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## From Cinema to Cyberspace: Meme Culture, Digital Virality, and the Politics of Representation in Malayalam Cinema

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### Abstract

The rise of meme culture and digital virality has reshaped the engagement of audiences with cinema. The study focuses the trend particularly in the context of Malayalam film industry. With the proliferation of OTT platforms, social media, and short-form video content, cinematic dialogues, characters, and scenes are increasingly reinterpreted in meme culture. This phenomenon has altered not only the longevity of films but also the way narratives, characters, and performances are perceived in the public sphere. This paper explores the intersection of digital culture, memeification, and the shifting landscape of authorship, film criticism, and audience agency. Through the study of five iconic Malayalam cinema characters—Dasamoolam Damu (Chattambinadu, 2009), Shammi (Kumbalangi Nights, 2019), Anappara Achamma (Godfather, 1991), Manavalan (Pulival Kalyanam, 2003), and Ramanan (Punjabi House, 1998)—the paper examines how memes function as a mode of reinterpretation, ideological critique, and socio-political commentary. Drawing from theories of hyperreality, toxic masculinity, feminist film criticism, affective economics, and carnivalesque aesthetics, this study critically evaluates the evolving digital discourse surrounding Malayalam cinema.

**Keywords:** Meme culture, Digital virality, OTT platforms, Authorship, Audience agency

Cinema has long functioned as a space for narrative construction and cultural representation. However, the advent of digital technology has led to a paradigm shift in the way audiences consume, interpret, and engage with films. The transition from passive spectatorship to active

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participation has given rise to meme culture, which allows viewers to remix, satirize, and reinterpret cinematic moments. Memes function as an alternative discourse, creating new meanings independent of a film's original context.

This paper examines how meme culture and digital virality influence the cultural memory of Malayalam cinema. It explores how minor and major cinematic characters have been transformed into digital icons, taking on new lives in meme culture. The impact of OTT platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ Hotstar is also analyzed, as they facilitate the revival of older films in meme discourse. The paper further investigates the political and ideological implications of meme culture, questioning how digital reinterpretation affects authorship, film criticism, and audience agency.

## **Digital Virality and the Evolution of Film Engagement:**

Digital virality has significantly transformed the way audiences engage with cinema, particularly in the Malayalam film industry. The advent of social media and meme culture has altered traditional film consumption, shifting it from a linear experience to an interactive and dynamic discourse. Memes, as a form of digital reinterpretation, allow cinematic dialogues, characters, and scenes to be resurrected long after a film's initial release. Many Malayalam films that were once overlooked or commercially unsuccessful have gained a second life through social media platforms, where their content is repurposed into humorous, satirical, or nostalgic digital artifacts. As Henry Jenkins notes in *Convergence Culture*, digital platforms enable "a shift from individualized and passive media consumption to a more participatory and collaborative engagement" (3). This shift highlights how audience reception is no longer confined to a film's theatrical or television lifespan but continues to evolve in the digital realm, influenced by contemporary cultural and social contexts.

A crucial factor in the resurgence of these films is the role played by Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms, which have facilitated the rediscovery of older films. Streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ Hotstar provide on-demand access to a vast archive of Malayalam cinema, enabling new audiences to engage with content that may have been previously inaccessible. These digital platforms act as "cultural repositories," allowing films to be continuously reinterpreted and reevaluated (Tryon 47). The presence of these films on digital platforms allows them to be integrated into online conversations, often leading to their reappraisal in popular discourse. Memes, in this context, function as a tool for cultural preservation and reinterpretation, as they bring forgotten films and characters back into public consciousness. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of "spreadable media," where audiences actively participate in the circulation and transformation of content, reshaping its cultural significance (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 11).

The rise of short-form video platforms such as Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and TikTok has further accelerated this process, creating new modes of film consumption. These

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platforms fragment and decontextualize cinematic moments, allowing users to reinterpret scenes through dubbing, lip-syncing, and remixing. This often leads to alternative readings of a film, wherein a serious moment may be reframed as comedic, or a villainous character may be transformed into a relatable or even endearing figure. Such decontextualization challenges traditional notions of authorship and narrative control, as filmmakers' original intentions are often subverted by audience reinterpretation. As Roland Barthes suggests in *The Death of the Author*, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148), emphasizing how meaning is constructed by audiences rather than dictated by creators. This shift underscores the increasing democratization of cultural production, where everyday users become active participants in reshaping cinematic discourse.

The transformation of film engagement through memes and digital platforms aligns with Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation, which posits that new media continually repurpose old media, adapting them into different cultural forms. In this context, memes and short-form videos serve as mechanisms through which cinema is not only preserved but also reformulated for new audiences. As Bolter and Grusin argue, "new media refashion older media to suit contemporary technological and cultural demands" (45). A single dialogue or character, once confined to its original cinematic setting, can take on new meanings when inserted into a contemporary digital conversation. This process of remediation ensures that films remain culturally relevant, as audiences reinterpret cinematic texts in alignment with modern social discourses.

Digital virality, thus, to an extent, has redefined film engagement by shifting control from filmmakers to audiences, enabling cinematic texts to be continually reimaged. The interplay between meme culture, digital platforms, and audience participation highlights the fluidity of meaning in contemporary cinema. As Malayalam cinema continues to navigate the digital era, the integration of film into meme culture underscores the evolving nature of media consumption, where past and present merge to create hybrid cultural texts. This phenomenon demonstrates how digital platforms function as spaces of both preservation and innovation, allowing film engagement to extend beyond its traditional confines and evolve in dynamic, participatory ways.

## **Five Iconic Meme Characters and Theoretical Interpretations**

Dasamoolam Damu, a minor character in *Chattambinadu* (2009), has transcended his original cinematic role to become a significant figure in Malayalam meme culture. His exaggerated performance, particularly his hyperbolic dialogue delivery and theatrical expressions, exemplifies the concept of hyperreality as theorized by Jean Baudrillard. According to Baudrillard, hyperreality emerges when representations become more real than reality itself, distorting authentic experiences in favor of intensified simulations. In the digital landscape, Dasamoolam Damu is no longer confined to the narrative of *Chattambinadu* but exists as a self-sustained digital persona, detached from his original context. His exaggerated masculinity, marked by aggression

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and bravado, has been amplified and commodified through meme culture, making him an archetype of performative machismo rather than a mere film character.

The transformation of Dasamoolam Damu into a meme legend demonstrates how digital culture can reshape audience perceptions of cinematic figures. Originally an incidental character, his over-the-top delivery has been repurposed into humorous digital artifacts, used to signify bravado, failure, and exaggerated self-importance in online discourse. His exaggerated aggression, initially meant to invoke fear or ridicule in the film, is now perceived as a source of comedic relief in memes. This shift underscores the participatory nature of meme culture, where audiences extract, reinterpret, and reshape cinematic elements to fit contemporary social narratives. Through this process, Dasamoolam Damu has become a case in how minor cinematic characters can gain disproportionate cultural relevance in the digital age, reinforcing the role of social media in redefining film legacies.

Shammi, the antagonist of *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), is a cinematic representation of hegemonic masculinity, embodying patriarchal control and rigid gender norms. His character aligns with R. W. Connell's theory of toxic masculinity, which critiques the societal expectation that men must exhibit dominance, emotional suppression, and aggression to assert their superiority. In the film, Shammi's obsession with control, his rigid adherence to traditional masculinity, and his performative confidence render him both a menacing and tragic figure. His psychological unraveling, particularly in the climax, exposes the fragility of patriarchal ideals, making him a compelling subject for cultural critique. Memes have played a crucial role in amplifying this critique, deconstructing his hyper-masculine image by reframing his actions as absurd and ironically humorous.

The memeification of Shammi represents a broader cultural shift where oppressive masculinity is no longer revered but ridiculed. His signature line, "I am the hero," originally intended to reflect his delusions of grandeur, has been repurposed as an ironic digital expression of misplaced self-importance. Through the lens of meme culture, Shammi has transitioned from an intimidating figure to a satirical representation of fragile masculinity, illustrating how digital spaces can subvert cinematic narratives. The reinterpretation of his character not only diminishes his perceived authority but also aligns with contemporary feminist discourses that critique the romanticization of hyper-masculinity. His digital afterlife demonstrates how memes function as a cultural corrective, enabling audiences to engage in participatory critique while reshaping the ideological meanings of film characters.

### **Anappara Achamma (*Godfather*, 1991): The Matriarch as a Digital Symbol**

Anappara Achamma, the formidable mother figure in *Godfather* (1991), has been recontextualized in meme culture to reflect both the reverence and satire surrounding traditional Malayali family structures. As a cinematic matriarch, Achamma embodies the archetype of the authoritative mother, a recurring trope in Indian cinema where maternal figures wield significant

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influence over domestic and social spheres. Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory, particularly her discourse on the male gaze and gender representation, provides insight into how Achamma's character is perceived. Unlike traditional female characters who are often subjected to the male gaze, Achamma's authority and control position her as a dominant force within the narrative. However, meme culture oscillates between reinforcing and subverting this portrayal, sometimes celebrating her as a symbol of familial strength and, at other times, reducing her to an object of humorous exaggeration.

The paradoxical nature of Achamma's digital representation reflects the complexities of gender discourse in Malayalam cinema. While some memes uphold her character as an emblem of resilience and familial discipline, others repurpose her sternness into comedic exaggeration, often juxtaposing her authoritarian demeanor with contemporary domestic conflicts. This duality reveals how meme culture negotiates between admiration and satire, maintaining a delicate balance between respect for cultural values and irreverence towards cinematic stereotypes. Achamma's presence in meme culture underscores how digital reinterpretation can both preserve and challenge traditional representations, highlighting the evolving role of female authority figures in the public imagination.

### **Manavalan (Pulival Kalyanam, 2003): The Rise of the Clown Figure**

Manavalan, a comedic supporting character from *Pulival Kalyanam* (2003), has witnessed an unexpected resurgence in digital culture, owing to his absurd and exaggerated antics. His character aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, which emphasizes the subversive power of humor, chaos, and grotesque exaggeration in disrupting societal norms. In the film, Manavalan is portrayed as a comically inept yet endearing figure, his exaggerated physicality and speech patterns contributing to his comedic appeal. In meme culture, these very characteristics have been magnified, transforming him into a timeless figure of digital absurdity. His exaggerated expressions and over-the-top reactions have become templates for reaction memes, often deployed in everyday online discourse to convey extreme emotions.

The digital afterlife of Manavalan exemplifies how comedic performances can gain extended relevance beyond their cinematic origins. His presence in memes has transcended generational boundaries, allowing younger audiences—many of whom may not have watched *Pulival Kalyanam*—to engage with his character in entirely new ways. The carnivalesque nature of his memeification ensures that his legacy is not static but constantly evolving, shaped by new interpretations and cultural contexts. This phenomenon highlights how digital media serves as an archive for cinematic humor, ensuring the continued visibility and reinvention of comedic figures long after their original theatrical run.

### **Ramanan (Punjabi House, 1998): Nostalgia and the Sentimental Meme**

Ramanan, the tragicomic poet from *Punjabi House* (1998), remains one of the most enduring figures in Malayalam meme culture, largely due to the emotional depth of his character.

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Unlike other memeified characters that are primarily used for humor, Ramanan's digital presence is rooted in a blend of comedy and sentimentality. His plight—marked by unfulfilled love, poetic lamentations, and exaggerated self-pity—resonates deeply with audiences, making him an emblem of melancholic humor. Henry Jenkins' theory of affective economics, which explores how media industries capitalize on emotional engagement, is relevant in understanding how Ramanan's character has been monetized through meme culture. The sentimental appeal of Ramanan's suffering allows for widespread digital engagement, as audiences repurpose his dialogues and expressions to articulate their own emotional experiences.

The endurance of Ramanan in meme culture demonstrates how nostalgia functions as a powerful force in digital reinterpretation. His dialogues, particularly those expressing heartbreak and poetic melancholy, have been adapted across various digital platforms, reinforcing his status as a cultural touchstone. While some memes celebrate his poetic despair with sincerity, others deploy his tragicomic persona in an ironic or exaggerated manner. This dual nature of his digital legacy—oscillating between genuine nostalgia and satirical detachment—illustrates how meme culture both preserves and reinvents cinematic characters. Ramanan's presence in digital spaces highlights the intricate relationship between nostalgia, affective engagement, and cultural memory, reaffirming the ability of meme culture to extend the emotional impact of film characters far beyond their initial cinematic lifespan.

## **The Politics of Memes: Representation and Ideology**

Memes, as digital artifacts, are deeply embedded in ideological structures and socio-cultural contexts. Contrary to the perception that they are mere forms of entertainment, memes function as tools of representation, shaping and reinforcing dominant cultural narratives. The process of memeification selectively amplifies certain traits of a character, often exaggerating them to fit prevailing societal expectations. This process is not politically neutral; rather, it reflects existing biases, power structures, and social hierarchies. As Limor Shifman notes in *Memes in Digital Culture*, memes “mediate between individual creativity and collective norms, ensuring that cultural production remains within familiar ideological frameworks” (37). In the Malayalam digital sphere, the transformation of cinematic characters into memes frequently aligns with established ideological positions, reinforcing or challenging dominant discourses on gender, class, and politics. Through humor and repetition, memes naturalize particular ideas, making them more palatable to the audience while subtly influencing public perception.

One of the most evident ideological dimensions of meme culture is its gendered nature. The memeification of male characters in Malayalam cinema often positions them as symbols of exaggerated masculinity, bravado, or comic relief. Figures such as Dasamoolam Damu or Shammi become hyperreal representations of male aggression, insecurity, or dominance, sometimes ridiculing these traits but also inadvertently normalizing them. Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is relevant here, as it explains how “signs of the real” are replaced with exaggerated

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versions that circulate as truth (Simulacra and Simulation 6). Male characters in memes exist in this hyperreal state, where their aggressive or absurd traits are exaggerated to the point of detachment from their original cinematic context. In contrast, female characters are frequently subjected to reductive and stereotypical portrayals, emphasizing their roles within patriarchal frameworks. Women in memes are often depicted in binary terms—either as controlling mother figures like Anappara Achamma, or as objects of ridicule, with their assertiveness framed as excessive or humorous. As Laura Mulvey argues in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, mainstream media often objectifies and marginalizes female figures by positioning them within restrictive gender roles (11). This disparity underscores the gendered dynamics of meme culture, where male characters are granted complexity and irony, while female characters are often reduced to simplistic tropes.

Beyond gender, meme culture also functions as a site of political engagement and resistance. In Kerala, where political discourse is highly vibrant, memes serve as tools for satire, critique, and mobilization. Political figures, policies, and events are frequently transformed into meme templates, allowing users to engage in participatory critique. As Henry Jenkins notes in *Convergence Culture*, digital platforms enable “grassroots participation, where audiences co-opt media to articulate their perspectives on power and politics” (23). This participatory culture is evident in the way Malayalam meme communities engage with contemporary political issues, using humor to critique governance, corruption, and ideological inconsistencies. Memes provide an accessible and engaging medium for dissent, enabling users to challenge dominant narratives and expose contradictions within political rhetoric. At the same time, meme culture can also be weaponised for political trolling, where digital communities use humor and irony to discredit opponents or reinforce ideological biases. This dual nature of meme culture—as both a space for critical resistance and a tool for ideological enforcement—demonstrates its significance in shaping public discourse.

Meme culture’s ability to rapidly disseminate ideological messages raises questions about digital agency and media influence. Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model provides insight into how audiences interpret memes within their socio-political contexts. Hall argues that media texts are encoded with dominant meanings by their creators but are subject to varying interpretations by audiences based on their ideological positions (Hall 136). This model is particularly relevant in meme studies, where the same meme can be consumed differently depending on the viewer’s political alignment or cultural background. For instance, a meme mocking a political leader may be interpreted as a critique of authority by some and as an act of disrespect by others. The inherent virality of memes ensures that these ideological messages circulate rapidly, influencing perceptions in both overt and subtle ways.

The politics of memes in Malayalam digital culture, thus, reveal the ways in which digital humor intersects with broader societal structures. While memes can function as progressive tools

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that critique authority, expose contradictions, and foster digital activism, they can also perpetuate biases, reinforce patriarchal norms, and normalize certain ideologies. As Shifman states, “memes have the power to naturalize ideological stances, embedding them in the everyday humor of digital discourse” (41). The study of memes, therefore, becomes crucial in understanding the intersection of humor, ideology, and representation, revealing the complex ways in which media shapes and reflects cultural consciousness.

## **The Influence of Memes on Filmmaking Practices**

The emergence of meme culture has profoundly influenced contemporary filmmaking practices, reshaping how directors, screenwriters, and studios conceptualize and market films. In the digital era, where audience engagement extends beyond passive viewing to participatory reinterpretation, filmmakers increasingly anticipate meme potential during production. Dialogues, performances, and even specific visual aesthetics are crafted with an awareness of how they may be decontextualized, transformed, and circulated across digital platforms. As Henry Jenkins notes in *Convergence Culture*, “Media convergence is more than simply a technological shift... it alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences” (3). This shift has led to an era where films are designed not just for theatrical impact but also for their potential afterlife in the digital sphere, particularly through memes.

One of the most evident manifestations of this phenomenon is the deliberate inclusion of “meme-bait” dialogues and exaggerated performances. Directors, recognizing the virality of certain character traits or dialogues, incorporate elements that are primed for digital repurposing. The success of characters like Dasamoolam Damu from *Chattambinadu* (2009) or Shammi from *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) demonstrates how heightened expressions and dramatic dialogue delivery lend themselves to memeification. According to Bolter and Grusin’s theory of remediation, “new media refashion old media in a constant process of adaptation” (45), a concept that applies to how films are now structured with the digital afterlife in mind. By crafting scenes with exaggerated expressiveness, filmmakers enable audiences to extract and remix content in ways that perpetuate engagement beyond the traditional cinematic experience.

Recently, the role of memes in film marketing has become increasingly significant. Studios and production houses now incorporate memes into their promotional strategies, leveraging internet trends to boost audience interest. This trend is evident in the promotional campaigns of major films, where trailers, teaser posters, and even official merchandise are designed with meme culture in mind. The marketing of films such as *Minnal Murali* (2021) and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022) exemplifies this approach, as studios actively encouraged meme engagement, fostering a sense of communal participation. As Limor Shifman argues in *Memes in Digital Culture*, “memes are not just carriers of cultural ideas but also mechanisms of social bonding” (15), demonstrating how studios strategically utilize meme culture to create an interactive, participatory marketing framework.

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However, the widespread adaptation of memes in filmmaking also introduces ethical dilemmas, particularly concerning authorship and creative ownership. The rise of fan edits, AI-generated content, and deepfake clips complicates traditional notions of cinematic authorship. While audiences engage in reinterpretation as a form of digital creativity, this practice can sometimes border on misrepresentation. For instance, deepfake technology enables users to manipulate film footage, raising concerns about misinformation and the distortion of original artistic intent. As Lawrence Lessig states in *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, “The challenge is not whether culture will be shared, but how culture will be shared, and under what terms” (22). The democratization of film discourse, while empowering audiences, also blurs ethical boundaries, necessitating a reevaluation of creative rights in the digital age.

The influence of meme culture on filmmaking is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it fosters a dynamic and interactive cinematic experience, where audiences actively engage with and reinterpret media texts. On the other hand, it challenges traditional filmmaking norms, compelling directors and studios to navigate new ethical and creative challenges. As digital culture continues to evolve, the interplay between memes and cinema will undoubtedly shape the future of filmmaking, redefining the boundaries of authorship, audience participation, and cultural production.

Meme culture has fundamentally reshaped the ways in which audiences engage with Malayalam cinema, transforming films from static cultural artifacts into dynamic, evolving texts. Digital platforms serve as extensions of cinematic discourse, where films are reinterpreted, repurposed, and recirculated through viral content, thereby prolonging their relevance in public memory. This shift has prompted filmmakers to recognize the potential of meme culture, leading to the deliberate incorporation of meme-worthy moments into cinematic narratives. At the same time, meme culture serves as a powerful tool for negotiating societal norms, as it both reinforces dominant ideologies and challenges existing power structures through satire and subversion. Consequently, traditional modes of film criticism are undergoing a paradigm shift, as audience-driven, participatory digital discourses play an increasingly influential role in shaping public perceptions of cinema.

However, the integration of meme culture into cinematic discourse also raises critical ethical and creative concerns that warrant scholarly attention. While memes contribute to the democratization of film criticism by allowing broader public engagement, they also risk oversimplifying complex narratives, reducing nuanced cinematic texts to decontextualized fragments. Additionally, issues of authorship, appropriation, and misrepresentation in digital reinterpretations underscore the need for a critical framework to assess the implications of meme culture on film studies. As digital technologies continue to advance, meme culture will remain a crucial force in shaping how cinema is remembered, critiqued, and consumed, necessitating

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interdisciplinary approaches that examine its impact on contemporary film discourse and cultural production.

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