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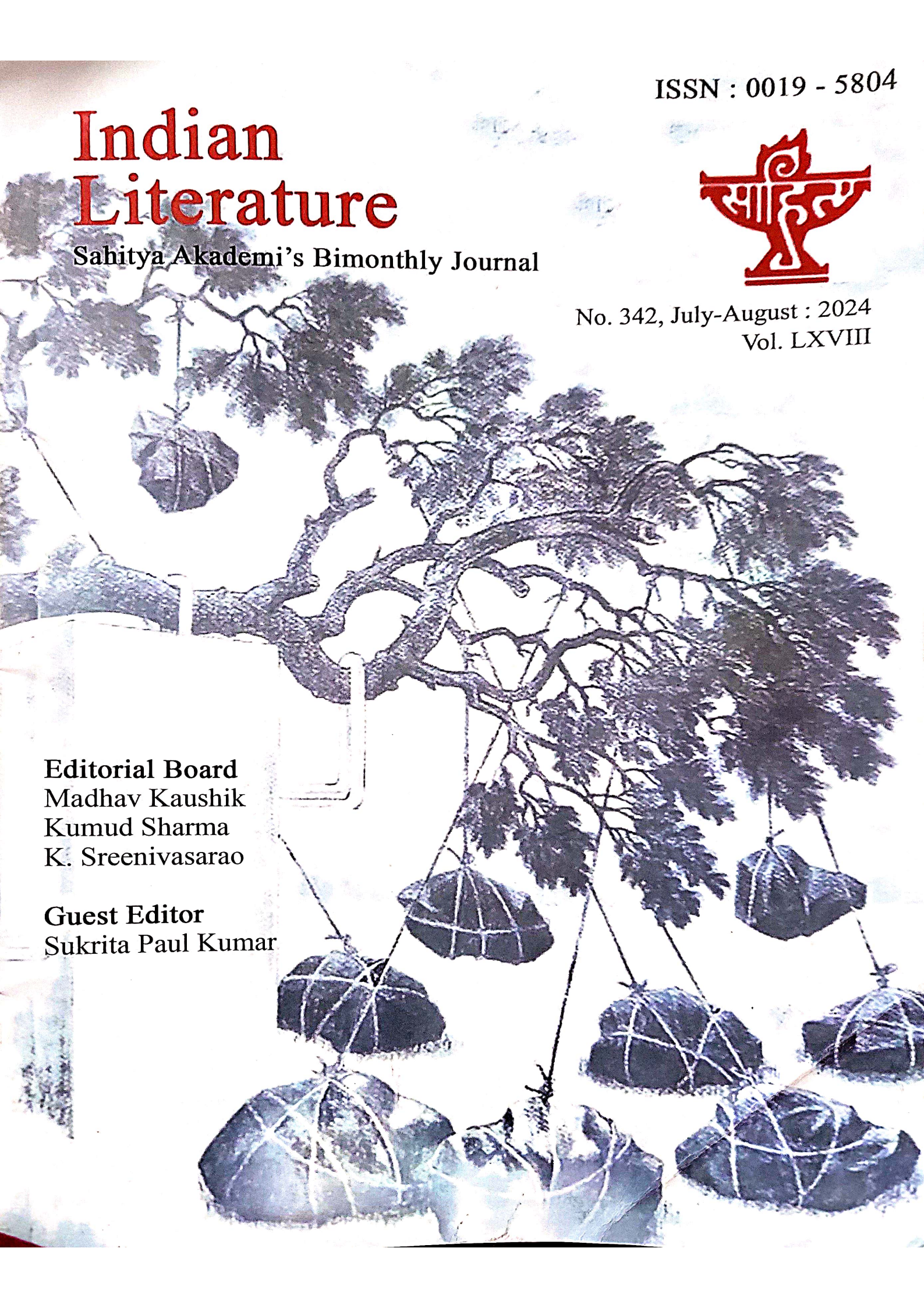
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INKBLOTS AND WHITE ROOM OF TORTURE: VISUALITY OF REVENGE IN NISSAM BASHEER'S MALAYALAM MOVIE *RORSCHACH*

Dr Amitha P Mani Assistant Professor, Research Department of English, MES Asmabi College, P
Vemballur

Smrithy Sudarsanan V Junior Research Fellow, Research Department of English, MES Asmabi
College, P Vemballur

Abstract

In human beings the urge for revenge manifests in an organic manner. The empathy within us that creates the oneness with someone's revenge is manipulated effectively in revenge plots. *Rorschach*, the neo-noir Malayalam movie released in 2022, directed by Nissam Basheer, written by Sameer Abdul, is an amalgamation of trauma, frustration, retaliation and revenge. The plot revolves around the revenge of Luke Antony, whose pregnant wife was murdered in a robbery carried out by Shafi and Dileep. The twist of the plot revolves around the death of Dileep, who escaped to Kerala with all the money and Luke's desperate attempts to avenge the dead Dileep. The movie adds to its credit the introduction of newer concepts like the Rorschach test, the idea of white room torture, and a blend of neo-noir and gothic features. The paper traverses the idea of revenge, it aims to investigate the visuality of revenge, pursuing the cinematic techniques employed to boost revenge's magnitude.

"Oh vengeance" – Hamlet

How can someone take revenge on a dead person? Reddit summarised the totality of the movie *Rorschach*, with the answer "Change the world in such a way that if they were alive, would be total despair. Once you have done this simply imagining that moment should bring you adequate satisfaction" (Kidkaiisa). *Rorschach*, the 2022 neo-noir Malayalam movie directed by Nissam Basheer and written by Sameer Abdul, envisages the situation mentioned above by exploring the human mind. The movie locomotes through a vague avenue, allowing the audience to translate the cinematic experience the way each individual interprets inkblots uniquely in a Rorschach test. Luke Antony, a wealthy expatriate with UK citizenship residing in Dubai with his wife, Sophia Luke, had an impeccable life. Still, his castle of dreams was shattered by a robbery carried out by Shafi and Dileep. Luke killed Shafi; however, Dileep escaped by brutally maiming Sophia. Sophia, who was pregnant with twins, died on the way to the hospital. Luke suffered not just the trauma from the loss of all that he had and cherished but was considered the prime suspect by the Police. Luke decided to pursue his revenge by destroying Dileep, who had escaped to Kerala with the money but was frustrated to know that he was killed in a car accident. The plot revolves around Luke's meticulous plan to destroy everything that belongs to Dileep, whether it be the assets he owned or the last goodwill in his name.

Rorschach is embellished with the neo-noir features that aided in establishing the theme of revenge and the protagonist's nature. Luke oscillates between the dichotomies of good and evil, and there are times when the bleak line between the both vanishes. The use of lights and shadows parallels the overall pessimistic mood reflected in the movie. Firstly, it traverses through the psychology of revenge, considering the two familiar hypotheses about revenge. Secondly, the focus shifts to the visuality of revenge, paying attention to the visual and textual analysis of the movie, thereby placing revenge at its crux, evaluating its amorphous forms as it transpires through the cinematic paraphernalia. This part also envisages the use of corrective methods like the white room torture and the symbolic portrayal of the Rorschach test, a psychological tool used in personality tests. While the former finds a direct depiction in the film, the latter, despite being the movie's name, is nowhere mentioned. However, the connotations of the Rorschach test speak louder through the movie's visuals.

Revenge, is any attempt to harm someone or some group of people "in response to feeling that oneself has been harmed by that other person or group, whereby the act of harming that person or group is *not* designed (46) to repair the harm, to stop it from occurring or continuing in the immediate confrontation, or to produce material gain." (McCullough 47). Luke's insatiable revenge in *Rorschach* can be analysed through the two main hypotheses of revenge. The first, "the comparative suffering hypothesis states that revenge simply aims at balancing the suffering score between the victim and the offender: the offender has made the victim suffer, and now the offender must suffer to an equal degree" (Turner 35). However, suffering can befall on the perpetrator in three ways, it could be "administered by the avenger himself (through revenge), by a third person (e.g., through a legal sanction), or by fate (through accidental harm)" (Gollwitzer and Denzler 5). Thus, for Luke, Dileep merely suffering wasn't enough, or else he would have disclosed Dileep to the Police. Luke wanted to avenge Dileep all by himself. The second, 'Understanding hypothesis', states that "revenge is satisfactory only if the perpetrator understands that the suffering is a direct consequence of the offense" (Van Prooijen 230). Though Dileep was terrified of Luke, he wasn't remorseful, and on the other hand, he was never an object of Luke's revenge when he was alive; hence, eliciting an understanding of the crime he committed is impossible. Luke, despite all the havoc he has caused on Dileep and all that remains of him, is still dissatisfied with his revenge as Dileep has escaped his revenge.

As Francis Bacon ruminates on revenge, "...a man that studieth revenge, keeps his own wounds green." (23). This still-bleeding, throbbing wound is necessary for the protagonist and the audience of any work of art to grab their conscience and suffocate them in avenging the wrongdoers. Bereft of it, the work loses its aim and wanders through the life of the prime mover. As for *Rorschach*, the visuals speak for Luke on behalf of his retaliation. The bleeding Sophia with her fully developed baby bump escalates Luke's loss and the gravity of Dileep's greed. Every time Sophia appears on screen, Luke and the audience are reminded of the pangs of Luke's tragedy. Nowhere in the movie can the audience see Dileep's face, and this estranged relationship enhances the visual experience. Luke blotching Dileep's face in his family photo is a premonition of Dileep's reputation, which will soon be tarnished. The dimly lit scenes, the selection of the colour tone, and the background score – are all the complementary add-ons that augment the sinister setting. An effortless establishment of the eerie is the result of the painstaking efforts of the entire crew, which fortifies the revenge atmosphere of the cinematic experience. The glitches between the scenes begin right from one of the early scenes where Luke goes in search of his wife, giving the premonition of the impending mystery that may or may not be regarded as psychic.

Classic revenge plots always had a tint of supernatural element that intensifies and elevates the plot. The use of supernatural elements, which could also be interpreted as Luke's hallucinations, is the obvious trump card in the movie's narrative. Luke's revenge begins with the knockdown of Dileep's name from 'Dileep's Heaven', Dileep's unfinished house, which Luke has purchased. Ann Ronald observes in her article, *Dickens' Gloomiest Gothic Castle*, how Dickens extends the eeriness to a whole city, "The elements of a Gothic castle to describe not a single building but an entire city, London itself" (72). The movie, in a similar way, extrapolates the gothic impression of Dileep's house to the whole village. Dileep's house evokes the Gothic aura enriching the mysterious experience and the ingredients of Gothic literature. The bleak house is notorious for being haunted, huge enough to flaunt flamboyance, yet failing in its purpose. 'Dileep's heaven' points to the 'grotesque' and 'gloomy' ambiance intensifying the effect with a 'damsel in distress' with Luke switching positions between a hero and 'anti-hero' supplanted with 'nightmares' and a 'villain', that sums up the effective portrayal of the gothic imagery (The Top 10 Elements of Gothic Literature).

Rorschach test uses irregular abstract forms to analyse an individual's emotional and psychological state, and the movie meticulously employs similar visual tools to heighten the effect.

The movie fruitfully uses these images to parallel the emotional states of its characters. The scene where Luke lies over a rock resembles the commonplace image used in the Rorschach test. Little does Luke reveal the iceberg of secrets that he camouflages inside him, and nothing suits more than the inkblot figure that brings out the buried iceberg of human psychology to symbolise what is to come. The mask that hides Dileep's face further surges the visual effect and can be attributed to yet another abstract form of inkblot. Nowhere in the movie can the audience find Dileep's face, and this estranged relationship with the villain is an asset to the visual experience. These masks not only cover the identity of Dileep and Shafi but also divulge the flaws in their characters. Dileep is forever veiled, subtly conveying the idea that the flaws in his character are incorrigible. During the climax fight, the gradually growing mask around Anil's face parallels his character and Dileep's. The veiled faces convey fear, strangeness, and anonymity. It could also imply that Dileep, Shafi or Anil can be anyone around us.

If someone is trapped in a pristine white cell where even the furniture and washroom are white, where one could see nothing but absolute whiteness, the colour that has been attributed to angelic behaviours and dominating the colonial and cosmetic world alike may not trigger angelic behaviours in prolonged situations. White room torture, as the name suggests, is a torture method wherein the prisoner or victim is equipped in a white prison. The prisoner's robe, even the food supplied for them, is white and flavourless. "Impenetrable and void of any sound", as Dipankar describes it, the prisoner is deprived of any sounds or social contact. Even the correctional officers wear padded shoes to make no sound. With all the surfaces smooth, the prisoner is denied any sense of touch, which ultimately results in the "depersonalisation" of the prisoner and can trigger "hallucinations or psychotic breaks" (Dipankar 2). The white room that Luke was left in as part of his interrogation of Sophia's death has a profound impact on all the later revenge tactics he envisages. Luke's retaliation is a mix of the repercussions of the white room torture, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and unending affliction. Inside, he is in a constant war between what is real and what is elusive. When Sophia's apparition corrects Luke, "I am your imagination, I exist only in your head" (*Rorschach* 1.05.02), Luke seeks affirmations from the Seetha to confirm Dileep's presence. His subconscious, who desperately yearns for revenge, wants to believe in Dileep's presence. Thus, Luke is elated when Sita, Dileep's mother, confirms that Dileep's presence is still hovering around them, as all that he has started is still incomplete.

In the climax of the movie, where Seetha commits suicide in the police station, the cell parallels a white room similar to the one Luke was in. Except for the green banana leaf in which her food is served and the 'kasavu' fringes of her saree, the entire room is white. The despair that Luke felt in the White Room parallels that of Seetha despite the fact that one is the victim and the other is the perpetrator. Luke's primary concern is retaliation; however, what concerns Seetha even more than the loss of her sons is the loss of her societal goodwill. "The devil is more devilish when respectable" (Browning). Hypocritical to the core, Seetha can opt for extreme measures when things fall apart, yet cannot bear the opinions of society. The poison that she used to kill Ashraf was purchased to kill herself in case Balan, her husband, elopes with his paramour. It is appalling to imagine the contradiction that a person bothered about public opinion does all possible things to tarnish the same and urges the family to do so. To sum up, the white room here refers to the characters' despondency during the situation. For Luke, the existence of Dileep was the sole reason to survive the torture, but Seetha has lost all her hopes and living with a tarnished name scares her more than death.

An outsider with stark cultural and individual differences abruptly arriving in a relatively rustic setting, with silhouettes of suspicion hovering around him or her, is a theme that is quite convincing and generates suspense in a narrative. The otherness this single character builds in the narrative, organically distinguishing everything in between, is the beauty of this technique. *Rorschach* is a melting pot of most of the well-known cinematic techniques. However, the way the ingredients are mixed brings about all the difference. The gothic setting penetrating the neo-noir

setting adds flavour to the sinister plot. Rorschach and the white room torture are the two novel components that were employed in the movie. The former may seem like a mere namesake with no reference whatsoever in the movie. However, a close analysis of the movie reveals the unbreakable connection Rorschach's images have played in conveying meanings to various scenes and situations in the movie. The latter, on the other hand, has been explicitly portrayed and has a direct role in the hero's plight.

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