

GREEN NARRATIVES OF CATASTROPHE IN MALAYALAM CONTEMPORARY CINEMA: A READING OF *2018* AND *MALAYANKUNJU*

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ABSTRACT

Green narratives focus on the deep and diverse relationship between humans and nature. The various interpretations regarding this relationship are brought out through different genres including contemporary cinema. The visualisation of natural disasters and catastrophes in cinema has had a great impact on human minds. Therefore new areas of discussions examine the association between the power of man and the supremacy of nature. This has led to the critical analysis of environmental instability and anthropocentric fragility as significant dimensions of life. Ecological catastrophes however intensify the notions and emotions expressed through the analysis. Contemporary Malayalam cinema visualises how disasters and catastrophes interrupt human lives, dreams, emotions and belief systems. This paper examines the films *2018* and *Malayankunju* which depict flood and landslide as catastrophic events that expose the vulnerability of human life in the face of destabilising ecological forces. The study explores eco critical perspectives, Anthropocene discourse and environmental justice reflected in the films. The films picturise ecological catastrophes and project the themes of human fragility, social boundaries and possibilities for social transformation. In this context, ecological catastrophes emerge as sites of moral and social reflection that challenge anthropocentric assumptions and invite a reconsideration of human – nature relationship.

Key Words: *Eco criticism, anthropocene, environmental justice, ecological catastrophe, contemporary Malayalam Cinema.*

INTRODUCTION

With the increasing global concern about environmental crisis and ecological instability, we have been able to see a growing presence of environmental themes in literature and cinema. Green narratives examine the relationship between human beings and the natural world, highlighting the many ways in which people interact with and depend upon their environment. They emphasise that nature is not merely a backdrop to human life but an essential force that sustains it. Disaster narratives, by contrast, focus on the experiences of individuals and communities during catastrophes, exploring the physical, emotional, and social consequences of such events. When these catastrophes arise from ecological or environmental causes, disaster narratives also become a form of green narrative by drawing attention to the close and often fragile relationship between humanity and the natural environment. The films, *2018* and *Malayankunju* fall under the category of green disaster narratives as both the films explore human experiences in the background of ecological disasters. The film *2018* brings to us the painful scenes of a devastating flood that swallowed the state of Kerala in the year 2018. It closely examines human interactions and community survival through the experiences of people from various spheres of life. *Malayankunju*, however, is based on a landslide that echoes a real disaster in Kerala. The film explores how a catastrophic event reshapes human attitudes, beliefs, and relationships. It presents human vulnerability not merely as a condition of suffering but also as a starting point for moral transformation. Drawing inspiration from real events, both *2018* and *Malayankunju* portray the emotional struggles and responses of people from different social backgrounds. This study analyses the films through the perspectives of ecocriticism,

Anthropocene discourse, and environmental justice. Together, these frameworks highlight the importance of human interdependence while drawing attention to the social realities that emerge during ecological crises. The study also considers how these films enrich contemporary Malayalam cinema's engagement with green disaster narratives and invite viewers to reflect more deeply on the relationship between humanity, society, and the natural world.

The flood in 2018

The film *2018*, subtitled 'Everyone Is a Hero', displays the unity and heroism of ordinary people, especially local fishermen, during the massive flood. The movie is directed by Jude Anthony Joseph who co-wrote the screenplay with Akhil P Dharmajan. Through a cinematic recreation of a catastrophic event, the movie brings together multiple individual narratives of survival during the crisis. The film however turns out to be a tribute to the people of Kerala. The film is categorised as a hyperlink film as it connects multiple and desperate story lines that merge during the 2018 Kerala floods. It does not focus on a single hero but centers on collective action that takes place during the disastrous events. The varied storylines together form a prism of experiences that disperses different colours of the disaster from diverse angles. The depiction of the slow creeping rise of water which later turns into a violent rush depicts the accelerating fear and panic that fills the atmosphere. The flood water overwhelms the manmade infrastructures, breaking through homes and shelters. It washes away every trace of human certainty, leaving people confused and questioning the very order of existence. As one disastrous event follows another, the visuals depict the destruction of homes, shelters, and personal belongings, forcing people into a state of despair. The film *2018* opens with news reports and references to the devastating Kerala floods of 1924. By recalling this earlier ecological disaster, it draws attention to the condition of rivers, dams, and the changing environment. These news reports and conversations encourage viewers to reflect on the relationship between human activity and nature, an idea closely associated with the Anthropocene. The floodwaters are presented as a terrifying force, sweeping through roads, houses, and public spaces. Everyday routines collapse within moments, and the sudden loss of safety and possessions throws life into confusion.

Before the flood strikes, the film also introduces the social divisions that shape everyday life. Through the experiences of its different characters, it exposes inequalities based on occupation and social status, particularly the way fishing communities are often undervalued. Once the flood intensifies, thousands of people become trapped inside their homes with no safe escape. Nature overwhelms human planning as rescue routes disappear beneath the rising waters. Cries for help fill the air, while the visuals repeatedly emphasise the limits of human control. At the point when technology and conventional rescue efforts prove inadequate, the fishermen arrive with their boats. Their intervention marks a turning point in the narrative, bringing compassion and courage to the foreground. Battling dangerous currents, they risk their own lives to save strangers. The film therefore presents the fishermen—long treated as a marginalised community—as the true heroes of the disaster, demonstrating how moments of crisis can reshape social perceptions and inspire collective solidarity.

The landslide in Malayankunju

The film *Malayankunju* is directed by Sajimon Prabhakar and written by Mahesh Narayanan. Released in 2022, *Malayankunju* portrays a devastating landslide to explore the extent of human dependence on nature. Set in a rural mountainous region of Kerala, the film captures the fear, confusion, and shock that follow the sudden disaster. The landslide transforms a peaceful landscape into a place of destruction and becomes the event around which the narrative develops. Unlike *2018*, which follows the experiences of several individuals and communities, *Malayankunju* centres on the inner world of a single protagonist, Anikuttan. As the story unfolds

through his perspective, greater attention is given to the psychological and emotional dimensions of survival. When the landslide strikes without warning, human strength, social status, and material possessions are shown to be insignificant before the overwhelming power of nature. Everything gets destroyed and Anikuttan suffocates under the broken infrastructural remains. The scene develops its pace of terror as he struggles to move and breathe. The ordinary social world before the disaster captures images of the rural environment, which include early morning scenes of workers walking in rubber plantations. Anikuttan is presented as a mechanic who works from home. The story unravels through the emotional turmoils of Anikuttan, who carries deep prejudice and trauma of the past within him. His father committed suicide after his sister had eloped with a man from a lower caste. This incident happened on the day of his sister's marriage that was arranged by the family and since then Anikuttan has not been able to find peace of mind. He appears isolated, angry and emotionally withdrawn, the trauma of his father's death shaping his worldview and his resentment turning into rigid caste prejudices. He gets irritated and annoyed when his neighbour's baby cries during nights. The neighbours belong to a lower caste and this leads to conflicts and confrontations within the boundaries of the ordinary life. His rigid beliefs seem to be unchangeable. However, the landslide destroys the stubborn walls of rigid beliefs and encroaches human life with utmost terror and fury. The ecological catastrophe challenges Anikuttan's beliefs and disaster forces him to confront both nature's power and his own social prejudices. It disrupts the social boundaries and alters his worldview.

Nature becomes an overwhelming ecological force as continuous rainfall destabilises the terrain and suddenly breaks into a landslide that destroys houses and the surrounding landscape. Nature appears as unpredictable and uncontrollable, and this projects the fragile relationship between human habitation and the environment. The scenes focus on the helplessness of humans before natural forces. It also projects the collapse of human confidence in controlling nature. This relates to the Anthropocene idea that human systems are fragile before ecological events. Anikuttan gets trapped beneath debris and undergoes a physical and emotional struggle. The darkness, the mud and the claustrophobic atmosphere suffocates him. The lack of mobility intensifies his fear and uncertainty about survival. He calls out for his mother, but gets no response. Here, we witness a collapse of his inner walls of beliefs. He then hears the cry of the neighbour's baby named Ponni. He calls out her name loudly. The tears in his eyes and the concern in his voice reflect the shift from individual survival to responsibility toward another life. He searches for the child. His loud cry sends reverberations of loss and belonging, both at the same time. After his tireless search, he finds Ponni, takes her in his arms, protects and carries her through the debris. Now this scene contrasts with the earlier scenes which showed his strong caste prejudice. He risks his life to save the child of the very family he once despised. Ecological disaster thus creates a moment of moral transformation. This reflects an eco-critical understanding of environmental crisis where ecological events reveal both human vulnerability and ethical responsibility. Nature's disruption or catastrophe forces individuals to reconsider rigid social divisions and realise the interdependence of human lives. The ecological catastrophe becomes the arena where human nature relationships are re-evaluated. Caste divisions dissolve in the face of ecological catastrophe as the landslide breaks both physical and mental walls. Ecological disaster transforms hostility into empathy and solidarity.

Theoretical Perspectives

The study draws on certain theoretical perspectives of ecocriticism, Anthropocene discourse, and environmental justice, which indeed help to interpret ecological catastrophe and social transformation. Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment", while Lawrence Buell defines it as the study of the

relationship between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis. Greg Garrard also defines ecocriticism as the “study of human and non-human relations throughout history of human culture and involves a critical analysis of the term ‘human ‘itself’”. Ecocriticism therefore explores the relationship between literature and environment and projects nature as an active presence and not just a background. In the films *2018* and *Malayankunju*, we watch how nature influences human life and becomes part of their experiences and social transformation. The term ‘Anthropocene’, literally translated as the ‘Age of Human’ is used to refer to a geological era where humanity has become a planetary force of change, that is, a phase where human activity significantly affects the planet. Paul Crutzen, a Nobel Prize winning atmospheric chemist, coined the term ‘Anthropocene’ in 2000 alongside biologist Eugene Stoermer to define a new geological epoch where human activity dominates Earth’s natural systems. He proposed this concept to signify that global impacts such as carbon emissions and land transformation has fundamentally altered the plain since the Industrial Revolution. Accordingly, natural disasters become more complex due to human impact, which leads to environmental imbalance and climate crisis. The Anthropocene perspective thus reveals that natural disasters are often shaped by complex interactions between natural forces and human activities. Environmental degradation and developmental interventions can increase the fragility of ecological systems. The flood in *2018* and the landslide in *Malayankunju* expose incidents that reveal the limits of human control over nature. Catastrophic disasters occur within ecologically fragile landscapes shaped partly by human activity.

The concept of environment justice tends to explore how environmental crisis affect communities differently. The environmental justice movement was heavily influenced by the US civil rights movement and gained prominence in the 1980s. Dr. Robert Ballard, often referred to as the father of environmental justice, is a sociologist who pioneered research on environmental racism in the 1970s and 1980s. His study brought out the idea that the marginalised communities often face greater environmental risks. As we see in the film *2018*, the character who is addressed Raviyetten, a blind man is almost ignored or forgotten amidst rescue efforts. His disability makes evacuation difficult. His blindness makes him unaware of the flooded danger around him, so he becomes vulnerable in a way others are not. Similarly, there is a disabled boy addressed as Undapi, who faces more challenges than the others. Undapi and his parents were among the last to be rescued. They face extreme physical risk and challenges as their survival becomes uncertain during the flood. Here we realise that disaster has a greater effect on the marginalized. The marginalized people undergo more stress during disasters. Their sufferings are intensified with the flood and its consequences. The initial scenes of *Malayankunju* also talks about caste prejudice and hatred exposing the suffering of the marginalized. Anikuttan hates his neighbours who belong to a lower caste. During the landslide however he saves the neighbour’s child from death and thus undergoes a moral transformation.

CONCLUSION

The films *2018* and *Malayankunju* bring meaningful insights regarding how natural disasters shape human experiences. Through different depictions of human struggles, emotions and experiences the films expose how vulnerable the social systems are. The analysis of these events also remind us how much we depend on the nature for our survival. The analysis also aims at social reflection as we realise that catastrophes lead to the collapse of the social walls of caste, ego and prejudice. Both the films foreground the importance of interdependence of humans in a society. Disaster narratives thus function as reminders of humanity. Social awareness and responsible behaviour can reduce the intensity of the natural calamities. Understanding the dangers of isolation should help people realise the need to stay together in spite of differences

in caste, region or occupation. Green narratives, therefore encourage ecological awareness and social solidarity. The adaptations of green narratives in cinema encourage viewers to rethink human nature, relationships and social harmony. In this context, *2018* and *Malayankunju* stand as significant examples of contemporary Malayalam cinema that underscore ecological catastrophe and its ethical implications.

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