

Unmasking the Features of the Pandemic Through Malayalam Cinema: A Study of Sanu John Varghese's *Aarkkariyam* and Dileesh Pothan's *Joji*

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Abstract

The pandemic provides an opportunity for filmmakers to identify the potential of the limited space. The pandemic-driven perspectives of the filmmakers widen the horizon of space beyond the spatial and temporal dimensions. Malayalam films have responded to the unprecedented and shocking outbreak of COVID-19 faster because space and its utilization have been always minimal in the industry. People have been shattered in isolation and the new normal imparted new phrases and idioms to the language of life. The desire to socialize, the angst to stay and work at home, the issues of parenting, and the financial crisis have all become part of the new normal. To narrate any kind of story has appeared challenging because the pandemic is an amalgamation of anxieties and it demands to be faithful to all the unfortunate situations of life while featuring it. Thus, the idea of shifting from the physical space to the psychological space progressed and it paves way for extraordinary films with brilliant performances. This paper is an attempt to explore the documentation of the pandemic in *Aarkkariyam*, a 2021 mystery drama and *Joji*, a crime thriller. The paper focuses on the many facets of the pandemic like psychological trauma, isolation, work from home, social and financial instability, and the change in the dynamics of 'home'.

Keywords: COVID-19, Malayalam cinema, trauma studies, pandemic fiction, new-normal.



Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joji_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joji_(film))

Joji is a 2021 Malayalam crime drama directed by the Dileesh Pothan and written by Shyam Pushkaran. *Joji* is a loose adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy Macbeth, starring Fahadh Fasil as Joji. The film has limited cast and crew considering the seriousness of the pandemic. The story of the patriarch Panachel Kuttapan, his three sons Jomon, Jason and Joji, grandson Poppy and daughter in law Bincy brings Shakespeare's greatest tragedy into a Christian household in Kottayam, Kerala. *Aarkkariyam* is a mystery drama released in 2021 during the pandemic, written and directed by Sanu John Varghese. The movie tells the mystery tale of the family of Ittiyavara played by Biju Menon along with his daughter Shirly featuring Parvathy Thiruvoth and her husband Roy played by Sharafudheen.

People across the globe have experienced—and continue to experience—the impacts of this disease and the social transformations it has wrought. For the sake of clarity and sequencing as I describe each artist's work, it will be important to distinguish between and define the terms COVID-19, the coronavirus, the quarantine, and the pandemic. The coronavirus is a type of virus that causes the disease properly called COVID-19.4

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A pandemic is the worldwide spread of a disease. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization categorized COVID-19 as a global pandemic. The general public sometimes refers to this time of quarantine and the continuing circulation of the COVID-19 disease as the time of the pandemic. Quarantine is locally determined. Each state within the United States closed businesses at different times and asked residents to stay inside. Quarantines varied in restrictions and duration, but in almost all cases of quarantine, arts institutions, deemed “nonessential services,” were shuttered. (Gonzalez 358)

In the first scene of *Joji*, a delivery boy puts on a mask and leaves his office, where several other employees are also wearing masks, head towards Joji's house. The trauma of pandemic is established in the first few scenes of the film, where all the characters appear alienated from each other physically. There is absolutely no overcrowding in the scenes as characters are staged with enough physical distance. Poppy is one main character who is introduced in the beginning, he wears a mask which has the teeth of a ghost and he runs to the delivery boy and he says, *Appapan quarantine la* translates “grandpa is in quarantine”. This particular dialogue is the only dialogue in the film which directly indicates the presence of pandemic in the film.

As the movie advances, the sequences with isolation are repeated, indicating an intense grasp of loneliness of characters in the narration. The financial crisis that Joji faces creates a friction between him and his feudal dad. The hopelessness sets in when Joji sleeps day in and out, where his two elder brothers and his father work harder even during the COVID. Summarising the study of Carrion, V. G., McCurdy, B. H., and Scozzafava, M. D, M. Masiero observe that, “The psychological trauma is easily imaginable: the loss of job, increased economic uncertainty, the strain of caring for themselves and family, can increase the loss of hope, and lower optimism, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, which can lead to a concomitant increase of mental health disorders” (4). Joji appears depressed and anxious in the home trying to figure out what he has to do, to deal with the trauma he is undergoing. World health organisation reports that: “Evidence suggests the pandemic and associated PHSMs have led to a worldwide increase in mental health problems, including widespread depression and anxiety” (7).

The temporary fall of Panachel Kuttappan marks the fall of an authority, who deprived freedom and dignity inside that huge building which has failed to bestow the warmth of a home. The proclivity to obey and serve the dominant father has become the natural order of the home. When Kuttappan regains his firmness, he becomes vigilant about everything around and started suspiciously observing his children. Ramos observes that “Older adults experiencing feelings of loneliness may also inadvertently put significant strain on their caregivers, thereby impacting interpersonal relationships” (4). Joji answers Kuttappan’s questions keeping in mind the authority he possesses. Joji’s iconic reply to his father in one of the scenes goes, *aviduthe prajakalil oruvan aane* translates, “One among your subjects”, sums up a very hostile environment within a home.



Courtesy: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aarkkariyam>

The plot of *Aarkariyam* is intricate as it has ontological as well as spiritual dimension carefully weaved into it. The film centers on the lives of three individuals, who, although content in each other's company, endure personal and professional hardships on a personal level.

Aarkariyam explicitly talks about anxieties during an indefinite period of lockdown. It focuses on how the community is affected and concisely describes Keralites' way of life amidst the pandemic. Individuals who have been living outside the state returned to Kerala because they have had trust in how the administration and state handles the situation. There are scenes which shows the real footages of Kerala Chief Minister’s daily press meet on COVID 19, and

news reports. The film also shows how people within a community ranging from immediate neighbours to local vendors from the nearby small towns become a bridge to the outer world.

Masking and Unmasking Crimes

The pandemic had stressed people to their core and extracted their zest for life. People became silent as a result of the global lockdown, and resultantly their pent up energy began to get manifested in various forms of their expression depending upon the situations they found themselves in. If artistic works were among the positive impacts of the epidemic, then its adverse ramifications resulted in violence. Study on the crime rates during COVID 19 states that though there had been an exponential decrease in the crimes committed at public spaces, crimes within home had been consistent due to stay-at-home orders (Stickle and Felson 532). *Aarkariyam* and *Joji* explained the dichotomous impact of the pandemic. *Joji* talked about the father-son tension that planted seeds of a retaliation which in turn culminated in the painstakingly planned murder of Kuttappan during lockdown. *Aarkariyam* showed how the father character in the movie, Ittiyavara, was seeking forgiveness from his own daughter and her husband because the lockdown had allowed them to be vulnerable without worrying about being judged.

Representation of the Women During the Pandemic

In *Joji*, Bincy's loneliness and resentment inside the home is vital in the narration. The epidemic heightened the resentment that Bincy already harbours from her forced silence and the injustices she faces. Similar to Lady Macbeth, Bincy is an ambitious woman with extremely restricted opportunities. She is the only woman in home, cooking for everyone and cleaning a huge building where people are emotionally islands apart. She is helpless in all the possible way as she is both financially and emotionally unstable and she also witnesses the humiliation faced by her husband. Women who are unemployed also risk becoming dependent on their male spouses, losing their social networks, and spending the entire day with their abusers. All of these factors increase their susceptibility to violence (Schneider et.al). Bincy's character arc gets complex as the narrative advances, revealing intricate details about her struggles with patriarchy, infertility, and her covert involvement in the patriarch's murder.

Although Shirley in *Aarkariyam* lives in a highly supportive home, she has experienced a series of horrific episodes. Unlike Bincy, Shirley is directly affected by the pandemic as

she and her husband face huge financial loss and has to travel back to Kerala amidst the chaos of the pandemic. Moreover, the thought of her only child who is stuck in the hostel due to the pandemic stresses her and the fact that her old father is willing to sell his home for providing financial aid to them intensifies her anxiety. Malik and Naeem state that “...it is important to understand that the pandemic impact on women with regard to their well-being is often more severe and long-term” (7,8).

Changing Idea of Home During COVID-19

The space utilisation in both the films are remarkable and Malayalam industry is quite comfortable in making and enjoying films within limited spaces. “Malayalam film is known for its sensitive depiction of essential subjects in films with fewer business components” (Paul 6). The film making during the pandemic has been excruciating because of the space and people management. Richards and Pacella observes that:

Creative workers, such as those that are either filmmakers or film festival organisers, are often predisposed to working in challenging conditions, where work and home lives blend. This blending of work and home was exacerbated by the pandemic, where, all our participants in this study experienced a blurring of work and home life due to lockdown restrictions and various “work from home” mandates (the conditions and severity of lockdown restrictions vary by state). (23)

Unlike other art forms, film making demands more people for its production and execution. The space utilisation in *Joji* and *Aarkkariyam* is incredible as it simultaneously followed the government rules of not risking the community health and also not compromising on the quality of the content.

The central part of Kerala is rich with big, isolated homes in the middle of rubber plantations. The choice of such locations has benefitted both the films in not disturbing the pandemic demands of film making. Both the movies have depicted the changing idea of home during the pandemic. Yalcin and Duzen opines that, “We define home as an imaginary space imbued not only with senses of belonging, desire, and intimacy but also with feelings of fear, violence, and alienation” (674). While *Joji* attempts to bring the fear, violence and alienation, *Aarkkariyam* explores the intimacy and warmth of the ‘home’.

There are many shorts in *Joji* where the home is shown as a single space amidst the dense rubber plantations and in *Aarkkariyam*, the home is surrounded by many plants and trees. The reality of alienation or rather isolation has been a pertinent feature of the pandemic. The attempt of human beings to utilise their own limited property to find their joy and bury their frustrations are all indispensable in chronicling the era of the pandemic. The two select films of the study stay close to the reality of the pandemic life as in representing the alienation within homes. The peculiar treatment of showing a large portion of empty spaces in a single room, inside *Joji*'s home augment to the terror pervading within the home. In the opening scene Poppy, a character in the film walks in and out of home depicting how people living under the same roof are far removed from each other, not just physically but emotionally too. Each room is very large and it has just one person living in it. There are repeated scene of *Joji* expressing his frustration in a closed room and the trauma of getting trapped within the confines of his home for an indefinite period. Apart from the staging, the dialogue-less scenes further contributes in bringing the pandemic inside the home.

Pothan is keen on separating Bincy and Jason who are the only married couple in the film and to maintain the patriarchal hierarchy within the home, Bincy is inevitably positioned in the kitchen and Jason, in his workspace. The crucial conversations between Bincy and *Joji* are separated by the walls of kitchen and dining area, which enhances the metaphorical idea of estrangement.

Joji is thus remarkable in its staging because the characters are set wide apart and it conveys the lack of bonding between the family members. The art direction specifically looks into a minimal approach of reducing the number of properties within a space. This mode of setting the interior of the home made it a space of voidness. Consequently, this voidness augmented to the silent terror brewing up within the home. The monotony of looking into vacuum has increased the impact of detachment within the home and also for the viewers. These approaches are various techniques to enhance the hostility in the climate of home in *Joji*. It lucidly sets the mood of the narration. It also justifies the time when the film is made and released.

The space in *Aarkkariyam* looks pampered and it delivers the warmth and affection of a home. There are plants in the courtyard where everyone does garden together. There is a kitchen garden and umpteen fruit bearing trees which make their life close to nature. The home

is adorned with properties that reflects the intimacy shared by the family members and it leaves open a room for the audience to wish and ‘pray’ for the family.

The home in *Aarkkariyam* breaks the stereotype of gendered spaces and it declares the open mindedness of the family members. The family cooks and eats together and all the spaces inside the home are equally accessible to everyone. According to Gupta, “If we watch a movie whose crisis is similar to our own, we can find incredible catharsis and relief by witnessing a resolution to our crisis offered by the movie’s storyline” (600). In *Aarkkariyam*, Ittiyavara, asks his son-in law Roy who is devastated due to financial loss to “*ellam avanil vitt aswasikkan padikknam*”, translates ‘to leave everything to God and relax’. *Aarkkariyam* imparts a cathartic experience to the audience as the cinema contemplates on various dimensions of prioritising relationships which help people navigate through their darkest times

Religion During the Pandemic

The pandemic terrorised and frightened religion and its powers with rational questions. In India, a considerable amount of population was skeptical about the efficiency of vaccination. The side effects of COVID vaccines were unnecessarily highlighted for discouraging people to not get vaccinated. People were mostly drawn into religious and irrational ways to tackle corona virus. Molteni et.al posit that “In the months following the pandemic outbreak there has been a flourishing of reports on religiosity and COVID-19, most of them detecting a religious revival in several countries” (S705). This had also been one of the cardinal reasons for the unprecedented spread of COVID-19.

Religions had an undivided take on how COVID 19 will end on its own without taking proper medical strategies. *Joji* engaged with the audience through a narrative which so was mundane, therefore, the presence of the religion was inevitable. When religion interfered into the narration, it portrayed the negligence of the system which challenged community health. The use of religion, its inhumane nature and artificiality was reflected in the incredible scene where the father chanted the prayer for the salvation of Kuttappan, who was battling with death.

Albert Camus’s *The Plague* had a story of a child dying followed by the conversation between a priest and a doctor with antithetical ideologies. When “One man has accepted this evil as finally good even though it is beyond his understanding how God will, in the end, transform it in accordance with his purposes. The other man can only revolt against what he has seen and ceaselessly "refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture"

(Hanna 226). In *Joji*, when father Kevin said that the manual of Christians is Bible, Jomon the elder and the most honest son of Kuttappan said “ente manual ente manasakshiyaaan,” that means “my manual is my conscience.” Thus, *Joji* engages in the conflict of religion versus rationality.

Pothan has made use of COVID 19 in a metaphorical manner where he simultaneously criticised religion and also the inhuman dispositions of the characters. He uses the signature properties of COVID era to narrate a murder and left many things unsaid which enhanced the aesthetics of *Joji*.

In *Aarkkariyam* the gravity of the faith overshadowed the religious dimension of the story. The story opens with Roy’s narration of how his wife Shirly’s faith in God relaxes her even in the middle of chaos. Roy has been shattered to know that, his father-in-law Ittiyavara, prayed to God for repentance after murdering Shirly’s first husband and also was flabbergasted by the way Ittiyavara submitted himself to the God.

Joji and *Aarkkariyam* have taken two extremely different stands on religion, like Camus’s characters in the plague Dr. Rieux and Father Paneloux. According to Hanna, Camus’ conclusion to this conflict of thoughts on religion is “If men are to speak of God, a personal and sovereign God, then there is introduced into human experience an infinite gulf between the sufferings of men and the designs of God --a tension which demands submission or revolt” (226).

Joji, Shakespeare and the Pandemic

“Thou art a boil, A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle, In my corrupted blood. (Shakespeare, 2.4.212-81).” This is an iconic remark made by Lear towards his ingrateful daughter Goneril in his tragedy, *King Lear*. Shakespeare has avoided the use of plague as a central motif in any of his plays, preferring to address it subtly through his dialogue. The use of the word ‘plague’, suggests the hatred Lear had on Goneril. In the making of *Joji*, Dileesh Pothan and Shyam Pushkaran follow a similar approach, wherein they made use of the pandemic as a medium or environment but not as the theme to narrate the story. This feature in some ways adhered to Shakespeare's thoughts on treating the plague in his writings. Scholars and Shakespearean theatre artists viewed this technique with great fascination.

Shakespearean research has not gone stand still during the Pandemic. Various departments on Shakespearean studies, film makers, writers, theatre companies to meme

creators have all researched on Shakespeare during COVID19 like in any other time. One of the major challenges is in establishing the relevance of Shakespearean works in such a hopeless time like the pandemic. The output of such research across the world pave the way for the adaptation of Shakespeare to myriad works of art with currency.

Dileesh Pothan's *Joji* is not the direct equivalent of Shakespeare's tragedy Macbeth. *Joji* resembles only the plot of the Macbeth, therefore it can be called as loose adaptation. The characterisation is influenced by the several major and minor traits of the significant characters in Macbeth. Pliability of Shakespearean works allow them to bring newness in their adaptations. Pothan effortlessly cut short many characters from Macbeth yet retains the essence of the story. He also adds a character like Father Kevin and this character infuses into the narration without derailing the central concept. The flexibility of Shakespearean adaptation lies in the scope of enlarging the vision without disturbing the main plot. The presence of Father Kevin in *Joji*, imparts more authenticity to the narration as the character pitches straight into the socio-religious milieu of Kottayam in Kerala.

Conclusion

Politics of narratives of *Joji* and *Aarkkariyam* are dichotomous in nature as they choose to express two versions of the pandemic. *Aarkkariyam* succeeds in documenting the pandemic situations by diving deep into the nuances of the features of the pandemic. The title *Aarkkariyam* which translates as 'who knows' is not followed with a question mark instead it is a statement which allows no further interpretations. It is declared as a statement of truth without probing into the origin or its evolution of what it stands for, thus it exists as an independent entity. The politics of *Aarkkariyam* is the predominant discourse existed during the pandemic which envisages all kinds of trauma instilled upon ordinary people that affected their everyday life. *Aarkkariyam* intends to discuss the socio-economic milieu of a middle-class family embodying various factors of the pandemic life. The film keeps visiting the economic downfall the government faces which in turn reflects in the hardships of the life of the ordinary people. Every time Roy, the businessman in the film, encounters a problem, the meaning of the title echoes. Thus, the ambiguity becomes the definite answer for the situation. The matter of enquiry is, who or what brings such a precision in the ambiguity of the situation. There was an attempt from the government apparatus to highlight the tragedies of

disease, so that many other political controversies could be conveniently sidelined. Though the pandemic was the elephant in the room, there were equally important issues going on. The sudden spread of super powerful metaphor helped the governments and MNCs to relax as people were only worried about the death. It would be unfair if people wouldn't think about the policies made and unmade by governments across globe during COVID 19 and its eventual effect on ordinary lives.

Unlike *Aarkkariyam*, *Joji* is an expression of dissent. *Joji* side-lined the impact of COVID 19 to the backdrop and foregrounded the maturation of a classic story line. The film has no intentions to magnify the relevance of the time by engaging in an ontological journey to find a 'deeper meaning' to the situation. As Slavoj Zizek opines, "The really difficult thing to accept is the fact that the ongoing epidemic is a result of natural contingency at its purest, that it just happened and hides no deeper meaning" (14). It never succumbed to the usual social responses during the time of a crisis instead its emphasis is on an individual. The political project of making a traumatic event in the history to an unforgettable reality forever, will always have vested interest and will be sponsored by state, capitalism and other apparatus of hierarchy. Documentations of such periods are mostly unfaithful attempts to falsify the history and these manipulated documents act as catalysts to legitimise political narratives. As Connerton rightly explains:

It is surely the case that control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power; so that, for example, the storage of present-day information technologies, and hence the organisation of collective memory through the use of data-processing machines, is not merely a technical matter but one directly bearing on legitimation, the question of the control and ownership of information being a crucial political issue. (2)

In *Joji* the title itself suggest that its about an individual and the pandemic was a time of individuation. People shut themselves into their own physical and psychological spaces. Fellow human beings, outsiders, and even neighbourhood started to incite terror and anxiety in individuals. Thus COVID-19 encouraged people to embrace their own company as there existed a threat in every other person and environment. (Schellinski). This phenomenon has more rootedness in the new normal or post pandemic situation than the mask and sanitizer era.

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