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The Semiotic Power of Cinematic Costume: Identity and the Re-design of the Hero and Heroine in New-Generation Malayalam Cinema

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<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8603-1906>**Abstract**

This article argues that in the new-generation phase of Malayalam cinema, from the early 2010s onwards, costume became the first system through which a character was built. The way a character was dressed influenced how audiences understood and interpreted the character's identity, personality, social status, lifestyle, profession, etc. Dialogue, theme, and setting were then arranged to follow from it. The claim is limited to this historical period. We can consider this in two ways: first, costumes help create and develop a character. Second, the way a character was dressed helped us understand other things like their dialogues, surroundings, and personality. The idea that we see a character's clothes before they speak is not included here, as this happens in all films, and not just in New Generation Malayalam cinema. The argument is tested by a first-appearance protocol applied to a core set of four films: *Narasimham* (2000) as a pre-new-generation control, *Charlie* (2015), *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), and *Aavesham* (2024). Six further films are also examined in support. The reading is placed against Jane Gaines on costume as subordinate to narratives. The fact that people began to wear the costumes shown in film may seem like evidence initially, but when we take a closer look, it is not as strong as it initially appears. What began as the deliberate redesign of the hero and heroine had become ordinary practice by the middle of the next decade.

Keywords: costume design, Malayalam cinema, new-generation cinema, mise-en-scène, semiotics, star studies

1. The Problem

Costumes in cinema mean more than the clothes an actor wears. They include ornaments, footwear, spectacles, facial hair, the style of the hair, and all other things that a character wears apart from their clothes. Everything the body brings into the frame belongs to it. It fixed the period and place, supplied colour, and told the audience something about a person before that person spoke or acted.

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Most writing on film costume grants it this descriptive power but stops short of giving it priority. Pamela Church Gibson treats costume as one element that produces meaning and feeling through the character. Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, writing on Hindi cinema, show that clothing marks age, marital status, and class, and also carries ideas of nostalgia, tradition, and respectability. In both accounts, costume is one element among several of equal weight.

Nick Lacey's textbook treatment places clothing earlier and separately. He divides *mise-en-scène* analysis into three parts: the subject, the lighting, and the setting (Lacey 18). Clothing appears in none of them. Instead, he treats it as one of the codes of non-verbal communication. Clothes make a statement about a person whether or not that statement is intended (Lacey 9–11). In Lacey's sequence, the reading of dress comes before the analysis of *mise-en-scène*, though he does not draw the conclusion that concerns this article.

Two areas of scholarship have not yet been brought together. The first is the Anglo-American writing on film costume, from Jane Gaines and Stella Bruzzi to Sarah Street. This work has shown that dress carries meaning, yet it has focused almost entirely on Hollywood and British films. The second is the critical writing on new-generation Malayalam cinema. This body of work has examined the movement's realism, narrative economy, and treatment of gender. Costume appears only in passing, treated as an attribute of characters whose construction is examined through writing and casting. Where Malayalam dress has been examined closely, as in the work of Musthafa Mubashir and M. Shuaib Mohamed Haneef on Gulf migration films, or A. P. Anupama and Amar Ramesh Wayal on audience response, the films lie outside the new-generation corpus or are studied for other ends. No study has asked whether the new-generation redesign of the protagonist was carried out first through costume.

The present article addresses this question and advances a strong affirmative answer. In these films, character begins with clothes. The costume is decided first. Dialogue, theme, and setting are then built on what the costume has already established. The claim could prove wrong. Section three sets out how it was tested.

2. What 'Coming First' Means Here?

The assertion that costume comes first admits three distinct interpretations. This article advances only the second and the third.

The first is a matter of visual order. We see clothes before we hear speech. Whatever a garment tells us is already in place before dialogue begins. This is true, yet it proves nothing distinctive. It was equally true of the Hollywood films Gaines describes, where costume was kept subordinate, and it is true of the Malayalam star vehicles discussed later. Something that occurs in every film cannot explain what is special about a particular group. This sense is therefore set aside.

The second is related to production. The claim is that the character is first designed through clothes. Props, rooms, and locations are then chosen to match the costume that has already been decided. Two kinds of evidence support this: one is the statements by the designers about their working style, and the other is the way everything on screen fits together, as if it was planned in this order.

The third concerns reading. The claim is that clothing determines the meaning of everything else that circles a character. A line of dialogue or a room means what it means because of the dressed body that occupies it. The test is direct: would the same line, spoken by the same actor in different clothes, still carry the same meaning?

Jane Gaines raises a harder objection from within costume studies. In classical Hollywood, she argues that everything visible was made to support the story. Costume above all was restrained so that it would not distract from the narrative. If clothing was subordinate then, why treat it as primary now? Two answers can be provided. First, Gaines describes a system in which the star had already told the

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audience who the character was before the film began. Costume had no such task. Remove the star, and the task falls elsewhere. In Kerala after 2011, it fell to the wardrobe. Second, Gaines herself leaves an opening. She also describes what she calls a costume plot, a line of meaning carried by dress that runs alongside the story and sometimes beyond it. This is the point at which this article enters.

Two ideas from Roland Barthes are considered useful for this analysis. The first is from *The Fashion System*, where he explains that clothing gets its meaning through contrast. That is, a garment means what it means because of what it is not and because of what is worn beside it. Barthes was studying written descriptions of clothes in fashion magazines, not actual clothing. So, this difference is important when applying his ideas to film, where clothes are seen rather than described. However, the idea of contrast still works, and Section Seven applies this idea to the films. The second idea is from “Rhetoric of the Image” and is called anchorage. An image can have many possible meanings, so, in order to make the viewer understand a particular meaning, they should be guided towards it. Sections Six to Eight argue that clothing often performs this role in these films. It helps the audience understand the character and the situation even before a single word is spoken.

3. How the Films were Read and Chosen?

The reading method is simple and uniformly applied. For each main character in a film, take the scene of their first appearance and stop at the first real line of dialogue. Then ask one question: what can be known about this person from the clothes alone? Those inferences are then checked against what the film later shows through dialogue and action. If the rest of the film confirms and sharpens what the clothes suggested, the argument about reading holds. Whereas if the clothes suggested nothing, or suggested something that the film later contradicts, the argument fails.

Four films are read closely. *Narasimham* (2000) comes from before the selected period and is used for comparison. It was chosen because it was one of the largest commercial successes in the history of Malayalam cinema, which means that the older way of working is being examined at its most confident rather than at its weakest. *Charlie* (2015) is the clearest case of a hero and heroine designed together as a pair. *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) is included for a particular reason, as it contains its own comparison. Two opposite kinds of masculinity are dressed by one designer, in one film, in one place, so the contrast can be examined without the complication of comparing one production with another. *Aavesham* (2024) shows the practice as an everyday habit ten years on, and its designer has explained his choices in an interview.

Six more films are discussed briefly: *How Old Are You?* (2014), *Bangalore Days* (2014), *Premam* (2015), *Rani Padmini* (2015), *Manjummel Boys* (2024), and *Eko* (2025). These films are included to show how the same approach can be used for different purposes. They do not carry the main argument.

Two things about this list should be admitted openly. All of them are films in which costume is noticeable. Choosing them for this reason means choosing evidence that supports the conclusion. That would be a problem if the list were presented as a survey of Malayalam cinema. It is not. These films are deliberately chosen because they provide the best conditions for testing the argument. If the argument fails here, it fails everywhere. The comparison film and the internal comparison are included so that failure remains possible. The second point concerns who did the work. These films were dressed by different designers, working with different directors and producers. When the same approach appears independently in the work of different people, it suggests that it is a practice rather than just one person’s style.

4. The Prior Regime: *Narasimham* (2000)

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Malayalam cinema before the new-generation shift focused heavily on the male superstar culture. Plots were often built to highlight him, while the woman opposite him was frequently given only an ornamental or romantic role. Meena T. Pillai has shown how this arrangement created and normalised a gender hierarchy, making it appear as natural rather than designed (Pillai, *Women in Malayalam Cinema*). In her study of Mohanlal, she also traces the image of the feudal lord in the star's screen persona and its effects on Malayali masculinity (Pillai, "The Feudal Lord Reincarnate").

Narasimham, directed by Shaji Kailas and written by Ranjith, is a useful control because it is a strong example of that persona. Applying the first-appearance protocol to Poovalli Induchoodan gives a revealing result. The character is introduced through an extended song sequence in which he emerges from the Bharathappuzha, is framed within the syllable *Om*, walks through fire, and is repeatedly shot from a low angle. The costume, a mundu and a twirled moustache, is clear within this setting, but what it shows is not a particular man. It suggests caste, region, and a mythic masculine type. It does not tell the audience what this person does in his daily life, whether he is careless or exact, or how he treats people who cannot help him. These things are shown later through dialogue and incidents.

The costume is doing a job here, but its role is mainly to create an image rather than to show the individual character. It is connected more to the star than to the character he plays. This is why the same style appears in many of Mohanlal's films during this period, without much change based on the different characters he plays. Here, the clothes represent stardom rather than character. This is the approach that began to change in the following decade.

One further finding here makes the argument of this article more complicated, and it is included for that reason. The mundu Mohanlal wears in the film became popular among the public and was sold and worn as the "Narasimham mundu" ("Star Styles"). The same source also records how the black shirt, bordered mundu, heavy beard, and dark glasses from *Premam* became very popular among young men fifteen years later. Therefore, the movement of screen costume into everyday wear cannot be used as evidence that new-generation audiences were reading character through dress. Star cinema produced the same effect. The difference is in what the garment carried with it outside the cinema. The *Narasimham* mundu became an accessory connected to the star persona that anyone could adopt, while the *Premam* look was connected to a specific and unheroic young character. This difference is real, but it is smaller than the earlier version of the argument suggested. Therefore, the evidence from the circulation of costumes should be given less importance.

5. What Changed after 2011?

From the early 2010s, a different kind of film began to appear. Stories were set in familiar Kerala locations and used familiar Kerala ways of speaking. The main characters were ordinary, imperfect, and often unimpressive. Women became more central to the stories and were shown with their own jobs, personalities, and desires. This change is usually discussed in terms of writing and casting, but it also had an effect on costume that is rarely discussed.

A star film does not need to spend its opening minutes showing who the hero is because the audience already knows the star. Section four showed how this works, the mundu and moustache did not need to tell the audience who Induchoodan was because Mohanlal's star image had already done that before the film began. But a film about an unfamiliar young man in Fort Kochi does not have this advantage. The film itself has to show the character's identity quickly, before dialogue begins to explain him. Clothing is the fastest way to do this, and these films used it for that purpose. Therefore, the importance given to costume in production, discussed in Section Two, comes from an industrial need rather than simply from an aesthetic choice.

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There is also a specific Kerala style of using clothing in films. Mubashir and Haneef, while studying two Malayalam films about Gulf migration, show how the replacement of the mundu by trousers works as a symbol of modernity. This shows that, in this cinema, a single garment can express an idea about history. A. P. Anupama and Wayal, using Barthes' ideas to study Celluloid and Premam, show how audiences understand such clothes as myths rather than simple facts. The films discussed below use this same approach, and in Premam and Aavesham, clothing carries meanings that go beyond the cinema hall.

6. Charlie (2015): The Pair Built out of Cloth

Charlie, directed by Martin Prakkat, is built around two carefully designed characters. The costume design is by Sameera Saneesh, and the art direction is by Jayashree Lakshminarayanan, whose work on the film won the Kerala State Award. The two departments clearly worked closely together. The film's costumes, sees the hero and heroine as a pair designed together rather than as two separately dressed leads. The first-appearance protocol also supports this reading.

Charlie is introduced in loose, bohemian clothes: multi-coloured or geometric shirts worn open, harem pants or loose cotton trousers, wooden-bead chains, beaded wristbands, silver rings, a thick moustache, and a long beard. Nothing is fitted or new. Even before he speaks, the clothes tell us a lot about him. They suggest that he does not dress to please others, that he has collected his clothes and belongings over time rather than buying them as a set, and that he is unlikely to follow a fixed routine. The film later confirms these ideas through different incidents. His talks about travel and his refusal to live a settled life add more detail to what his clothes already suggest. The paintbrushes, musical instruments, coir bags, water jugs, colourful interiors, and high-range tea estates also seem connected to his character rather than being just neutral surroundings.

Tessa is also built through her clothes, and the first-appearance method works even more clearly for her. She appears at a family function wearing a multi-coloured sleeveless coat, black palazzo pants with a side slit, a red stole tied as a hair band, large black-framed spectacles, a prominent silver nose pin, and a beaded chain above the elbow. Compared with the sarees and simple glamour usually associated with Malayalam heroines for decades, her clothes show that she is different and free-spirited. Even before she speaks, her appearance shows that her clothes are not meant simply to please others.

The detail that carries the most weight comes when she performs the Margamkali and keeps both the nose pin and the spectacles on. This is anchorage in Barthes's sense, and it is important to be clear about what is being anchored. A traditional Christian dance performed by a young woman can have several meanings, including submission to an inherited tradition. A more conventional film might have used the performance to show her as a traditional woman, even for a short time. However, her costume prevents this reading. The spectacles and the nose pin show her as a woman with a practice of her own who is also performing a tradition, rather than a traditional woman who is simply taking part in the dance. If those two objects are changed, the scene would have a different meaning. This is the test that the hermeneutic claim has to pass.

7. Kumbalangi Nights (2019): The Internal Control

Kumbalangi Nights, directed by Madhu C. Narayanan and designed by Saneesh, contains within a single film the comparison that the rest of this argument has to make across different films. Two types of masculinity are dressed by one designer, in one location, for one production, and they are dressed in opposition to each other. Therefore, the difference between them cannot be explained by budget, house style, or period.

The four brothers wear everyday normal clothing that does not give them a heroic appearance. Saneesh has spoken about putting one of them in loose pants, and this looseness is important because it

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avoids the tailored look that Malayalam cinema had long used to show masculine confidence. When the first-appearance protocol is applied, the men appear unfinished, close to their work, and not fully in control of their circumstances. Because the clothes already show this, their quarrelling, clumsy affection, and eventual solidarity feel truthful rather than sentimental.

Shammi is the control. His shirts are pressed and tucked in, his moustache is carefully maintained, and this rigid appearance is established in his first appearance, before the film shows what he will become. The point is not simply that neat clothing suggests a controlling man. It is that the neatness gets its meaning from the brothers' loose clothing in the same frames. This is Barthes's contrastive principle working on screen rather than on the page, the tucked shirt has no fixed meaning and gets its meaning from what it is compared with. Two things follow from this. The film's image of controlling masculinity begins with the shirt, and this reading cannot be dismissed as a meaning added to whatever clothes the wardrobe department happened to provide, because the contrast is clear and built into the film itself.

The internal control also answers the concern about selecting evidence based on the outcome. If costume were only noticeable in films where it happens to be noticeable, there would be no reason for one production to dress two characters as opposites through their clothing. This clear contrast shows that the costumes were deliberately designed, and this is what the productional claim argues.

8. Aavesham (2024): The Convention Settled

By the middle of the 2020s, this practice was no longer a special feature of the movement. Recent films no longer treat character-specific or clearly coded clothing as a style choice that needs to be explained. They simply assume it.

In Aavesham, directed by Jithu Madhavan and designed by Mashar Hamsa, Fahadh Faasil's Ranga is clearly established through his first appearance. He wears a crisp white shirt and white trousers, heavy gold chains, dark glasses, and an emerald earring, for which the actor had his ear pierced. Hamsa has explained that the earring was chosen to match the green Qualis that the character drives ("Style of Ranganna"). This is a small detail, but it has a strong effect because it connects the man to his vehicle and, through it, to his territory using a single stone. Anchorage is again the mechanism. The vehicle by itself is an ordinary object on a Bengaluru street, but the earring makes it appear as an extension of the man.

Status, self-fashioning, theatrical menace, and comic vanity are all shown before Ranga says anything important. Because his body is already dressed to show confidence, his catchphrase gets its swagger from his appearance. Later in the film, he changes into black, and this change feels like a change in his character because the white clothes had already carried so much meaning. Compared with the protocol, this is the opposite of Narasimham: the clothes are specific to the character rather than to the actor, and Fahadh Faasil's other roles during this period are not dressed in a similar way.

9. The Supporting Set

The remaining films show the different purposes this same priority can serve. They are discussed briefly because they support the argument rather than establish it.

In Premam, also designed by Saneesh, costume shows the passage of time. The film moves through three stages of one man's life, and clothing, rather than makeup, shows the difference between them: ordinary college wear, followed by the black shirt with mundu, heavy beard, and dark glasses. Malar, in contrast, wears starched cotton sarees without much makeup. This simple style is important because she is a teacher of a particular age and temperament, and the sarees show this before she even opens the register.

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How Old Are You? works by keeping the clothes simple. Nirupama is a government clerk whose ambitions have been put aside, and Saneesh dresses her in plain sarees that suit her position. When the film shows her returning to her earlier self, it does not make her clothes more stylish. Her transformation feels believable because it happens within a wardrobe that remains modest.

Bangalore Days, designed by Pampa Biswas, shows urban mobility and independence through floral frocks and simple city wear. This allows the film to focus on what its three characters do with that freedom instead of spending time showing that they have it.

Rani Padmini uses costume to show the difference between the two women before dialogue clearly distinguishes them. Since there is no conventional male hero to organise the story, their clothes carry much of the responsibility of showing who is who.

Manjummel Boys applies this priority to a group and to real events, the 2006 accident in the Guna Caves at Kodaikanal. Hamsa dresses the young men in plain shirts, trousers, and casual footwear with a period look, keeping them within their social world rather than making them appear above it. This is important because the film focuses on what ordinary friends do when one of them falls.

Eko, directed by Dinjith Ayyathan and written and photographed by Bahul Ramesh, takes the practice into a darker setting. Mlaathi Chedathi and the young servant Peeyoos wear simple, worn clothes suited to a remote estate on the Kerala–Karnataka border. This allows the film to reveal less about Kuriachan and remain slow and indirect, because the audience already has enough information to understand the two people in front of them.

10. Limits

Four qualifications should be noted. The first is that costume and production design are not always clearly separate in practice. In Charlie, the interiors and the wardrobe were designed together. Therefore, the claim of priority refers to the order in which the spectator receives them and the order in which the character was designed. It does not mean that the designer worked alone.

The second is that this priority is not found in every film of this period. There are films from the same period where sound or landscape is more important, and trying to read them mainly through costume would be forced. The claim is that costume leads in a substantial and identifiable group of new-generation films, not that it leads in every film. Section three was framed to make this difference clear rather than hide it.

The third concerns the circulation evidence, which has already been discussed in Section Four. Screen costumes becoming part of everyday wear happened under the star system as well as after it. Therefore, this alone cannot show that audiences were reading character through clothing. It is still suggestive, but only when we also consider what meaning the garment carried with it. Answering this question properly would require audience research, which this article has not conducted.

The fourth is that the hermeneutic test is based on counterfactual reasoning. Saying that the Margamkali sequence would mean something different without the spectacles means thinking about a version of the film that does not exist. This is common in textual analysis, but it is not without problems. A study that examines how much viewers actually understand a character through costume would provide stronger evidence than close reading alone.

11. Conclusion

The argument is that in new-generation Malayalam cinema, the character begins with the clothes, and other parts of the film are built around what the clothes have established. Across the four films studied closely, this argument holds. Charlie shows a hero and heroine designed based on what they wear. Kumbalangi Nights shows two men dressed as clear opposites within a single production, which suggests deliberate design rather than a critic simply finding meaning in the costumes. Aavesham shows

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the same approach continuing as an ordinary practice a decade later, supported by the designer's own explanation.

Two parts of the original claim had to be given up or reduced. The idea that clothes matter because we see them before we hear speech was left out at the beginning because this is true of every film and therefore does not explain anything specific about these films. The argument from popularity remains only in a weaker form. Narasimham shows that star cinema could make its costumes popular in everyday life just as effectively as newer films. When people copied a look, it shows that they noticed the clothes. However, it does not tell us what they understood from those clothes.

What the comparison does establish is the change that the article set out to explain. In Narasimham, the mundu and the moustache show caste, region, and a familiar heroic type. The individual character is developed later through the story because the star had already created that image. Once the star was no longer the main focus, this work had to be done inside the film, and clothing did it. Sameera Saneesh, Pampa Biswas, Mashar Hamsa, and the designers working with them created the hero and heroine using the simplest materials available to them.

Two questions remain open. The first is about audiences. Whether viewers really build an understanding of a character through costume, as close reading suggests, can only be known by asking them, and this article has not done that. The second is about the rest of Indian cinema. If the same change happened after the decline of star-centred production in Tamil, Telugu, or Kannada cinema, then this is a general result of that decline. If it did not, then it is a Kerala-specific story. What can be said with confidence is that in 2015, dressing a heroine in mismatched chappals and a red stole was a meaningful choice, while by 2025, it had simply become a normal way of introducing a character.

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