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The Banality of Mourning: Ritual, Community, and the Social Performance of Death in the Malayalam Film Ee. Ma. Yau.

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Abstract:

This paper examines the Malayalam film Ee. Ma. Yau. as a critical exploration of the banality of mourning and presents death as a banal social process deeply embedded within the societal structures. It closely studies the spectacle of performance associated with death rites and reflects upon the human experience shaped by the mundane structures of society. Institutional authority, communal surveillance, and repetitive social practices continuously disrupt the funeral rituals in the film. This paper seeks to account for the deeper philosophical engagement with banality, triviality and everydayness of death. It presents mourning as a site of failed communitas, where meaning is continually deferred. It attempts to renegotiate the nexus between death, ritual, community and mundanity, exposing the hidden vulnerabilities of a society in the wake of major upheavals. The film offers a compelling vision of the modern world, where even death is absorbed into the banality of everyday life.

Keywords: Banality of Mourning, Death Rituals, Social Performance, Everyday, Malayalam Cinema.

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Introduction

Death is a major occurrence across human societies throughout history, bringing about existential upheaval. Funeral rites serve as complex social mechanisms that help the living cope with the loss. As argued by Victor Turner and Émile Durkheim, mourning practices are conceived as moments in which communal hierarchies are temporarily dissolved, and collective solidarity is reinforced (Durkheim 212; Turner 94). The death rites provide the community with an outlet for cohesion and solidarity by transforming personal grief into a collective cultural performance. However, this assumption is challenged by many cultural representations in which death is portrayed not as a moment of epic tragedy or irrevocable personal loss, but as something far more ordinary and diffuse.

Lijo Jose Pellissery's film Ee. Ma. Yau. offers a refreshing perspective in which death is stripped of its usual cinematic grandeur and affords no transformative possibilities for those who remain. It is not glorified as a moment of transcendence that evokes existential reflection among the descendants. The film, directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery and based on a screenplay written by P. F. Mathews, is set in the coastal Latin Catholic fishing village of Chellanam in Kerala. It revolves around the sudden death of a village elder, Vavachan Mesthiri. The film departs from traditional spiritual portrayals of mourning and death, instead presenting them as emerging from the banality of everyday life. Mundane negotiations, personal resentments, financial calculations and speculations surround his death. Logistical concerns and social performance outweigh grief, and moaning ceases to be a cathartic experience.

This paper argues that Ee. Ma. Yau. exposes the banality of mourning, where the structures that are intended to sacralise death become incorporated into the banal rhythms and repetitive routines of social life. Death does not bring about even a temporary communal togetherness; it reveals the fragility and vulnerability of a society in the wake of something as

perturbing as death. The film reveals that death is constructed not as a sacred rite of passage, but as a complex network governed by institutional authority, communal surveillance, and mundane negotiations.

Martin Heidegger, in his work *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics World, Finitude, Solitude,* says: "Boredom – who is not acquainted with it in the most varied forms and disguises in which it arises, in the way it often befalls us, only for a moment, the way it torments and depresses us for longer periods too" (79). Boredom is an affective condition characterised by temporal stagnation, repetition, and a pervasive absence of meaning where the subject fails to be engaged in any significant way. Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her famous work *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind,* talks about boredom as "it is an all-purpose index of dissatisfaction" (581). She says, "the inner life comes to be seen as consequential, therefore its inadequacies invite attention. The concept of boredom serves as an all-purpose register of inadequacy" (23).

When such conditions permeate ritual contexts, mourning risks becoming an empty, mechanical enactment in which the gestures of grief assume greater significance than grief itself.

Ee. Ma. Yau. reveals how boredom permeates mourning and robs death, of its existential intensity. According to Elizabeth Goodstein, "while boredom appears to be a private experience of primarily subjective significance, its very pervasiveness marks it as a socially meaningful phenomenon" (12). Boredom becomes the affective condition through which the villagers experience the grief of loss. Mourning is situated within structures of everyday monotony, ritualised passage of time, and the exhaustion of meaning. Sean Desmond Healy, in his work *Boredom, Self and Culture,* refers to the unpleasantness of boredom through a series of evocative phrases, describing it as" the emotional incubus" (16), "a deep-seated

agony" (28), "the escalating apprehension of the void" (92) and "the collapse of meaning" (99).

Boredom has long been understood as a mass phenomenon that manifests within collective settings. Communal boredom arises when individuals experience boredom *en masse* (Kierkegaard 228), often as a result of the absence of meaningful stimuli. In group settings structured by empty routine, "the gift for listening is lost, and the community of listeners disappears" (Benjamin 91), leading to a collective withdrawal. Such prolonged endurance produces a shared affective state of weariness among the mourners, reinforcing societal codes through collective stagnation and repetition. They become a community united not by a tragedy, but by sharing boredom.

The narrative structure of Ee. Ma. Yau. portrays mourning as a banal social process instead of an intense emotional experience. Spanning across the time frame of one night and a day, the film unveils the social drama and the institutional control behind the death and burial of a poor commoner. Mourning is presented as a socially regulated performance where the performers display appropriate levels of grief under the vigil of the community. The members of the community oscillate between being participants and audience, according to the requirements of the social performance.

The sociological concept of the "dramaturgical analysis of everyday interaction," developed by Erving Goffman, posits that individuals are continually engaged in forms of performance to manage the impressions they convey to others (22). Mourning in the film can thus be interpreted as a set of socially variable performances of lament, in which individuals enact prescribed forms of sorrow to reaffirm their identities and positions within the community. "Lived experience transforms human beings—and the larger social circles in which they partake - cognitively, emotionally, and morally, and therefore significantly contributes to the transmission of ideas and formation of structures" (Horvath et al. 2). Thus,

Vavachan Mesthiri's death turns the household into a public stage of the enactments of grief which are interpreted and judged by the audience. In the close-knit community depicted in the film, these social performances are crucial and subject to communal regulation.

The portrayal of death in this film can be analysed based on Hannah Arendt's influential formulation of the "banality of evil," while analysing the trial of Adolf Eichmann. It shows how moral catastrophes can emerge from seemingly trivial bureaucratic workings and unflinching adherence to rules (287). Although her argument addresses political violence rather than funeral practices, it can be extended to demonstrate how the theory of banality applies to the mundane, everyday practices of life, and how violence arises from the bureaucratic and institutional banality embedded within social structures. When applied to funeral rites, the concept of banality suggests that death is experienced not as a rupture in the patterned flow of life—demanding emotionally charged expressions—but as an event managed through social and institutional frameworks.

As Saikat Majumdar says, when bureaucracy invades social life, the events become devoid of deeper meaning and they are met with the "banality of power", where profound events are met with a clinical, "medical" indifference (166). By disciplining grief into orderly, almost mechanical performances, the film transforms the funeral into a carefully orchestrated, banal social process.

Majumdar says:

> A fury of passion, Zygmunt Bauman has argued unforgettably in Modernity and the Holocaust (1991), might help you kill sixty people. To kill six million, however, passion is irrelevant. What you need is a bureaucracy. Drain the horror, empty the pity and terror. Bring in the filing cabinets. Be clinically indifferent. Killing, Eichmann had uttered business-like, is a medical matter. If Renaissance humanism had dethroned the fury of the supernatural and introduced human beings as the true

> protagonists of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy, the Enlightenment re-carved the human soul with the corporeal body of reason: the machine. And the filing cabinet (166).

Arendt famously argued that "bureaucratic systems have the capacity to transform morally significant actions into routine administrative tasks that are performed without reflective thoughts" (287). In Ee.Ma.Yau., death becomes subject to such banal procedural logic. Ee. Ma. Yau. demonstrates that death is stripped of affect and compartmentalised into routine procedures: the doctor refuses to certify death and delegates the task to an unsympathetic head nurse instead; the Vicar turns against the family, further complicating the ritual process, and the police fail to arrive at the house, exposing the bureaucratic indifference that governs the management of death. The priest's insistence on police inspection over the reason of death, the doctor's helplessness on arriving at the house of death and the lack of interest on the part of the police- all point towards the fact that mourning itself is enmeshed in the institutional and bureaucratic requirements which are themselves rooted in routine, apathy and banality. Boredom is found in such transitional spaces, which Sandywell calls an abstract 'dead 'space (44).

Victor Turner describes the emergence of communitas during periods when a society undergoes significant transitions. Funerals produce moments of liminality, a transitional state that temporarily suspends ordinary social structures and allows participants to experience communitas—an egalitarian sense of collective belonging (95). However, the funeral in Ee. Ma. Yau. fails to produce such a solidarity and, in turn, intensifies the rifts and tensions in the community. The overnight vigil depicted in the film fails to produce such communitas and instead exposes underlying distinctions of class and economic status. The death here does not necessitate the formation of communitas, but brings forth fatigue and frustration.

Eran Dorfman says, "I analyse boredom and fatigue as resulting respectively from a lack or an overflow of stimuli. I locate these in the context of the everyday, conceived as a repetitive mechanism that allows the integration and processing of new events. Boredom would thus result from an everyday that is perceived as lacking in events, whereas fatigue would stem from a too eventful everyday" (188). Dorfman's insights show how shared social situations often produce fatigue and disengagement. Ee. Ma. Yau. reveals how exhaustion is synchronised and curated by the banal ritual settings. In theorising banality and boredom, thinkers note that everyday life consists of regular and repeating events. In Dorfman's words:

> Late modernity is characterised by a split between the everyday and events. Every day, according to this conception, consists of everything that repeats itself regularly enough. Every day I wake up, brush my teeth, use my language, move my body, etc. All these habits constitute my everyday life. An event, on the other hand, is what transcends this repetition: something that is new, that hasn't happened before. However, no event is completely new. Events necessarily involve some everyday elements, insofar as they take place in habitual language, body, space, etc. There is thus only a certain degree of newness in an event, and the more remote the event is from my everyday, the more I conceive it as extraordinary, a memorable incidence which strikes me with force (188).

His idea helps us to look into mourning as a banal social practice where death goes through repetitive and structured funeral rites. The ordinariness of these rituals gradually absorbs the extraordinary shock and grief associated with death. The predictability of mourning replaces the emotional weight of grief. Thus, the 'everyday' offers a habitual texture upon which every social event can be understood and processed. Eventually, the novelty of the event is absorbed into the familiar framework of daily life, and the new and the old become intimately linked.

Drawn-out time and endless waiting are characteristics of funerals. When one is bored, time drags and slows down, such that it feels like one is being held in limbo (Heidegger 96-97). Waiting generates public discontent and restlessness, and the promise of fulfilment seems to be suspended. Waiting for the body to arrive, waiting for the service to end and waiting to offer condolences- take the mourners into a "dead time" (Heidegger 105), where the temporal experience becomes exhausting. Thus, the vigil becomes a shared experience of exhaustion rather than one of grief.

Lars Svendsen argues that "boredom arises when repetitive activities fail to generate a sense of meaningful engagement" (21). Rituals that depend on repetitive gestures are prone to such experiences. While boredom is often associated with inactivity, Svendsen emphasises that it can also be found in situations dense with activity, when those activities fail to provide a sense of subjective importance. The film portrays how boredom can emerge in a heavily crowded, activity-driven space, eliminating meaningful engagement in the rituals that are being performed. The symbolic significance associated with the funeral progressively declines as these rituals become banal performances. The conversations of the people move from grief to gossip to speculation about the cause of death. A peculiar mixture of tension and inertia engulfs the atmosphere, marked by ongoing arguments, negotiations and conjectures. The infinite delay in the final funeral rites caused discontent among the people.

As the procedural aspects of the funeral are shaped and regulated by the authorities, social performance determines the behaviour of society. The mourners near the corpse intensify their wailing according to the status and prestige of the visitors. Even while crying, Eeshi's mother does not forget to assert her love for her deceased husband and to highlight her benevolence in not insisting on dowry from her daughter-in-law. Even Eeshi's desire to give his father a flamboyant funeral is driven by a need for getting social approval and respectability. A modest funeral may embarrass him, as everyone in the village remembers

the grand funeral Vavachan had given his father. Thus, the funeral becomes a site of calculated deliberation rather than an intimate familial moment of grief.

Henri Lefebvre's analysis of everyday life offers further insight into the film's depiction of mourning. Lefebvre argues that "everyday life consists of repetitive routines and mundane practices that structure human existence" (31). In Ee. Ma. Yau., the rituals surrounding death unfold within the established patterns of village life. Lefebvre argues that these ordinary practices constitute the fundamental texture of social reality. Every extraordinary event—including death—are inevitably absorbed into its banal rhythms. Cooking continues among neighbours, discussions of work unfold among fishermen, and children move in and out of the house, even as the body lies inside. The sounds of wind, rain, and the sea form a continuous backdrop, situating the funeral within the village's natural environment. The camera moves through the crowded interiors of the house, capturing the spatial claustrophobia and the sense of confinement it produces. Instead of zooming in on individual grief and intense emotions, the camera takes long takes of communal mourning interspersed with other interactions. Arguments, cries, sobs, sighs, and whispers unfold within the same frame, suggesting the inseparability of grief from the ordinary dynamics of social life.

Death does not suspend the banal routines of the village; rather those routines continue to unfold around it.

So many of the roles played by the characters of society are pre-scripted, obligatory, socially sanctioned behaviours. As Robert Musil says, "personal experiences become impersonal representations independent of any experiencing individual: we cannot be sure our anger is our own as it is informed by received cultural ideas of what form it should take" (Musil 95). According to Legge, "we outsource ourselves into certain cultural formulas, and recognise ourselves… in them" (102). Boredom is integral to many of the performative roles

within society. Thus, mourners are expected to perform their grief in accordance with socially prescribed frameworks. Crying, reciting prayers, offering condolences and praying are expected to be at par with the cultural formulas of the community. The scripted social displays and rote behaviors of the mourners reveal an underlying banality and emotional detachment. Ritualised social participation relies on conformity to established social codes over time, rendering these acts increasingly stereotyped and banal.

The repetitive gestures of mourning rituals—such as prayers, waiting, conversations, and bodily arrangements—illustrate how social interactions within a collective setting are structured as highly stereotyped and formalised actions. These actions rely on repetition and pattern, originally intended to foster bonding, but they inadvertently produce boredom and monotony.

The repetitiveness strips them of their intended meaning, making the sacred rituals mundane and mechanical.

It is in the final act of Eeshi's decision to bury Vavachan in the house's courtyard that the social drama culminates. The burial, shifted from the sacred realm to the domestic sphere, becomes a challenge to generational memory and family pride. For Eeshi, it was a desperate attempt to restore meaning to the ritual by discarding the ecclesiastical authority that had been weighing him down. Burying outside the church cemetery is often perceived as a matter of shame and dishonour among the Christian communities, as it signifies exclusion from ecclesiastically sanctioned belonging. Eeshi bypasses the authoritarian structures in his decision and points to the collapse of the communal and institutional frameworks. In contrast to Turner's model of ritual completion, which restores social order, the burial that Eeshi chose signals a resignation to the failure of inclusive communal institutions. The erection of a cross above the grave is the last attempt of Eeshi to assert dignity against institutional exclusion.

Through the long takes in confined rooms, the film efficiently captures the experience of spatial fatigue. The limited seating and crowded setting serve to intensify the tension depicted in the film. Long takes absorb the atmosphere's exasperation. The film offers no relief through spatial expansion. Conversations sound impatient, and space feels claustrophobic. Instead of redemptive communal ties, there are accumulations of grudges and resentments. By the time of burial, the feeling of exhaustion is at its most intense.

The camera follows the real-time progression of events, detailing every minute discussion and conversation. The editing is structured in such a way that the spectator continues to inhabit the scene even after its immediate narrative purpose has been fulfilled. The film depicts every deferment of the ritual as an aesthetic condition. Silences and pauses are foregrounded, and the spectators bear the weight of the suspended ritual. The corpse, which is placed in the centre of the room, is only partially visible in some scenes. The camera does not portray the corpse with a soft, solemn grace. It moves in and out of the house to capture the everyday mechanisms of institutional life. The camera is able to produce the feelings of congestion, claustrophobia and exhaustion.

Conclusion

The film weaves together the banality of death through disrupted rituals, bureaucratic interventions, performative grief, and the rhythms of everyday life. The film tries to reinterpret the social meaning of death in a communal setting. It shows that even death can be a banal yet revealing event where social performance, institutional authority and individual interests intersect. The narrative unveils the complex and contradictory social forces that come into action when communities pass through moments of upheaval. So death here is not presented as a moment of transcendence but rather as a banal and socially mediated event.

From a dramaturgical perspective, the funeral becomes a social stage on which actors perform socially sanctioned roles: the grieving widow, the son displaying filial love, the disheartened neighbour, the authoritative religious figure, and the unsympathetic bureaucrat. Their performances do not necessarily signal a lack of sincerity; rather, they reveal how even emotional expressions are shaped—often unconsciously—by cultural scripts and social surveillance. Mourning is at the same time, an emotional outlet as well as a public spectacle.

So, the cinematic narrative of Ee. Ma. Yau. presents death not with its cinematic grandeur but reveals the social and material circumstances associated with death. It reveals how communities bridge the tension between mundane realities and existential challenges. Mourning and burial are dictated by verification, regulation, and suspicion of the authorities. The death, usually presented as an emotional rupture, succumbs to the ordinary logic of institutional systems. The priest's insistence on institutional protocol and the involvement of authorities transform death from a sacralised ritual to a banal social performance.

The film portrays how a community fails to produce communitas in the wake of such an event as death and how a funeral fails to generate collective solidarity. The death only serves to intensify social hierarchies and divisions within the Chellanam community. The gathering of the village folk does not bring about an egalitarian sharing of grief, but it discloses the tensions embedded in the community regarding authority, control and morality. The ritual process ends not in the solemn incorporation state, as advocated by Turner, but in a fragmented affective outpouring.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond the film itself. By portraying mourning as a banal yet socially revealing event, Ee. Ma. Yau. contributes to a broader rethinking of how contemporary cinema represents death and ritual. In contrast to traditional cinematic depictions that emphasise solemnity and transcendence, the film highlights the complex interplay between institutional power, communal dynamics, and the everyday

practices through which societies confront mortality. In contrast to the traditional cinematic representations of death as evoking the tender feelings of empathy and sharing, Ee. Ma. Yau. reveals the interplay between the institutional control and the dynamics of the society. It is a reassessment of the portrayal of death in a realistic, banal setting amidst the intricate ties between religion, community, and everyday life. \The film treads a different path in its representation of death within the cultural and social institutions of Kerala's social landscape. It is the banal structures of society that ultimately shape the experience of grief.

The film does not deprive death of its significance, but it does not offer any redemptive qualities or transcendence to the event. It underscores the myriad ways in which human societies seek meaning within the fragile frameworks of ritual and community. For scholarship on Malayalam cinema, this is a refreshing perspective on how regional films comprehend and portray cultural rituals and social institutions. More broadly, the analysis suggests that the study of death in cinema can benefit from interdisciplinary approaches that combine philosophical, anthropological, and sociological perspectives.

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