

WEAVING WORLDS; INTERTEXTUAL STRATEGIES IN THE NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE OF EMPURAAN

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ABSTRACT

Intertextuality can be simply defined as the shaping of a text's meaning by other texts or by the relationships between texts. It is a literary technique that involves referencing, borrowing, or alluding to other texts within a new work. The concept was coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s and has since become influential in literary and media studies. *L2: Empuraan* is a 2025 Malayalam political action thriller directed by Prithviraj Sukumaran and starring Mohanlal. It is a sequel to the 2019 film *Lucifer*. While the movie is celebrated as a mass entertainer like its predecessor, it goes beyond surface-level action by combining themes of politics, mythology, and religion to create a deeper and more complex narrative. This paper examines how *Empuraan* employs intertextuality as a deliberate narrative strategy to construct a rich, immersive world that weaves together the domains of politics, myth, creativity, and spirituality. Through a close reading of the characters, narrative structure, symbolism, and plot, this analysis argues that *Empuraan* operates on multiple levels: as a mass-market action thriller, a sociopolitical commentary, and a modern reimagining of ancient myth.

Keywords: *Intertextuality, allusion, referencing, symbolism, narrative structure*

INTRODUCTION

L2: Empuraan is a 2025 political action thriller directed by Prithviraj Sukumaran and written by Murali Gopy. The film stars Mohanlal and Prithviraj in the lead roles and serves as the sequel to the 2019 film *Lucifer*. *Lucifer* was originally conceived as part of a three-part film series. The first installment was *Lucifer*, followed by *Empuraan* as the second. The third installment, tentatively titled *L3: The Beginning* or *L3: Azrael*, is yet to be released. The trilogy is produced by Antony Perumbavoor, Subaskaran Allirajah, and Gokulam Gopalan. When *L2: Empuraan* was released, it became a major success. The director had envisioned it as a pan-Indian film and promoted it extensively across the country. However, following its release, the movie sparked several controversies—both political and religious. These disputes led to widespread protests and criticism, prompting the filmmakers to re-edit the film. In response, the movie underwent nearly 24 changes, amounting to approximately two minutes of footage being altered or removed in an effort to address the concerns and ease tensions. Even after all these changes, the film remained a major success, going on to become one of the highest-grossing Malayalam films worldwide and earning blockbuster status.

Intertextuality can be simply defined as the shaping of a text's meaning by other texts or by the relationships between texts. It is a literary technique that involves referencing, borrowing, or alluding to other texts within a new work. The concept was coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s and has since become influential in literary and media studies. Although the term “intertextuality” was coined in the 20th century, the practice of texts referencing, echoing, and responding to one

another is centuries old. The theoretical foundation was laid by Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, whose concept of dialogism emphasized that no text exists in isolation—it is always in conversation with other texts, voices, and cultural contexts. His idea of heteroglossia further highlighted how multiple social languages and perspectives coexist within a single work, especially in novels. Building on Bakhtin's insights, Julia Kristeva introduced the term “intertextuality” in the 1960s, arguing that every text is a “permutation of texts,” shaped by cultural codes and prior discourses. She challenged the notion of a text as a closed, self-contained system, proposing instead that meaning is generated through its relationship with other texts. Roland Barthes later expanded this framework in his seminal essay *The Death of the Author*, where he argued that the meaning of a text does not stem from the author's intent but from the reader's interpretation within a broader cultural and textual network. For Barthes, the author becomes a “scriptor,” and the reader emerges as the central figure who constructs meaning by weaving together multiple textual threads. Collectively, these thinkers shifted literary theory away from individual authorship and toward a view of literature as a dynamic, interwoven field of cultural and textual exchange. Intertextuality enriches film by linking it to other texts, genres, and cultural moments, allowing deeper meaning and audience engagement. It turns cinema into a layered conversation across time and context. This paper examines how *Empuraan* employs intertextuality as a deliberate narrative strategy to enrich its thematic depth and cultural resonance, allowing the film to engage with broader political, cinematic, and mythological discourses.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive textual analysis grounded in intertextual theory to examine how *L2: Empuraan* constructs meaning through its engagement with political, historical, mythological, cinematic, and star-based references. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia, Julia Kristeva's formulation of intertextuality as a “permutation of texts,” and Roland Barthes's reader-centered approach to meaning-making, the film is analyzed as a culturally embedded text rather than a self-contained narrative. The methodology involves close reading of *Empuraan* alongside its prequel *Lucifer*, identifying recurring intertextual patterns and categorizing them into political-historical, mythological-religious, cinematic, and meta-intertextual domains rooted in Mohanlal's star persona. Real-world events, political figures, mythic archetypes, and cinematic traditions are treated as cultural texts that inform the film's symbolic and ideological framework. Rather than focusing on authorial intent or audience reception, the analysis prioritizes how intertextual references function narratively and ideologically to generate layered meanings, enabling the film to comment on contemporary socio-political realities while operating within the conventions of a mainstream political thriller.

Intertextual Foundations in *Empuraan*

The intertextuality in *Empuraan* can be broadly categorized into four distinct yet overlapping domains: political or historical intertextuality, mythological or religious intertextuality, cinematic intertextuality, and meta-intertextuality rooted in Mohanlal's stardom.

1) Political and historical intertextuality:

The movie begins with the reference to the Godhra train incident which caused the Gujarat riots

in 2002. On February 27, 2002, Coach S6 of the Sabarmati Express was set ablaze near Godhra railway station in Gujarat, killing 59 Hindu pilgrims—many of them Kar sevaks returning from Ayodhya. The incident, widely reported as a targeted attack by a Muslim mob, sparked one of the most devastating communal riots in modern Indian history. Over the following months, violence swept across Gujarat, resulting in the deaths of nearly 1,000 people, the majority of whom were Muslims, and displacing tens of thousands. Multiple investigations—including the Nanavati-Mehta Commission and the Banerjee Committee—offered conflicting conclusions about the nature of the train fire, with debates continuing over whether it was a premeditated act or an accident. The events profoundly shaped India's political and social landscape, raising enduring questions about governance, justice, and communal harmony. In the movie the character Zayed Masood (Prithviraj Sukumaran) is a survivor of the Gujarat riots and is seeking revenge for the tragedy of his family.

The character initially named Baba Bajrang in the film was later changed to Baldev following controversy. He symbolically represents Babu Bajrangi, also known as Babubhai Patel, a central figure in the 2002 Gujarat riots who was sentenced to life imprisonment by a special court for orchestrating the Naroda Patiya massacre, in which around 97 Muslims—including women and children—were killed. He serves as the film's central antagonist, and his characterization functions as a symbolic critique of religious extremism. By aligning the villain with real-world figures implicated in communal violence, *Empuraan* implicitly urges viewers to recognize and reject such ideologies—not just within the narrative, but in society at large.

In *Empuraan*, the political parties shown in the story clearly reflect real-life parties in Kerala. The IUF (Indian Union Front) represents the Indian National Congress, the RPI(M) stands for the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and the ASM (Akhandha Sathya Morcha) is a symbolic version of the BJP or RSS. By using these fictional names, the film comments on actual political dynamics while keeping the story within a fictional frame. In *Lucifer* and *Empuraan*, several characters appear to symbolically mirror prominent figures from the Nehru-Gandhi family. P.K. Ramdas (PKR) evokes the legacy of the Nehru dynasty, while Priyadarshini Ramdas (Manju Warrier) closely resembles Priyanka Gandhi in both name and political positioning. Jathin Ramdas (Tovino Thomas) can be seen as a fictional parallel to Rahul Gandhi, especially in his role as the heir to a political legacy. In *Lucifer*, the antagonist Bimal Nair shares notable similarities with Robert Vadra, Priyanka Gandhi's husband, who has faced multiple investigations by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) for alleged involvement in money laundering and irregular land deals, including reported links to UK-based arms dealers.

The film does not glorify any particular political party; instead, it presents a nuanced critique of Kerala's political landscape by highlighting the limitations within each faction. BJP is portrayed as religiously extreme, INC as vulnerable to manipulation, and CPI as lacking national influence. The narrative uses Kerala's political framework as a foundation to explore broader questions about power, ideology, and the ultimate consequences of political decay. So all these character choices and ideologies reflect the film's use of intertextuality to comment on real-world political dynamics through fictional storytelling.

Another historical reference in *Empuraan* is to the Mullaperiyar Dam, subtly mirrored through

the fictional Nedumpally Dam. In the film, the dam is portrayed as a looming threat, and Chief Minister Jathin Ramdas attempts to address the issue by proposing a check dam—an act that involves relocating Adivasi communities from their land. His sister publicly accuses him of corruption, arguing that the plan is merely a temporary fix rather than a real solution. During her speech, she recalls the dam's colonial history, referencing a 999-year lease agreement between the British and the then ruling king—an unmistakable nod to the real-life Mullaperiyar arrangement, which remains a contentious issue between Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

2) Mythological or Religious Intertextuality:

In W. B. Yeats's poem, *The Second Coming*, the anticipated return of a Christ-like figure is subverted into something darker—an antichrist-like presence born out of chaos. Yeats suggests that the world's problems have grown so severe that the traditional image of a benevolent saviour is no longer sufficient; instead, a more disruptive force is needed. *Empuraan* echoes this idea through its central character, Stephen Nedumpally, also known as Khureshi Abraham. The film implies that Kerala's deep-rooted political and social issues cannot be resolved by a conventional hero. Stephen, initially portrayed in *Lucifer* as a local leader with a mysterious past, is revealed in *Empuraan* to have a far more complex and morally ambiguous identity—as a global criminal mastermind. His transformation reflects the unsettling notion that in a fractured world, salvation may come not from purity, but from power cloaked in shadow.

The idea of a saviour emerging from darkness is embedded in the very title *Lucifer*, which refers to the fallen angel in Christian theology. However, the concept is not confined to Christianity alone. In Hindu mythology, Mahiravana—a relative of Ravana and ruler of the underworld (Pathala Loka)—kidnaps Rama and Lakshmana with the intent to sacrifice them to his deity, aiding his brother's cause. Similarly, in Islamic belief, Iblis is a fallen angel who defies divine command, echoing the rebellious nature of Lucifer. In *Lucifer*, the title is assigned to Stephen Nedumpally by journalist Govardhan (Indrajith Sukumaran), and in *Empuraan*, when Govardhan confronts Khureshi Abraham, he asks about his true identity. Stephen responds that people call him by many names, but the one he prefers is the one Govardhan gave him—Lucifer, Mahiravana, or Iblis. This blending of mythologies across religions avoids anchoring the character to a single tradition, instead presenting him as an anti-Christ-like figure whose shadowy power is positioned as necessary to confront the deep-rooted problems of the state. The film thus challenges conventional notions of heroism, suggesting that true change may not come from peace and purity, but from a force that understands and operates within the darkness.

3) Cinematic Intertextuality

The primary cinematic intertextuality in *Empuraan* is rooted in its prequel, *Lucifer*. *Lucifer* unfolds around the death of P.K. Ramdas (PKR), a powerful and beloved Chief Minister of Kerala, and the political turmoil that follows. Amidst this chaos, Stephen Nedumpally emerges as the MLA of Nedumpally constituency—a charismatic and influential figure whose source of power remains mysterious. He ultimately becomes the savior of the IUF party and the state by eliminating the antagonist Bimal Nair (Vivek Oberoi) and positioning PKR's son, Jathin Ramdas, as the party's new face for the upcoming election. The film ends with subtle hints about Stephen's shadowy past and his possible identity as Khureshi Abraham.

In *Empuraan*, this universe expands. Jathin Ramdas, once seen as a hopeful successor, has now become corrupt—engaging in questionable land deals and introducing extremist figures like Baldev into Kerala's politics. The state is once again in disarray, and Stephen's public persona disappears, replaced by the global criminal identity of Khureshi Abraham. The sequel shifts focus from Stephen's political role to Khureshi's deeper, darker origins, suggesting that the state once again needs him—not as a conventional leader, but as a force capable of restoring balance through unconventional means.

Empuraan draws subtle but deliberate intertextual parallels to Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy, particularly in its narrative structure and treatment of the protagonist. Director Prithviraj Sukumaran has acknowledged that both *Lucifer* and *Empuraan* were inspired by Nolan's approach to storytelling, where the central character—like Batman—is not always present on screen, yet his influence permeates every scene.

In *Empuraan*, Khureshi Abraham (Stephen Nedumpally) is largely absent from the early parts of the film, much like Bruce Wayne in *The Dark Knight Rises*, who disappears from Gotham. Yet, the chaos unfolding in Kerala constantly points to his looming presence, creating an aura around him before he reappears. This technique builds tension and mythos, suggesting that the protagonist is not just a person but a symbol—an idea deeply rooted in Nolan's portrayal of Batman as more than a man, but a legend.

4) Meta-Intertextuality Rooted in Mohanlal's Stardom

Empuraan's metaintertextuality is deeply enriched by Mohanlal's legendary screen persona, drawing from a lineage of iconic roles that have shaped Malayalam cinema's mass hero archetype. Characters like Jagannadhan from *Aaram Thampuran*, Sagar Alias Jacky from *Irupatham Noottandu* and *Sagar Alias Jacky Reloaded*, and Induchoodan from *Narasimham* are not just cinematic figures—they are cultural symbols of power, mystery, and moral complexity.

Stephen Nedumpally, and more intensely Khureshi Abraham, inherits this legacy. Like Jagannadhan, he enters a space in turmoil and silently shifts the balance of power. Like Sagar Alias Jacky, he operates in the shadows of global crime, commanding respect and fear. And like Induchoodan, he stands against corruption with a personal code that defies conventional morality. *Empuraan* doesn't just reference these roles—it builds upon them, allowing Mohanlal's past characters to echo through the narrative, making Stephen/Khureshi a culmination of decades of cinematic mythmaking. This layering creates a powerful metatextual experience where the audience's memory of Mohanlal's stardom becomes part of the film's emotional and symbolic weight. All these blurs the line between the character he portrays and the actor himself.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Empuraan* masterfully weaves together multiple layers of intertextuality—political, historical, mythological, cinematic, and meta—creating a rich network of meaning that goes beyond conventional storytelling. By drawing from real-life figures, events, and cultural archetypes, the film blurs the line between fiction and reality, challenging viewers to engage with its deeper social and political commentary. Though it presents itself as a fictional narrative, the unmistakable references to Kerala's political climate, historical tensions, and religious symbolism

reveal a deliberate intent. *Empuraan* is not just a mass entertainer; it stands as a bold artistic statement from its creators, reflecting on the complexities of leadership, identity, and the moral ambiguity of power in contemporary society.

One of the key strengths of *Empuraan* lies in its ability to engage a younger audience through the lens of a commercial entertainer while subtly introducing them to politically and historically significant issues. Since the film is crafted with mass appeal, it naturally draws in viewers who might not otherwise seek out such topics. By embedding references to real-life events—like the Godhra incident, Mullaperiyar Dam, and Kerala's political dynamics—the film sparks curiosity and encourages viewers to explore these subjects further. In this way, *Empuraan* becomes more than just a cinematic experience; it acts as a cultural trigger, prompting many to research and reflect on historical realities they were previously unaware of. This blend of entertainment and awareness makes the film socially impactful, even if its influence begins with just a spark of interest.

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