea of moving to Delhi to evade further problems and seeks her forgiveness for everything that transpired. Kamala, who compares Akbar Ali to a wind that creates ripples in a pond, lets him leave her. Her life after conversion has been so

challenging that she feels confused about her decision to embrace Islam. In a scene, she even asks her maid Mini whether she prefers her as Kamala or Suraiyya, to which Mini responds in silence. Despite being a celebrated Indo-Anglian writer, towards the end of her life, she suffers seclusion and resentment for embracing a religion of her choice. As the film approaches its climax, it renders scenes of Kamala Das visiting the Nalapat house for the last time, where the local Hindu activists forbid her from entering the snake shrine. Unwavering in her decision to enter her ancestral house and the adjoining snake shrine, she ignores the protests and fulfils her desire.

As has already been said, *Aami*, as a biopic, weaves its narrative with the episodes of Kamala Das's private life, which also complementarily manifest the hallucinations and fantasies of her mind. Just as the distinction between her public and private life is indiscernible, so is the contrast between her real and imaginary life. Kamala Das, in the interview with Asianet, states:

As I had a hectic life, I was badly in need of a fantastical world. For our existence, we need an imaginary life, without which the words will lose their charm and life will become a barren land. So, an imaginary life is mandatory. We should have a real life and an imaginary life, like two rivers flowing through parallel paths. Both of these lives should strengthen and complement each other. (Translated by the researcher)

Implying her whimsical bent of mind and her eternal love for Lord Krishna, the movie adopts Lord Krishna as a full-length character acting as her cynosure, her guiding light. In her autobiographical works like *My Story* and *A Childhood in*

Malabar, she mentions the instances where she has had visions of Krishna, marking his eternal presence in her life. In *My Story*, she exemplifies an incident when she envisions Krishna, to whom she says, “Always, always, I shall love you. I told him, not speaking aloud but willing him to hear me, ‘only you will be my husband, only your horoscope will match with mine...’” (87). In her poem titled “Krishna”, she writes:

Your body is my prison, Krishna,
 I cannot see beyond it.
 Your darkness blinds me,
 Your love words shut out the wise world's din. (67)

Raghunath Sahoo believes that Kamala Das does not look for godhead in the figure of Lord Krishna but seeks an ideal lover in him (6). As already seen, the movie primarily shows her life as a series of relationships with other men, but there has always been a fantasy figure. All her search for different kinds of lovers was an unsuccessful attempt at getting the perfect love figure, which for her was Lord Krishna. Throughout her life, Kamala searched for an ideal love, which, in her imagination and fantasies, was always in the form of Lord Krishna.

Lord Krishna first appears as a character in the movie's opening sequence, motivating the sick Kamala to write as she is being admitted to the Bombay hospital. This specific shot with the camera positioned at a high angle shows her in a vulnerable state, where she expresses her apprehensions about her death to Krishna. Lord Krishna's presence and companionship in each stage of her life have assuredly

been rendered in the movie. As a child, Kamala first envisions Krishna when she is sick with a fever in Calcutta. It appears so enchanting to her that she begins to visualise him as a flautist on the street, a milkman, and her rickshaw puller. In her teenage years, she envisages Krishna in her art tutor, Hussain Ansari, whose presence she yearns for. Lord Krishna, whom she presumes is her bosom companion, shares her thoughts and doubts with him:

KAMALA: Krishna, why did you fall in love with Radha, who is older than you?

KRISHNA: Is there any connection between love and one's age?

KAMALA: No?

KRISHNA: One can love anyone at any time. Is it not a universal truth?

KAMALA: Can I love my Krishna?

KRISHNA: Is there any girl in this universe who is not in love with me?

KAMALA: Only I should love my Krishna. (Translated by the researcher, *Aami* 38:05 – 38:33)

The director tries to illustrate how real an entity Lord Krishna was in her life and how she ardently possessed him. In the scene portraying Kamala's wedding night, when there is a Kathakali performance at their house, she visualises him among the audience.

When Kamala decides to commit suicide by jumping off the terrace during a bout of depression, Krishna shows up as her saviour. In the specific scene, Krishna reminds her of the things left undone; he consoles her by affirming that her wounds will heal soon, thus bringing her back to life. In the same scene, Lord Krishna, as her muse, inspires her to write as her heart is overflowing with poetry. He promises to stay with Kamala forever, so she starts writing in his presence. Later, when Carlo appears, Kamala and Krishna discuss Carlo's relationship with her and her decision to leave for Calcutta with her husband and children. In another scene where Kamala is seen perturbed about Krishna deserting her, he reassures her of his love for her; she feels that the abandoned soul of Radha thrives deep within every woman. As she grows old, Kamala Das laments the loss of her youth's freshness and expresses her concern to Krishna that he does not appear whenever she beckons, but Krishna comforts her, saying that she still has the scent of a Neermatala flower. Even when she embraces Islam, she does not abandon Lord Krishna but desires to call him the 'Prophet'. In a scene where her friend Lakshmi asks if she has deserted Krishna, she says they will not find Krishna in his abode at Guruvayur since he is now with her. However, towards the climax of the movie, during her last visit to Punnayurkulam, she gives up her lord there, as she believes it is time to surrender everything in life. The movie maintains Kamala Das's imaginary sensibility through the character of Lord Krishna. For Kamala Das, as Merrily records, "Reality is very drab, as drab as white khaddar—I try to perfect my life by adding things which may not really have happened" (201). The movie's climax is set in 2009 at her son Jayasurya's house in Pune, where Kamala Das is in poor physical condition. In the voiceover that

concludes *Aami*, Kamala compares herself to a wild elephant that isolates itself from other elephants when it is time for death.

Movies based on women primarily focus on their private lives, where the narrative tends to perpetuate a woman's abjection and depravity. Dennis Bingham, in *Whose Lives Are They Anyway*, remarks:

In contrast to Great Man films, however, female biopics overall found conflict and tragedy in a woman's success. A victim, whatever her profession, made a better subject than a survivor with a durable career and a non-traumatic personal life... Female biopics frequently depicted their subjects as certainly or possibly insane made so by the cruelties of a victimizing world or by the subject's insistence on having her own way in the world. (217)

One of the characteristics of the trajectory from the public to the private in the biopic is when the woman becomes a prominent part of the narrative, focusing on her victimhood and making use of their traumatic experiences to a great extent.

Ellen Cheshire believes, "For the women, the films dwell on their victimhood, exploiting their tragedy to a greater degree than their male counterparts..." (8).

While in *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, a significant part of the plot is told from Kanchanamala's perspective, in *Aami*, it is entirely about a woman, which leads to an absolute representation of the private. Both movies prioritise the traumatic personal lives of the women as opposed to the adulatory tone of the 'great men' biopics. Karen Hollinger, following in the tradition of Carolyn Heilbrun's assessment of women's biographies, and two major scholarly critics of the biopic—

George Custen and Dennis Bingham—see the female biopic as denigrating rather than celebrating women as models of accomplishment in the public sphere. (15- 16)

Aami, compared to the previously discussed biopics, is an unreserved exploration of the subject's private life. With the exception of a few sequences from her public life, the film investigates Kamala Das's private life from childhood to old age—possibly in response to the growing interest of a new audience. Courtney Gregg believes, "The paradoxical nature of the yearning to preserve a private life for those who have chosen careers that force them into public scrutiny is no more apparent than in biopics" (25-26). The movie, coupled with the private aspects of her life, pursues the consciousness of Kamala Das, where everything is mediated through her thoughts and fantasies rather than the facts of her private life, which can be checked with others. The verisimilitude of the events cannot be audited with anything else; instead, it is her life seen through the eyes of a woman whose opinions and emotions have always been in flux. By taking Kamala Das's private life to an extreme, *Aami* illustrates how her consciousness portrays her privacy, making the transition from the public to the private explicit and comprehensive.

CONCLUSION

A complex form of creative expression, cinema strives to move the audience to adopt peculiar emotional responses. With the gradual expansion of cinema, a myriad of film genres has evolved, of which the biographical film, or biopic, is a prominent one. In a broader sense, all films attempt to adapt reality in implicit or explicit ways, thus making them pertinent. The biopic, founded on the lives of real individuals, living or dead, and initially an offshoot of historical movies, has been a trend in the West since the early days of cinema. The Indian biopic has recently become prominent with its precursors in mythological and historical movies.

In a regional film industry like Malayalam cinema, the biopic as a film genre, to a great extent, is still in its infancy. Malayalam cinema, which set itself in motion with a social drama like *Vigathakumaran* (1928), later followed by mythological movies, historical movies, literary adaptations, and melodramas, gradually set the stage for the biopic. Even though Malayalam cinema, highly acclaimed for its calibre, has been traditionally rooted in fiction and romance, there have also been movies founded on actual incidents. Movies like *Traffic* (2011), based on how a donor's organ was transported for a heart transplant with the aid of doctors and the traffic police in Chennai, *Virus* (2019), premised on the Nipah virus outbreak in Kozhikode, *2018* (2023), which narrates the devastating floods in 2018 in Kerala, and *Manjummel Boys* (2024), which revolves around the story of a group of friends who visit the Guna caves in Tamil Nadu, where one of them gets trapped, exemplify the recent passion for real incidents. Malayalam cinema, in its transformation phase, seems to be inclined towards narratives based on real individuals or incidents,

perhaps due to the growing interest of the audience in witnessing a story that they are already familiar with *Vimaanam* (2017), built on the life of Saji Thomas, who, despite being dumb and deaf, built a light-weight aircraft; *Vellam* (2021), an inspirational story of Murali Kunnumpurath, an alcoholic turned entrepreneur; and *Kurup* (2021), about Sukumara Kurup, a fugitive from Kerala, are instances of movies based on real individuals but not biopics in the truest sense. Though the industry's predilection for real-life stories is more than evident through these movies, its grip over biopics is still nascent, apart from a few recent releases like *Captain* (2018), based on the life of the legendary footballer V.P. Sathyan and *Ayisha* (2023), which narrates a singular phase in the actress Nilambur Ayisha's life.

Even though the biopic is still an emerging film genre, contemporary filmmakers seek to inquire into the personal and emotional domains of the subject, which is a clear demarcation from the earlier movies based on the public persona of historical figures. The present study is predicated on the hypothesis that Malayalam biopics follow a trajectory that marks a shift from the subject's public life to his or her private life. The thesis examined the five major Malayalam biopics released between 2010 and 2020. The films chosen for the analysis—*Yugapurushan* (2010), *Makaramanju* (2011), *Celluloid* (2013), *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (2015), and *Aami* (2018)—were examined in line with a pattern involving a transition from the public to the private. In the West, the biopic has been a part of cinema since its earliest beginning as a part or subgenre of historical movies. In India, the genre has its origins in mythological and devotional movies. Later, with the advent of historical movies, the portrayal of heroes was closer to romances. Only later, a detailed,

realistic depiction of people in the public sphere began to be delineated through biographical movies. However, of late, the Indian biopic has covered a diverse range of subjects, including inconspicuous personalities and even outlaws, clearly deviating from the traditional hagiographic portrayals of the subjects. Referring to the Malayalam biopic, which was preceded by quasi-biopics that did not reveal the real identity of the subject, anticipating litigation and controversies, is still in the incipient phase.

This study has employed only minimal theoretical insights as it is concerned with the evolution of the Malayalam biopic from the portrayal of the public to the portrayal of the private. It tried to apply the typical aspects of the biopic proposed by theoreticians like George F. Custen, who pointed out the traditional pattern of dividing the subject's life into different stages. The use of a basic tenet like voiceover in biopics changed with their change of focus; that is, the study saw a rise of voiceovers in biopics that focused more on the private lives of the subjects. Rooted in the lives of real individuals, the biopic actors face myriad challenges to get into the skin of the subjects through unique diet patterns, lifestyle changes, and makeovers. Dennis Bingham finds an intrinsic urge in the biopic to dramatise reality to ascertain the director's version of actuality. As an adapted discourse, the biopic is not a literal recreation of a previous text. However, it creates a new history in a novel medium, entirely relying on the director's take on the subject. As a profit-oriented enterprise, the film industry is concerned about the contemporary audience's demand, which consequently accounts for the rise of biopics. Genres like

the biopic acquaint the public with a wide array of affective reactions, captivating them and thus resulting in the biopic boom.

R. Sukumaran's *Yugapurushan* (2010), a movie inspired by the life and teachings of Sree Narayana Guru, in line with early devotional movies, uncovers Sree Narayana Guru as a public figure in the socio-religious sphere of Kerala, excluding his personal or emotional life. The movie establishes the socio-religious milieu of the time by illustrating scenes of brutal atrocities of the upper caste against the lower caste, where they were denied access to temples and schools and even to wear an apparel of their choice. To abolish the vicious caste system prevalent during his time and to elevate the status of the lower castes, Sree Narayana Guru ventured to build temples for them. The movie details the consecrations of temples at Aruvippuram, Murukkumpuzha, and Kalavancode, which allowed entry to all sans caste or creed. *Yugapurushan* delineates how Guru adopted a strong antagonistic stance against the worship of crude gods and irrational rituals, which eventually led to the inception of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam/SNDP, Advaitasramam, and Sarada Matom for the upliftment of the marginalised. Apart from Guru's association with luminaries like Kumaran Asan, Dr Palpu, KC Kuttan, Ayyankali, and Bodhananda Swamikal, the movie also introduces national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore in conversation with Guru. The movie incorporates revolutionary movements like the Ooruttambalam agitation and Vaikom Satyagraha, which are crucial events in the history of Kerala.

Thus, while *Yugapurushan* is comprehensively built on the public life and teachings of Sree Narayana Guru, it imparts only a sketchy account of his private

life. As an early biopic of the decade, it highlights Guru's relevance as a social reformer without revealing his private self.

Directed by Lenin Rajendran, *Makaramanju*, centred around Raja Ravi Varma's life, renders a particular stage in the artist's life as a painter and portrays him as being involved in the act of painting. Though the movie acquaints the audience with many of his paintings, two of his portraits—*Nair Lady Adorning her Hair* and *Urvashi and Pururavas*—are addressed in considerable detail. Adopting the artistic license of a director, Lenin Rajendran ventures to intertwine the love stories of Ravi Varma and his muse Sugandha Bai and the mythical story of the celestial damsel Urvashi and the Chandravamsha King Pururavas. While most of Ravi Varma's artworks illustrated in the movie are his mythological paintings, they also depict a few of his portraits of Hindu gods and goddesses. Further, the movie demonstrates the lithographic press he started in Bombay to produce oleographs of goddesses like Lakshmi and Saraswati. The biopic also features Ravi Varma as a controversial figure who paints semi-nude pictures, for which the Bombay High Court indicted him.

While *Makaramanju* essentially frames the artist at work, it also furnishes minor details of his family by delineating scenes where Ravi Varma's wife consistently grieves over his prolonged absence, thus deeming herself an abandoned wife. The movie delineates a few intimate scenes, too—a few with his wife Bhageerathi and a few with his lover Sugandha Bai, whose existence is still a point of contention. Compared to *Yugapurushan*, *Makaramanju* indicates the commencement of entering the subject's private sphere.

Celluloid (2013), following the life of JC Daniel, the Father of Malayalam Cinema, elucidates the challenges faced by the pioneer during the production of *Vigathakumaran*, the first movie produced in Kerala. By examining the life of a filmmaker, the movie traces JC Daniel's ventures to meet trailblazers of cinema like Dada Saheb Phalke and Nataraja Mudaliar to learn more about cinema. It shows how he finally launched Travancore National Pictures in the Saradavilasam building. The movie brings up the storyline, shooting, and release of *Vigathakumaran* and the repercussions of the same. While pursuing the obscure life of JC Daniel, *Celluloid* also ferrets out the life of P.K. Rosy, a Dalit girl, as the first heroine of Malayalam cinema, which forms the sub-plot of the movie. Initially a kakkarissi player, Rosy became an actress in Daniel's cinema due to the dearth of female actors in Kerala. The movie further details the making and release of *Vigathakumaran*, which was an unsuccessful endeavour. *Vigathakumaran*, released in 1930, infuriated the audience because Rosy, a Dalit girl, played the role of a Nair lady. Hounded by the public, she went into oblivion.

In the second half of the movie, the character of Chelangatt Gopalakrishnan, a prominent film journalist, unveils J.C. Daniel's life, shrouded in obscurity. Through Chelangatt's character, *Celluloid* offers an extensive glimpse of Daniel's private life, where he was subject to depression and penury. The failure of *Vigathakumaran* led him into a brief period of dejection. However, he soon reclaimed his life as a successful dentist, while his second attempt at filmmaking annihilated him without any chance of resurrection. Moreover, the movie presents Daniel's wife, Janet, as a constant presence and an unflinching support both in his

public and private lives. Unlike the earlier biopics, *Celluloid* manifests the private and emotional life of J.C. Daniel, highlighting his depression and solitude, thereby portraying him as a private man.

Ennu Ninte Moideen (2015), based on the life of B.P. Moideen, a local celebrity in Mukkam, a village in Kerala, marks a significant change in the trajectory of the biopic, where the public life is minimally portrayed in order to emphasise the private aspects of the subject. Primarily based on the romance of the Muslim youth Moideen and a Hindu girl, Kanchanamala, the movie unravels the repercussions of an interfaith love affair. Though Moideen was a socio-political activist, his public life is only superficially unveiled in the movie as merely a backdrop to his private life. Apart from an exiguous portrayal of Moideen's public persona—as a member of the People's Socialist Party, as a football player, a sports journalist, and the publisher of the *Sports Herald*, and as the founder of Kerala Kala Mandir- *Ennu Ninte Moideen* explicates the unending love of Moideen and Kanchana. It traces the lovers' rendezvous, the exchange of letters, and how they sustained their love even during a decade of separation. The movie includes details like the invention of a new script to write letters when they get confiscated frequently at Kanchana's house and the honking of his car in a specific pattern that communicates his location to her. Despite enduring hardships and waiting for years, they had to face a series of obstacles, which have been comprehensively manifested in the movie. Moideen's antagonistic relationship with his father, owing to their political differences and the love affair, is crucial to the plot, and it even culminates

in the father stabbing his son. Even after the couple survives a string of impediments in love, fate finally acts as a villain, snatching Moideen away from Knachanamala through a boat wreck. Kanchanamala, who made multiple attempts to end her life, finally decides to live for Moideen at the behest of his mother.

Though the biographies of Moideen copiously discuss his social, cultural, and philanthropic activities, the movie obviates these aspects, thus emphasizing his private life. Even when deciphering his private life, it skips Moideen's nikah with a Muslim girl, probably to preserve his grand image as an eternal lover. *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, compared with the previous biopics, enters the orbit where private lives are placed higher than traditional public activities.

Aami (2018) pivots around the life of the celebrated author Kamala Das and covers the different stages of her life, calling attention to her personal and intensely private emotions. As a writer with a mercurial personality, it has always been challenging to differentiate between Kamala Das's public and private lives; her literary works mostly have their genesis in her personal feelings. Dividing her life into three stages, the movie attempts to capture the illusions and delusions of her mind. While tracing her childhood, the movie introduces to the audience her ancestral house, her attachment to her grandmother, her relationship with the maids, her love for the Nirmatala tree and the snake shrine near the house, and the trauma caused by her forced removal to the alien atmosphere of Calcutta by her parents.

As *Aami* unravels the teenage and adulthood of Kamala, it acquaints the audience with characters like Hussain Ansari, her art tutor to whom she was

attracted, and Madhava Das, her husband, and her Italian penfriend Carlo. It renders the extremely private side of her life, which depicts a forced physical relationship, her trauma of being in a passionless marriage, and Madhava Das's homosexual relationships. The movie incorporates Kamala Das's phase of depression, which leads to a failed suicide attempt. After the death of Madhava Das in her late middle age, she nurtures a companionship with Akbar Ali, a young Muslim scholar, that culminates in a physical relationship. The romantic entanglement with Ali ends in her conversion to Islam but not in the fruition of the affair. In her old age, resisting the protests of Hindu activists, she visits the Nalapat house for the last time. As a biopic, *Aami* signifies the most personal and highly controversial issues in the subject's life, asserting the zeitgeist of biopics in recent times.

The biopics analysed here—*Yugapurushan*, *Makaramanju*, *Celluloid*, *Ennu Ninte Moideen*, and *Aami*—indicate a clear shift of focus from the public lives of the biopic subjects to the private; a persistent and gradual incorporation of private aspects into the diegesis is quite evident in these movies. Taking into account the demands of the contemporary public, the economic imperatives, and the relaxed censorship norms, recent biopic makers venture to illuminate the private and emotional domains of the subjects. A biopic's principal objective is to recount an individual's real-life story from the perspective of its director, which inadvertently demands necessary dramatisation. With only a handful of biopics to its credit, Malayalam cinema is likely to witness an explosion of the same owing to its wider acceptance among the current audience and the prowess of the new directors in

probing into the private world of the subjects. Interactions with biopic makers reveal that there are numerous biopics in the making. So, the directions in which the biopic in Malayalam cinema traverses, in terms of both specialised genres and the focus on private lives without the fear of litigation, will inevitably result in the genre's blossoming.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With a pertinent site in the panorama of cinema, the biopic as a film genre has gained momentum recently in India, which, in an intriguing manner, helps the audience connect with real people and the events associated with them. The genre, apart from dramatising the lives of renowned personalities, which involve their upheavals, moments of crisis, and final victory, also brings to light the lives of the marginalised who have made their voice heard in society. In an era of media proliferation, the biopic serves to shape the public perception of historical persons and events, providing an insight into human experiences and their intricacies. As a replication or extension of the biopic boom in Bollywood, Malayalam cinema has been witnessing a recent rise in biopics, signifying an increasing demand for real-life narratives on screen. Moreover, as the demand escalates, it provides the scope for more movies in this genre with prospective chronicles from several spheres like history, politics, and art.

This thesis takes up a specific aspect of the Malayalam biopic, that is, the thematic evolution from the public to the private. As a part of the advancement of the biopic in Malayalam, there has been an evident shift of focus from the public aspects of the subjects to their private dimensions, which has been examined here with the analysis of five movies released in the last decade. This chapter aims to propose a few recommendations for further studies in the area.

As mentioned earlier, the last decade saw the release of a spate of biopics in Bollywood, which also has its reverberations in Kerala. The escalation in the

production of biopics obviously will pave the way for their subgenres, which might include sports biopics, artist biopics, literary biopics, political biopics, etc., and each one will have its own poetics of representation. For instance, while a sports biopic tends to focus on one major event or sports tournament in the subject's life, an artist biopic might focus on the subject at work and his or her artistic oeuvre. The poetics of each subgenre is anticipated to evolve, and certainly, research needs to be done regarding this aspect of the biopic.

It is relevant to analyse the gender perspectives in the Malayalam biopic as it entails a correlation of cultural ideals, historical perspectives, and the directors' perceptions of the lives of the biopic subjects. With the genre's progression, the gender paradigms are seen to evolve from the conventional and orthodox portrayals of women in a patriarchal context to more sophisticated and inspiring representations of female subjects, hinting at the gradual transition of societal norms and gender roles. As debates and conversations are still rife concerning gender equality, it is vital enough to investigate the gender dimensions presented in biographical movies.

The credibility of biopics is often put into question as they claim to be true portraits of real people, living or dead. Usually, the biopic as a film genre strives to strike a balance between factual account and artistic license, where the former adheres to the true events in the subject's life and the latter, with a view to fascinating the audience, tries to dramatise his or her life by incorporating scenes that enhance their experiences. As a unique genre that tries to hold the scales even

between fidelity and creativity, it demands an investigation into this particular aspect of the biopic, a film genre that connects with the viewers in a personal capacity.

The audience's response to the biopic or its reception often fluctuates between appreciation and criticism, for the genre caters to the public's understanding of renowned personalities, which can raise potential questions about the filmmakers' responsibilities in representing their lives on the silver screen. On the one hand, the audience appreciates biopics for offering a glimpse into the struggles behind the achievements of pioneers in different spheres. On the other hand, it criticises biopics for issues like selective representation of the subjects, mainly based on the predilection of the directors. Another avenue for research on the Malayalam biopic would be to examine the audience's reception because of the different factors that influence them.

As a film genre with distinct appeal among the audience, which allows the audience to connect with the real-life individuals being depicted emotionally, it adopts various marketing strategies for the promotion and subsequent success of these movies. As a burgeoning genre, the Malayalam biopic demands nuanced marketing strategies in which content marketing plays a pivotal role. Apart from that, strategies like casting popular actors in lead roles, releasing biopic trailers on social media, and interviews with the actor, the biopic subject, his or her relatives, and the movie crew are adopted in promoting these films. An inquiry into the diverse marketing methods is imperative as the Malayalam biopic ramps up in the current film scenario.

As noted previously, the biopic has always been a popular genre in the West, unlike in India, where it is only a recent phenomenon. Drawing a comparison between Indian biopics and international biopics is a pertinent area for future research. In addition to thematic differences between Indian biopics being melodramatic with strong emotional appeal and Western biopics emphasising the complex and multifarious nature of the subjects and factual accuracy, there are also differences in narrative techniques, technological aspects, and production values. A comparative study of Indian biopics founded on local settings with a thrust on cultural norms and Western biopics that claim to deal with universal themes has a prospect in the field of academic research.

The scope of research on Indian biopics in general and on Malayalam biopics in particular is vast and diverse, as the nuanced treatment of the subjects' lives and content is constantly evolving. Essentially, the broad spectrum of scholarly investigations into Indian biopics, using different facets of film studies, offers platforms for learning about the genre, which is, by and large, an amalgam of art, history, and life.

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