

E-BOOK

50 YEARS
OF
—MALAYALAM—
CINEMA

Dr V C Harris

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E-GUIDE & SUMMARY
BY

Dr Premanand M E

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF
ENGLISH, ST. JOSEPH'S COLLEGE, DEVAGIRI

Fifty years of Malayalam Cinema

VC Harris

Most people, when they think of Indian cinema, think Bollywood or Bengal. Kerala is famous for its lush beauty and serenity. Yet Kerala boasts one of the most cine-literate audiences in the world, one in which taxi drivers refer to arthouse directors by their first names. Tucked away behind the serene backwaters and the swaying palm fronts, even in the remotest areas. Are scores of active film societies,

Film and politics are two abiding passions of the people of Kerala and they combine in a unique cinema that, except for a few names, has screened the films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Murali Nair. This year we are proud to present a survey of 50 years of Malayalam cinema. starting with the extraordinary musical Neelakkuyil. (The Blue Cuckoo)

<https://youtu.be/6W8uhRfQoJw>



Socio-political contexts

Although Malayalam cinema shares certain broad features with other cinemas in India, Kerala's specific socio-political history, which stands apart from that rest of the country in many significant ways, has contributed to the making of a film tradition that is quite distinct.

Following Indian independence, Kerala was reorganised as a state in 1956 by bringing together, largely on the basis of a common language, three territories- Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar- the last of which was directly under British rule, while the first two were princely states that the British controlled indirectly.



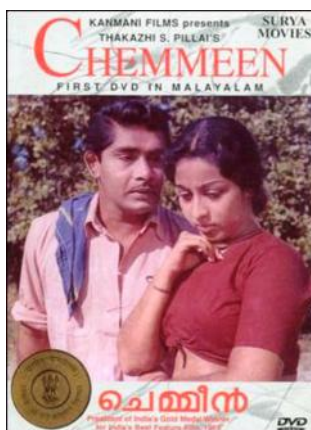
The history of Twentieth-century Kerala is, to a great extent, a mixture of the consequences of several important late-Nineteenth century struggles and movements aimed at social reform (which continued well into the Twentieth century), and the emergence of the Nationalist movement and the Left ideology.

The social-reform movements, across the whole spectrum of religious and caste-based communities, succeeded in initiating a process of democratisation and modernization, though this also meant moving into the emerging patriarchal, capitalist economy, with caste based and religious communities trying to rid themselves to fit into the changing times. Soon, with the freedom struggle gaining momentum and the Left ideology making deep inroads into the social and political fabric of Kerala, the issues relating to caste and gender that the reform movements sought to highlight in their own specific ways were swept under the carpet, as it were, in deference to questions of class and other politico-cultural reasons, had to large extent been insulated from the developments in the rest of the country, along with the remarkable success of the communist movements, led to the construction of a distinct post-independence political identity. So that, in the first general election after the reorganisation of the state, a Communist government was voted to power in 1957. The Leftists continue to have a major presence in the mainstream political life of Kerala even today.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the processes of artistic production, including cinema, were determined by the important issues of the time: caste inequality, class consciousness, nationalism, and progress. There was optimism in the air, and there was enthusiasm. All of which could be found in Neelakkuyil (Ramu

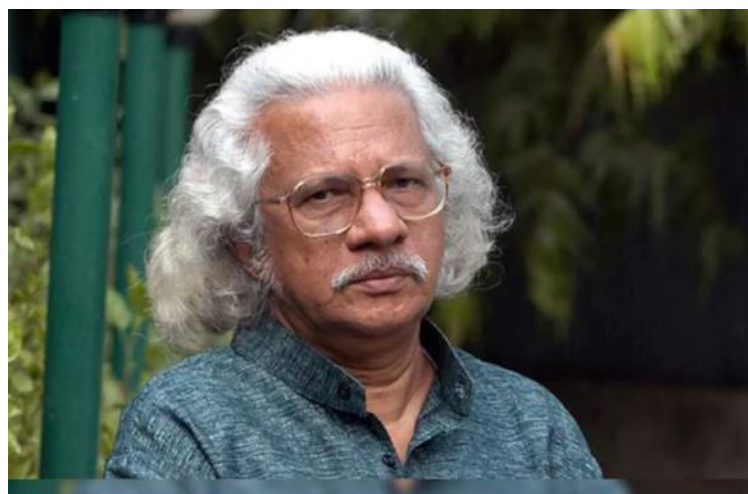
Kariat/P. bhaskaran, 1954) often considered a landmark film in Malayalam, for it succeeded in fusing, for the first time, a variety of ingredients: a truly local, well-crafted story; a distinct engagement with issue such as caste inequality, progress, and the construction of a modern secular subject; a remarkably distinct use of film music, drawing on folk musical traditions; and an array of stars and technicians, including well-known writers and political activities, mostly with a broad socialist orientation, who would later dominate the Malayalam film industry. The patriarchal ideology at work in the film is quite obvious today, but the popular and critical success of Neelakkuyil was largely instrumental in the construction of a dominant pattern, and logic, of film narrative in Kerala. A decade later, this is further reinforced through another landmark film, Chemmeen (Ramu Kariat, 1965). Based on a novel by one of Kerala's best-known writers, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Chemmen is an epic portrayal of a particular fishing community in Kerala, again focusing on local culture and mythology, and the problems related to caste and community differences. Again, the patriarchal ideology at work is quite obvious from the film's founding logic: that the safety of the fishermen at sea depended on their wives' chastity and loyalty at home.

[Chemmeen Movie](#) video link



Even while reinforcing established parameters of the form and content of cinema, Chemmen, with its tragic ending, also marks a broad shift from the hope and idealism of the previous decades to a growing sense of discontent and disillusionment. Historically, this works at two levels. At the national level, the dream of a free and prosperous modern India, which galvanised the anti-colonial struggle, was beginning to pale, with large sections of society continuing to be denied the fruits of independence and progress, and with the social costs of capitalist development beginning to manifest themselves. At another level, in Kerala, the Left ideology was under stress, with the developments in the USSR, Eastern Europe, and other parts of the world beginning to impact on the Communist outfits in India, leading to rifts within and discontent outside. All this helped bring to the form the underlying tensions in society relating to urbanisation, bourgeoisification, the realignment of castes and communities within the new polity, and, broadly, the conflicting trajectories of tradition and modernity.

[Swayamvaram 1972 - YouTube link](#)



Credit - <https://www.news18.com/news/movies/adoor-gopalakrishnan-targets-cleaning-staff-of-kr-narayanan-institute-over-caste-row-6755851.html>

Arguably the inaugural film in this genre, articulates the crisis of the middle class torn between the traditional social norms relating to family and sexuality, and the modern impulse to choose for oneself and move on. The film reflects the general discontentment in urban or semi-urban life, with the problems of unemployment, poverty, and lack of opportunities playing a crucial role. In the process, the film also invents a new cinematic idiom, something that will continue to inform much artistic work in the next two decades.

In a slightly different, though related, way, G. Aravindan's *Thampu* (1978) enacts the drama inherent in a village community coming face to face with certain images of modernity represented by the arrival of a circus troupe. The village youth feeling tempted to abandon his traditional role and join the circus signifies the tensions that underwrite the rural/urban divide as well as social mobility in Kerala. That the film does this without being sentimental, or tragic, is quite significant, for it calls attention to the resilience of village life even in the face of steep challenges from within and outside.



During the 1970s, there was a stiff interrogation of several modes of traditional thought and life, including the values associated with religious beliefs and practices. The secularization and modernization of the Indian polity helped to critique the religious

in more ways than one, though should be noted immediately that, by the 1990s, the process was reversed. But the fact that M.T. Vasudevan Nair could depict in *Nirmalyam* (1973) the degeneration that social change, with all its implications for the priests and the laity alike, brought to temple-related rituals is doubly significant today, when religious intolerance and fundamentalism are on the rise. (Nair is represented in this season with the very fine, almost silent *Kadavu* (1991), a poignant story about a young boy who runs away from his almost suffocating family and is employed as a ferryman.)

It is customary to treat 1975 as a watershed in the history of post independence India, for it makes the declaration, in the face of largely imagined threats, of National Emergency—a constitutional move that seriously curtailed all kinds of political and civil rights and vested unbridled power in a handful of politicians, government functionaries, and the police. This period produced a crop of films, of which *Amma Ariyan* (John Abraham, 1986) is a remarkable example. The film takes the form of a journey from one part of Kerala to another, and charts the dreams and despairs of a group of men who try to identify themselves with 'the Cause' but finally arrive at a sense of futility, which is still politically meaningful. The protagonist's reporting to his mother that he realizes his middle-class moorings prevent him from a total identification with the revolutionaries and the working classes is a deeply significant comment on the general profile of the movement itself. The film is thus an important document on the rise and fall of the revolutionary spirit in contemporary Kerala.

The last decade of the Twentieth century brought in a whole new crop of social and political issues, with, on the hand, the LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation, and Globalisation) mantra beginning

to play crucial role, while, on the other hand, varieties of religious fundamentalism, especially the Hindu Right, gained legitimacy and political power. Along with this, there arose new social movements that, in an unprecedented manner, began to articulate the concerns of women, the Dalits (people belonging to the lower castes, the erstwhile 'untouchables'), and the Adivasis (the indigenous tribes), not to mention the various minorities and environmental activists.

Simultaneously with all this, Kerala, though with several limitations in terms of size and resources, was rising to a position of pre-eminence in the country with the highest social-welfare index: near total literacy, low birth rate, good health care as manifested in low infant-mortality rates, and good working conditions. (Inversely, Kerala also has one of the highest suicide rates in the country.) there was talk of a special Kerala model of development, though it has to be admitted that, today, it looks more and more problematic, especially in the light of a stagnant economy marked by minimal industrial growth and revenue generation, coupled with the massive influx of foreign earnings by the large Malayalee diaspora in the middle East, Europe, and the United States.

The cultural domain was a major site of contestation, though, in terms of cinema, the impact continues to be rather minimal. There is a greater degree of commercialisation that, in the wake of the decline of the arthouse tradition inaugurated in the 1970s, has led to a depletion of resources as far as good. meaningful cinema is concerned. At the same time, there is greater variety in the kinds of cinema produced: while images relating to the Hinduisation of culture are on the rise, there are also attempts at radically redefining the form and content of cinema. Shaji N. Karun's

Vaanaprastham- The Last Dance (Pilgrimage-1999), for instance, reworks material drawn from Kerala's performance-art traditions with a view toward redefining and re-articulating the subject of art (as well as the artist as subject) in the light of shifting societal perceptions. T.V Chandran's work is also exemplary in this regard: while being firmly rooted in the formative political culture of the late 1970s and 1980s, his films have continually sought to redefine themselves in the context of the charging times. This is amply borne out by his 2003 film, *Padam Onnu: Oru vilapam* (Lesson one: A Wail).

In the history of Malayalam cinema, there has been no dearth of films that address themselves to the life world of the Muslims in Kerala. Demographically, Kerala is different from the rest of India in that its population is nearly 40% non- Hindus (predominantly Muslim and Christian), while among the 'Hindus' themselves it is the 'backward' caste called Ezhavas who predominate. Yet, the representation of the minorities down the decades have been quite problematic in general, probably because, in spite of constitutional imperatives, secularism as a social agenda continues to be a vexed issue in India. It is in this context that one has to look at films such as *Olavum Theeravum* (P.N Menon, 1970) <https://youtu.be/LPAbkB663xc>

and *Padam Onnum:Oru Vilapam*. <https://youtu.be/uZtxt9u-Guo>



A word about film music. It is easy to see that the forms and traditions of music that prevailed in Kerala till the dawn of the Twentieth century were more or less community- or region-specific. There was no particular musical tradition that all the people of Kerala-or at least a large majority of the people, regardless of community, caste, and regional differences-could listen to, appreciate, and enjoy. Different sections of society had access to different forms of music. All this changed drastically with the advent of film music, with its antecedent in theatre music and other such practices. This was one kind of music that everyone had access to; it was the kind of music that sought to address diverse sections of society. In formal terms, this was made possible by an apparently eclectic combination of elements drawn from a variety of sources-folk, classical, and others. The whole process coincides with the dynamics of the democratisation of Indian society. Film music in India, and in Kerala specifically, has actively participated in, and promoted, the construction of a public sphere-a space where all kinds of people can come together and share a common experience, and chart out a common agenda for life today and tomorrow.

(Essay published in the Festival Book of the 14" International Film Festival of Brisbane, Australia, 2005)

Notes:

Neelakuyil (English: [The Blue Cuckoo](#); Malayalam: [നീലക്കുയിൽ](#)) 1954

Neelakuyil (English: [The Blue Cuckoo](#); Malayalam: [നീലക്കുയിൽ](#)) is a 1954 Malayalam film jointly directed by P. Bhaskaran and Ramu Kariat. It is a neo-realistic melodrama and was based on a story written by Uroob who co-wrote the screenplay and dialogues along with P. Bhaskaran. Neelakuyil was a landmark film in Malayalam cinema history that paved a new path for Malayalam cinema by breaking away from the earlier tradition of adapting plots from Hindi films for making Malayalam films, of which the story or the characters could

never be identified with the culture of Kerala. It won the All India Certificate of Merit for Best Feature Film, and the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Malayalam, thus becoming the first nationally recognized Malayalam film. Most of its shooting was done outdoors and it captured images of the rural, agrarian Kerala, its vast paddy fields, the life of the peasants and the feudal society.[1]

Plot

The plot revolves around rustic life in a small village. Neeli (Miss Kumari), a Dalit peasant girl, falls in love with Sreedharan Nair (Sathyan), a school teacher. Neeli becomes pregnant. Sreedharan Nair refuses to marry Neeli as he fears being ostracized by a conservative society. Neeli becomes an outcaste and dies in child birth. Sankaran Nair (P.Bhaskaran), the village postman, adopts the child ignoring the protests of society. Sreedharan Nair marries Nalini (Prema), a member of an aristocratic family. Neeli's son Mohan (Master Vipin) is brought up by the postman. The film ends with Sreedharan Nair and Nalini accepting the boy as their own child.

[Chemmeen - story in detail](#)

Chemmeen, which was written by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai in 1956, is a passionate love story set in the backdrop of the coastal areas of Kerala. It is primarily the tale of a young woman – Karuthamma – the daughter of a Hindu fisherman Chembankunju, who falls in love with Pareekutti – the son of a Muslim fish trader. Due to their religious and social differences, and the rules of the sea, their love is nipped in the bud and Karuthamma marries Palani, an orphan fisherman.

The story is of Karuthamma and Pareekutti, she the daughter of a poor fisherman, and he the son of a fairly successful trader. Chembankunju belonged to the Mukkuvan caste, and according to tradition of the seafront they are ineligible to own a boat. But he bribes his way through the customs and traditions and becomes an owner of the boat by getting help from Pareekutti. The young man goes bankrupt while Chembankunju, purchasing his first boat and nets, is on the way to comparative wealth. Karuthamma is given in marriage to a visiting fisherman, Palani, and goes to live in his village. Chembankunju had bought his first boat from Kandankoran, a man of higher "caste" whom Chembankunju admired for his wealth, bearing and somewhat extravagant life-style. Chembankunju's wife dies and so does Kandankoran: thereupon, the aspiring fisherman marries the widow. But the marriage is not a success; Chembankunju's health and drive falter, and his enterprise declines. His only other child, a daughter, estranged over her father's second marriage, moves out of the house. Chembankunju, his life now in ruins, without aims

and orientation, belatedly repays a small portion of the money he had borrowed from Pareekutti. But the money now has no use to Pareekutti either: he is given to haunting the beach alone, singing, his sanity suspect.

Pareekutti walks to Karuthamma's village, presumably to give her the money forced upon him by her father. When he arrives, it is late in the night and Palani is out at sea. Love compounded with great pity overcomes Karuthamma's moral conditioning. Out at sea, Palani struggles with a huge shark he has baited and looks in vain for Arundhati (guiding star of fisherman and symbol of chastity) as a giant whirlpool forms and waves become mountainous. He cries out to his wife (the fisherman's traditional guardian angel) to pray for him: "The lives of the men at sea are in the hands of the women on shore." The primordial fisherman, on a piece

of wood, had escaped because ashore "a chaste and pure woman" had prayed steadfastly for the safety of her husband at sea. But Karuthamma is in the arms of Pareekutti, and Palani is dragged down to the abode of Katalamma, the sea goddess. The lovers by the sea are swept out and drowned by an outraged ocean.

[Swayamvaram - Summary](#)

Swayamvaram is the story of Vishwam and Sita, an eloped couple who arrive in a new city to start their life afresh. Vishwam is a young man with the fires of revolution still burning in his heart. He starts looking for a job and aspires to be a writer and publish his own novel while Sita looks for small jobs. They fail in their attempts to find work and economic constraints force them to shift to a slum, with an old woman named Janaki and Kalyani, a prostitute. They struggle through economic hardships and are at one point, even forced to sell Sita's jewellery.

Vishwam finds a job as a teacher in a junior college but soon loses it and finally ends up working as a clerk in a timber factory. The couple is soon blessed with a baby and start trying to set up their lives. However, things take a tragic turn when Vishwam falls critically ill. Sita does all she can to get her husband treated but is unable to afford the medicines. Vishwam dies, leaving her alone with her baby. The film ends with Sita feeding her baby and looking at a closed-door...

[G. Aravindan's Thampu \(1978\)](#)

Besides a long glittering river, some men raise a pole. A tent balloons up. Where there was wide sand and the sound of water lapping, there is now a truck, chairs, hoops, stools, ropes, goats, a lioness, a pair of fat girls, some bicycles, and an old man with a philosopher's dignity, putting on white paste. Across a dirt road, the circus truck comes to a village. The tent goes up. Schoolboys run to the tent.

Village women come and watch an acrobat roll a hoop across a tightrope. A lion leaps from the edge of one stool - across darkness - onto another stool. A gap-toothed old woman gazes at a goat on a tightrope; her eyes are wide with curiosity. For three days the circus makes small ripples in the life of this village. Municipal permits are required. At a toddy shop, a soldier befriends the circus strongman; a pump attendant sits on a rock each day watching a village girl bathe and dry her hair. The dwarf brings back to the circus a watermelon larger than his head.

For three days, the circus is the centre of attention of village life, but soon the villagers lose interest and move on to the preparation for a local festival and the circus troupe packs up and trundles away leaving no trace.

[Amma Ariyan \(John Abraham, 1986\)](#)

“Amma Ariyan” follows Purushan, who’s preparing to leave for Delhi for his research. While travelling in Wayanad, he meets some policemen who are carrying an unidentified dead body found hanging on the wayside. Even though he can’t recognize the dead man, he feels he’s very familiar with that face. The thought makes him restless, subsequently leading into an obsession for finding out whoever that is. He abandons his trip to Delhi and meets with several of his friends and acquaintances to find out who the dead person is. From one of his friends he finds out that the deceased is a tabla player, Hari.

Purushan and his friends decide to inform the death of Hari to his mother who’s living in Kochi. So they set out on a long journey on foot, while meeting with many of Hari’s friends who subsequently join the group. Through the memories of Hari’s friends, we get to know more about his character, but can’t understand what exactly went wrong. They travel from Wayanad through Kozhikode to Beypore, Kodungalloor, Thrissur, Kottapuram, Vypin, and finally to Fort Kochi. Throughout the journey, the group witnesses a number of political struggles through the landscape, which helps them understand more about Hari’s death and leading into a politicisation of apolitical intellectuals.

The backdrop of “Amma Ariyan” takes place in a politically unstable time in Kerala in which leftist political extremism led to the Naxalite movement, which garnered much support from the common people. The political struggle that occurred at the time led various artists to respond to it through furthering the struggle through art. John Abraham is famous for his nomadic lifestyle and radical nature and has made the film to reflect upon this.

[Olavum Theeravum, 1970](#)

Olavum Theeravum is a 1970 Malayalam film directed by P. N. Menon and written by M. T. Vasudevan Nair based on his own short story of the same title, published in an anthology of short stories in 1957. The story is about a Muslim trader who falls in love with his dead friend's sister who is the daughter of a prostitute. But the girl's mother forces her to marry a wealthy man who has an eye on her. She rejects him but is raped by him and commits suicide.

[Padam Onnum: Oru Vilapam, 2003](#)

Article in Delta woman by Sreejesh.....

These women, mostly from poor background, married at an early age, usually at or before 18 years of age are married to men only because their parents think at least they will escape from the poverty in the house and will have a good life. But in reality, these women only have a happy life lasting for about a month, and after that the dowry given by the girl's parents is spent by the husband and the problem starts. The first problem is language as the grooms of Mysore know only Kannada and the brides know only Malayalam. The first few days of marriage do not have this problem only because of the dowry.

The next problem starts when the family relocates from the current house to a single room house in the slum. After relocation, usually these men leave their wives and would be back once in a month or like that only for abusing, harassment on the basis of dowry. By the time these women would be pregnant and most of these women give birth to three or four children within five years of marriage and after that husband leaves them for ever.

“Paadam Onnu: Oru Vilapam” tells the woes of Muslim girls in the interior villages of Malappuram, a district in Kerala dominated by Muslims.

MOVIE

Shahina's is one such marriage. She is young, intelligent but naive, who is in her 10th standard whose only aim is to study well, got married to Razkak forcibly to avoid huge dowry. The marriage was arranged by Haasan Moyeen, who somehow convinced the family, that if they don't get her married now, they will have to shell out huge dowry later on.

Razak is already married. He wanted a second marriage just to use the dowry to go to the Gulf. Shahina is unable to even realise what is happening to her. After going to her husband's house when Razak uses his authority as her husband to have sex with her, she becomes hysterical. This gets repeated every time and Razak's desire to have her grows more and more. He forces his wife to drug her one day and enjoy her. After knowing what happened, Shahina almost acts like mad and Razak uses this as a reason to divorce her.

Shahina is so happy to return to her mother. Started attending her school but the whole world collapsed under her when she realised she was pregnant. Her mother dies of a heart attack after hearing the news. Poor Shahina is accused of adultery and ostracized.

Summary of the text by Dr Premanand M E, Associate Professor,
Department of Language & Literature, St. Joseph's College
(Autonomous), Devagiri

Kerala is known for its beauty and tranquillity, but it also has a highly knowledgeable and passionate audience for cinema. Film societies can be found even in remote areas, and film and politics are intertwined in Kerala's unique cinema scene. The survey of 50 years of Malayalam cinema, starting with Neelakkuyil, highlights the work of directors like Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Murali Nair.

Kerala's cinema is distinct due to the state's specific socio-political history. After Indian independence, Kerala was formed by bringing together three territories based on a common language. The state saw significant social reform movements aimed at modernization and democratisation, but also involved moving into a patriarchal, capitalist economy. The Left ideology gained momentum, overshadowing issues of caste and gender. The

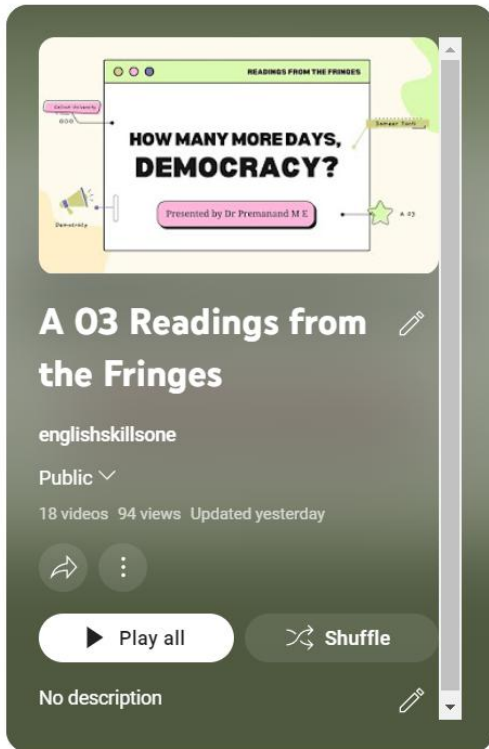
Communist party was voted to power in the first general election after the state's reorganisation in 1957, and the Left continues to have a major presence in Kerala's political life.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Malayalam cinema was influenced by important issues such as caste inequality, class consciousness, nationalism, and progress. Neelakkuyil (1954) and Chemmeen (1965) are considered landmark films that reinforced established parameters of film narrative in Kerala. Both films focused on local culture, mythology, and the problems related to caste and community differences, but also exhibited patriarchal ideologies. Chemmeen marked a shift from the hope and idealism of the previous decades to a growing sense of discontent and disillusionment, reflecting broader tensions in society relating to urbanisation, bourgeoisification, the realignment of castes and communities within the new polity, and the conflicting trajectories of tradition and modernity.

This shift, which could be read into Chemmeen to a certain extent with historical hindsight, began to mark Malayalam literature in a big way in the 1960s, with the emergence of what is often called the modernist movement. The new cinema that emerged in the early 1970s, spearheaded by Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G. Aravindan, John Abraham, and others, and often dubbed 'art cinema, was a response to the shifting grounds of politics and aesthetics. Swayamvaram (Adoor Gopalakrishnan, 1972)

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