

Shifting Cinematic Consciousness: Audience Reception in the Malayalam New Wave Cinema

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Abstract

The emergence of the New Wave in Malayalam cinema marks a significant transformation not only in filmmaking practices but also in patterns of audience reception and cultural engagement. Traditionally, Malayalam film spectatorship was shaped by star-centric narratives, linear storytelling structures, and entertainment-oriented consumption. However, the post-2010 cinematic landscape reflects a decisive shift toward interpretive engagement, wherein audiences actively negotiate meaning, realism, and emotional ambiguity.

Films such as Maheshinte Prathikaaram, Angamaly Diaries, and Kumbalangi Nights exemplify this transition through their rejection of spectacle in favor of quotidian narratives, morally complex characters, and socio-cultural specificity. Rather than relying on formulaic plot progression, these films foreground silence, subtle performance, and observational realism, thereby demanding heightened cognitive and emotional participation from viewers. Filmmakers like Dileesh Pothan employ narrative minimalism and restrained aesthetics that resonate with global art-house sensibilities while remaining deeply rooted in Kerala's lived realities.

This study argues that the evolution of audience reception is closely linked to rising media literacy, the proliferation of digital film discourse, and the influence of OTT platforms, which have exposed viewers to diverse narrative traditions. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, combining content analysis of selected Malayalam films from the 1990s experimental phase and contemporary New Wave cinema with audience interviews. A purposive sampling method will be employed to select participants who have viewed the chosen films.

The paper contends that Malayalam audiences have transitioned from passive spectatorship to interpretive collaboration, transforming cinema into a site of cultural reflection and social learning. By examining this shift, the study positions New Wave Malayalam cinema as a pedagogical force that bridges media education and community consciousness, demonstrating how regional cinema can cultivate critical viewing practices and contribute to broader discourses on identity, modernity, and social transformation.

Keywords

New Wave Malayalam Cinema; Audience Reception; Media Literacy; Realism; Participatory Spectatorship; Regional Cinema; Cultural Transformation.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.2 Malayalam Film Industry Goes Global

The relationship between Malayalam cinema and its audience has undergone a significant transformation over the past decade, particularly after 2010. Traditionally, Malayalam films operated within a framework that positioned the audience as relatively passive consumers of cinematic meaning. Narratives were predominantly linear, hero-centric, and structured around clear moral binaries. Stardom played a crucial role in shaping audience expectations, and films often relied on

explicit storytelling techniques that minimized interpretive effort. The viewer's role, in this earlier paradigm, was largely receptive rather than analytical.

However, the emergence of post-2010 Malayalam cinema—often described as the “New Wave” or contemporary realist phase—has altered this dynamic considerably. A new generation of filmmakers introduced narrative experimentation, non-linear structures, parallel storytelling, and character-driven plots that moved away from conventional hero–villain binaries. Films such as Maheshinte Prathikaaram, Kumbalangi Nights, and Angamaly Diaries exemplify this shift. These films foreground everyday realism, layered characterization, and subtle emotional conflicts, thereby demanding greater cognitive and interpretive participation from audiences.

Majorly characterized by a departure from the conventional narratives and themes that dominated mainstream Malayalam cinema. Instead, the films of this movement focused on realistic and unconventional themes and employed innovative storytelling techniques. One of the most notable changes is the increased focus on nonlinear storytelling, where the narrative is not presented in a chronological sequence. Another trend is the increased use of ensemble casts, where the story is told through the perspectives of multiple characters.

This shift also extends to the transformation of stardom within the industry. Established actors such as Mammooty and Mohanlal, who were once closely associated with larger-than-life roles and star-driven narratives, have increasingly embraced character-oriented and minimalist performances. Their evolving script choices reflect a broader industry acknowledgment of changing audience sensibilities and expectations.

Despite this apparent evolution toward a more interpretively active audience, reception patterns remain uneven. For instance, Ozhivudivasathe Kali—an experimental and critically acclaimed film—did not achieve comparable commercial success, whereas films like Maheshinte Prathikaaram and Kumbalangi Nights were both critically and commercially successful. This disparity raises important questions regarding the nature of audience engagement and the conditions under which experimental narratives are embraced or resisted.

This study seeks to examine the shift in audience reception of Malayalam cinema through the lens of Reception Theory and Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model. By comparatively analyzing the narrative strategies of selected films and conducting qualitative interviews with viewers who have engaged with these texts, the research aims to understand how audiences interpret, negotiate, and construct meaning in contemporary Malayalam cinema. In doing so, the study attempts to locate the precise contours of this transition—from passive consumption to active interpretation—and to explore the socio-cultural factors that shape contemporary audience reception.

Foundational Theories

Reception theory by Stuart Hall (Hall, 1980) posits audiences as active interpreters, shaped by culture and context, challenging passive models like the hypodermic needle. Spectator emotion arises from personality, cultural capital, and immediate states, enabling diverse responses to realism and ambiguity. Phenomenology highlights shifts to performative spectatorship via digital fragments, reconstructing "lost" experiences.

Film Studies Applications

Janet Staiger's historical reception analysis examines public discourse and ethnographic data to trace viewer shifts beyond psychoanalytic passivity. Francesco Casetti details cinema's expansion into transmedial, participatory regimes. Carl Plantinga's pleasures (empathy, narrational reflexivity) explain engagement with moral complexity.

Regional Contexts

Malayalam New Wave studies link globalization, youth media, and films like Traffic (2011) to democratized reception via social platforms. Recent works emphasize realism, gender, and immersive storytelling fostering sociocultural transitions.

Work	Core Idea	Relevance to Your Paper
Reception Theory (Stuart Hall et al.)	Encoding/ decoding by audience context	Ties media literacy/OTT to interpretive shifts
Staiger, Historical Audience Reception	Empirical discourse analysis	Model for your interviews/content analysis

Casetti, Phenomenological Turn	From screen to performance	Explains silence/minimalism demanding participation
Work	Core Idea	Relevance to Your Paper

Malayalam cinema has long balanced commercial spectacle with artistic innovation, but the post-2010 New Wave marks a pivotal evolution in how audiences engage with films. From star-driven narratives of the 1990s and 2000s, viewers now embrace morally ambiguous stories in films like Maheshinte Prathikaaram (2016), Angamaly Diaries (2017), and Kumbalangi Nights (2019), favoring subtle realism over formulaic plots.

2.0 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This paper tries to find the shift in the audience reception of Malayalam cinema. Few experimental films due to narrative and way of storytelling are not accepted by the audience even if it was made after 2010.

Traditional Malayalam spectatorship relied on linear heroism and emotional catharsis, rooted in Kerala's star culture (e.g., Mohanlal-Mammooty era). New Wave directors like Dileesh Pothan disrupt this with quotidian Kerala life, silences, and ethical grayness, echoing global art cinema while amplifying local identities.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Malayalam cinema's post-2010 New Wave has reshaped aesthetics and audience consciousness, necessitating a literature review bridging reception theory, film studies, and regional contexts. This section synthesizes scholarship on spectatorship shifts from passive immersion to active interpretation, framing interpretive collaboration in films like Maheshinte Prathikaaram (2016).

Reception Theory Foundations

The theory majorly talks about how audience receive a text. What happens in between the process of encoding and decoding of the text.

Reception theory positions audiences as co-creators of meaning, countering text-centric models. (Jauss., 1982) introduced the "horizon of expectations," where viewers' genre anticipations are disrupted by innovative works, prompting renegotiation. In Malayalam New Wave, narrative minimalism shatters commercial melodrama's predictability, expanding horizons toward ambiguity and realism.

(Iser, 1978) complemented this with "gaps"—textual indeterminacies filled by reader imagination. Silences and understated conflicts in Dileesh Pothan's films exemplify gaps, turning passive consumption participatory.

(Hall, 1980) added socio-cultural nuance via encoding/decoding, positing dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings by viewers' positions. Kerala's literate audiences, with high media penetration, likely favor negotiated decodings of moral grayness, aligning with New Wave's binary rejection.

Historical Audience Reception

(Staiger, 1992) historicized reception through paratexts and ethnography, advocating empirical study. Applied to Malayalam cinema, this reveals shifts: 1990s experiments like Kazha (2004) hinted at realism, but post-2010 hits democratized it via social media. Staiger's framework informs this study's interviews, capturing digital amplification of meanings.

(Plantinga, 2009) dissected emotional responses—empathy, reflexivity—explaining New Wave's appeal via "narrational engagement" with complex characters. Unlike star-driven catharsis, these elicit reflective pleasure from dilemmas.

Phenomenology and Cinematic Shifts

(Casetti, 2015) traced cinema's "performative turn," where digital fragments demand active reconstruction. Kerala's OTT proliferation blends global art-house with local specificity, heightening consciousness.

(Sobchack, 1992) emphasized embodied spectatorship, where viewers "perform" realism sensorially—resonant with New Wave's quotidian textures.

Malayalam Cinema Contexts

(Baskaran, 2013) traced roots to 1970s parallel cinema, evolving via mid-2000s indies like *Traffic* (2011).

(Kumar, 2023) linked films like *Angamaly Diaries* (2017) to neoliberal youth transitions. Recent studies connect media ecology—smartphones, YouTube—to participatory viewing, where audiences co-author narratives online

(ShodhKosh, 2023) Gaps persist: Stylistic analyses abound (e.g., Pellissery's hyper-realism), but audience empirics lag. No major study integrates reception theory with qualitative New Wave data, overlooking OTT's media literacy role.

(Subhedar, 2024) talks about the feminine touch in the film *Kumbalangi Nights*. Though the film is about masculinity, but it also gives the core idea of having women in the family and the role they play in transforming a mere building to a home.

(Babu, 2021), this paper reminds us how important is it to discuss these cases of caste atrocities even in the 21st century, as the real cases exists even today, which probably goes unnoticed or unregistered.

(Miranda, 2022) how the film portrays dalit victimisation and how a mere play gets converted into a heinous crime in the film, *Ozhivudivasathe Kali*.

Synthesis and Research Gaps

Theme	Key Scholars	Application to New Wave
Expectation Disruption	Jauss (1982)	Minimalism challenges star formulas
Textual Gaps	Iser (1978)	Silences demand viewer completion
Encoding/Decoding	Hall (1980)	Negotiated readings via Kerala literacy
Empirical Reception	Staiger (1992)	Guides interview methodology
Emotional Reflexivity	Plantinga (2009)	Explains ambiguity's appeal
Digital Performativity	Casetti (2015)	OTT fosters active reconstruction

Spectatorship evolves with media ecologies, yet regional applications like Malayalam remain underexplored. The present study addresses this empirically, positioning New Wave as pedagogical—cultivating critical habits absent commercially.

(Chatterjee & Pal, 2020) in the paper probes how Indian millennial audiences, mainly the ‘Digital Mainstream’ have been watching cinema on OTT platforms and why are they switching to mobile devices rather than sticking to the big cinema screens. The researcher tried to analyze the satisfaction level of the audience while watching the content on a smaller screen by conducting the survey and in-depth interviews

Less studies have been conducted comparing the experimental films pre and post 2010. Audience reception has changes in this time frame. The experimental films are now accepted and celebrated among the audience and they are trying to engage in reading the film than watching for entertainment and melodrama.

4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

An interpretive phenomenological approach captures audience experiences, emphasizing how audiences negotiate realism and ambiguity. This mixed-method design integrates:

- **Content analysis of the selected films by applying Stuart Hall’s Reception Theory**
- (Sanal Kumar Sasidharan, 2015) *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* by Sanal Kumar Sasidharan
- (Narayan, 2019) *Kumbalangi Nights* by Dileesh Pothan:

- **Semi-structured audience interviews** to document interpretive processes.

Film Selection Criteria

Purposive sampling selects 2 films based on:

- Critical acclaim and commercial success
- Directorial signatures (Sanal Kumar Sasidharan, Lijo Jose Pellissery)
- Representing narrative minimalism, moral complexity.
- Availability across theatrical/OTT platforms for diverse viewer access

Year of Release	Films	Key Features	Available Platforms
2015	Ozhivudivasathe Kali	Early realism experiments, subtle social critique	Youtube
2020	Kumbalangi Nights	Narrative minimalism, silences, moral ambiguity	Amazone Prime

Content Analysis

By applying Stuart Hall's Reception Theory, the researcher will examine the follows:

1. Narrative structure
2. Aesthetic markers
3. Socio-cultural specificity
4. Interpretive demand

Purposive sampling targets 15 participants:

- **Demographics:** Ages 18-45, mixed gender, varying education levels
- **Viewing profiles:** Regular Malayalam cinema viewers
- **Media access:** OTT and Theatre

5.0 LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study deals with the Narrative analysis of the selected movies released worldwide by applying Vladimir Propp's Narrative parameters. This study is not trying to analyse the representation issues or audience perspective on the change in narratives to understand the reasons for acceptance these experimental movies are receiving. The researcher has selected only two films for the study from the pool of movies.

6.0 DATA ANALYSIS

6.1 Applying Stuart Hall's Reception Theory on Kumbalangi Nights



Kumbalangi Nights emerges from the post-2010 transformation of Malayalam cinema, where narrative emphasis shifts from star-centric spectacle to character-driven realism. The film situates itself within a coastal village space and explores fractured masculinity, emotional repression, and reconfigured family structures. Unlike conventional hero-driven narratives, the film decentralizes power and distributes subjectivity among multiple male characters.

Table 1: Narrative Structure Analysis

Narrative Element	Conventional Malayalam Cinema	Kumbalangi Nights
Protagonist	Single dominant hero	Multiple flawed male characters
Conflict Structure	Hero vs Villain binary	Internal emotional conflicts
Storytelling	Linear, explanatory	Layered, slow, observational
Emotional Resolution	Heroic triumph	Emotional healing
Masculinity	Assertive, dominant	Vulnerable, fragmented

The absence of a traditional heroic arc encodes a rejection of dominant masculinity. The film invites viewers to invest in emotional journeys rather than physical confrontation. The storytelling style demands interpretive patience.

6.1.1 Representation of Masculinity

The central ideological axis of the film is masculinity.

Table 2: Masculinity Coding

Character	Behavioral Traits	Cinematic Framing	Encoded Meaning
Shammi	Authoritarian, narcissistic	Mirror shots, rigid posture, structured interiors	Toxic patriarchy
Saji	Emotionally repressed → breakdown	Close-ups, dim lighting	Healing through vulnerability
Bobby	Immature but sensitive	Casual framing, open landscapes	Emotional growth
Bonny	Silent, stable	Minimal dialogue	Alternative masculinity

Shammi's mirror scenes symbolically encode fragile masculinity masked as discipline. His carefully arranged domestic space contrasts with the chaotic but emotionally authentic home of the brothers. The film encodes masculinity as something constructed not natural and therefore transformable.

The emotional breakdown of Saji is particularly significant. Crying, traditionally coded as feminine weakness in mainstream cinema, is reframed here as cathartic and restorative. The camera lingers without melodrama, encouraging viewers to decode vulnerability as strength.

6.1.2 Domestic Space as Ideological Arena

The film treats domestic architecture as political language.

Table 3: Domestic Space Representation

Space	Visual Characteristics	Emotional Atmosphere	Encoded Ideology
Brothers' House (Beginning)	Broken walls, cluttered	Dysfunctional	Masculine immaturity
Shammi's House	Clean, structured, surveillance-like	Suffocating	Patriarchal control
Brothers' House (Ending)	Warm lighting, shared meals	Restored intimacy	Chosen family

The transformation of the brothers' house symbolizes emotional reconstruction. The house does not become architecturally perfect; rather, it becomes emotionally habitable. This encodes the idea that family is defined by care, not order. Shammi's house, although visually perfect, is emotionally violent — reinforcing the encoded critique of authoritarian masculinity.

6.1.3 Marginality and Class

The protagonists are socially marginal men.

Table 4: Class and Marginality

Dimension	Representation in Film	Encoded Meaning
Employment	Unstable livelihoods	Economic vulnerability
Social Image	Seen as irresponsible	Social labeling
Emotional State	Lonely, disconnected	Structural neglect
Narrative Position	Central characters	Humanization of margins

Rather than romanticizing poverty, the film normalizes it. The marginalized male subject is not glorified but humanized. The audience is encouraged to decode class struggle as emotional struggle.

6.1.4 Cinematic Techniques as Meaning Production

Encoding operates through form as much as content.

Table 5: Formal Techniques and Ideology

Technique	Usage in Film	Ideological Function
Natural lighting	Realist aesthetic	Authenticity
Silence	Long pauses	Emotional depth
Mirror imagery	Shammi's self-gaze	Narcissistic patriarchy
Close-ups	Emotional breakdown scenes	Intimacy
Warm tones (ending)	Family dinner	Restoration

The use of silence compels the audience to “read” facial expressions and emotional undercurrents. Meaning is not verbally explained — it is visually suggested. This requires active decoding.

6.1.5 Stuart Hall's Encoding–Decoding Application

The film encodes a preferred reading aligned with progressive masculinity and anti-patriarchal ideology.

Table 6: Possible Audience Decoding Positions

Decoding Position	Likely Interpretation
Dominant Reading	Film successfully critiques toxic masculinity and promotes emotional growth.
Negotiated Reading	Shammi is problematic, but traditional masculinity still necessary in some contexts.
Oppositional Reading	Film unfairly demonizes patriarchal authority.

The film's commercial success suggests that a large segment of contemporary Malayalam audiences adopted a dominant or negotiated reading. The accessibility of humor and emotional warmth enables broader acceptance compared to more politically dense films.

6.1.6 Polysemy and Interpretive Openness

The film does not explicitly sermonize. It leaves room for:

Psychological interpretation of Shammi

Sympathy toward flawed brothers

Ambiguity about long-term change

This openness creates a polysemic text — one that generates multiple meanings depending on the viewer's socio-cultural position.

6.1.7 Conclusion

Through narrative decentralization, thematic exploration of masculinity, symbolic use of domestic space, and realist cinematic techniques, Kumbalangi Nights encodes a progressive ideological message that challenges hegemonic masculinity and redefines family.

The film requires interpretive participation, confirming the shift toward an active audience model in contemporary Malayalam cinema.

6.2 Applying Stuart Hall's Reception Theory on Ozhivudivasathe Kali



Ozhivudivasathe Kali is an experimental Malayalam film that unfolds almost entirely in a single forest location where a group of upper-caste men gather on a holiday to drink, gamble, and socialize. Over time, their seemingly harmless recreational activity evolves into a disturbing enactment of caste violence.

The film is shot in black and white and unfolds almost in real time, emphasizing naturalistic dialogue and improvisational performances. Unlike mainstream narrative cinema, the film offers minimal guidance for interpretation. The viewer is forced to observe interactions and decode their ideological implications independently.

6.2.1 Narrative Structure and Storytelling Form

The narrative structure deviates significantly from conventional Malayalam cinema.

Table 1: Narrative Structure Analysis

Narrative Element	Conventional Malayalam Cinema	Ozhivudivasathe Kali
Protagonist	Clearly defined hero	No central protagonist
Plot Structure	Structured beginning–middle–end	Episodic, observational
Conflict	External dramatic conflict	Social and ideological tension
Storytelling Mode	Dialogue-driven explanation	Minimal explanation
Narrative Resolution	Moral closure	Ambiguous and disturbing ending

The film intentionally removes narrative conventions that guide audience interpretation. There is no heroic figure to align with and no explicit moral explanation. Instead, meaning emerges gradually through interaction between characters. This narrative strategy requires viewers to actively decode the ideological structures underlying the characters' behavior.

6.2.2 Representation of Caste and Power

The central ideological layer of the film revolves around caste hierarchy and social dominance.

Table 2: Caste and Power Representation

Narrative Element	Representation in Film	Encoded Meaning
Group of men	Upper-caste social privilege	Normalization of caste hierarchy
Marginalized character	Object of mockery and control	Structural oppression
Game dynamics	Power exercised through humiliation	Violence embedded in leisure
Final confrontation	Escalation of aggression	Exposure of caste brutality

The film portrays caste dominance not through overt political speeches but through everyday behavior. Casual jokes, mockery, and subtle intimidation reveal how caste privilege operates within ordinary social settings. The group dynamic gradually exposes how leisure activities mask underlying social hierarchies. The game itself becomes a metaphor for social power structures.

6.2.3 Masculinity and Group Behavior

Masculinity in the film is performed collectively through aggression, competitiveness, and dominance.

Table 3: Masculinity Representation

Character Behavior	Cinematic Presentation	Encoded Meaning
Drinking and gambling	Long observational shots	Masculine bonding rituals
Verbal teasing	Natural dialogue	Competitive masculinity
Collective intimidation	Group framing	Mob psychology
Physical aggression	Sudden escalation	Violence embedded in masculinity

Unlike films that portray masculinity through heroic action, this film examines masculinity as a social performance within peer groups. The men reinforce each other's authority through verbal humiliation and competitive behavior. Masculinity here is fragile and dependent on domination of others, particularly those positioned lower within the social hierarchy.

6.2.4 Space and Isolation

The spatial setting plays a crucial narrative role.

Table 4: Spatial Representation

Location	Visual Characteristics	Encoded Meaning
Forest setting	Isolated, natural environment	Detachment from social accountability
Outdoor drinking area	Informal gathering space	Illusion of freedom
Absence of women	Male-only environment	Reinforcement of patriarchal authority
Enclosed group interaction	Limited movement	Intensification of conflict

The isolated forest setting removes the characters from social regulation. Without external societal constraints, the underlying power hierarchies become more visible. The environment thus becomes a symbolic space where hidden ideologies surface.

6.2.5 Cinematic Techniques as Meaning Construction

The film relies heavily on formal techniques to encode meaning.

Table 5: Formal Techniques and Ideology

Technique	Use in Film	Ideological Function
Black-and-white cinematography	Stark visual contrast	Moral ambiguity
Long takes	Continuous observation	Real-time realism
Minimal background score	Natural soundscape	Documentary-like authenticity
Improvised dialogue	Naturalistic performance	Social realism
Static camera framing	Observational perspective	Audience as witness

The absence of dramatic editing or music forces viewers to confront the unfolding events without emotional guidance. The audience becomes an observer rather than a guided participant. This stylistic choice intensifies the realism and encourages interpretive engagement.

6.2.6 Encoding of Ideological Meaning

Through narrative and formal elements, the film encodes several ideological positions.

Table 6: Encoded Ideological Messages

Theme	Encoded Message
Caste hierarchy	Social privilege perpetuates violence
Masculinity	Dominance-based masculinity is destructive
Leisure culture	Violence can emerge within ordinary social interactions
Group psychology	Collective behavior amplifies aggression
Social inequality	Marginalized individuals remain vulnerable

The film does not present these ideas through explicit dialogue or narrative explanation. Instead, ideology is encoded within everyday interactions and escalating group dynamics. The audience must infer the broader social commentary from these behaviors.

6.2.7 Application of Stuart Hall's Encoding–Decoding Model

The film's interpretive openness creates multiple possible audience readings.

Table 7: Audience Decoding Positions

Decoding Position	Possible Audience Interpretation
Dominant Reading	The film critiques caste hierarchy and toxic masculinity.
Negotiated Reading	The film depicts social realities but exaggerates them for dramatic effect.
Oppositional Reading	The film portrays male social interaction negatively or unfairly.

Because the film does not provide clear narrative guidance, audience interpretations may vary significantly. Some viewers may interpret the film as a powerful critique of caste and patriarchy, while others may focus on the surface-level depiction of male leisure activities.

6.2.8 Interpretive Complexity and Audience Reception

Compared to more emotionally accessible films such as Kumbalangi Nights, this film places a heavier interpretive burden on viewers. The absence of emotional catharsis, humor, or narrative resolution makes the film intellectually demanding.

This complexity partially explains why the film achieved strong critical recognition but limited commercial success. The film expects viewers to decode symbolic social commentary without narrative assistance.

6.2.9 Findings

Ozhivudivasathe Kali constructs a layered critique of caste hierarchy, masculine power structures, and collective violence through minimalist storytelling and realist cinematic techniques. Its observational narrative style deliberately minimizes narrative guidance, compelling viewers to actively interpret the ideological implications of character interactions.

From a reception theory perspective, the film demonstrates how meaning is not fixed within the text but emerges through the interpretive process of the audience. The film's experimental narrative and ideological subtlety result in diverse decoding positions, which helps explain its critical acclaim alongside limited mainstream acceptance.

6.3 Comparative Content Analysis Using Reception Theory



6.3.1. Narrative Accessibility

Aspect	Kumbalangi Nights	Ozhivudivasathe Kali
Narrative Style	Character-driven storytelling	Observational, real-time narrative
Plot Progression	Gradual emotional development	Episodic interactions
Audience Guidance	Emotional cues and narrative direction	Minimal narrative guidance
Resolution	Emotional closure and healing	Ambiguous and unsettling ending

Kumbalangi Nights provides a clear emotional journey that helps audiences connect with characters and follow the story easily. In contrast, Ozhivudivasathe Kali deliberately avoids traditional narrative cues, leaving viewers to interpret social dynamics themselves.

From a reception theory perspective, the former encourages dominant readings, while the latter produces multiple negotiated or oppositional readings.

6.3.2 Representation of Masculinity

Dimension	Kumbalangi Nights	Ozhivudivasathe Kali
Masculinity Type	Vulnerable, emotionally evolving	Aggressive, hierarchical
Male Relationships	Healing and solidarity	Competitive and hostile
Central Conflict	Personal emotional struggle	Social power dynamics
Ideological Position	Redefinition of masculinity	Exposure of toxic masculinity

Kumbalangi Nights humanizes flawed men and allows them to grow emotionally, which creates empathy for viewers. Ozhivudivasathe Kali presents masculinity in its rawest form—violent, insecure, and oppressive—without offering redemption.

This difference affects audience reception: one offers emotional identification, while the other forces critical distance.

6.3.3 Representation of Social Structures

Social Theme	Kumbalangi Nights	Ozhivudivasathe Kali
Family	Broken but reconstructible	Absent family structure
Class	Marginalized men humanized	Privileged caste dominance
Patriarchy	Critiqued through Shammi	Embedded within group behavior
Community	Healing through relationships	Conflict emerging within male group

Kumbalangi Nights situates its critique within a narrative of transformation and hope.

Ozhivudivasathe Kali exposes oppressive social structures without providing narrative comfort.

The second film therefore requires deeper sociopolitical interpretation.

6.3.4. Cinematic Form and Audience Engagement

Technique	Kumbalangi Nights	Ozhivudivasathe Kali
Cinematography	Warm colors and natural landscapes	Stark black-and-white imagery
Editing	Conventional pacing	Long takes and minimal cuts
Sound	Music supports emotional tone	Mostly natural sound
Dialogue	Character-driven conversations	Improvised and fragmented

Kumbalangi Nights uses cinematic language that guides emotional engagement.

Ozhivudivasathe Kali uses minimalist techniques that make viewers passive observers of social violence. This stylistic difference greatly affects how easily audiences decode meaning.

6.3.5. Encoding of Ideological Meaning

Theme	Kumbalangi Nights	Ozhivudivasathe Kali
Masculinity	Emotional vulnerability is strength	Dominant masculinity leads to violence
Social Structure	Marginality can lead to solidarity	Privilege produces oppression
Moral Direction	Clear ethical stance	Ambiguous moral positioning
Audience Position	Encouraged empathy	Forced critical observation

6.3.6. Audience Decoding Possibilities

Decoding Type	Kumbalangi Nights	Ozhivudivasathe Kali
Dominant Reading	Audience accepts critique of toxic masculinity and celebrates emotional growth	Audience recognizes critique of caste hierarchy
Negotiated Reading	Some viewers sympathize with traditional masculinity	Some viewers interpret events as exaggerated social drama
Oppositional Reading	Few reject the ideological message	Some viewers see the film as pessimistic or overly political

The narrative accessibility of Kumbalangi Nights encourages dominant readings.

The complexity of Ozhivudivasathe Kali produces a wider range of negotiated and oppositional interpretations.

6.3.7. Reception and Commercial Success

Table 7: Reception Comparison

Dimension	Kumbalangi Nights	Ozhivudivasathe Kali
Critical Reception	Highly acclaimed	Critically acclaimed
Audience Reception	Widely embraced	Limited audience reach
Box Office	Commercial success	Limited commercial success
Interpretive Demand	Moderate	High

Both films share experimental qualities, but Kumbalangi Nights balances realism with emotional accessibility. Ozhivudivasathe Kali demands greater interpretive effort and lacks conventional narrative rewards. Thus, the difference in reception reflects how audiences decode complex cinematic texts.

6.3.8. Findings and Conclusion

The comparison between Kumbalangi Nights and Ozhivudivasathe Kali reveals that audience reception is shaped not only by ideological content but also by narrative accessibility and emotional engagement. While both films critique patriarchal structures and masculine dominance, their storytelling strategies differ significantly.

Kumbalangi Nights mediates its critique through emotionally relatable characters and narrative closure, enabling audiences to adopt a dominant reading with relative ease. The movie also had used popular actors and the music has a big role in making the audience engaging and interpretation also thus becomes easier. In contrast, Ozhivudivasathe Kali employs minimalist storytelling and ideological ambiguity, requiring a higher level of interpretive participation from viewers. The music was mostly not there and also director used non popular actors for the same which also effected the commercial screening of the film.

This contrast illustrates the broader shift in Malayalam cinema's audience culture, where viewers are increasingly capable of engaging with complex narratives, yet still respond differently depending on the level of interpretive effort required.

7.0 Interview Responses from 15 Participants

The Researcher has done purposive sampling and took interviews of 15 participants who have seen both the films. The researcher has used semi-structured interview questions based on Stuart Hall's Reception theory. After analysing the data, researcher could easily see that even though, audience has started accepting complex narrative and experiments in filmmaking, they want it to be relatable and emotionally engaging

7.1 Audience Decoding Positions

Decoding Category	Number of Participants	Interpretation
Dominant Reading	7	Participants understood and accepted the intended critique of masculinity and social structures presented in the films.
Negotiated Reading	5	Participants accepted some themes but interpreted them through their own experiences or cultural perspectives.
Oppositional Reading	3	Participants struggled to interpret the film's deeper message or disagreed with its portrayal of social issues.

The results suggest that most viewers decoded the films in a dominant or negotiated manner, meaning they generally recognized the filmmakers' intended critique of toxic masculinity and social hierarchy. However, a smaller group displayed oppositional readings, particularly when interpreting the more abstract narrative of Ozhivudivasathe Kali.

7.2 Audience Preference Between the Films

Film Preference	Participants
Kumbalangi Nights	12
Both Films	3
Ozhivudivasathe Kali Only	0

The majority of participants reported stronger engagement with Kumbalangi Nights. Respondents described the film as emotionally relatable and narratively accessible.

In contrast, Ozhivudivasathe Kali was often described as symbolic, intellectually demanding, or difficult to interpret, which limited its broader audience appeal.

7.3. Emotional Engagement with the Films

Emotional Engagement Level	Participants
High	5
Medium	8
Low	2

Most participants reported medium to high emotional engagement, particularly with Kumbalangi Nights.

Participants highlighted scenes such as:

- Saji's emotional breakdown
- The final family dinner scene
- Shammi's controlling behaviour

These moments were frequently cited as emotionally impactful and helped audiences connect with the film's themes.

7.4. Audience Reception Analysis based on Audience Responses

Participant	Gender	Age	Preferred_Film	Emotional_Connection	Decoding_Category
P1	F	24	Kumbalangi Nights	High	Dominant
P2	M	28	Kumbalangi Nights	Medium	Dominant
P3	M	35	Kumbalangi Nights	Medium	Negotiated
P4	F	22	Kumbalangi Nights	High	Oppositional
P5	M	31	Both	Medium	Dominant
P6	F	26	Kumbalangi Nights	High	Negotiated
P7	M	40	Kumbalangi Nights	Medium	Negotiated
P8	F	29	Both	Medium	Dominant
P9	M	23	Kumbalangi Nights	Low	Oppositional
P10	M	34	Kumbalangi Nights	Medium	Negotiated
P11	F	27	Kumbalangi Nights	High	Dominant
P12	M	45	Both	Medium	Dominant
P13	F	21	Kumbalangi Nights	High	Oppositional
P14	M	38	Kumbalangi Nights	Low	Negotiated
P15	F	32	Kumbalangi Nights	Medium	Dominant

The audience responses indicate a clear difference in reception between the two selected films. While both films present critiques of masculinity and social hierarchy, their narrative accessibility significantly influences audience interpretation.

Participants largely interpreted Kumbalangi Nights through a dominant reading, recognizing the film's critique of toxic masculinity and its emphasis on emotional vulnerability among male characters. The narrative structure, relatable characters, and emotionally driven storytelling allowed viewers to easily engage with the film's themes. In contrast, Ozhivudivasathe Kali generated a wider range of negotiated and oppositional readings. Several respondents acknowledged that the film addressed issues of caste hierarchy and group violence but found the narrative structure challenging to interpret. The minimalist storytelling, absence of conventional narrative cues, and symbolic presentation required greater interpretive effort from viewers.

These findings support the argument that contemporary Malayalam cinema audiences are increasingly capable of engaging with complex narratives. However, the level of audience engagement is still influenced by narrative accessibility and emotional relatability.

The results, therefore demonstrate that while experimental filmmaking is gaining recognition within Malayalam cinema, films that combine social critique with emotional storytelling, such as Kumbalangi Nights, tend to achieve broader audience acceptance.

8.0 CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine whether Malayalam New Wave cinema represents merely an aesthetic shift or a deeper transformation in audience reception and cinematic consciousness. Through a combined content analysis of Ozhivudivasathe Kali (2015) and Kumbalangi Nights (2019), and qualitative audience interviews.

After applying Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model provides additional insight into the diversification of audience readings. Unlike traditional Malayalam cinema, which often encoded dominant moral alignments, both films resist binary characterization. Participants demonstrated dominant, negotiated, and occasionally oppositional readings,

especially in relation to masculinity and caste violence. This multiplicity of decoding positions indicates an increasingly reflexive audience capable of engaging with moral ambiguity.

The comparative findings suggest that Malayalam New Wave cinema operates as a pedagogical space that trains viewers in interpretive literacy. *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* represents a high-intensity model of cognitive spectatorship, foregrounding discomfort and demanding critical endurance. *Kumbalangi Nights* democratizes this mode, integrating ambiguity into emotionally resonant narratives that achieve mainstream acceptance. Together, they illustrate the gradual normalization of participatory spectatorship within Kerala's media culture.

From the interviews with the audience it's mostly clear that, audience may have moved ahead and started becoming part of interpretation than considering film as an entertainment medium. But star cast and music also play a pivotal part in engaging the audience. Therefore, the study concludes that Malayalam New Wave cinema marks a shift from affective immersion and star-driven moral certainty toward interpretive collaboration and reflective engagement. The spectator is no longer positioned as a recipient of narrative closure but as an active co-author of cinematic meaning.

In positioning regional Malayalam cinema within global theoretical debates on reception, this research underscores that shifts in cinematic form are inseparable from shifts in spectatorship. The New Wave is thus not simply a stylistic category but a reconfiguration of cultural consciousness—one that redefines how audiences watch, interpret, and inhabit cinema.

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