



Exploring Identification and the Idealisation of the Love Object in *Thoovanathumbikal*

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ABSTRACT: The film *Thoovanathumbikal* is deeply etched in Malayali consciousness since its release in the late 80s. It was notable for its fresh treatment of love, prostitution, and longing. Even today, most spectators, especially men, idealise and romanticise the character Clara. She is the other woman, bold, mysterious, and the one who cannot be possessed. In other words, she is the unattainable, 'lost object' (Gorman, 2023). In this research paper, I analyse the film through the concepts of idealisation and identification, spectator idealisation and identification, and the characters' idealisation of each other.

KEYWORDS: *Thoovanathumbikal*, Identification, Idealisation, Clara.

Thoovanathumbikal, released in 1987, revolves around three characters: Jayakrishnan, Clara, and Radha. The character of Jayakrishnan is established in the opening scene, as he creates havoc over the selling price of produce. He is stubborn and possesses all the conventional characteristics of a wealthy, feudal landlord, involved in dubious businesses and associating with pimps and thugs. The central focus is on Jayakrishnan, and the plot develops through his love relationships. In this paper, I focus on how the notion of identification operates in the movie, along with the process of the central characters' idealisation of their love objects.

Despite revelling in alcohol and pimping prostitutes for his friends, Jayakrishnan's careful placement on a moral high ground is carried out by the fact that he does not directly engage with prostitutes. Jayakrishnan's vulnerabilities surface as the scene immediately after taking his friend to a prostitute follows sombre music that hints at the loneliness he faces. This particular placement of moral high ground ensures that the spectator empathises with the character immediately. Thus, the spectator's identification with the central character is secured. Moreover, dialogues that translate to "I saved myself (my body) for someone that I love deeply" and his oath of marrying the prostitute, if she were a virgin, renders him the perfect candidate for romantic love.

Music is an essential factor that ensures this identification with the character of Jayakrishnan. This efficient use of music hints at the central character's longing and conceals vulnerabilities and a need for intimacy. The music in the scene mentioned earlier, the scene after he leaves his friend with a prostitute, is evidence for the same. At first, he attempts to seek it from the character Radha, who is presented as the first woman he has fallen for. Jayakrishnan's vulnerabilities are visible for the first time following his rejection. Thus, he visits the prostitute Clara and is completely smitten by her. Jayakrishnan proposes marriage and faces rejection. Clara elopes on her own, and even after this, she moves in and out of his life as she pleases. The final scene is supposed to be their last meeting, and it is hinted that Jayakrishnan married Radha. Thus, Jayakrishnan switches between idealising one love object and the other.

Idealisation of the Love Object: Clara versus Jayakrishnan

Love cannot operate without idealisation, as one has to find the love object somehow more exceptional than the rest. Kaja Silverman quotes: "Idealisation is something we cannot do without because, under the right circumstances, it facilitates not so much rivalrous as loving identifications—because it alone makes possible a genuine relation to the other" (Silverman, 1996, p. 40). Thus, imperative to the love relationship, Jayakrishnan idealises Clara and vice versa. However, Jayakrishnan's idealisation is rapid and without discernment. He is operating from his principles of marrying the girl if he has intercourse with a virgin. Thus, it purely comes from himself and not a genuine relation with the other. Kaja Silverman explains that this relation operates in annihilatory logic in classical psychoanalysis. When the subject confronts the otherness of an object, it responds with the need to close the distance between the self and the other. The subject seeks to integrate the other into itself. (p. 53) Thus, the subject wants to possess the image that works in Jayakrishnan's relationship with Clara.



As opposed to the above, Clara offers an active gift of love; she is fully aware of his limitations yet chooses to bestow ideality on him. Kaja Silverman explains that "the active gift of love" involves the "idealising (of the other) beyond the parameters of the 'self,' in doing so with a full understanding of one's own creative participation concerning the result. It means to confer ideality, not to find it" (Silverman, 1996, 78). Although Clara is vulnerable, with her tragic past, she asserts her individuality by leaving. It is also noteworthy that in most cases, transgressions of societal norms are excused because of a tragic past. The Malayali collective social consciousness can still sympathise with Clara because of Clara's abusive childhood, what Jayakrishnan calls a "sob story." Thus, she is the 'fallen woman' a male must save. Nevertheless, the departure occurs when Clara rejects Jayakrishnan's marriage proposal. However, Clara heteropathically identifies with Jayakrishnan consciously; his limitations are apparent to her, and she is self-aware of her idealisation of him. She is determined to maintain her individuality, and if she were not, she would readily have accepted the security Jayakrishnan offered.

Radha and Clara are ideals for Jayakrishnan, and the characters' limitations are not mentioned anywhere in the film. Jayakrishnan's love for Radha and Clara obeys the economies of passion dictated by Freud, in which the other replaces the ego ideal (Silverman, 1996, p. 79). The identification Silverman proposes, in contrast, results in "neither the triumph of self-sameness nor craven submission to an exteriorised but essentialised ideal" (p. 79). With Radha, Jayakrishnan's love is purely ego-based; thus, he publicly humiliates her once he rejects her. Also, the fact that Jayakrishnan views desire and love as the loss of the ego is evident in the way he describes how he "saved" himself for the right person. Freud also states that in love, "the subject surrender[s] itself to the object," resulting in the "impoverishment of the ego" (Silverman, p. 71). Instead of this self-effacing love women are expected to offer, Clara is an exception, and her love operates within the requirements of a generous love for the other.

Through a Levinasian framework, conceptualising ethics as a "relation one has with the other- a relation (...) rooted in respect, responsibility and one which calls the self into question" (Toye, 2010, p. 47), the discussion of the other- in terms of gender and class is fraught with problems in Thoovanathumbikal. As explained above, one can witness that its treatment of gender dynamics is not ideal but a reflection of its context. However, it

presents a much better ethical perspective on self-other relations through the concept of Irigaray's "proximate distance" (Toye, p. 47). By "proximate distance," she means that there is closeness yet a "space of mediation" existing between the self and the other (Toye, p. 47). Thus, in contrast to the classical framework of the self's constant want to possess the other, the self alters itself to form an ethical relationship with the other. In Thoovanathumbikal, Clara's elopement establishes this space between them. Despite the other political gaps in the movie, this assertion of agency on Clara's part works on both ethical and political levels. Through elopement, Clara resists and rejects her objectification. Another instance of the above is Clara expressing her desire to be the unhealed wound from the chain on the madman's leg. She wants to be that wound connected to a singular plate in the chain. This metaphor also signifies Luce Irigaray's concept of the self not replacing or annihilating the other. On the contrary, the self is in close proximity to the other. Hence, Clara's inculcation of the necessary distance between the two characters renders the relationship ethical.

How is Clara's image effectively constructed and circulated?

To reiterate, Kaja Silverman argues that providing the active gift of love is reimagining the individuality of the loved object, thus rendering it a subject without the subject losing itself. This condition is necessary for an ethical love relationship. Further, culturally, she also argues for the "creation and circulation of alternative images and words" (Silverman, 1996, p. 81) to encourage the active gift of love in subject-object relations. Though Clara is a conventionally attractive woman who appeals to the Malayali consciousness, certain aspects of the character are radical. Even though a heroine as a prostitute has appeared before in Malayalam Cinema, *Avalude Raavukal* is the most noteworthy. Clara is much more humanized than the former. As mentioned, she is rendered a subject precisely by her rejection of him. In brief, Thoovanathumbikal has undoubtedly resulted in the rethinking of love beyond the confines of morality. However, this is carefully constructed so the spectator can identify with the love portrayed on screen. For example, the overarching presence of the colour white on the screen, especially after their first intercourse, contributes to the mystical element of their relationship, visually signalling purity, that despite the supposed immoral beginnings of their relationship, it is pure nevertheless.



The Creation of Clara as a Fantasy through Aesthetics and Nostalgia

Additionally, imagining Clara as a fantasy helps create the distance required to circulate such an image. The fantasy elements ensure her acceptance; she is an ideal removed from the mundane. This notion is cemented by associating her directly with rain, with dialogues such as "every time she arrives, it rains, except the last time." The rain is a metaphor for their connection, and in one of their last meetings, she decides to marry someone else so that she does not interfere with his promised marriage to Radha. The rain is a recurring metaphor, and separating Clara from everydayness, as opposed to Radha, allows space for her digression from societal norms.

Similarly, the aesthetic elements of the movie contribute to lending a dream-like quality to scenes involving Clara. As a fantasy, Clara is augmented by the peculiar use of visual aesthetics. This fantasy echoes Barthes's conception of love as creating a sense of being out of touch with reality. The scenes with Clara are dreamy, with the efficient use of soft lighting that magnifies the character's mysterious nature. Thus, the spectator's gaze coincides with Jayakrishnan, as one admires and falls in love with the heroine. Clara's character is unique in the sense of the psychological insight that Padmarajan offers to her portrayal. The love portrayed on screen reflected the changing sensibilities. The movie revolutionised the need to sanctify love with marriage, which was extremely common in the 1950s and 60s. She disappears and revisits him multiple times on her terms later. The conventional trope of the yearning heroine waiting for her nomadic lover is reversed here. Regardless, being reintroduced to marriage is the norm, as Clara is also married later to a minor character.



Fig 1. One of the scenes that has a dream-like quality



Fig.2. Soft lighting offers the impression of a fantasy.

Placing nostalgia as one of the central themes in the movie also helps create this acceptance of the character and the sense of 'disreality.' The editing and the peculiar colour tone provide an air of nostalgia. The editing is slow-paced primarily, and picks up the pace when Jayakrishnan is with his friends, revelling in alcohol, prostitution, and violence. Furthermore, the overall subtle colour tone, especially in scenes filmed in the daylight, facilitated by natural lighting, renders an air of authenticity. Also, the muted colour palette signals nostalgia, one of the movie's essential themes. It presents an impression of the remembrance of a distant memory. Additionally, Johnson's poignant background score, reminiscent of rainfall, augments the element of nostalgia.

Concluding Observations

In this paper, I have scrutinized how the film's visual language assures spectator identification and idealisation of the characters on screen. Further, it was found that Clara's heteropathic identification with the character Jayakrishnan helps her offer an active gift of love for him.

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