

# Ecocinecriticism and Cultural Contextualizing: A Study of the adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* into a Malayalam Movie *Kaliyattam*

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The philosophical argument of existence of man extends to nature and everything around him. And thus, the essence of human beings are not just themselves but how they are related to the universe. Though the prevalent utilitarian culture redefines success and identity to humans, in essence and purpose man is related to the world around, and not just to himself. The upsurge in these discussions after the naturalists' claim began with ecological and environment centred discussions that emerged in the 1980s.

The environmental discussions that emerged in the non-literary intellectual sphere slowly spread to the literary and other related discussions. It gained a momentum in the 1990s with the publication of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. And the book laid the foundation for the field in the decades that followed. Taking 'an earth-centred approach to literary studies', Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationships between literature and the physical environment" (xviii).

The ecocritical reading proliferate throughout the genre to every section. The intersection of cinema to environment and ecology lead to the emergence of ecofilms, ecocinecriticism, green film studies or ecocinema. The very first use of the term eco cinema, if not the concept in its present sense, is attributed to Roger C. Anderson's *Ecocinema: A Plan for Preserving Nature*. It was in fact a proposal to film all living organisms in the world and show them in theatres with simulated conditions that resemble natural environments and was a deliberate attempt to show the way of preserving nature. It criticized the attitude of growing detachment from

nature and ecology and thus was more in a sarcastic line. But it also spoke about the possibility of connecting the study of ecology or environment with cinematic texts.

The present-day discussions of ecocinema is developed from the 2004 article *Towards an Ecocinema* of Scott MacDonald. Sheldon Lu calls ecocinema “the cinema with an ecological consciousness. It articulates the relationship of human beings to the physical environment, earth, nature and animals from a biocentric, non-anthropocentric point of view” (2). The popular trends in this regard include extended monographs, examining wildlife and nature documentary, environmental themes, representation and use of animals in film, green perspectives on film, like David Ingram’s *Green Screen*, ecological and environmental issues etc.

The increasing ecological consciousness lead to eco-disaster films and environmental documentaries like *The Day after Tomorrow* and such synergies of ecocriticism and film studies gradually consolidate into the evolution of the new paradigm of ecocinema studies. A broader analysis of ecocinema studies include environmental ethics and aesthetics; environmental justice studies, animal studies, pollution and toxic discourses, health, food and sustainability, post humanism etc. It is much similar to the nature writing or naturalist critics in literary studies. And, the initial impetus of studying natural environments in films lies in a romantic notion of resisting the destruction and conquest of nature. Nevertheless, the studies in environment do not limit there.

There is a remarkable difference between nature documentaries and environmentalist cinema from ecocinema. In nature documentaries, as Karla Armbruster argues, viewers are commonly encouraged to identify with an omniscient narrator and all-seeing camera, assuring an “innocence of involvement in the forces affecting the natural world” even while being allowed a penetration of that world’s most inaccessible reaches (232). Also, the environmentalist cinema is more of pro-environment, pro-conservation, pro sustainability perspective. It is more in the line of activism. On the other hand, ecocinema/ ecofilms/ ecocinecriticism is about the question of eco awareness and eco consciousness. It differs with specific social and cultural backgrounds and in the inclination, differences in audience receptions and even in the lines of transnational cinema. It also discusses about eco- cosmopolitanism. Thus, they generate the sense of nature and its significance.

In the book, *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice* edited by Stephen Rust, Salma Monani and Sean Cubit, they argue, “... the fundamental job of an ecocinema is not to produce pro-environmental narratives shot in a

conventional Hollywood manner (that is, in a manner that implicitly promotes consumption) or even in a conventional documentary manner (although, of course, documentaries can alert us to environmental issues). The job of ecocinema is to provide *new kinds of film experience* that demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship and help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset” (20). Thus, it envisages new vistas in the understanding of the ecological consciousness. The simplest definition of Timothy Morton makes sense here, “ecology means we co-exist”. It relates us to everything around us.

Thus, it is the study of various extensions of ours/ of human beings into the universe. It is in this juncture, that the paper analyses the ecocinecriticism of the adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Othello* into Malayalam gains its significance. When one among the four great tragedies of Shakespeare got adapted into an entirely different and diverse cultural context of India, it must reshape itself and to ‘re-evolve’ to ‘adapt’ itself to this entirely new cultural context. And the paper argues that, this cultural re-shaping is done mainly by making it more like the environment of the place. And this suiting to the environment, made it suitable to the culture of Kerala.

The movie adaptation *Kaliyattam* (the title can be translated into English as ‘The Play of God’) is in the Malayalam language, a language spoken in the southern part of India, Kerala. It came out in the year 1997 and was directed by Jayaraaj. The movie is an adaptation of *Othello* in the backdrop of a typical indigenous performance of the region, *Theyyam*. *Theyyam* is a prominent indigenous art/ dance form of northern Kerala, which has its origin from the tribal culture and is practiced mostly by Hindus. The film was a critical and commercial success and won several awards including the National Film Award (India) for the Best Director and the Best Actor for the year 1997. The character Kannan Perumalayan corresponds to Othello, Thamara to Desdemona and Kanthan the character of Iago.

More than the story line or the methodology through which the story is narrated, or even about the caste intricacies; it is the setting and nature that play a significant role in the cultural ‘contextualizing’ of the play. There was a criticism against the movie that, “*Theyyam* remains the context for, rather than the medium of, the film. But although it seems that director Jayaraj wants to use both Shakespeare and *Theyyam* not to reflect upon either of them so much as upon the question of caste in Kerala, in this respect the film is ultimately disappointing, for it does not do anything with its explosive ingredients and with the astute positioning of Othello as a *Theyyam*

“kolam”(Loomba 131). But it is this disappointment of being away from the explicit discussions of caste and other social issues, that leads to the ‘contextualizing’ of the play to the Indian/ Kerala setting. The prevalent social issues of the region are very much in the air, but they are left undiscussed. This approach of the director laid the foundation for the deliberations on ecocinecriticism of the movie.

Ania Loomba even confesses that the movie is nostalgic, “the film has been accused of nostalgia, of picturing a modern-day Kerala which seems devoid of any signs of modernity and urbanity” (131). It is this picturization of the elements from the nostalgia that makes the adaptation to the cultural scenario of India complete. This pedagogical pertinence for specific audiences can be considered as an offshoot of or manifestation of ecocinema. And here, the ecological sense corresponds to nation and culture- specific narratives. This connection to the environment and sense of nostalgia make the narrative ‘local’. It is this process of localization that makes the work/movie part of the culture. Nevertheless, cinema is unequivocally culturally and materially embedded.

Ecocinecriticism opens us our understanding of ecology and environment. For Nadia Bozak, “ecology, by its very definition, is unrestricted; it is impossible to say where nature stops and culture begins, or vice versa” (15). Usually it is the local narratives that elucidate the celebrating and even conflicting cultural values and attitudes towards the environment. From an ecocritical perspective, the concept of environment cannot be restricted just to the organic world, or one with laws of nature, it is that whole habitat which encircle us, the physical world entangled with the cultural. It is the connection and negotiation with the environment that gives meaning to our existence. And here, cinema engages itself in a constant negotiation with the entangled world around it. Jayaraj’s *Kaliyattam* is no different. It is not about bringing in social issues and the solution to it or about a pure mass entertainer, the challenge here is to place a British play and that of from the first decade 17<sup>th</sup> century, to typically an Indian context. And for that the technique of nature- culture synergy is used by the director.

The easiest way for cultural ‘contextualizing’ is to make the movie, cherish the national and indigenous values of the ‘target’ medium. Through the audiovisual presentations of individuals and habitats, which penetrate deep into the imagination, the cinema makes the task easier. And it is this element of nature, its varied

manifestations, that makes this movie different from the very many adaptations of *Othello* across the world. Rain is a constant, recurrent yet inevitable theme in Malayalam literature and movie. And through rain and other aspects of nature, where it is at an intersection with culture, the eco-consciousness among the people of Kerala gets reflected, also it makes the movie 'desi'. For some critics like Paula Willoquet- Marcondi in *Framing the World: Exploration in Ecocriticism and Film* considers that ecocinema is capable of inspiring progressive eco-political discourse and action among viewers. Consequently, the ecology favoured interpretation of *Kaliyattam*, thus, initiates a strong and fervent political discourse and action.

Ecoart, is also a different manifestation of art and all these points to the very fact of interpreting realities at various levels, much different from the conventional ones. Even the concept of ecocriticism is eclectic. It does not limit to the conventional understandings about ecology. Hence, the conventional ecological reading of *Kaliyattam* itself won't suffice. It discusses about the depiction of reality, limitation of length, exaggerated facts, fiction as representation or misrepresentation, representations of people and land in cinema, ecological cinema production, the conflict between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism defining carcinoma. It encompasses everything that surrounds it. And hence, the nature, the mood, the aspects of culture, the temperament as reflected through the nature, everything adds to the ecocritical reading and thereby a better understanding of concept of contextualizing of the play *Othello*.

Just like the concept of environmental justice, ecocinema invites discussions on historically marginalized and "othered" communities by the mainstream Hollywood and/or other national cinemas. The main character, Kannan Perumalayan, is a theyyam artist is one such incident. More than the issue of caste conflict, the movie projects the presence of such characters in the society. The significance of the practice of theyyam is that apart from being of tribal origin, it is also a form that relies much on the varied aspects of nature. And here, nature is not just a consoling consort, but at times takes up violent forms too. This clash is reflected in the character of the *Othello* equivalent Kannan Perumalayan.

According to Adrian Ivakhiv, "a holistic ecocinecriticism would closely analyse not only the representations found in a film but the telling of the film itself- its discursive and narrative structure, its intertextual relations with the larger world, its capacities for extending or transforming perception of the larger

world- and the actual contexts and effects of the film and its technical and cultural apparatus in the larger world” (18), and it is here the ecocritical reading of *Kaliyattam* makes sense. The different cultural apparatus is offering an extended meaning to the text and it gives an “appropriation” to the text to diverse cultural contexts.

There is even a line of thought in ecocinema that examines films produced by/ with historically marginalized communities that are underrepresented in film- using eco cinema and Fourth cinema of Barclay. And such a study of *Kaliyattam*, in the context of the concept of the Fourth Cinema of Barclay is beyond the scope of the paper. The unsettling dominant narratives and the constructive practices both in history and culture has manipulated not just our psyche, but even the collective memory and intellectual traditions. At this juncture, the re-reading or multiple reading of movies like *Kaliyattam* opens us new vistas of understanding of the realities around us.

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