



Memories Cast in Ritual and Soil: *Neelakkuyil* and *Nirmalyam* as Mnemonic Narratives of Kerala's Modern Crisis

Unnikrishnan Kalamullathil

Assistant Professor of English, Department of English, Sri Vyasa NSS College, Wadakkanchery, Thrissur, University of Calicut, Kerala, India

Received: 07 Jun 2026; Received in revised form: 25 Jul 2026; Accepted: 30 Jul 2026; Available online: 02 Aug 2026
©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper examines *Neelakkuyil* (1954) and *Nirmalyam* (1973) as mnemonic texts within Malayalam cinema that encode the complex experience of modernity in Kerala. Situating the films within the socio-historical transformations of postcolonial Kerala — marked by linguistic reorganisation, agrarian reform, communist mobilisation, and the decline of feudal and ritual formations — the study argues that these works do not merely reflect social change but actively participate in the construction of cultural memory. Drawing on Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory alongside postcolonial frameworks of hybridity and ambivalence, the paper analyses the distinct mnemonic landscapes each film produces as sites where the tension between tradition and modernity is negotiated. *Neelakkuyil* employs social realism to memorialise caste repression and legitimate a rationalist, reformist nationalism, while simultaneously reinscribing gender and caste hierarchies through the silencing of subaltern voices. *Nirmalyam*, in contrast, adopts an elegiac modernist aesthetic to lament the spiritual and ontological displacement wrought by modernisation — a register of loss, dispossession, and irresolvable historical rupture. Taken together, the two films constitute a dialectic of cultural memory: one oriented toward liberation and futurity, the other toward mourning and critique. In doing so, they lay bare the contradictions and costs of modern transformation in Kerala. The paper concludes that these films remain vital for understanding how postcolonial societies visualise, negotiate, and contest the meanings of progress, identity, and historical change.



Keywords— Cultural Memory, Malayalam Cinema, Postcolonial Modernity, Caste Representation, Film Studies.

I. INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial societies rarely traverse a smooth path toward modernity. Rather, modernity arrives as successive disruptions and displacements — the promise of the new shadowed by the loss of the old. Nowhere is this experience more complexly textured than in Kerala, where linguistic reorganisation, agrarian reform, communist mobilisation, and the erosion of traditional social institutions unfolded in rapid, overlapping succession. Cinema, emerging as a mass medium alongside these transformations, became a crucial site for articulating the fears and aspirations of a society in transit. This paper

examines two landmark Malayalam films — *Neelakkuyil* (1954) and *Nirmalyam* (1973) — as mnemonic artefacts encoding Kerala's cultural memory of modernity. Rather than reflecting social change, they produce scenographies of loss and mediate the traumatic passage from feudalism to contested modernity.

Neelakkuyil, directed by P. Bhaskaran and Ramu Kariat, was released on the eve of Kerala's linguistic reorganisation in 1956, a moment of intense political transformation. The film follows Sreedharan Nair, an upper-caste teacher who impregnates Neeli, a Dalit woman, and refuses to marry her because of caste prejudice.

Deploying social-realist conventions associated with the Left cultural movement, the film engages directly with the discourse of caste equality. Nearly two decades later, M.T. Vasudevan Nair adapted his own short story, Pallivaallum Kalchilambum, into *Nirmalyam*. The film traces the existential crisis of a temple oracle (velichappadu) as the feudal-religious order that sustained him gives way to secular rationalism. Where *Neelakkuyil* remembers a world of oppressive hierarchies requiring dismantlement, *Nirmalyam* mourns the spiritual and cultural vacancy left in their wake. Together, the two films constitute a discourse of cultural memory: one oriented toward the emancipatory possibilities of modernity, the other lamenting modernity's failure to preserve the foundational structures of tradition.

Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann define cultural memory as the ensemble of mechanisms through which societies preserve, transmit, and reinterpret the past. Far from a passive storehouse, cultural memory is actively produced through institutions, rituals, narratives, and media. Cinema — with its capacity to vividly evoke place, time, and affect — is a powerful medium of such memory-work. In postcolonial Kerala, films like *Neelakkuyil* and *Nirmalyam* do not simply document historical change; they enact it, generating images of the past that sediment into collective consciousness. This paper demonstrates how each film constructs a distinct mnemonic landscape — one grounded in the agrarian realities of caste oppression, the other in the crumbling courtyard of a temple and the spiritual dispossession of its oracle — and how these landscapes, read together, illuminate the tensions and costs of modernisation in Kerala.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: CULTURAL MEMORY, POSTCOLONIALITY, AND CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION

To read *Neelakkuyil* and *Nirmalyam* as mnemonic narratives requires a set of theoretical frameworks capable of addressing the intersection of memory, modernity, and representation. Jan Assmann's account of institutionalised remembrance centres on the role of collective memory in sustaining cultural identity across generations. Assmann distinguishes between 'communicative memory' — embedded in everyday social interaction and spanning roughly three generations — and 'cultural memory,' preserved through ritualised expression in texts, monuments, and performances. Cultural memory, Assmann argues, 'is characterised by its distance from the everyday. Its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These are fixed points in the past. Even when they lie in the remote past, cultural memory connects with contemporary groups,

forming the basis of their identity' (Assmann 129). Cinema, as a contemporary and ritualised mode of spectatorship, participates in the production of cultural memory by condensing historical experience into canonical narratives.

In postcolonial contexts, the colonial inheritance and the traumas of modernisation render the construction of cultural memory especially fraught. Homi K. Bhabha argues that postcolonial subjects inhabit a 'third space' — neither purely colonial nor simply indigenous, but negotiated through hybridity and ambivalence, where identities form at the intersection of colonial imposition and indigenous tradition. As Bhabha writes, 'It is in the emergence of the interstices — the overlap and displacement of domains of difference — that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated' (Bhabha 2). This interstitial condition is visible in Kerala, where the ideals of modernity — equality, rationality, progress — were advanced through a communist political idiom yet remained in persistent tension with entrenched caste stratification, feudal land relations, and the enduring authority of Brahmanical ritual. The films examined here navigate this interstitial terrain, producing narratives of loss and desire that register the fractured consciousness of a society suspended between two socio-cultural worlds.

Cinematic scholarship has established that cultural memory is constructed not only thematically but formally. Setting, cinematographic style, narrative structure, and characterisation all contribute to the production of mnemonic landscapes. As Meena T. Pillai observes in her analysis of *Nirmalyam*, the film 'attempts to portray the fragmented character of social and cultural realities and identities in the backdrop of a shift from an agrarian to a capitalistic, consumerist society' (82). This fragmentation is not merely described but formally realised: the disruption of linear temporality and the staging of historic al discontinuity are achieved through the film's very aesthetic choices. Equally, *Neelakkuyil* 's 'nationalist realism' — its insistence on landscape, costume, dialect, and ritual as markers of regional authenticity — functions as a mnemonic device that anchors the story within a recognisably 'Keralite' world, even as the narrative advocates for its transformation. The films thus operate on two registers simultaneously: as documents of historical transition and as instruments of memory-making that shape how audiences understand and remember the past.

The mnemonic function of these films is further complicated by their engagement with subaltern subjectivities and marginalised communities. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation — 'Can the subaltern speak?' — resonates across both texts. In *Neelakkuyil*, Neeli

is denied speech: her agency is absorbed into the moral transformation of the upper-caste protagonist. In *Nirmalyam*, the oracle's climactic act of spitting blood before the deity amounts to inarticulate protest against his dispossession. In both cases, the representational choices expose a central tension within progressive cultural memory: both films critique oppressive social orders while simultaneously reproducing hierarchies of voice and visibility, raising urgent questions about whose memory is preserved and whose experience is effaced.

III. *NEELAKKUYI*: MNEMONIC LANDSCAPE OF FEUDAL OPPRESSION AND THE PROMISE OF REFORM

Neelakkuyil was produced at a pivotal moment in Kerala's history, as the region stood on the threshold of the dissolution of feudal social relations and the consolidation of a modern democratic polity. The film's narrative is structured around the tension between tradition and modernity, played out through the grammar of caste hierarchy and an emergent discourse of equality. Set in a Kerala village surrounded by paddy fields, ancestral homesteads (tharavad), and caste-bounded spaces, the film constructs a mnemonic landscape that evokes agrarian feudalism. Through a sustained visual attention to the markers of caste — the tuft of the Nair karanavar, the paan box of the Namboodiri, the segregated dwelling of the Dalit woman — the film formally integrates this world into collective memory even as its narrative argues for its supersession. The film's realism thus carries a double function: it documents the phenomenology of a social order on the verge of extinction, preserving for memory the texture of a world the narrative itself seeks to overcome.

At the centre of this mnemonic project stands Neeli, a Dalit woman whose pregnancy and death at the railway tracks condense the representational logic of feudal violence: Dalit bodies as disposable, exploitable, and ultimately expendable within the prevailing social arrangement. Yet Neeli's representation is formally and politically constrained. As Jenny Rowena argues:

Here, the question of caste/gender (as in most other social-realist films of the period) is not taken up from the perspective of the person for whom [they are] most problematic — the Dalit woman. A truly radical narrative about caste/gender inequality would have represented Neeli's story from her perspective. The entire narrative is represented from the upper-caste man's perspective, for whom the discourse on caste/gender equality becomes a means to establishing his superior identity. (36)

This observation identifies the central contradiction of the film's mnemonic ambition. *Neelakkuyil* mobilises the memory of caste oppression, but frames it through the moral awakening of an upper-caste male protagonist. The memory that is thus preserved is one of upper-caste enlightenment rather than Dalit suffering. Extended sequences depicting Sreedharan Nair's guilt and existential torment after Neeli's death position him as the story's moral centre, inviting spectatorial identification with his crisis of conscience. Neeli, meanwhile, is doubly erased — literally, by death, and symbolically, by narrative silence.

The postman Shankaran Nair, played by P. Bhaskaran, serves as the film's ethical anchor — a rationalist and egalitarian who embodies the cultural vision of the Communist movement. As Jenson Joseph notes:

The postman Shankaran Nair is the 'unmarked' modern subject, whose legitimacy emanates from, and is reaffirmed by, the approval of Moithu and the mass audience of popular cinema that he represents. The Communist, as the representative of the region, represents the unfaltering spirit of rationality, the basis of Malayali nationalism, and mobilizes the region into one unity of modern nationhood. (40-41)

The film's resolution — the handing of Neeli's child to Sreedharan Nair with the injunction to 'bring him up as a human being, not as a Nair, Pulaya, or Mappila' — projects a vision of a secular, casteless future. The child becomes a symbol of futurity and of the redemptive potential of modernity. Yet this intergenerational transfer is wholly negotiated between men; women, and Dalit women in particular, are excluded from the social contract that underwrites the modern nation.

The mnemonic landscape of *Neelakkuyil* is thus structurally paradoxical: the very act of remembering feudal oppression is designed to propel it into the past as something to be overcome, yet the act of remembering simultaneously restates the hierarchies of gender, of caste, of voice that constituted it. The film's didactic address to a presumed mass audience — illiterate, subaltern, in need of enlightenment — reinforces the role of the middle-class, upper-caste intellectual as the primary agent of social transformation. As Joseph argues:

The Left and its aesthetic project of social realism conceived the realms of rational politics and the relations and negotiations between communities/men as the only constitutive elements of 'social reality'; consequently, it marginalized or delegitimized the effects and energies of romance and sentiments, perceived as

circulating in the 'familial' spaces and as appealing mainly to women. (51)

This gendering of cultural memory carries significant scholarly implications. By staging the drama of modernity in ostensibly public, male-dominated spaces — the teashop, the school, the village square — the film effectively erases women's experiences of and from modernity. The agrarian landscape, with its paddy fields and village pathways, is recoded as a masculinised terrain traversed by male protagonists whose ethical dilemmas and reformist aspirations define the contours of historical transformation.

IV. *NIRMALYAM*: MOURNING THE HOLLOW CORE OF MODERNITY

Where *Neelakkuyil* constructs a mnemonic of oppression to be overcome, *Nirmalyam* undertakes a distinct mnemonic project: it mourns the dissolution of a world of ritual certitude and spiritual coherence, even as it acknowledges the injustices and exploitations that world sustained. Set in the early 1970s — a moment when the effects of modernisation, including secularism, rationalism, and economic reorganisation, were beginning to show their costs — the film traces the deterioration of the temple oracle. Once a revered intermediary between human and divine realms, the oracle has become an anachronism: his functions have contracted with the decline of feudal patronage, the rationalisation of religious practice, and the expansion of biomedical knowledge. His trajectory from reverence to redundancy provides an analytical lens through which the film examines the human cost of Kerala's modernisation.

M.T. Vasudevan Nair's directorial debut is marked throughout by formal economy and visual restraint. As Meena T. Pillai observes:

In *Nirmalyam*, one meets a director who has grappled with and almost mastered the power of technologized visual images to communicate beyond any written language. Though in M.T.'s later scripts one comes across a celebration of the word as dialogue, *Nirmalyam* is an example par excellence of artistic restraint of the verbal language. There are no extraneous scenes or conversations, and the director's economy is as striking as his craftsmanship. (1)

This formal restraint intensifies the film's affective register. Prolonged shots of the oracle's weathered face, slow tracking movements through the ruined temple courtyard, and minimal dialogue produce a sense of suspended temporality — life caught between gradual destruction and

stasis. The mnemonic landscape of *Nirmalyam* is constituted by a proliferation of ruins: the decayed temple, worn ritual objects, the oracle's threadbare costume. These material remnants function as loci of memory, evoking a once-coherent social and spiritual order that has lost its organising logic.

The oracle's relationship to the goddess is one of total devotional subsumption: his identity is inseparable from his function as divine intermediary. As P.K. Nair notes, '*Nirmalyam* embodies the sense of historical rupture that accompanies the erosion of a once-sacrosanct tradition' (45). This rupture is not merely economic but ontological. Once the villagers no longer seek his blessings, once the temple festivals are repackaged for tourism, and once the goddess's power to afflict — the threat of smallpox — is neutralised by medical science, the oracle is left without a viable place in the modern world. His exclusion is compounded by the rationalist critique, which renders his suffering linguistically inexpressible. Unlike the postman in *Neelakkuyil*, who speaks fluently within the idiom of progressive politics, the oracle's protest remains inarticulate — finding its only outlet in the film's climactic act of violence against the deity.

That climactic scene — in which the oracle, betrayed by both society and the gods he has served, spits blood onto the temple deity — ranks among the most searing visual metaphors in Indian cinema. As Srinivasarao Kasarla writes:

The film's climactic moment — where the oracle, betrayed by both society and the gods he once served, spits blood onto the temple deity — remains one of Indian cinema's most searing visual metaphors. This act of defiance and despair underscores the deep disillusionment of a generation witnessing the collapse of their cultural moorings. It is both a symbolic rejection of failed faith and a visceral outcry against socio-economic marginalization. (723-724)

The gesture is polyvalent: simultaneously desecration and sacrifice, rejection of divine authority and an ultimate act of devotion in which the oracle's blood mingles with the idol. At this moment, the film refuses the clean distinction between religious fidelity and apostasy, between faith and disillusionment. The oracle's body becomes the site of an unresolvable paradox that figures the persistence of religious affect alongside the violence of its dispossession. The scene haunts the viewer precisely because it refuses to figure modernity as liberation; instead, it stages modernity as abandonment.

The mnemonic landscape of *Nirmalyam* is fundamentally melancholic. The film evokes a world in

which human life was embedded within a larger cosmological framework — one in which suffering carried meaning and ritual provided orientation. Yet it does not indulge sentimentalism. The feudal-religious order is shown to have been sustained by exploitation: the oracle has always been impoverished, his labour appropriated by temples and landlords alike. His father — a bedridden, paralysed figure — emblematises the stultified past, in Pillai's words 'unable to react to the stimuli and needs of the present' yet 'hanging on to the family and to life — an extra mouth to feed, a conscience bedridden but not buried' (2). The oracle's wife is driven to prostitution by economic necessity, a fate that lays bare the economic violence concealed beneath ritual piety. The film's memory-work is therefore critically reflective rather than nostalgic: it acknowledges the injustices of the past while registering genuine grief at the spiritual vacancy of the present.

The film's origin in M.T. Vasudevan Nair's short story, Pallivaallum Kalchilambum, and the significant temporal and thematic distance between story and film, deepens its mnemonic density. As Pillai notes, the intervening period — the 1960s and early 1970s — was marked by 'seething changes in the socio-economic history of Kerala' (Pillai 2): the decline of agrarian feudalism, the rise of a capitalist consumer economy, and a growing disillusionment with the early promise of communist governance. These transformations are encoded into the film's narrative and mise-en-scene. The wandering son who attempts to dispose of the sacred sword and anklet embodies what Pillai describes as 'the existential dilemma and ennui of the youth of the post-sixties era, the image of the angry young man who vents his anger on all tradition, and also probably the Naxalite movement's infusion of a mood of radical rebellion in the youth' (2). The film thereby stratifies multiple historical moments, creating a palimpsest of memories that captures the complexity of Kerala's contemporary crisis.

The title itself — *Nirmalyam*, meaning the spent flower offerings removed from an idol the morning after worship — functions as a mnemonic device. As Pillai writes:

The word '*Nirmalyam*' denotes the remains of an offering, especially of flowers offered on an idol during pooja, which are then removed in the morning. Significantly, the film begins with the morning ritual of casting away the *Nirmalyam* and cleaning the idol. The director thus attempts to portray cinematically a social situation where the last remains of the selfless devotion of the past are wiped away from an idol, which will remain a

stone sans decoration, sans devotion, and sans divinity. (4)

The opening image establishes the film's governing metaphor: the oracle is himself *Nirmalyam* — a remnant of a ritual order rendered obsolete by modernity. The film's mnemonic purpose is to preserve the memory of this disposal and to bear witness to the losses entailed by the transition to modernity — but without offering resolution or consolation. The oracle's fate remains unresolved at the film's close, his act of desecration without discernible consequence. This refusal of closure is itself a mnemonic stance: a counter-narrative to the redemptive, progressive historical imagination that characterises modernist historiography.

V. DIALECTICS OF CULTURAL MEMORY: BETWEEN LIBERATION AND LOSS

Read together, *Neelakkuyil* and *Nirmalyam* constitute a dialectic of cultural memory within the Malayalam cinematic tradition. They mark two distinct coordinates in Kerala's negotiation of modernity, each generating its own mnemonic landscape and affective structure. *Neelakkuyil* is futuristic: its memory of feudal oppression is deployed pedagogically, educating audiences in the values of caste egalitarianism and secular nationalism. The film's mnemonic landscape — agrarian village, paddy field, caste-segregated space — is preserved to be transcended. Its narrative trajectory is resolutely forward-looking, oriented toward what Joseph describes as 'a New Malayali nation of rational subjects' (31) whose identity is defined by the repudiation of caste hierarchy and the embrace of modernity.

Nirmalyam is retrospective and elegiac in contrast. Its mnemonic terrain — the crumbling temple courtyard, the oracle's dilapidated home — conjures a world that is already irrecoverably lost. The film does not advocate for its recovery: it maintains a clear-eyed recognition of the violence and exploitation embedded in the feudal-religious order. What it mourns is the ontological shelter that order provided — however oppressively — and the spiritual vacancy left in its absence. As Kasarla writes, '*Nirmalyam* embodies the sense of historical rupture that accompanies the erosion of a once-sacrosanct tradition. The oracle's fall from reverence to ridicule is not merely a personal tragedy but a broader allegory for the cultural and spiritual crisis in post-independence Kerala' (723).

The dialectical relationship between the two films can be productively understood through Walter Benjamin's concept of 'dialectical images' — configurations in which past and present collide to generate critical illumination. *Neelakkuyil* memorialises oppression to legitimate the

project of modernity; *Nirmalyam* memorialises loss to interrogate that project's failures and violence. Together, they disclose the fundamental contradiction of Kerala's modernisation: that equality is purchased alongside marginalisation; that the rationalisation of social life coincides with the loss of spiritual coherence; and that individual emancipation is shadowed by the dissolution of communal bonds.

The dialectic operates formally as well as thematically. *Neelakkuyil*'s nationalist realism — its ethnographic attention to regional markers of identity, its integration of authentic-seeming dialect, and its deployment of folk musical conventions — functions as a mnemonic device that anchors the modern nation within culturally familiar territory. As Joseph observes, 'what prompts the dominant historians to claim the social realist cinema of the 1950s and to begin the story of the aesthetically superior Malayalam cinema from this movement is mainly the deployment of nationalist realism that imagines the nation, its people and landscape' (28-29). By clothing the disruptive energies of social change in a stable image of regional identity, this realism domesticates what might otherwise prove radically unsettling.

Nirmalyam, in contrast, is marked by a distinctly modernist aesthetic: elliptical, visually restrained, and narratively ambiguous. The film refuses melodramatic excess and attends instead to the materiality and corporeality of suffering, producing a qualitatively different mnemonic effect. Whereas *Neelakkuyil* constructs a memory that is readily narrativised and instrumentalised for political purposes, *Nirmalyam* constructs a memory that resists easy narrativisation, remaining riddled with unresolved contradiction. The oracle's act of spitting blood onto the deity cannot be absorbed into a progressive narrative of social reform; it persists as an excessive, traumatic, unassimilated remainder.

The gendered politics of memory in both films warrant attention. As noted above, *Neelakkuyil* figures the drama of social change as a masculine undertaking, negotiated among men in public spaces, with Dalit women positioned as objects of the discourse of reform rather than its subjects. *Nirmalyam* introduces a more nuanced gendered dimension through the figure of the oracle's wife, whose prostitution is framed not as moral failure but as economic necessity — a consequence of the collapse of the feudal-religious order that once provided, however inadequately, for the oracle's household. Pillai notes that 'the wife's prostitution is tantamount to the Velichappadu's attempt to sell the holy ornaments in the final section of the short story' (Pillai 2). This parallel opens onto a more nuanced reading of gendered labour and survival under the

conditions of modernity, though ultimately the film subordinates her experience to the oracle's existential crisis.

Spivak's interrogation of subaltern speech acquires different resonances in each film. In *Neelakkuyil*, the subaltern — Neeli — is literally silenced by death, her experience appropriated by the voice of an upper-caste reformer who speaks on her behalf in the service of his own political agenda. The cultural memory of her suffering is thereby aligned with the moral claims of upper-caste progressivism. In *Nirmalyam*, the oracle speaks — but in the language of ritual and devotion, a language rendered inaudible and illegible by the dominant rationalist discourse of modernity. His final act is an inarticulate bodily protest that escapes the available forms of linguistic expression. In both films, the predicament Spivak identifies is enacted: subaltern subjects are either silenced or rendered unintelligible within hegemonic representational regimes.

Yet to characterise these films as simple instruments of upper- and middle-class hegemony would be to underread their complexity. Both texts contain what Raymond Williams calls 'structures of feeling' — emergent cultural formations not yet articulated, finding partial and imperfect expression in the fabric of affect and form. In *Neelakkuyil*, the Muslim fisherman Moithu constitutes a supplementary figure who exceeds the film's pedagogical framework — an embodiment of what Joseph terms 'a rustic modernity' (Joseph 39), characterised by irreverent humour, physical vitality, and an instinctive subversion of caste pretension. In *Nirmalyam*, the oracle's physicality — his suffering, his bleeding, his transgression — constitutes a zone of affective intensity that surpasses the film's nominal thematic of feudal decline. It is precisely the embodied, uncontainable quality of the climactic scene — its excess as historical trauma rather than its legibility as ideological statement — that gives it such enduring power.

VI. CONCLUSION

Read in dialectical relationship, *Neelakkuyil* and *Nirmalyam* together disclose the contradictions inherent in Kerala's modernisation process. As Kasarla argues, M.T. Vasudevan Nair's oeuvre provides 'a critical construct to understand how cultural identity is negotiated continuously and what the consequences of historical forces are in post-colonial Kerala' (720). The work of memory performed by these films exceeds preservation or commemoration; it constitutes a critical interrogation of the past that makes visible the losses and omissions that accompany historical progress. *Neelakkuyil* memorialises oppression to legitimate reform; *Nirmalyam* memorialises loss to interrogate that reform's shortcomings. Together, they generate a stratified, contradictory, and unresolved cultural

memory commensurate with the complexity of the historical crisis they address.

The films raise searching questions about the politics of representation and the limits of progressive cultural memory. Despite their critical intentions, both texts reproduce certain hierarchies of voice and visibility. The subordination of subaltern agency — in both films — to narratives centred on upper-caste male subjectivity is a structural, not incidental, feature of their mnemonic strategies. As Rowena argues, 'it is by assimilating the radical discourse on caste/gender with pseudo-radical films such as this that [the upper-caste man] is able to posit himself at the centre of Malayalee progressiveness and culture' (36). Any serious account of the cultural memory of modernity in Kerala must therefore reckon not only with what is remembered but with what is forgotten; not only with whose voices are preserved but with whose voices are foreclosed.

Yet for all their limitations, *Neelakkuyil* and *Nirmalyam* remain indispensable for understanding how Kerala has narrated and made sense of its own transformation. These are not works that project a singular, coherent memory; rather, they constitute a contested terrain on which memories of oppression, liberation, loss, aspiration, violence, and tenderness coexist in unresolved tension. Owing to their formal density and affective force, these films continue to shape the collective memory and interpretive frameworks of subsequent generations negotiating Kerala's modernity. They demonstrate that cultural memory is not a fixed deposit but a dynamic process requiring constant renegotiation and critical attention. As Pillai concludes, it is 'historically impossible today that *Nirmalyam* would be anything but a living element that needs to be preserved as its own historical resource, which can be critically analysed regarding the present but must not be considered a monument to a lost past' (4).

The mnemonic landscapes of *Neelakkuyil* and *Nirmalyam* — the paddy field, the temple courtyard, the village square, the oracle's dwelling — are not merely settings but active agents of memory: sites where historical experience is rendered perceptible, affectively transmissible, and open to critical engagement. As Kerala continues to negotiate the legacies of its modernisation — the persistence of caste inequality, the dislocations of globalisation, and the erosion of traditional modes of community and being — these films offer a critical prism through which to trace the burdens and ironies of progress. They remind us that modernity is not a destination but an ongoing condition of crisis and negotiation, and that the labour of memory — difficult, partial, and contested —

remains essential to navigating that condition with political and ethical seriousness.

REFERENCES

- [1] Assmann, J. (1995). Collective memory and cultural identity (J. Czaplicka, Trans.). *New German Critique*, (65), 125–133.
- [2] Benjamin, W. (1968). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (H. Zohn, Trans.; pp. 217–252). Schocken Books.
- [3] Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- [4] Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton University Press.
- [5] Chatterjee, P. (1986). *Nationalist thought and the colonial world: A derivative discourse*. Zed Books.
- [6] Dirks, N. B. (2001). *Castes of mind: Colonialism and the making of modern India*. Princeton University Press.
- [7] Fabian, J. (1983). *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object*. Columbia University Press.
- [8] Joseph, J. (2012). Revisiting *Neelakkuyil*: On the Left's cultural vision, Malayali nationalism and the questions of "regional cinema." *TAPASAM*, 26–57.
- [9] Kasarla, S. (2025). Cultural narratives and postcoloniality: M.T. Vasudevan Nair's dual legacy. *International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES)*, 7(5), 720–726.
- [10] Menon, B. (2012). *Regional modernities: Popular culture and local articulations*. Oxford University Press.
- [11] Menon, D. M. (2021). *The blindness of insight: Essays on caste in modern India*. Navayana.
- [12] Nair, P. K. (1989). *The moving image: A study of Indian cinema*. National Film Archive of India.
- [13] Nandy, A. (1983). *The intimate enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism*. Oxford University Press.
- [14] P Bhaskaran, & Kariat, R. (Directors). (1954). *Neelakkuyil* [Film]. Chandrathara Productions.
- [15] Nair, M. T. V. (Director). (1973). *Nirmalyam* [Film]. Sree Vinayaka Pictures.
- [16] Pillai, M. T. (n.d.). *Nirmalyam: Resurrecting the "word" and the "world."* Phalanx. Retrieved November 20, 2025, from https://phalanx.in/pages/article_i007_Nirmalyam.html
- [17] Prasad, M. M. (1998). *Ideology of the Hindi film: A historical construction*. Oxford University Press.
- [18] Prasad, M. M. (2005). Reel faiths: Tradition, modernity, and the postcolonial subject in Malayalam cinema. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 27(2), 79–90.
- [19] Rowena, J. P. (2002). *Reading laughter: The popular Malayalam "comedy-films" of the late 80s and early 90s* (Publication No. N/A) [Doctoral dissertation, Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages].
- [20] Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.