

INDIA'S INDIGENOUS *LEAR*: *IYOBINTE PUSTHAKAM*

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ABSTRACT

In his 2014 Malayalam-language film *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (*The Book of Job*), Amal Neerad combines this Biblical fable with *The Brothers Karamazov* and *King Lear* to illustrate generational tensions in a divided South Indian family on a colonial tea plantation. Patriarch Job perpetuates colonial evils, including anti-tribal pogroms and sandalwood smuggling. Here, Job disinherits his youngest son Alosy (a conflated Edmund+Cordelia figure) upon discovering his Communist sympathies. Through such Shakespearean dilemmas, Neerad's film raises ethical questions regarding caste, race, politics and environment. Ultimately, familial and societal transgressions reflect pivotal times of national division and transformation, during the era of India's colonisation, Partition and Independence.

KEYWORDS: India, Kerala, *King Lear*, Cinema, Amal Neerad.

UN REY LEAR INDIO: *IYOBINTE PUSTHAKAM*

RESUMEN

En su película de 2014 en Malayalam, *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (*El Libro de Job*), Amal Neerad combina esta fábula bíblica con *Los Hermanos Karamazov* y *El Rey Lear* para mostrar las tensiones generacionales en una familia dividida del sur de la India en una plantación colonial de té. El patriarca Job perpetúa los terrores coloniales, como las matanzas anti-tribales o el contrabando de sándalo. Aquí, Job deshereda a su hijo más pequeño, Alosy (una combinación de Edmund y Cordelia), al descubrir su simpatía por la ideología comunista. A través de dilemas Shakespearianos, la película de Neerad se pregunta cuestiones éticas sobre la casta, la raza, la política y el entorno. En definitiva, las transgresiones familiares y sociales reflejan periodos cruciales de división nacional y transformación durante la era de la colonización india, la Partición y la Independencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: India, Kerala, *Rey Lear*, cine, Amal Neerad.

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The 2014 Malayalam-language film *Iyobinte Pusthakam* [*The Book of Job*], directed by Amal Neerad, proclaims itself a mashup of an unlikely literary trio: The Biblical *Book of Job*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 1880 novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, and William Shakespeare's c1605 drama *King Lear*. Neerad's film centres on a family dispute between a father and his three sons over a colonial-era Munnar tea plantation in today's Kerala, India's southernmost state. This generational saga is visualized against the forested cliffs and hilly tea plantations of Idukki district. The undulating, serene green landscape provides an alternately ethereal and earthy background for Neerad's 1940's period film, set during the era of India's colonisation, Partition (1947) and Independence (post 1947). This essay examines how Neerad's film (hereafter termed '*Pusthakam*') uses Shakespearean scenes to highlight issues ranging from colonial-era exploitation and anxieties surrounding miscegenation to contemporary local topics of land rights, tribal community marginalization, and deforestation. Ultimately, *Pusthakam*'s familial and societal transgressions and its promise of redemption reflect the wider arc of contemporary pivotal national upheavals, division and transformation.

This essay focuses on *Pusthakam*'s relationship to *Lear*, among the three works to which its creative team attributes inspiration. I first locate the filmic-textual relationship in theoretical paradigms of appropriation and 'fraternity', turning next to a discussion of the plot's central Marxist egalitarian, anti-capitalist and environmentalist concerns. This essay then moves on to look at the intersection of issues of familial division and marriage with those of caste, race, gender and patriarchal control, analyzing *Pusthakam* in relation to other Indian Shakespeare adaptations. Finally, I examine the film's visualisations of verdant tribal forests threatened by deforestation and of its climactic scene of man versus nature, in my close reading of *Pusthakam*'s parallels between nature, family, and nation and its ultimate moral against endless human greed.

In *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, Neerad foregrounds his native culture and land in weaving in *Lear*'s themes of familial love, blindness, betrayal, and loss to pose ethical questions on sociopolitical issues: inequalities of caste and race, environmental degradation, and neocolonialism. While Shakespearean themes undergird pivotal moments during the tale, the film's *Lear* origins are alluded to directly only in the blurb on the back of its DVD case. Due to this lack of a more overt identification, Neerad's work is listed in the filmography of *Shakespearean and Indian Cinemas* as a film "referencing Shakespeare" (Trivedi and Chakravarti 332). While this essay discusses the film as an adaptation, it must be noted that it also could be considered further as an instance of *appropriating* Shakespeare, particularly if we take this term to connote "possession" (Jean Marsden 1, qtd. in Iyengar and Desmet 4). Neerad effectively possesses a colonial text to retell the story of India's colonisation, repossessing the nation through a Marxist perspective that is both past and contemporary to debate ethical questions.¹ *Pusthakam* thus could also be

¹ The Leverhulme Trust supported this research fully. Kerala remains the rare Indian state to democratically elect a Marxist government regularly, since the 1950s.



said to align with the paradigm proposed by Iyengar and Desmet, where “because appropriation carries strong overtones of agency, potentially for the appropriated as well as for the appropriator, it can convey political, cultural, and in our contention, ethical advocacy” (4). In discussing Neerad’s film, I also find useful Gitanjali Shahani and Brinda Charry’s proposed theoretical framework of “fraternity” between Indian Shakespeare cinemas and the text (167). They note that “Hindi cinema and Shakespeare quite simply stand in an easy fraternal relationship, marked by equality and reciprocity, with each other, each drawing upon the other’s merits and strengths to reach new audiences” (167). Here, however, Mollywood² gives little back to Shakespeare. Instead, much like *Lear*’s own fraternal struggles, Neerad’s *Iyobinte Pusthakam* possesses Shakespeare entirely, taking over and assimilating *Lear* for its own benefit.

With three works to use as intertext, Neerad weaves in only those threads that suit his theme. He alters *Lear*’s daughters to sons, befitting an era where Kerala’s Syrian Christian women were still fighting for equal land inheritance rights after the 1916 Travancore Christian Succession Act (a right eventually restored in a 1986 campaign spearheaded by Mary Roy). He further softens Shakespeare’s bleak ending by adding a redemptive arc from the Biblical *Book of Job*. In this moral tale of divine justice, Job is tested severely by God, but his piety eventually carries him through undeserved suffering with the loss of his friends, family, and possessions, and the resultant bitter depression. As in *Job* and *Lear*, in *Pusthakam*, both the father and the youngest child are brought to their lowest point before reconciling; here, however, each receives their just deserts. Aside from naming his Christian patriarch Job, Neerad adopts the other main characters’ names from *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s wrenching, final novelistic exploration of familial ties between father and sons. Biographer Joseph Frank records how *Karamazov*’s composition was inspired by the (Edgar-like) incident of a young man wrongly convicted of his father’s murder actually committed by his own brother, and how Dostoyevsky was preoccupied with the younger generation’s search for moral values and the failures of their “morally bankrupt” fathers to “impart any life-enhancing moral values to their sons” (707). These themes, interwoven with Job/*Lear*’s similar failures and his elder son’s transgressions, notably recur throughout Neerad’s period reimagining.

Neerad constructs familial moral failure and disintegration as a microcosm of the wider corruption and partition of the colonial nation, the family’s greedy, deadly squabbles mirrored in broader themes of societal unrest and revolution. If Dostoyevsky’s final novel was written and published amid the societal upheaval following the Russian Emancipation Reform of 1861 that abolished serfdom, an equally fraught sociopolitical context with local concerns past and present informs *Pusthakam*’s South Indian setting. Kerala is the rare Indian state with a Communist party regularly elected to power, ever since the 1950s saw the state’s formation from the Travancore, Cochin and Malabar territories and the democratic election of a

² Mollywood is the Malayalam cinema industry.



state Marxist government. Popular Marxist reforms included the promotion of universal literacy through free state education, and a land redistribution programme that eliminated large estates to provide the poor with property. From the outset, Neerad's film reflects Kerala's political leanings and history, deploying Shakespeare as a mouthpiece to amplify Marxist concerns.

The director further uses Shakespearean moral dilemmas to present his own ethical questions regarding ideas of ownership –terrestrial, physical, sexual, spiritual. Here, the retold fable of three sons and their father is framed by the narrated reminiscences of an elderly Communist leader, Comrade Varkey (T.G. Ravi). Varkey narrates the first part of the generational saga as flashback, recounting how native servant boy Iyob/Lear (Lal) is beloved by his British master Harrison, who ensures the boy gets an education. Unlike Lear, Iyob has experienced extreme poverty at the outset, and unlike Lear, there is no epiphany; his deprivation never renders him sympathetic to those less fortunate. After Harrison dies, a now grown Iyob demonstrates ingratitude befitting *Lear's* theme, when he forcibly evicts Harrison's tribal mistress and their baby daughter, Martha (Isha Sharvani) from their mansion. New master Iyob becomes a "brown sahib," or a local who behaves like the coloniser, and he perpetuates colonial inequities. The patriarch moves his own family into the mansion –his elder sons Dimitri (Chembad Vinod Jose) and Ivan (Jinu Joseph) are as evil as Goneril and Regan, while the youngest son Alosly (Fahadh Faasil) is the film's morally upright Cordelia-Edgar character. Quietly, Alosly becomes close to Martha when their mothers visit one another in secret, and their friendship grows until his mother dies, and soon young Alosly becomes estranged from his own family.

Unlike *Lear's* opening act with its fundamental scene of familial division, in *Pusthakam*, the central family splits several times. At the heart of their conflict lie issues of possession, land ownership and caste, conflated with issues of gender and race. Accordingly, one departure from its source stories comes when Neerad's film highlights what Poonam Trivedi terms an overlooked "local inflection of the caste differentiation" in Indian Shakespeares (*India's Shakespeare 23*). Kerala's Christian families (like Job's in the film) often trace their genealogy to converts from the lower castes of Kerala's Hindu society, where upper classes are stereotypically associated with fair upper-caste Aryans or Brahmins, while lower classes are aligned with darker complexions, and the "scheduled" castes–tribals, "untouchables" or Dalits. In Kerala, Brahmin priests still control temple sites and in some, women are disallowed free entry; before the universal Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936, lower-caste worshippers were warned that if they dared to cross a temple threshold, their eyeballs would explode. Nationwide, indigenous peoples and lower-caste citizens are frequently disadvantaged, bullied, and even murdered. One ethical concern Neerad's 2014 film raises is the ongoing land dispossession of Kerala's tribals; that year, 2014, saw months of tribal-led protests for the distribution of land promised to them ever since the 1950s government elimination of the feudal/serf landlord system and allotment of estates. As recently as 2019, a national plan to evict one million tribals from their traditional protected lands and forests was abandoned only after widespread protests. Tellingly, the violent incident that first causes Alosly



to flee is his brothers' horrific abuse and murder of a young low-caste servant girl, which the youngster witnesses. This act establishes the two elder siblings' cruelty at the outset, whereas that of Goneril and Regan is only hinted at in the beginning of *Lear*, by Cordelia's parting "I know you what you are / And like a sister am most loath to call / Your faults as they are named" (1.2.259-261). The torture incident also helps underline the film's preoccupation with the ethics of ownership and the abuse of power.

In addition to the film's focus on *Job's* Biblical themes of familial destruction versus repatriation, Neerad sets up Martha and Alosly as an Adam-and-Eve couple, who champion a return to nature and love each other against societal taboos. By the time the film's flashback is finished and cuts to the present day, Alosly is set up as a prodigal son figure, in keeping with the film's title. The motorbike-riding, cigar-smoking, suave naval officer returns to find his family's toxic dynamic unchanged. Dimitri and Ivan are trying to pressure their father Iyob into selling his land to a sandalwood smuggler. Meanwhile, Ivan lusts after Dimitri's two-timing, sensual wife Rahel/Edmund (Padmapriya). Furthermore, the family has ostracised Alosly's childhood tribal maid sweetheart, Martha, labelling the medicinal healer a witch.³ Martha and Alosly's resumed love affair is pure and sincere, and forms the counterpart to the toxic family corruption on multiple metaphorical levels. Closer to *Lear's* Edmund than Edgar, heroine Martha⁴ is an illegitimate heir and one that is also of mixed race and caste. This disparity in heritage causes Alosly's father to discourage their romance. Even if white women are often fetishized in Indian cinema, Martha's half-white illegitimacy makes her unsuitable to Iyob, as is the idea of his family's intermarriage with her tribal caste. Filmmaker Neerad treats the Martha character with unusual generosity; Priya Mathew and Rajesh James explain that "Malayalam cinema has always showcased a peculiar antipathy and disrespect for the lower-class Anglo-Indians who were supposedly born out of illegitimate relationships between Europeans and women belonging to the coastal areas of Kerala rather than upper class women" (32). Typically, the "Anglo-Indians of Kerala belong to the Latin Catholic sect which is considered to be of lower-caste ranking" (31). Conversely, Neerad's Marxist vision exalts Martha as a *Perdita* figure, an apparently lowborn shepherdess lass whose purer nature trumps both artificial societal stratification and patriarchal opposition, resulting in a successful union.

In centring a couple's transgressive love affair and setting it in opposition to patriarchal control, Neerad's film follows a tradition of other Indian films that rejig Shakespearean power structures to interweave gendered struggles for social and sexual equality and autonomy. In *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, despite the masculine title, women remain at the centre; bastardy and miscegenation are seen as a threat to established

³ The tribals of Kerala are renowned for their esoteric herbal medicinal cures, for ills from wounds to pox and asthma.

⁴ Martha, like the more obvious Alosly, Dmitri, and Ivan, likely takes her name from Dostoyevksy's character.



patriarchal power structures. This tone is set at the film's start, with Martha's tribal family's own forcible eviction introducing elements of casteist discrimination and land dispossession. Similarly, other filmic Indian Shakespeare adaptations displace racialised anxiety onto marriage and control of the female, where transgressions often occur through the conflict between Westernised or Western-facilitated love and more traditional, patriarchally arranged unions. Indian film adaptations often substitute various "otherings" for Shakespearean racial differences, or insert these to add complications. For example, the hero of Jayaraj's 1997 *Kaliyattam (Othello)* is a dancer from an untouchable caste who elopes unthinkably with the Brahmin village head's daughter. Similarly, Vishal Bhardwaj's 2006 *Omkara (Othello)* features a lower-caste hero who is the 'half-caste' result of an illicit servant-master union, and Bornila Chatterjee's 2014 *The Hungry (Titus Andronicus)* recasts Aaron the Moor as a lower-class servant entangled in an upstairs-downstairs affair with his millionaire mistress. The 1965 Merchant-Ivory film *Shakespeare Wallah* (literally, 'Shakespeare-fellow') highlights the transgressive love affair involving English actress Felicity Kendal, entangled in a scandalous offstage love triangle with a desi actor and a glamorous Bollywood film heroine; Aparna Sen's *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) features Anglo-Indian spinster and Shakespeare teacher Violet, who hosts an unmarried Indian couple during their illicit amours. In all of these cases, societal anxieties of class, race, and caste interfere and complicate these lovers' unions, rendering these tales bittersweet, unlike Neerad's triumphant cinematic retelling.

Ania Loomba's observation is relevant here, that patriarchal domination provided a model for establishing racial hierarchies and colonial domination (7). Alexa Joubin and Martin Orkin see race and gender as interconnected categories (201-202); India has its own hierarchy of gendered racism, as seen in the preference for 'fair' brides and the proliferation of fairness beauty creams and uniformly fair-complexioned pageant candidates. Colonial-era racism has mutated into a different poison, remaining interlinked with the Hindu caste system assigned at birth, and its illegal yet pervasive discrimination. As Patricia Akhimie terms it, caste and race intermingle in "a system of social differentiation" (2). Despite Independence and the dissolution of India's kingdoms, illegal hierarchies of caste persist, replacing those established by former royal and colonial masters.

In *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, Martha's tribal blood aligns her with the Indian Motherland, and the lovers' societal transgressions occur at a pivotal time of national and societal transformation with the country's Partition and Independence. The couple personify natural, physical, societal, and spiritual union, and their harmony is juxtaposed with the division caused by Job, who perpetuates colonial inequities by permitting anti-tribal persecution and deforestation of native tribal-owned lands. Martha's own disinheritance is notable for Kerala, with a tradition of matriliney; in a region which was never fully colonised, a family's name and land passed through the eldest female heir. Communist Alosky's partnership of free choice with Martha can be seen as a metaphor for the egalitarian movement in secular Kerala where men of all faiths lived in harmony, and her feminine autonomy represents a metaphor for the new freedom of India; their energies of love and union run counter to the forces of fracture, division and control posed by colonialism, Partition, and patriarchy.



Its focus on feminine autonomy may explain why Neerad's film attributes inspiration to *Lear* even while its characters are effectively gender-flipped, bearing the names of the Karamazov brothers rather than the Shakespearean sisters. In this, Neerad's film is unusual for modern-day Indian adaptations of *Lear*, which have largely outgrown the former cultural squeamishness of the taboo of portraying multiple disobedient daughters. Preti Taneja's creative rewriting of *Lear* in English prose novel form as *We That Are Young* (2017) resets the tragedy in modern-day Delhi, where young heroine Sita is murdered after refusing the patriarchal system of arranged marriage, to which her two older sisters have already conformed. Unsanctioned love also precipitates family disharmony in Sangeeta Dutta's cinematic *Lear* version *Life Goes On* (2009), set in a London-based diasporic Hindu family. Here, after their mother's death, her three daughters are left to convince their father that the family will not disintegrate further if he accepts what he perceives as their transgressions, such as youngest daughter Dia's choice of a Muslim partner.

Iyobinte Pusthakam also pointedly contrasts visuals of Martha's free-spirited liberation and the marital unhappiness of Rahel, Dmitri's house-bound wife. Where Martha is pictured in a fantasy interlude, sailing with Alosky or running free with a white horse, indoor shots of Rahel's caged pet songbird are arranged to give the viewer the impression that Rahel feels equally trapped in her marriage. Her sultry glances at Ivan over family meals suggest their eventual adulterous affair, which lead to fatal conflict between the older brothers and to her own suicide, a tragic conclusion evocative of *Lear*'s Regan-Edmund-Goneril love triangle and suggestive of the futility of self-division, and by implication, of colonial Partition.

Pusthakam's postcolonial themes and ethical concerns set it apart from most other filmic Shakespeares, just as its portrayal of a low-caste heroine goes against the grain of conventional Malayalam cinema. One wonders whether this betokens a trend of increasing articulation of local and/or global concerns, or if it is simply individual and incidental? Other Malayalam-language Shakespeare films, such as Jayaraj's trilogy⁵ or V.K. Prakash's 2012 *Karmayogi* (*Hamlet*, literally 'the sacrificer') are equally invested in emphasising moral messages against greed or jealousy. However, these films are set in mythological eras and seem unconcerned with modern-day neocolonial or environmental issues.

One recent regional filmic Shakespeare, Abhaya Simha's 2017 niche Tulu-language *Paddayi* (*The West*), articulates current environmental and ethical concerns while resetting *Macbeth* in the coastal South Indian village of Malpe, Karnataka. In Simha's version, capitalism drives overfishing and greed that conflict with the natural rhythms of the fishermen and the monsoon, precipitating widescale tragedy. Alternatively, while mainstream Hindi-language offerings tend to also be set within a recognisable past or present era, Shahani and Charry argue that these interpretations emphasise profit over message: "Bollywood Shakespeare seems less a political or

⁵ *Kaliyattam* (*Othello*, literally 'the play of god,' 1997), *Kannaki* (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2001) and *Veeram* (*Macbeth*, literally 'courage,' 2016).



moral project than a sharp player in the amoral, profit-driven global marketplace. Ethical concerns, then, might seem to be of minimal relevance to any examination of Shakespeare in Bollywood” (162). Where *Pusthakam* remains focused on the postcolonial transition and attendant concerns, Shahani and Charry posit that “Bollywood’s appropriation of Shakespeare has not been (in its narrowest sense) a postcolonial endeavor, aiming to “write back” to the empire through its usurpation of the colonial Ur-text. Rather, it simply popularized Shakespeare for a mass audience” (162). Neerad’s film is not “mass-market”; although it has English subtitles, it is not sold globally, is currently out of print, and is aimed only at its local state audience. Yet Kerala still boasts a population of 33 million, a ready-made mass audience for Neerad’s messages against colonialisation, capitalism, deforestation, and corruption.

In turning now to examine the second half of *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, I contextualise this discussion of its layering of international literatures within a discussion of lateral relationship metaphors, mainly those of fraternity (Shahani and Charry) and *masala* spice (Gil Harris), to better unpack “how Shakespeare can serve as both emblem of India’s colonial past and its ongoing project of national self-definition” (Huang and Rivlin 13). Shahani and Charry argue convincingly that the framework of “fraternal relationships” is “especially useful to understand Shakespeare adaptations in postindependence India as the nation renegotiates the terms of its relationship with the former colonial culture” (171). In situating cinematic Shakespeares within their metaphorical model of fraternity, they present a relevant dissection of Gulzar’s filmic 1982 Hindi *Angeer/Comedy of Errors*, which “places Shakespeare as an element in this network of intertextual relations rather than its source” (167).

They consider the bastard lineage of the film’s “Ashok brothers and Bahadur brothers” (Dromio and Antipholus equivalents) as one deriving from a “larger family tree” reminding them of the “brothers of Shakespeare’s play and Plautus’s before him [...], the Corsican brothers of Alexandre Dumas’s nineteenth-century French novella and the many theatrical and film adaptations it inspired. And finally, as Bollywood audiences, [...] *Amar Akbar Anthony*” (166). This mixing is reminiscent of *Pusthakam*’s narrative layering, and the latter film (1977) is particularly relevant to a discussion of Kerala, as its three brothers are “separated at birth, raised as Hindu, Christian, and Muslim, and reunited in adulthood” (Shahani and Charry 169). Unlike the rest of India, Neerad’s state of Kerala is broadly multireligious, with a population that is approximately 55% Hindu, 25% Muslim, and 20% Christian, besides its tribal and Jewish minorities, lineages further complicated by years of intermarriage with colonial spice traders. Mathew and James point out that *Iyobinte Pusthakam* “make[s] no mention of the surnames of the Anglo-Indian characters[.] However, in reality, the Anglo-Indian community of Kerala has divisions among them based on surnames, which suggest their line of descent – be it Portuguese, Dutch or English” (34). If Shahani and Charry believe that the Hindi film “is predicated on a certain erasure of religious and political tensions that the secular state had historically sought to repress” (169), conversely, Neerad’s film brings such socio-political tensions to the forefront, using Shakespeare to crystallize these into familiar scenes of familial and geographical division.



Neerad's assimilation and combination of *Lear*, *Job* and the *Brothers Karamazov* is arguably so successful because his film widens personal conflicts into a relatable fable of transgression and redemption, underlined by ethical and political concepts of freedom and fraternity. In pre-Independence India, Iyob is loyal to the British government. At first thrilled when his favourite youngest son returns all grown up, he is horrified when Aloshy is revealed to be a naval mutineer and rebel freedom fighter. In a confrontation that takes place in the front yard of the mansion, set at the midpoint of both the film and its trailer, and visualised in the physical and moral centre of Iyob's land-grab crime, their political and moral differences come to a head. Exclaiming: "Aloshy –nee *Communist* aano?" [Aloshy –are you a *Communist*?] (00:00:56), Iyob punches and disinherits his youngest son; with equanimity, Aloshy rides away on his motorcycle, a symbol of rebellious independence. In an ensuing scene, when Iyob bequeaths his land to family in the public sphere of his front yard, he is asked by one observer why he is dividing the land into halves rather than thirds. Like Shakespeare's wounded king at the start of *Lear*, Iyob responds grimly that his third child is dead to him. He is oblivious that his elder sons have in fact just ambushed Aloshy's motorcycle, speared its rider through, and tossed their brother off a cliff.

It is worth noting that if *Pusthakam*'s fight scenes are gratuitous, they are endemic to the *masala* fight-and-dance⁶ cinematic genre that sheds light on the form's popular reception. Shahani and Charry maintain that regarding India's popular filmic Shakespeares, Salman Rushdie's definition "most effectively captures its aesthetic conventions, as a kind of uniquely Indian 'Epico-Mythico-Tragico-Comico-Super-Sexy-High-Masala Art'" (148-149, qtd. in 162). Jonathan Gil Harris too argues for the use of "masala" in discussing Indian Shakespeare, using the local term as a metaphor for multiplicity and plurality against an authoritarian purity: "at the heart of masala [is], a more-than-oneness that I believe is crucial to resisting authoritarianism in all its forms" (12). He writes that in Shakespeare's own plays, "The promiscuity of influence [...] recalls the mixed inspirations for masala movies" (22). Thus, the masala film is Shakespearean in its multiplicity of inspirations, lineages, and themes. *Pusthakam* is definitely a *masala* movie, mingling several source tales, cultures, and concerns into its own distinctive recipe, a combination offering something for everyone.

Crucially, the *Lear*-esque pivotal scene of land division lies at the midpoint of Neerad's film, rather than at the start. One reason for this relocation may be the importance placed on the "nation-as-family trope" that Shahani and Charry mention in connection with India's cinematic Shakespeares (163). This trope "depicts the national unit as akin to the family unit, bound by enduring affective ties" and

⁶ Here, the musical number is a stock dream-sequence song unrelated to the plot –Aloshy romances Martha against a picturesque backdrop while a snow-white horse drifts by (an exotic animal, non-native to the tropical state; filming was delayed for a day when the horse escaped into the hills during the scene).



“acquires additional significance in the Indian context where [...] fulfilling one’s duty toward the family constitute[s] the fundamental ethical principle guiding an individual’s life” (163). *Pusthakam* widens the scope of this tenet and regards the planet as the family unit, warning us of the far-reaching and irrevocable consequences of going against the core tenets of familial duty and harmony.

By visualising its conflicts strikingly against a backdrop of verdant tribal lands and lush colonial tea plantations –cinematographer-director Neerad garnered an annual Kerala state award for best cinematography– *Pusthakam* further aligns nation with nature, acting as a parable of conservation through its message of championing tribal rights. Like *Lear*, his film conflates inner conflict with environmental conflict, while weaving in Biblical ideas of loss through greed. Unlike *Lear*, *Iyobinte Pusthakam* does not end in tragedy for all, offering a more *Job*-like redemption. Like Gloucester, Alosy survives his cliff fall (here, very real). His descent is broken by friendly thick forest growth, which saves his life, underlining the link between natural conservation and human survival. Poor Tom-like, he is nursed back to health by tribals and Martha hidden in their “low farms, / Poor pelting villages, sheep-cotes and mills” (*Lear* 2.2.183-184). When Alosy’s brothers seek his life, the tribals close ranks against those who have persecuted them by allowing and encouraging anti-tribal pogroms, and sacrifice their lives for his protection.

Job’s own indifference towards the tribals and their habitat is reflected in a tumultuous scene that replaces *Lear*’s storm, without offering its ensuing catharsis. Whereas Shakespeare’s *Lear* in the storm discovers solicitude for and kinship with its “poor naked wretches” with “houseless heads” (*Lear* 3.4.28, 30), *Pusthakam*’s *Iyob* faces down a rampaging wild forest elephant, its habitat shrunk through logging, in a manmade conflict. The episode brings Alosy closer to Martha, as they bond when he helps her escape the beast’s fury as it chases them up a tree –its tusks the “oak-cleaving thunderbolts” (*Lear* 3.2.5)– yet it also underscores the harm of environmental destruction through endless human greed. Domesticated elephants are ubiquitous in Kerala, where orphaned elephants raised at forest sanctuaries later go on to parade with pomp during local temple festivals, or to clear fallen trees from houses and unload construction logs from lorries. Occasionally, the local news reports that a male elephant in the heat of *musth* (hormonal excess) has escaped its handlers and run amok, resulting in tragedy if it encounters civilians during its regular fit of hormonal discomfort. It seems a perfectly logical choice for local director Neerad to visualize *Lear*’s climactic scene of man versus nature as an elephant stampede rather than a storm, which would hardly move a local audience jaded from the biannual monsoon. Such is the artistic license afforded –or appropriated– when filming Shakespeare. In the climax of *Pusthakam*’s Orwellian⁷ nature-versus-man-style encounter, as the maddened wild elephant faces down *Iyob*, he confronts and

⁷ George Orwell immortalised the unsavoury colonial-era practice in his essay “Shooting an Elephant.”



shoots it triumphantly, attempting to assert his dominance over nature but only exposing the real beast within his own self.

The elephant-shooting scene foreshadows the film's ultimate familial tragedy, continuing the link between environmental and familial violence, with scenes that play out across the family mansion and its natural surroundings. Conniving with smuggler Angoor Rawther to take over the plantation, Iyob's middle son first shoots his elder brother over Rahel (who later takes her own life), and then attempts his own father's life. Realizing his mistakes belatedly, Iyob flees and is reunited and reconciled with Alosy briefly, before multiple shootouts eliminate everyone but Alosy and Martha, leaving the young couple destined for a happy ending like that of Nahum Tate's *Restoration Lear*. When Alosy is arrested, Comrade Varkey comes to his rescue, and his narration concludes the film.

Remarkably, in *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, Biblical symbolism is seamlessly interwoven throughout with Shakespeare, Dostoyevksy, and legends of tribal magic into a perceptive retelling of the rise and fall of family pride and greed, visualized against the background of a colonial tea plantation. Neerad's ambitious film touches on issues of fatherly and filial sacrifice, loyalty and revolt, Marxism and colonialism, interracial and inter-caste union, man versus nature, and man versus the beast within. Somehow, Neerad deftly merges these in a cinematic symbiosis that reflects *Lear's* final message of harmony and mutuality: "When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down /And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live, /And pray, and sing, and tell old tales" (*Lear* 5.3.10-12). Beatrice Lei posits that "it is his perceived cultural difference from us that defines all our encounters with Shakespeare" (21). Yet in an era where capitalist India still exports colonial tea and where it is under increasing internal and international pressure to protect its indigenous cultures from Kerala's hill tribes to the Sentinelese, *Lear's* Biblical transgressions and transformations remain resonant.

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