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Malayalam movie *Kishkindha Kaandam*: A reader-response criticism

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Abstract

The Malayalam film industry has grown into a distinguished field in Indian cinema. Moreover, Molly Wood has carved a niche for itself through the settings, filmmaking techniques, characterization, and realistic features. The aesthetics of nature and its fineness have become feathers to the cap. Following the same legacy *Kishkindha Kaandam* (2024) movie, directed by Dinjith Ayyathan and produced by Joby George Thadathil, holds an indispensable position. Since the movie has left a different impact on the mind of the researcher, reader-response criticism is used to examine this movie in a transformative way. Reader-response criticism is not the analysis of a literary text but the analysis of the response of readers to the text. The reader plays a major role in interpreting the meaning of a text. Meaning inheres not in the text but in the reader. The reader does not merely consume the texts passively; instead, they are actively involved in constructing a meaning out of it. On the whole, this paper sheds light upon the Malayalam movie *Kishkindha Kaandam* from the perspectives of reader-response criticism.

Keywords: *Kishkindha Kaandam*, reader-response criticism, meaning and text

Introduction

Among many modern theories of criticism, Reader-response criticism is a significant one since it lays emphasis on the role of the reader. Reader-response critics shift their focus from conventional cognition of a text into mental operations and responses of readers as their views follow a text on the page before them. They also conceive the meanings of a text, which solely depend upon the 'production' or 'creation' of the individual reader, and neglect a single correct meaning for all readers, either on the linguistic parts or the artistic whole of a text. First of all, these critics' opinions of the primary factors shape into readers' responses, followed by a line that differentiates their subjectivity from the objectivity given in a text. As a conclusion, innovative reading and grasping of meaning, and development of new perspectives are the end products of this criticism. The movie *Kishkindha Kaandam* is taken as a subject matter to analyze on the basis of the Reader-response theory. It is a 2024 Malayalam mystery thriller film directed by Dinjith Ayyathan and written by Bahul Ramesh. The story takes place in the monkey-inhabited Kallapathi reserve forest where the protagonist, ex-military officer Appu Pillai, and his younger son Ajayachandran, a forest officer, live. The casting includes prominent figures like Asif Ali, Vijayaraghavan, Aparna Balamurali, Nizhalgal Ravi, and others. Irrespective of many critical analyses and previous research articles on this movie, this research paper makes one think out of the box. The researcher wishes to dig out the unexplored part of the movie. Effectively, a reader-response criticism of this movie is to unveil the concealed ideas and their relevance to society. Interestingly, this research paper aims to claim the role of minor character Aparna from a different perspective.

Research Questions

This research paper aims to find responses to the arising questions. The initial one is: What type of reader does this paper emphasise? Followed by the query, does the research paper go beyond the idea of subjective reading? The final inquiry: do the findings have any value to empower society?

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Literature Review

Dr. Deepa Prasad L, in her research paper “Looped up Time, Locked up Memories: *Kishkindha Kaandam* and *The Persistence of Memory*,” compares the similarities between the movie and the painting regarding time, memory, and their interconnectedness with experience and perception. Further justifying the title, how time gets looped up and memories get locked up for the character Appu Pillai.

In the article “Reframing Vulnerability: A Case Study of *Kishkindha Kaandam*,” Maria Mathews stresses that the protagonist of the film, Appu Pillai, an elderly man with cognitive decline, exemplifies how ontological vulnerability can serve as a paradoxical source of agency and protection.

Research Gap

On account of analyzing these articles, it is evident that the movie *Kishkindha Kaandam* is viewed mainly from the perspective of the protagonist explicitly. Moreover, these works epitomize the researchers as ‘implied readers’. The role of the ‘actual reader’, the implicit facts of the movie are unexplored, and so the reader-response criticism to this movie is a novel idea to proceed further.

Research Methodology

Reader-response theory is the overall strategy to examine the movie *Kishkindha Kaandam*. The researcher is apathetic towards the character Appu and the monotonous first part of the movie. In the event of preventing his prejudices from interrupting the research, he brings them under bracketing.

Main Text

The focus of reader-response theory is to emphasize the role of the reader in the construction of meanings in a text. It leads to studying how a text is being received by readers. ‘Phenomenology’ and ‘Hermeneutics’ are the key concepts to proceed with reader-response theory. ‘Phenomenon’ means the world as we perceive it, and ‘noumenon’ is the world as it really is. Therefore, phenomenology derives the individual perception of the world. Furthermore, Edmund Husserl, the German philosopher who is the father of phenomenology, is well-known for his book *Logical Investigations*. On the other hand, ‘Hermeneutics’ also shares the essence of reader-response theory, which deals with the study of interpretation. Its key exponent, Friedrich Schleiermacher, tells hermeneutics is not only for religious texts but for all texts. One can comprehend that it is suitable for any art form, including films. So this criticism has a meaningful effect in dealing with the movie *Kishkindha Kaandam*.

To begin with the analysis, it is much convenient to quote the ‘Rabbit-duck illusion’ made popular by Ludwig Wittgenstein. He included it in his *Philosophical Investigations* as a means of describing two different ways of seeing, ‘seeing that’ versus ‘seeing as’. The same image appears to be a rabbit, and alternatively appears to be a duck. In the same sense, Thom Kuhn, the philosopher of science, used the rabbit-duck illusion as a metaphor for revolutionary change in science, illustrating the way in which a paradigm shift could cause one to see the same information in an entirely different way. In accordance with his idea, reader-response theory applies to this movie. While earlier researchers of this movie, along with the audience, view this movie as a duck, this paper, through the lens of reader-response theory, views it as a rabbit. Besides, David

Bliche, a reader-response critic, comes out with his book *Subjective Criticism*. He mentions New Criticism as Objective Criticism, yet reader-response criticism as Subjective Criticism. A Subjective Criticism of this movie sidelines the protagonist Appu Pillai and sets its focus on Aparna, his daughter-in-law. Upcoming critics’ notions help one to strengthen the viewpoint for this minor character.

Notably, Stanley Fish, the linchpin of reader-response theory, counter-argues with the ideas of the New Critics in his book *Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics*. ‘Affective Fallacy’ is the term coined by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, which means a text should not be analyzed based on its emotional appeal and readers’ response. Fish counterstrikes the same as ‘Affective Stylistics’, not a fallacy but a style of reading. He further elaborates meaning is an event, not fixed. It includes a close reading of the text, tracking response and meaning as an activity. These valid points are more than enough for one to dig out the hidden meanings of the movie.

Based on the above-mentioned views, here is a recap of the movie from a different standpoint. Aparna is getting married to Ajayan, Appu Pillai’s youngest son. Since he marries for the second time, it happens simply in the registered office. The protagonist Appu Pillai is no longer a part of this marriage. The new bride is unwelcomed by her father-in-law at her first visit to her in-law’s home. In the late evening, the newly married couple connects with Appu’s elder son, who has settled abroad with his family, via video call. Through a conversation with Ajayan’s colleague, it is apparent that Aparna has dropped her IT profession in Bangalore and has quit her passion for travel and acting on the grounds of marrying Ajayan. The strict father-in-law never allows her into his room, besides ignoring conversation with her conversation. The heroine volunteers herself as a detective to find out the reasons for Ajay’s first wife’s demise and their missing son. Her concern for them is never recognized. Finally, the hero unveils the hidden secrets only after her constant urge. The miserable part arises when she consoles herself as a member of this unwelcomed family and joins hands with Ajayan in search of his dead son for the sake of society.

It is essential to understand and appreciate art, depending on the background and cultural mindset of the audience. This is what Hans Robert Jauss, a popular Reception theorist, signifies on how a text is received across ages. Moreover, he deals with the concept ‘Horizon of expectations’ in the book *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*. In the case of this movie, the primary intention of the audience is to solve the puzzle in the arising mystery thriller plot. In the era of women’s empowerment, this movie fails to answer the audience’s expectations for women’s roles. So the devastating projection of women makes way for critique. The paper elaborates the same with other critics’ views.

Wolf Gang Iser, a key figure in reader-response theory, discusses the concepts of the ‘implied reader’ and the ‘actual reader’ in his work *The Implied Reader*. While the earlier is a hypothetical construct within the text itself, representing the kind of reader whose attitudes, knowledge, and perspectives the author seems to expect the text to evoke, the latter is the real, individual reader who brings one’s own experiences and subjective interpretations to the text, interacting with it in a less predictable way than the implied reader. When the implied reader empathizes with the protagonist Appu for his age and medical condition, the

actual reader pities for heroine Aparna. In one sense, the implied reader finds Ajayan as a perfect son, but in another sense, the actual reader deducts him as a dad-pleasing son who has changed a passionate, professional IT woman into an idle housewife. Iser views reading as a dynamic process where the actual reader fills the gap of the text to make its potential effective. So the gap for Aparna is unveiled only by the 'actual reader'.

The motive of the research is to elaborate on the difference between 'closed text' and 'open text'. This is what Umberto Eco, the Italian literary critic and semiotician, discusses in his corpus *The Role of the Reader*. The first type says about a particular interpretation of any work, and the second type says about diverse readings. The movie *Kishkindha Kaandam* aptly fits its shoes in the second way. It not only sets its focus upon unsolved puzzles but expands beyond that. It interrogates the *Profession for Women* and *A Room of One's Own* (Virginia Woolf). The passive representation of women characters throughout the movie is crucial to note. There is no significance for the late Appu's wife even in dialogue or in photos. Appu's eldest son stays far away with his family since the home is an ill-suited place for women. Ajayan's first wife died of cancer, and grief for his dead son. The role of Aparna is only to find the conundrum. She never receives love and attention in return. Consequently, this residence stands as *A Doll's House* (Henrik Ibsen). As a deduction, the search for Ajayan's son and Appu's investigation continue in a circular plot. Aparna is an object who traps in the whirlwind.

Findings

Here are the solutions to the raised questions. This paper emphasises the 'actual reader', who interprets innovatively, instead of the 'implied reader', who follows in the footsteps of the author. While the latter comprehends the movie as a mystery thriller, the former comes out with a sparkling idea of feminist claim. Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher, underlines the concept 'Dasein', which means the human existence, being-in-the-world. It describes how humans are deeply embedded in and relate to their world, not separate from it. In that sense, this concept demands the existence of Aparna in the family. Since it is void, this paper brings it to the spotlight. Explicitly, one may view Aparna's role as untie the knots in the family, but implicitly, such existence is unusable to her. So the curiosity for Aparna's dasein ends in distress. This paper attempts to have a deep dive into the participation of women in a male-dominated family and its necessity to be fixed. Predominantly, such consciousness will evolve to empower society.

Summation

Roland Barthes, the French literary theorist, philosopher, critic, ends his essay *The Death of the Author* with these words, "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author". This saying aptly fits this research paper since it arouses the 'actual reader' by neglecting the movie creator's point of view. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the popular Nigerian writer in her book *We Should All Be Feminists* claims, "My own definition of a feminist is a man or a woman who says, 'Yes, there's a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better'. All of us, women and men, must do better" (48). In accordance with her statement, we should all be feminists, even the director of the movie fails to be. Additionally, the character

Aparna herself remains unmindful of it. In essence, this research paper, as a reader-response criticism, stimulates the 'actual reader' which leads the road into women empowerment and inquiring their roles, representations. More than that, the affective stylistics keeps up the spirit for this movie to be an open text, with an anticipation of numerous perceptions.

Future Scope of Study

Throughout the movie forest region and natural setting have been used as its backdrop. Many missing objects are found amidst trees and buried in soil. Frequently, Appu burns his findings in the forest. Such representations pave the way to examine this movie on the basis of eco-criticism theory. Furthermore, considering the women characters commensurate with nature, this movie keeps the hope of the eco-feminism theory alive.

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