

Journeying Through the Human Psyche: A Semiotic Shift as Portrayed in the movies *Manichithrathazhu* (1993) and *Seshippu* (2025)

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Abstract

*This study is an attempt to view the drastic shift in human psyche as visualised in the movies *Manichithrathazhu* (1993) and the recent movie *Seshippu* (2025), through a comparative semiotic analysis. This evolution of psychoanalytic representation in the Malayalam cinemas shows the human mind as an abode of ‘haunted space’ as portrayed in the classic movie *Manichithrathazhu* slowly shifting to an abode of ‘fragmented space’ as portrayed in the movie *Seshippu*. Through this study, an attempt is made to bring out the socio-cultural changes where human beings are isolated, disillusioned and possess a fragmented psyche. There is no ‘Doctor Sunny’ to ‘fix’ the psyche of ‘Ganga’ as seen in *Manichithrathazhu*; rather, the audience is left to ‘witness’ the complex emotional turmoil within the human mind that is fragmented and isolated, in *Seshippu*.*

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Through the years, Malayalam cinema has made a radical evolution in portraying the human psyche. Earlier, Malayalam movies picturised psycho-thrillers with real –like supernatural elements that was beyond description. The structured plots, the mansions, the surrounding people, all tote up to the creepy feelings that the story imparts. Gothic elements and a ‘haunted’ psyche adds to the ‘horror-emanating’ plotline; whereas, in recent movies the human beings are portrayed as isolated beings, whose seclusion and disillusionment creates a ‘fragmented’ psyche that develops an eerie feeling. This study is an attempt to bring out this drastic change by closely analysing the semiotic signs and symbols as shown in the movies *Manichithrathazhu* (1993) and *Seshippu* (2025). It is actually a well organised reflection of the modern human condition as a whole.

In *Manichithrathazhu* the ‘thekkini’ or the mansion itself is a symbol of horror as it is full of large spaces; there are a lot of creepy stories associated with it. The way the story of ‘Nagavalli’ is narrated to Ganga, who already had psychological disturbances, and the ‘forbidden’ closed area adds to the ‘otherness’ in Ganga. The background scores as well shows the transformation of Ganga, who is a Malayali woman into Nagavalli, a Tamil-speaking courtesan. The ornament box and gold jewellery in it, the jingling of anklets, all of these help to create an aura of the already lingering ‘madness’ in Ganga. Here, mind is like a haunted space that can be diagnosed and rectified by a specialist, here Dr. Sunny, who is rational, understanding and ultimately ‘cures’ the psychic chaos in Ganga. This rationale figure is inevitable in the case of classical movies. This is a representation of the embedded concept within the society, at that time, all the problems could be resolved by an authoritative figure only – doctors, priests, or family patriarchs, etc.

In recent movies, the change in the existence of human psyche is clearly visible. In movies like *Seshippu*, the protagonist does not have an identity that is in ‘excess’, as is in the case of Ganga, but rather, a ‘fragmented’ psyche or lacking an identity in totality. The psyche is not a haunted space in contemporary movies, but rather an isolated self. In other words, we can say that the shift is from surplucity to voidness. Here, the protagonist, who is a ‘ghost writer’, is a victim of fragmentation, isolation, and with a lack of identity unlike Ganga, who has a disturbed psyche, leading to multiple identities, the presence of a ‘thekkini’ and other

traditional backgrounds including a mythical story. In *Seshippu*, the narrator is a product of urbanisation and societal isolation, which was an aftermath of the digital boom.

The greatest difference can be observed in the fact that unlike Dr. Sunny in *Manichithrathazhu*, *Seshippu*, which is the reflection of the modern society lacks this ‘ever understanding’, sensible and courageous, authoritarian power. He is capable of deciphering the complexities of the human mind, its repressed and suppressed emotions, as in the case of Ganga, and ‘fix’ all the problems. He is a dominant authority that stands for tradition and family rules that places the powerful in the centre; whereas, in *Seshippu*, there is no Dr. Sunny to fix the fragmented psyche of the ‘ghost writer’, who is isolated and is the product of a disillusioned era governed by technology; the mere hand movements of the protagonist on the keyboard is the only evidence of his existence.

This evolution in cinematic representation mirrors significant socio-cultural changes in Kerala and beyond. The transition from joint family systems to nuclear households, from rural settings to urban environments, and from stable identities to fluid, digital selves has deeply influenced how individuals perceive themselves and their place in the world. In the earlier era, identity was largely shaped by community, tradition, and shared narratives. In contrast, the contemporary individual often experiences isolation, disillusionment, and a sense of fragmentation. The psyche, therefore, reflects these conditions—it is no longer anchored but scattered. Furthermore, the shift from “haunted space” to “fragmented space” also indicates a change in how suffering is understood. In *Manichithrathazhu*, suffering is dramatic, visible, and ultimately curable. It is something that can be externalized and confronted. In *Seshippu*, suffering is quiet, internal, and often invisible. It does not seek resolution; instead, it demands acknowledgment. This aligns with modern psychological discourse, which increasingly recognizes the complexity and ambiguity of mental health experiences. Not all conditions have clear diagnoses or cures, and not all struggles can be neatly resolved.

Another aspect that we have to keep in mind is the evolution of the concept of a ‘ghost’ in Malayalam movies. Nagavalli in *Manichithrathazhu* is a very emotional and tragic presence throughout the movie; while when we reach *Seshippu*, the ghost over there is the internal seclusion and torments that he goes through. In the earlier movies, the ghost or horror element was clearly evident. They had a very commanding external presence throughout the movies. But in the recent movies, the horror element is purely a lack or void created by the ‘absence’ of the self. This shift from the ‘presence’ of a ghost to the horror caused by the ‘absence’ of a ghostly presence is drastic and it causes an internal struggle not only in the minds of the audience, but also society at large. Earlier, the fear was of being possessed by something external; now, it is the fear of losing oneself entirely.

To be precise, one can say that Malayalam movies are not just portraying this evolution of invisible, or isolated psyche, but also mirrors the exact picture of how the society is evolving into nuclear units which was once a collective space.

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