



Migration And Nostalgia In Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract: Migration to the Gulf has been one of the most transformative socio-economic movements in modern Kerala's history. Beginning in the 1970s, this migration reshaped the state's economy, family structures, and collective imagination. Malayalam cinema is an art form deeply embedded in Malayali social consciousness and it has continuously engaged with the figure of the Gulf Malayali, portraying him as a symbol of aspiration, alienation, and nostalgia. This paper examines the cinematic representation of Gulf migration in Malayalam films, tracing its evolution from early idealized portrayals to recent introspective and critical narratives. Through close readings of the movies Arabikatha (2007), Pathemari (2015), and Aadujeevitham (2024) the study explores how Malayalam cinema visualizes the emotional, ideological, and cultural dimensions of migration and nostalgia. Hence the study explores to constructing a collective memory of the migrant experience in Kerala.

Index Terms - Migration, Nostalgia, Malayalam Cinema, Gulf Malayali, Diaspora, Cultural Identity.

Introduction

Migration has long been a defining feature of Kerala's modern history and shaping Kerala's economy and cultural imagination. Among Kerala's many migratory movements, the Gulf migration stands out for its magnitude and enduring impact. Beginning in the early 1970s, following the oil boom in West Asia, thousands of Malayali people travelled to gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the U A E, Kuwait, and Oman in search of employment. The Gulf dream started as a means of economic survival gradually transformed into powerful cultural aspiration. Over time, it came to represent not just financial success, but also the promise of social mobility and the captivating of modern life. The migration wave created a new social category in Kerala called the 'Pravasi Malayali' whose remittances reshaped Kerala's economic and social landscapes. Gulf money brought visible transformations to build new houses, vehicles, consumer goods, and aspirations. The absence of the migrant changed traditional family life and created new feelings of waiting, longing, and distance. The Gulf was not just a place to work but it became an emotional and cultural space that shaped what it means to be a Malayali. Malayalam cinema, with its deep connection to the Kerala's everyday life and collective consciousness has served as both a mirror and a critique of this phenomenon. From early humorous depictions of the 'Gulf returnee' to the later explorations of alienation and loss, cinema has mapped the shifting meanings of migration. The Gulf Malayali stands between hope and loneliness. He is both a provider for his family and a wanderer far from home. He represents success, yet he also carries silent pain.

The Gulf Dream and Early Representations

From the late 1960s, migration to the Gulf became one of the most important stories in Kerala history. According to the Kerala Migration Survey 2023, about 2.2 million people from Kerala are living abroad, and around 1.8 million have returned home. These numbers show how deeply migration has shaped Kerala's society and culture.

Early Malayalam films looked at this reality with both admiration and irony. *Vilkkannundu Swapnangal (1980)*, the first Malayalam movie shot in the Gulf, showed migration as both a dream and a struggle. The main character earns money abroad but feels emotionally lost when he comes back home. Many films of that time presented the ‘Gulf returnee’ as a comic figure as someone with gold watches and luxury items, yet disconnected from his roots. Even with wealth, he remains a stranger in his own village.

Movies like *Varavelppu (1989)* and *Garshom (1999)* used humour and irony to show the gap between the dream of the Gulf and its harsh reality. In these films, the Gulf is not just a place but it becomes a symbol of ambition that slowly takes away one’s sense of belonging. When migrants return, they realize that both they and their homeland have changed, creating a distance that cannot be repaired.

Reflective Turn of Nostalgia and Alienation

By the early 2000s, Malayalam cinema started to portray migration not just as an economic journey but as an emotional and psychological experience. Films like *Arabikkatha (2007)*, *Pathemari (2015)*, and *Aadujeevitham (2024)* marked a shift from stories of success and prosperity to those of loneliness, alienation, and longing. These films show how migration divides a person’s sense of self. These films also show struggle of Gulf Malayali between the homeland left behind and the foreign land that never fully feels like home.

In *Arabikkatha*, the protagonist’s idealism clashes with the harsh realities of migrant life. It revealing how globalization reshapes human relationships. *Pathemari* tells the quiet tragedy of a man who sacrifices his entire life for his family. Similarly, *Aadujeevitham*, based on Benyamin’s Malayalam novel, captures the physical and mental struggle of a man trapped in the desert. *Aadujeevitham* symbolizing the alienation faced by thousands of Gulf migrants.

through these films, Malayalam cinema reflects this universal feeling of being ‘in between’ two worlds which is never completely home, yet never entirely away.

Ideological Displacement in Arabikkatha

In *Arabikkatha*, Lal Jose portrays “Cuba” Mukundan, a staunch leftist who reluctantly takes up work in Dubai. The film uses his journey to dramatize ideological exile. his Marxist convictions collide with the capitalist realities of the Gulf. The desert landscape becomes a metaphor for both material prosperity and moral emptiness. The film suggests that migration not only dislocates the body but also fragments the ideology and ethics that once grounded it.

Emotional Absence and Domestic Displacement in Pathemari

Salim Ahamed’s *Pathemari* offers a poignant portrayal of a first-generation migrant, Pallickal Narayanan who leaves Kerala in the 1960s to support his family. His absence defines the emotional geography of the household. His wife and children live in the shadows of his sacrifices. The film frames migration as both an act of love and a form of erasure. It means the father’s presence is reduced to remittances his voice mediated through telephone calls and letters. Nostalgia, here, becomes not a yearning for place but for lost intimacy and unfulfilled time.

The film also situates the personal within the structural. By 2015 NRI deposits reached higher levels. *Pathemari* shows these statistics, revealing the invisible emotional cost behind the state’s economic success.

Survival and Dehumanisation in Aadujeevitham

Blessy’s *Aadujeevitham (The Goat Life)* adapted from Benyamin’s famous novel of the same name offers one of the most powerful portrayals of a migrant’s suffering in Malayalam cinema. The story is based on real-life events. It follows Najeeb, a Malayali man who travels to Saudi Arabia in search of a better life but ends up enslaved on a desert farm. The vast empty desert becomes a symbol of isolation and despair. This is showing how migration can turn into a struggle for survival.

Unlike earlier Malayalam films that presented the Gulf as a land of dreams or success *Aadujeevitham* exposes the harsh realities faced by many workers time to time. It focuses not on the wealth or nostalgia of return but on the pain and loss of identity in a foreign land. Nostalgia here becomes a form of resistance. Najeeb's memories of home, family, and freedom keep him alive in the face of extreme suffering.

The film echoes the themes which explore displacement, memory, and the human cost of migration.

Nostalgia as Cultural Memory

Across these films, nostalgia operates on two intertwined levels, those are personal and collective.

On the personal plane, it manifests as longing for home, kinship, and identity. On the collective level, it reflects Kerala's yearning for a morally cohesive, pre-globalized past. The Gulf Malayali becomes both a symbol of success and an emblem of loss.

In *Arabikkatha*, nostalgia is ideological. Mukundan's longing for a purer, socialist Kerala mirrors the disillusionment of a generation caught between idealism and neoliberal transformation.

In *Pathemari*, nostalgia is familial and temporal. Narayanan's memories of home are frozen in the 1960s even as the real Kerala modernizes beyond recognition.

In *Aadujeevitham*, nostalgia becomes existential. The longing not just for home but for humanity itself.

Malayalam cinema has played an important role in creating a cultural memory of migration. It does not only show how migration changed Kerala's economy and society, but also how it affected people's emotions and relationships in the kerala . The films tell collective stories of longing, separation, and hope that many Malayalees share.

Common images appear again and again. The vast sea that separates the migrant from home, the endless desert that represents loneliness, the letters and phone calls that keep families connected and the empty house that waits for someone's return. These symbols remind viewers of both the dreams and the pain that come with life abroad.

Malayalam cinema preserves the experiences of migration as part of Kerala's cultural identity. It helps people remember not just what was gained through migration, but also what was lost. In this way cinema becomes a mirror of collective memory and capturing the emotions, sacrifices, and nostalgia that define the Gulf Malayali experience.

Return, Rupture, and the Impossible Homecoming

The idea of "return" is a key theme in stories about migration. In the beginning, Malayalam films showed return as a happy ending process . Return is a sign that the migrant had achieved success and could finally come home. But in later films this return became more painful and uncertain. When the migrant comes back he often finds that home has changed beyond recognition. The place he dreamed of returning to no longer exists and he himself has also changed.

In *Pathemari*, Narayanan's return to Kerala is full of sadness and irony. He comes back to a land that has been reshaped by Gulf migration . In *Arabikkatha*, the hero's journey ends not with peace but with confusion. He begins to question his beliefs and his sense of belonging. *Aadujeevitham* takes this feeling even deeper. The main character's escape from the desert is not a victory but a painful rebirth. Though he reaches home, he carries the scars of his suffering and cannot truly return to the life he left behind.

These films show that nostalgia is not simply about going back. It is about remembering and realizing that the past cannot be rebuilt. The longing for home really turns into a quiet sadness and a reflection on what has been lost forever. In this way Malayalam cinema turns the idea of 'return' into a powerful story of memory, change, and the impossibility of going home again.

Conclusion

The story of Gulf migration in Malayalam cinema is ultimately a story about longing, loss, and identity. Through decades of cinematic engagement filmmakers have transformed the figure of the Prava'si Malayali'. Gulf migration in Malayalam cinema is a symbol of aspiration and success into a deeply human portrait of displacement and nostalgia. What began as a dream of economic liberation gradually became a complex emotional narrative . This reality shows one that captures both the pride of achievement and the ache of absence.

Films like *Arabikkatha*, *Pathemari*, and *Aadujeevitham* have expanded the boundaries of Malayalam cinema. These films turning migration from a social reality into an aesthetic and philosophical inquiry. Each of these films in its own way explores the fragile balance between belonging and estrangement. The Gulf becomes not just a geographical space but an emotional landscape where hope and despair coexist.

these films reveal nostalgia is not merely a sentimental recollection of the past but it is an act of survival and remembrance. It connects individuals to their roots even as they drift farther from them. Cinema thus becomes a cultural archive that preserves Kerala's collective memory of migration. that means a memory filled with dreams, sacrifices and silences.

Malayalam cinema also redefines reimagining the Gulf Malayali and what it means to be Malayali itself. The migrant's journey across seas, deserts, and time mirrors Kerala's own journey through modernity, globalization, and cultural transformation. The longing that fills these screen narratives reminds us that migration is never just a movement of bodies but a movement of hearts and self. In the end Malayalam cinema speaks of not a physical place, but a feeling. It speaks more on ever shifting space between memory and hope between the world left behind and the world yet to be found.

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