



**CONTEXTUALISING *MACBETH* IN KERALA: ANALYSING *JOJI* AS A
SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY**

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Abstract

*Shakespearean adaptations are not something new to Malayalam. From the translation of Shakespeare's, *The Taming of Shrew* by Kandathil Varghese Mappilai, to the screen adaptations from *Kaliyattam* to *Joji*, Shakespeare is always an influential presence in Malayalam literature and films. Shakespearean adaptations hold a specific narrative function that explores and evaluates human emotions like pride of victory, ambition, and greed. Malayalam movies are a true reflection of Kerala's diversity, socio-cultural challenges, and its complexities. This paper focuses on how the movie *Joji* became a thematical adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The movie *Joji* (2021), directed by Dileesh Pothan and screenplay by Syam Pushkaran, is a true inspiration from *Macbeth*. Through its unique storytelling technique, which is a peculiar feature of Malayalam movies, *Joji* is a localised adaptation of *Macbeth*, where the plot is set into a modern rubber estate in Kerala. Here, the extensive theme and settings of *Macbeth* transplants into the contemporary Kerala setting where it becomes the tale of tragedy and ambition. The tale of *Macbeth* was written in a political manner, whereas *Joji* focus on family conflicts, following the narrative of Shakespearean classic tragedy. The feudal setting of *Macbeth* is replaced in *Joji* into a wealthy patriarchal family. Panachel Kuttappayi, the character who rules his family and business with his commanding words is similar to the character of King Duncan. Fahad Fasil as the character *Joji*, is similar to *Macbeth* where his ambitions, greed and frustrations led to the subsequent murder of his father with the help of his sister in law, Bincy, the lady *Macbeth*. Ambition gives victory, but here his greed gives ambition. In *Macbeth*, witches played a key role. In *Joji*, his drunken uncle, Dr. Felix, passively calls him "*Kodeeswaran*" (billionaire) a correlate. It motivates him like the prophecy of the three witches in *Macbeth*. It boosted the greed that was already brimming in the mind of *Joji*. This thematical adaptation reflects the complexities of modern morality and justice. *Joji* explains how literature inspires culture and it is specific timeless story of the Shakspeare's tragic hero, *Macbeth*.*

Keywords

Shakespeare, Kerala, Malayalam films, Macbeth, Joji, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The Malayalam movie *Joji* (2021) directed by Dileeshpothan and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* share parallel themes, while they have a long distance between the cultural and social aspects. The movie *Joji* is set in a rural village of Kerala (India). The whole story goes around with *Joji* (played by Fahadh Faasil), an unsuccessful lazy man with whole expectations to be rich one day. *Joji* is the youngest son of a wealthy plantation owner, (kuttapan). Kuttapan is a powerful man who rules his entire family with his words. The story was set in a patriarchal family setting. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was set in medieval Scotland and the play revolves around the life of *Macbeth*, a nobleman and general in Duncan's army. *Macbeth's* adaptation into *Joji*, a general in the army to a



lazy son is seemingly strategy but at the same time Shakespearean themes are universal. The story of *Macbeth* begins with the victory of a battle and his return with his friend Banquo but at the same time *Joji* begins showing the patriarchal setup of the family and Joji as a worthless son.

The social trend of family takes a dark turn when Kuttapan was hospitalized because of stroke and Joji sees an opportunity to become rich by take over the family property. Here the social conditions give him a greedy and ambitious mind set. While Macbeth in the victorious journey encounter with three witches, their future prophecy turned Macbeth greedy and ambitious. The role of lady Macbeth has a key role in the play. Macbeth murder the king Duncan and seize the throne and his ambition was driven by the wife, Lady Macbeth but in movie *Joji* there is no direct adaptation. Joji's brother's wife Bincy Jaison play similar character. There no direct or internal conversation between them but she knows joji's intention. She encourages and gives him moral support. The scenes when the father (kuttapan) was hospitalized Joji wants to take photo with his horse from the front yard which father don't allow. In those moments he saw an opportunity but was afraid of his father, and he thought of seeking permission from his elder brother. This time Bincy gave the advice of taking the photo without seeking anyone's permission. This gave him courage to come out from the fear of his father. In another scene she provokes him by saying 'you waste whole life by eating in the kitchen slab' which lead to his paranoia and ruthlessness that he eventually kills his father. Then on the funeral she says to Joji to wear a mask and come out which gives direct hint that she knows everything and she was completely aware of his mind set.

Joji's power grows and he became increasingly violent and tyrannical which lead to the murder of his suspicious brother Jomon. Joji clearly showed his manipulation skills on him, but when it failed it ultimately led to the downfall of Jomon. In *Macbeth* towards the end they descent into madness. Banquo's ghost haunts Macbeth. Similarly, Joji's mental state begins to deteriorate and he was haunted by guilt and paranoia which lead to his downfall. The play ends with the downfall of Macbeth, he was killed by Macduff, a Scottish nobleman who revenge the death of his family. The movie ends with Joji's complete downfall, broken and destroyed by his own actions. Both are about the ambition, rooted in different time period and setting but connected by the similar exploration of human flaws and moral dilemma.

Shakespearean Adaptation in Malayalam Movies.

From the movie *Kaliyattam* to *Joji* the mollywood film industry has a bunch of Shakespearean themes. The movies explore the universal themes of Shakespearean dramas and are adapted to localized culture. It reflects themes of love, revenge, morality and justice etc...In inspiration and direct adaptation the filmmakers go through the theme, characters, plot to suit in the Kerala culture context.

The most important Shakespearean adaptations to Malayalam movies are *Kaliyattam*, *Kannaki*, *Karmayogi*, *Annayum Rasoolum*, *Iyyobinte Pusthakam*, *Veeramand Joji*. *Kaliyattam* (1997) is a movie directed by Jayaraj, starring Suresh Gopi and ManjuWarrier. It was very noticed and appreciated Shakespearean adaptation of *Othello* in Malayalam. Married couples Suresh Gopi and Manjuwarrier played the characters of Othello and Desdemona. Suresh Gopi as the character Kannan Perumalayan played the equivalent character of Othello as a possessive and misguided Theyyam artist. The role of Desdemona was played by Manju Warrier through the character Thamara. Iago in *Othello*, the motiveless but strong villain was played convincingly by Lal through the character Paniyan, who put evil ideas into the Kannan's head about Thamara and another Theyyam artist Kanthan (Bijumenon).

Kannaki (2001) is another Jayaraj film which is a localized adaptation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. The title character Cleopatra was played by Nandita Das and actor



Lal played the character Antony as Manickam. He was portrayed as a cock fighter. Choman (siddique) is the friend of Manickam and his sister Kumudam (Geetu Mohandas) also loves Manickam. Kannaki reflects the complexity of a woman character, into the mollywood adaptation as a strong willed and stubborn woman. *Karmayogi* (2012) directed by V K Prakash, is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Indrajith played the role of Rudran Gurukkal, the protagonist of the film as an unhappy son who lost his father. Similar to Hamlet, his uncle kills his father and marries his mother and Rudran is an introvert eager to take revenge.

Annayum Rasoolum is a 2013 Malayalam movie directed by Rajeesh Ravi. It's almost a direct adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The leading characters are played by Fahadh Faasil as Rasool and Andrea Jeremiah as Anna. The setting of the story was plotted in the Kochi. The busy city life and lot of silence are equally reflected as dialogues. The music and forbidden love, escaping from the reality but followed by inevitable fate and tragedies. *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014): directed by Amal Neerad, is a thematic adaptation of *King Lear*. In Shakespeare's story the father has three daughters but in the Amal Neerad version there are three sons where Lal plays the role as the father and Fahadh Faasil as young son. The story goes on to portray the relationship between each other and their fight for wealth. *Veeram* (2016) directed by Jayaraj is a direct adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Kunal Kapoor played as Chandu Chekavar, a Malabar warrior who lived in the 13th century is a direct resemblance of Macbeth.

Joji- The Tale of Macbeth's Ambition and Tragedy:

In *Joji*, *Macbeth's* characters are set into the localized Kerala village. The core theme of ambition, guilt and power reflects in the film *Joji*. The protagonist Macbeth is Scottish general and later became Scottish king. The prophecy of three witches makes him ambitious. He murdered King Duncan for the throne, which leads to his inevitable downfall. *Joji*, the Malayalam adaptation is about a lazy, ambitious young son of a wealthy family who lives under the patriarchal domination of his father. Joji became greedy and ambitious, and he was motivated to accumulate financial security. He saw that opportunity by murdering his father. While Macbeth aimed for political gain, Joji is a more materialistic man. At the end both lead to the downfall.

Duncan is a noble king murdered by Macbeth because of his greedy and ambitious mind for the throne. Panachel Kuttappayi, Joji's father is a man of power who controls his family. Joji saw an opportunity to become rich by accumulating his father's wealth. His greedy ambition catalysed by decline of his father's health conditions. In *Macbeth*, Duncan was a noble king but in *Joji* Panachel Kuttappayi and his relationship with Joji is more complex. Joji at the beginning of the movie was not all ambitious to acquire wealth but wants an escape from the iron control of his father. Murdering his father not only gained him freedom, but also led to his rise into power.

In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is a more ambitious and manipulating character who drives her husband into murdering Duncan. Unlike Macbeth, Bincy in *Joji* is Joji's sister in law. She was not a direct participant but she motivated and gave moral support for Joji. Lady Macbeth is a more controlling and dominant character. But Bincy is passive and she wants to escape from the oppressive control of her father in law. Bincy doesn't go through guilt and madness like Lady Macbeth. Similarly, in *Macbeth*, Banquo is a loyal soldier of Duncan and Macbeth's friend. After hearing the prophecy Macbeth feels him as a threat to his ambition. So Macbeth killed him. Jaison in *Joji*, is Joji's elder brother who always supported Joji. After the father's death he is more suspicious about the Joji. Joji feels that he is a threat to his plan which ultimately ends with his murder.

In *Macbeth*, the characters of witches misguided or manipulated Macbeth. He became more ambitious and greedy and it led to his downfall. In *Joji*, there are no literal characters as witches that serve as fate and prophecy. But dynamic control and action of characters is similar to

the witches which gave motivation and misguided Joji to kill his father. His drunken uncle called him 'kodeeswaran' (billionaire) a correlate. Bincy motivates and gives courage to him, while his father is in hospital. She worked as a moral support to him. This triggers Joji to murder his father and attain wealth. In both stories, an external force misguides or manipulates the protagonist and eventually leads to the tragic end of both.

Conclusion:

The comparative study of *Macbeth* and *Joji* reflects themes of ambitious, guilt, and destructive power of nature which are universal. *Joji's* world is plotted in rural Kerala setting, but core psychological and moral conflicts work from a similar angle in both stories. So it can be noted that Shakespearean themes and complexities crossed all cultural differences and time scale. *Joji* masterfully reinterprets *Macbeth* within a contemporary Keralite setting, replacing supernatural elements with psychological realism. Through its minimalist storytelling, symbolic visuals, and psychological depth, *Joji* stands as a testament to the adaptability of Shakespearean narratives. While it deviates from *Macbeth* in many ways, its thematic essence remains similar, reinforcing the timeless relevance of Shakespeare's exploration of human ambition and downfall. Shakespearean themes transcend time and culture, making them universally adaptable. His works resonate across diverse contexts, from medieval Scotland as in *Macbeth* to modern Kerala, as in *Joji*. The timeless exploration of human nature allows endless reinterpretations, proving Shakespeare's enduring relevance in global storytelling and cinema.

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