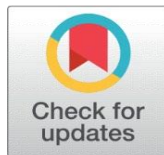
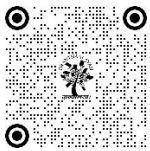




YAVANIKA: THE MOURNED ART AND THE UNMOURNED ARTIST

Basheer VP ¹✉

¹ Assistant Professor of English, Kunnamangalam Government Arts and Science College, Calicut, Kerala, India



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INTRODUCTION

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance (Yeats, 23)

Yavanika is a celebrated and critically acclaimed Malayalam movie which came out in the year 1982. Four decades
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ABSTRACT

"Yavanika: The Mourned Art and the Unmourned Artist" explores the layered symbolism behind the theatrical curtain—Yavanika—as both a metaphor and a literal veil that obscures the life and legacy of the artist behind the spectacle. This study delves into how traditional and modern art forms mourn the decay of the performative space while often neglecting the emotional, social, and existential decline of the artist. By analyzing literary texts, dramatic performances, and visual representations, the paper interrogates the cultural phenomena where art is immortalized, yet the creators remain invisible, marginalized, or forgotten. The narrative critically reflects on the paradox of public reverence for lost art forms alongside private neglect of the individual who created them, raising questions about memory, erasure, and the politics of mourning in artistic discourse.

Keywords: Yavanika, Performative Art, Artist Invisibility, Mourning in Art, Cultural Memory, Forgotten Artists, Aesthetics and Erasure, Theatrical Symbolism, Art and Identity, Marginalized Creators

have passed after it was released and the Malayali audience now witnesses well-crafted and technically superior thriller movies on a regular basis; but Yavanika still retains the power to hold the viewers attention and engage them in the debate of the ethics and aesthetics of art.

Art may seem a separate entity when the questions of ethics are raised and discussed. But as Virginia Woolf points out in *A Room of One's Own* "it is still attached to life at all four corners" (57) and is not to be differentiated either from the social fabric or the ethical one. With the ongoing #me too# movements, the discussion of responding to an unethical artist's aesthetics also has gained prominence. This paper tries to look into how the 1982 movie Yavanika dealt with this question and what pronouncements it made on the topic.

There have always been artists who had been terrible wrong doers, but excellent creators. Roman Polanski, Paul Gauguin, Woody Allen, Michael Jackson all have had morally or ethically ambiguous personal lives. Responding to their art has left at least some of the art admirers in splits because telling the dancer from the dance is a difficult task. GK Chesterton wrote how "art like morality consists of drawing the line somewhere" (Matthes, 4): the art, the artist and morality draw clear lines in Yavanika, just as Black and White the name of the play within the movie suggests. Demarcations are clearly drawn as the unethical artist is left unmoored where as the aesthetics of his art is deeply missed.

Yavanika is a thriller which investigates the absence of a missing artist. At the same time, it lets the viewer watch and appreciate a full length play that is deftly sewn into the action of the movie. The movie takes place around Bhavana Theatres, a drama group which is currently staging the play Black and White. Vakkachan is the proprietor of the troupe and as the movie begins the artists are getting ready for their new stage. Ayyappan, their table player doesn't arrive and they set out in the hope that he will join them before the performance. His partner Jalaja exchanges glances with Joseph Kollappally as the group worries over his absence.

Ayyappan doesn't arrive for any of the subsequent performances and Vakkachan is compelled to report him missing. Jacob Eerali, played by Mammooty comes as the investigating officer and the game is afoot. Ayyappan is introduced to us at first as a drunkard whose hands are never drunk. When somebody comments that Ayyappan must have been thoroughly drunk to miss a stage, Varunan, played by Jagathi asserts that Ayyappan may be inebriated but his hands are always sober, a clear demarcation of the dancer from the dance. Ayyappan's art has got nothing to do with his person; it is separate and untarnished by the ethical ambiguities of the artist.

This is the first idea that the viewer receives of Ayyappan, that he and his art are separate and his dilemmas are his alone and not of his drumming fingers. His picture is complete through several flash backs, each of his colleagues has something new to tell us of him, none of which is good news. He is presented to us as an alcoholic by Vakkachan, played by Thilakan, as an abusive colleague by Balagopalan, played by Nedumudi Venu, as a pervert and rapist by Rohini, his partner, played by Jalaja, as an irresponsible, immoral and wayward husband and father by his family. No positive terms are used to describe his person; even his son Vishnu, played by Ashokan states that killing his father has always been one of his options.

Art is food for serious considerations and in-depth ruminations; the movie states. As the play Black and White begins Vakkachan instructs the audience not to be persuaded away from the play by the noise made by a popping soda bottle, a

wailing child or a shifting chair. These distractions will affect the enjoyment of the play and they will end up missing important aspects of the play which talks about the complicated man-woman relationships. Supreme attention is to be paid to a work of art; otherwise, the audience will never come to terms with its significance and then it will be their loss, theirs alone.

Art presents a totally different world; a world that the artist doesn't inhabit. The foes in the play within the movie are real life lovers. Balagopalan and Rohini, the star-crossed lovers in the play are incidental colleagues in real life. Young Varunan is the stooped grandfather and the womanizing Balagopalan is a one-woman man in the play. Rohini in real life is a meek and subjugated young girl who cannot escape from a man who abuses her day and night. But in the play, she is an opinionated, head-strong woman who declares to her family that she will marry only the person she loves. The lovers are murdered in the play by the suspicious and antagonistic partner; where as the suspicious and antagonistic partner in real life is killed and disposed of by the lovers.

The world of art is presented as a world of blurred boundaries. When Jacob Eerali asks Vakkachan whether Ayyappan used to consume alcohol he replies that artists normally drink. Vakkachan is sleeping with the singer of the troupe and gives her a salary hike even when all other artists claim how stingy he is when it comes to handing out remuneration. He accepts the allegation of being a womanizer when Varunan throws it in his face, like it is normal thing happening in drama troupes. Balagopalan tries to flirt with every woman in the troupe and is not shy about admitting it. The rule book at work is different from the rule book practiced outside. But even this rule book doesn't take lightly to a truly unethical disposition.

The first visual of Ayyappan in the movie is a photograph, which Eerali's wife describes as a photograph of a drunkard and Eerali describes as a photograph of a criminal. Ayyappan went to North India as a very young boy and came back to Kerala with magic in his fingers. It is said that he had a family in the north and after coming back to Kerala he married another woman and had a son, Vishnu. The only person who can take away his nonchalance and sway him is his son. Later he manipulates Rohini's mother and takes Rohini out of her family, forces her to stay with him and blackmails her with the threat that if she chooses to disobey him, he will bring in her sisters too and abuse them. He is unsettled if somebody talks to Rohini or sees her out of work. These are all brought to us through flashbacks. In the first moving visual of Ayyappan, we have him passionately drumming on his table. There is a woman dancing, her body swaying to the music. Here the movie brings about the second differentiation between Ayyappan and his art. Even though his fingers are drumming on, his eyes are voyeuristically moving over the body of the dancer. Ayyappan the artist is invariably dissociated from his art. In another flashback, Ayyappan could be seen trying to sexually assault this lady which puts an end to his first association with the troupe.

The occasion of Ayyappan first meeting Rohini also is a similar sequence. Rohini is dancing on the stage and Ayyappan is in the wings again playing his table. Ayyappan is lost in the dancer's body and her movements, even while his flawless playing continues. He takes a fancy to her, and brings her to Bhavana Theatres exploiting her family's financial precariousness. These are the only visuals the movie offers us of Ayyappan and his art and in all these Ayyappan

is seen dissociated from his art. The other visuals show his moral depravities; drunk and passed out in the toilet, picking fights with everyone around, molesting women, stealing her savings from Rohini etc. The movie treats his person harshly without giving him any grey areas. He is portrayed in black and white; just like the play within the movie which is titled similarly even though it is talking about the grey areas of complex inter human relationships.

So, when Ayyappan went missing nobody actually misses him. When his body is found, there is nobody grieving over his death. His wife comes in search of him when he goes missing just because he was a source of income. Rohini cries because she couldn't hide the corpse well, and now that the police found the dead body the investigation would take a new turn. When the talks about his replacement were going on, it was suggested that replacing him would be difficult, because his mastery over his art is unquestioned. But that doesn't make anybody eulogize him after his death or lament his absence. An unethical artist is not mourned, the film states this unequivocally. His art may be supreme, but that doesn't endear him to anybody. The art and the person who made the art are distinguished by the film and as far as the film is concerned, when questionable ethics is put on the table, different shades of grey are forgotten and only the black and the white remain.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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