

**DISCARD STUDIES AND THE POETICS OF LOSS IN SELECT
MALAYALAM CINEMA**



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of the requirement for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS in English
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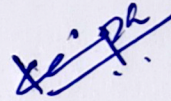
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Discard studies examine the implications of disposability in society. This project attempt to study exclusion of spaces and human beings in two Malayalam movies; - *Kumbalangi Nights* and *Ee Ma Yau*. The study centers on spatial narration, narrative techniques, and the representation of characters. In *Kumbalangi Nights*, the characters are marginalised as they live in a ramshackle house in an area where garbage is discarded and they lead an unconventional lifestyle. *Ee Ma Yau*, reminds us that societal structures can discard a person even in death. Chapter one, titled "The Psychogeography of Spaces," introduces the theoretical frameworks for analysing the films. Chapter two, titled "Politics of Space and Exclusion in *Kumbalangi Nights*," examines the movie's plot and characters and tracks their journey from being discarded by society to reclaiming their agentic selves. The third chapter, titled "Death and Waste in *Ee Ma Yau* recalls the transient nature of life and the influence of society. Thus, the project analyses the vulnerability of the margins that also provide them the power to live.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled "Discard Studies and the Poetics of Loss in Select Malayalam Cinema" is a record of bonafide work done by me under the supervision of Dr. Priya K. Nair, Associate Professor, Department of English, and that no part of the dissertation has been presented earlier for the award of any degree, diploma, or any other similar title of recognition.



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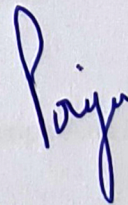
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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled "Discard Studies and the Poetics of Loss in Select Malayalam Cinema" is a record of bona fide work carried out by Kripa Ann Koshy under my supervision and guidance.



Dr. Priya K. Nair

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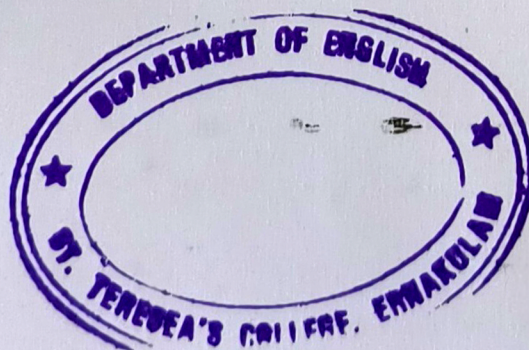
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Introduction

The notion of discarded space is connected to urban geography, environment studies, and critical theory, making it a crucial area for understanding the spatial framing of waste and exclusion. In the context of discard studies that analyses the material and symbolic concepts of waste, the idea of discarded space emerges as a lens for exploring urban degradation, environmental deterioration, and social decline. The production and abandonment of space is not just a physical act but a deeply ideological one. Spaces that are deemed non-productive are excluded by the capitalist society. This is evident from the abandoned villages and neglect of certain communities that serve as sites of dispossession and resistance. These spaces remain sites of alternative practices and cultural expressions.

Henri Lefebvre's theory of space, the spatial triad of the perceived, conceived, and lived space, offers a model for analysing how spaces are subjected to marginalisation, abandonment, and reimagination. Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "wasted lives" highlights the process through which individuals, communities, and spaces are rendered excess. By analysing the relationship between waste and space, the study reveals the hidden meanings of disposability and resilience in contemporary environments. The theoretical lens helps to study how systemic forces control certain populations and spaces as disposable. The project explores how contemporary society constructs and manages waste through analysis of the two films- *Kumbalangi Nights* and *Ee Ma Yau*.

There are individuals who are displaced, marginalised, or excluded from the dominant framework of society. The study uses the ideas proposed by Bauman to examine how human existence and spatial dialectics are intertwined in practices of

exclusion and discard. One of the central ideas proposed by discard studies is the politics of disposability that examines how people, objects, and environments are rendered obsolete or surplus under modern capitalist and colonial systems. Discard Studies also discusses the materiality of waste, which investigates the life cycles of discarded objects and their entanglement with global economies.

Kumbalangi Nights (2019) directed by Madhu C. Narayanan offers a vivid and strong critique of conventional norms, social hierarchies, and exclusion. The film's setting becomes a microcosm of larger social injustices. The brothers, who are considered outcasts, challenge the existing traditional notions of masculinity and societal expectations. The film's cinematography takes the film to a whole new level through the minute detailing of the scenes and characters. The backdrop of Kumbalangi is vital as it reflects the reality of the middle class. The film is known for its natural presentation, realistic narration, subtle description of relationships, and break from conventional tropes.

Examining the film through the perspective of discard studies reveals how certain areas, such as marginalized individuals, are deemed unproductive and consequently overlooked. The deteriorating house symbolizes the isolation experienced by the inhabitants and the state of their existence. They become targets of societal exclusion, which drives them deeper into the outskirts of society. By showcasing their challenges and defiance against societal exclusion, the film emphasizes the significance of recognizing and restoring neglected lives and places within the community.

The men in the film challenge the dominant ideas and perspectives put forward by the society. They are portrayed as failed and undergo unemployment,

mental health struggles, and familial breakdown. The film engages with the marginalisation of the protagonist due to lack of economic stability and strongly critiques the dominant toxic forms of masculinity. The project studies how the film challenges notions of worth, waste and belonging.

Ee Ma Yau (2018), directed by Lijo Jose Pelliserry, is a strong commentary on hierarchies and the politics of space. The film follows the story of a son who tries to organise a dignified funeral for his father at a coastal village only to face obstacles. The film focuses on social injustices. The funeral arrangements become entangled in power struggles, religious authority, and economic hardship. The dead person is degraded to a mere body, stripping his dignity away after death. He is denied even the privilege of a proper burial in the church cemetery. The film exposes how even in death, individuals can be treated as waste.

The film highlights the paradox of death in society. The village becomes a symbol of the temporary and disposable nature of human lives within broader socio-political structures. Death is treated as something that has to be managed and controlled rather than a purely emotional event. The film critiques the performative nature of grief and how death becomes a spectacle. The people who visit the house interfere in the matters, critiquing the events, thus showing how society treats death. The precarious position of the dead is presented wherein one has to fight for recognition even in death.

The project is divided into three chapters. The first chapter introduces the theoretical framework, including theories by Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, and other theorists. The second chapter analyses *Kumbalangi Nights* through the lens of discard studies, observing how the film portrays the discard of space and humans. The

individuals marked as waste later regain agency and reclaim their lives, proving that even margins can be transformed into new lives. The third chapter analyses how the discarded are ripped off justice and dignity even during death through the film *Ee Ma Yau*. The universal phenomenon of death turns into a spectacle, a performance where society exerts itself in every aspect, keeping them intact in the liminal space.

Chapter 1

The Psychogeography of Spaces

Discard Studies is a transdisciplinary field that analyses waste and its societal consequences. The field of discard collaborates with numerous other areas of study like anthropology, sociology, and ecocriticism. The roots of discard studies can be traced back to early works on waste and material culture. The increase of waste and its impact on the environment increased academic interest in waste, linking it to pollution and industrial overproduction. The 2000s witnessed the emergence of Discard Studies as an academic field influenced by environmental justice and ecology. The scholars examined waste infrastructure and connected them with colonialism and power that existed in the society. Robin Nagle coined the term “discard studies” and eventually found a blog that helps researchers from across the world to study, analyse, and publish thoughts and concepts of waste and wasting.

Discard can be defined as a process and a system that governs and determines who or what is expendable. As a process, discarding is the physical act of removal, but it turns into the mechanism of making things, places, and people unwanted. As a system, discard is employed in structures that maintain hierarchies, values, and exclusion. Discard can also be alluded to as an ideology- a way of thinking that covers exclusion, inclusion, and evaluation of spaces and beings. This way of thinking includes the marginalised and the outcasts who exist in the fringes of the society and are reduced to societal excesses.

Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky are the key figures in discard studies and talk about how the power structures harm marginalized communities. The theorists deconstruct the concept of waste and analyse discard through the lens of

“defamiliarization”. “The broad and systematic approach to how some materials, practices, regions, and people are valued and devalued, become disposable or dominant, is at the heart of discard studies” (Liboiron and Lepawsky 3). In the words of Lepawsky and Liboiron, scholars often have to unlearn and debunk their common knowledge and find concrete methods to defamiliarize their thinking and develop nuanced expertise.

Discard studies is interdisciplinary and expands into social sciences, culture studies, and film studies, recognising physical waste and social and political exclusion. Intensive research is now carried out on understanding how humans are discarded and how the act of discarding joins with power structures and narratives of discarding in society. Scholars like Zygmunt Bauman, Henri Lefebvre, and Edward Soja discuss human and spatial discard that resonates completely with the society. They speak about the production of waste not just in landfills but in labour, space, and culture.

A place is an expanse endowed with human experience and understanding. It is a regulated world of meaning. In her book *Space, Place and Gender*, Doreen Massey says that a place is a constellation of social relations. It is a setting to which humans are emotionally and culturally tied. A place can be defined as a site whose form, function, and meaning are contained within the constraints of closeness. The term place can be applied to a broad spectrum of locations, from microscopic sites to the macroscopic scale of a nation, planet, and beyond. A place has an identity, history and rootedness.

A non-place can be defined as an anthropological space of transience wherein human beings are anonymous and do not hold any significance. Hotel rooms, airports,

and shopping malls can be regarded as non-places. It is a crossroad of human relations where there is no connection. The perception of a space as a non-space is subjective and depends on the individual. Any individual can view any location as non-space. The individual is lonely, passive, and unknown. A non-place is an alienating and a temporary space.

(Social)space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather it subsumes things produced and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity - their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object. (Lefebvre 73)

Henri Lefebvre develops a 'concrete abstract' tripartite model of space. He argues that any socially produced historical space is constituted by a dialectically interwoven matrix of what he calls 'spatial practices', 'representations of space' and 'spaces of representation' each allied with a specific cognitive mode through which we represent it to ourselves respectively, the domains of the 'perceived', 'the conceived' and the 'lived'. The first of his three levels of space pertains to the most abstract processes of social production, reproduction, cohesion, and structuration. The third set of terms refers to the space of the embodied individual's cultural experience and the signs, images, forms, and symbols that constitute it. It is this level of space that has been mapped so thoroughly by phenomenology, whose emphasis on the individual's lived existential experience of space resonates with that found in this dimension of Lefebvre's work. The middle terms, those of the representations of space or the realm of the conceived, point towards what we more conventionally think

of as space proper, mediating between and drawing all three levels together into a coherent ensemble.

Lefebvre suggests that space is not a void waiting to be filled with content but is socially produced. Space is the product of a complex of factors and elements that prioritises how certain forms and structures of space can be linked to functions and how these impact the use of space in everyday life. Space is a material product and the means by and through which capitalism survives. Space is simultaneously a process involving social relations between people and between people and things in space. It is subject to the actions and operation of power in which the control, ownership, and regulation of space permits some actions to occur whilst limiting or prescribing others. One aspect that he traces in the history of space is the demise of the body.

Lefebvre's theory of production of space creates a framework to understand how certain spaces are left desolate by actively considering such spaces as waste through social, economic, and political processes. Certain locations are imagined as innately disposable and degraded. They are neglected and kept away from mainstream society, which eventually erases their presence. The people in such spaces lose agency, and a cycle of spatial discard continues for a long time. They are abandoned by power and government, leaving them desperate and hopeless. Lefebvre discusses the political nature of spatial exclusion. These spaces later gain the potential for resistance and alternative spatial practices. They can be reimagined beyond the stereotype of waste.

Edward Soja's concept of third space is found in his seminal work *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real and Imagined Places* published in

1996. “Third space is a purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings “(Soja 3). Third space is introduced as a realm that exists between and beyond physical and conceptual spaces. It is both a site of oppression and possibility wherein people resist and transform themselves. It is a site of betweenness, between development and abandonment, investment and neglect, construction and decay. They oscillate between states of use, disuse, and repurposing.

According to Edward Soja, the first and second spaces are two different, and possibly conflicting, spatial groupings where people interact physically and socially, such as home and school. Third spaces are the in-between, or hybrid, spaces, where the first and second spaces work together to generate a new third space. Soja says that space is to be reconceived as both a historical and a geographical-spatial project, a continuous dissolution and reorganization of the environments, including our bodies, that we all inhabit. Soja utilizes Lefebvre’s idea of “production of space” to demonstrate that space is created by society and often reflects repressive settings. He emphasizes that marginalized populations are pushed into discarded areas that dominant social forces have considered to be unproductive, unwanted, or disregarded. Soja describes how the urban landscape generates exopolis that constitute areas that are peripheral to social and economic life and function as urban waste.

By applying the concept of the third space to discard studies, we see how waste spaces are not fixed. They are ruled over by dominant orders, redefined and reinvented by practices, and imagined and reimagined through cultural and social narratives. They are real sites of transformation, liminal spaces that truly reveal the hidden struggles and possibilities of living. Discarded spaces help to maintain the urban landscapes, the marginalised are the real power units of the society.

The settings of the films *Kumbalangi Nights* and *Ee. Ma. Yau* offers the application of third space and waste landscape wherein the locations turn out to be central to the narrative. The films portray survival and social stigma, exclusion, and discarding. These liminal spaces exist in the periphery between life and abandonment. The films sketch the lived realities of the characters and spaces, their inner turmoil and ambiguity, more closely. Spaces and people become victims of societal agency but later regain power, building resistance against the oppressive forces.

Zygmunt Bauman is a world-renowned Polish sociologist and philosopher. Bauman's thoughts on Liquid Modernity offer insights into social and economic aspects of discard studies concerning exclusion and marginalisation. In *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman talks about the hold neoliberalism has, which has led to a situation where social interactions are unstable and unpredictable in society. Bauman's view of waste relates closely to spatial dynamics as it portrays how marginalised groups are limited to places where their visibility and importance are minimal.

Liquid modernity is a shift from fixed structures to recurrent changes, flexibility, and instability. Traditional social bonds are dismantled, and life becomes unpredictable and individualised. People transform into consumers rather than citizens, and those who cannot keep up with the pace of the world become "wasted". There are no permanent bonds, and they can be quickly changed with less effort. This fluidity extends to all dimensions of life, including personal relations, careers, and identities.

Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life" explores how certain individuals are stripped of their rights. He introduces the idea of "homo sacer" or "sacred man", one

who is alive but is not included in the society. His concept of “the state of exception” refers to times when the discarded individuals enter the exceptional phase. He refers to people who exist as human waste within global governance.

If it is the sovereign who, insofar as he decides on the state of exception, has the power to decide which life may be killed without commission of homicide, in the age of bio-politics this power becomes emancipated from the state of exception and transformed into the power to decide the point at which life ceases to be politically relevant. When life becomes the supreme political value, not only is the problem of life's non-value thereby posed, it is as if the ultimate ground of sovereign power were at stake in this decision. In modern bio-politics, sovereign is he who decides on the value or non-value of life as such. (Agamben 142)

Spaces of discard are sites where material and human waste accumulate, reinforcing the connection between social and environmental disposability. The revitalization of discarded spaces can improve living conditions and rebuilt neighbourhoods. Such spaces are examples of social stratification and neglect. The concept of discarded spaces appears in critical theory and is closely linked to themes of social disparity and class distinctions. They may also signify the breakdown of urban plannings and a challenge to long term sustainability. Discarded people inhabit and shape discarded spaces.

Spatial stigma refers to the idea that individuals who reside in discarded spaces inherit the social stigma associated with those spaces. Imogan Taylor in his work *Stigma: Machinery of Inequality*, discusses how stigma is not just personal but

tied to the power structures and living environment. Stigma operates through moral decay, institutional neglect, and social exclusion. Spatial stigma functions both as a material and a symbolic force. It defines their social worth, dignity, and future possibilities. It can also be considered as an extension of social control ensuring that those spaces remain trapped in the cycle of exclusion.

Chapter 2

Politics of Space and Exclusion in *Kumbalangi Nights*

Disposal of space can be defined as abandonment and marginalisation of some places that are conceived to be socially or economically undesirable. When the space is discarded, identity, history, and community is also lost as these places are no longer close to the society which makes the people feel disconnected and alienated. Discard studies in films reflects how disposability and exclusion are depicted in the society. Films can critique the practices of society through narrative tactics, visual metaphors and character development. They act as a critical prism through which relationship between social relations and economic inequality is examined.

Kumbalangi Nights (2019), directed by Madhu. C. Narayanan and written by Shyam Pushkaran is a critique of social exclusion and stigma in Kerala. Kumbalangi is a coastal village in Kerala that is rich in aquatic life and backwaters. The film stands completely in contrast with the beauty and grandeur of the space. The film follows the lives of four brothers who struggle with social and economic instability. The film exposes how different societal structures impose themselves on precarious individuals and push them to the fringes of society. The village of Kumbalangi is portrayed as a discarding and a reclaiming space similar to the internal psyche of the character.

Kumbalangi's abandoned location changes throughout the narrative, providing a nuanced remark on how places, like people, may be reclaimed, revitalized, and redefined. The film challenges the idea that places that are considered unworthy or expendable cannot become places of connection, healing, and belonging by using the deteriorating environment as a potent symbol of emotional and social abandonment.

Using this perspective, *Kumbalangi Nights* examines how abandoned or neglected physical areas can reflect larger societal and individual neglect and offer hope for healing and rebirth.

Using discard studies as a framework, this chapter examines how film represents discarded spaces, individuals, spatial marginalization, and failed masculinities. Theories from Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Zygmunt Bauman, Giorgio Agamben, and the concept of spatial stigma are employed to analyse the social hierarchy. *Kumbalangi Nights* reclaims discarded identities by challenging the traditional norms of society.

The first scene of *Kumbalangi Nights* portrays a group of children playing football on a school ground. It later focuses on Frankie, one of the central characters, who scores a goal and gets appreciated by others. The joy is soon replaced with unease when, on the next shot, his friends want to go to his house. Frankie does not agree with this idea and cancels the plan put forward by his friends. This change of attitude highlights his discomfort regarding his domestic space. The scene soon shifts to the main location of the film, the village of Kumbalangi.

The very next scene shows a boy drowning in the water. This dream seen by Frankie can represent the unresolved conflicts in his mind, a need for change, or even a helping hand. The next frame shows Frankie's house in a wide-angle camera shot. The house is incomplete, metaphorically and physically. The walls are broken, there is no door, and the camera zooms into the cracks of the wall, foreshadowing the broken relationships of the members of the house. Saji, the eldest of the four brothers, acts as the head of the family, and Bobby is portrayed as a jobless young lad. The food prepared by Frankie remains on the table until Bobby walks in. Later an unhealthy

fight happens between Saji and Bonny wherein Frankie interferes with “this house is hell, shit.” (*Kumbalangi Nights*, 00:12:37). Frankie is more mature than the others and closer to Bonnie who is mute. Frankie lives in a boarding school and Bonnie lives with his friends and does not visit the house often.

The house mirrors the social and economic precarity of its inhabitants. The characters are outsiders to the normal, society-accepted family structure. There are broken walls, damaged furniture, and the absence of a paternal or maternal figure. The zoom-in towards the picture of Mother Mary reveals the yearning for a female presence in the family. Analysing the scene with Lefebvre’s production of space, the house depicts the socially imposed status of the characters as discarded men. The house acts as the perceived space physically and the lived space for the characters. The house also symbolizes the brothers’ failure to be a part of a respectable society.

The spatial stigma on the characters is further proven when they converse with Shammi regarding the marriage of Bobby and Baby. Shammi dehumanizes Saji and Bobby by addressing their house as a “lodge” and their neighbourhood as “shit-land”. He compares their living condition to his own and critiques them for not having a proper income. One can notice the influence of society in Bobby’s next dialogue “Only the house is ours, the shit-land is of the public” (*Kumbalangi Nights*, 1:01:10). This incident portrays the characters as socially inferior affecting their self-worth and relationships.

The condition of the house again comes into context when Bobby addresses Saji and Bonnie regarding the women they brought to the house. “Good families have a culture” (*Kumbalangi Nights*, 1:34:36). Society shapes the ideas and notions of the character. They rely on approval from society rather than choosing their happiness

and necessities. The character thinks that the voice of society determines the culture and value of family. The house is later referred to as a “dumping yard” showing the perceived mentality of the characters. The characters consider themselves as ruined and unfit for social acceptance.

Edward Soja’s concept of “third space” can be seen in the houses of the films. Saji’s house gradually reclaims its relevance and Shammi’s ideological house loses its mask of perfection. Saji’s house portrays a comeback from exclusion and the portrayal of an alternative masculinity and community. They do not go with the norms of society, identify their true selves, and transform their spaces into happy and lively locations. Liquid Modernity can also be applied here to the concept of the house, its relevance is never fixed. It is fluid and changes with the course of the lives of the characters. The house of the Tamil man, Saji’s friend, stands as a total exception to the other locations of the film. The house has a positive aura, filled with flowers and butterflies showing positivity and hope.

Shyju Khalid’s cinematography is brilliant as he contrasts the calm and peaceful nature with the vandalised and mundane life of the characters. The lives of the brothers are similar to the stray kittens abandoned near the house. This scene can be connected with the idea of wasted lives proposed by Bauman. The familial connection is complex as Saji’s father married Bonnie’s mother and had Bobby and Frankie. She later adopted the path of spiritualism after her husband’s death. The brothers do not have a permanent income or a stable job. Bobby is ashamed of his skills in fishing, calling it a mean job. He is unable to work in the fish factory as he cannot follow the strict regulations of the same. Bobby’s fall in character can also be seen in the beginning when he asks his friend whether one will put up an entire tea shop just to have a single cup of tea which indicates that he need not marry the girl he

loved just because he wants to have fun. Bobby's character undergoes transformation towards the end as he turns out to be hard hard-working, married man who sees life more responsibly. He gets accepted by everyone and utilises his skills for his livelihood.

The precarity and helplessness of the character Saji can be seen when he emotionally breaks down after the death of his friend. He is pressured by the world around him, including his family. Though he is the head of the family, he does not have the agency to exercise his powers. Towards the second half of the film, Saji turns out to be strong, determined, and ready to transform his space and life into a better situation. He seeks help from others in times of despair rather than losing himself. The change of attitude can be seen when, in the final scenes of the film, Saji talks to Shammi, retorting his old dialogue that even forest dwellers can change and that he is experiencing peace in his life now. The family photograph taken during the wedding vividly portrays the revival of the family from the discarded scenario imposed by society.

Lack of communication is a leitmotif in the film. The brothers do not spend time together or sort out the problems between them. Unnecessary fights happen between the brothers throughout the film. Saji is unable to understand his idea of being a discarded individual. He is beaten with a paddle by Bonnie when he thrashes Frankie. He is unable to understand himself and this is clear when he requests Bobby to take him to a doctor. Saji defines what it means to be a man by embracing vulnerabilities. He initially has a broken, directionless masculinity. Later he breaks down, embracing emotions. Seeking help redefines his strength through healing and self-improvement. By taking responsibility for Murugan's widow, he turns out to be

nurturing which also turns out to be a feminine quality. He contrasts the character of Shammi and the dominant image of males.

In the first shot of the film, the camera zooms into a picture of Mother Mary. This can be seen as the absence of maternal love and the absence of females in the household. Towards the second half, when Murugan's wife Sathi enters the house with the child it resonates with the picture of Mother Mary. She starts to make the house feel like home. It indicates the beginning of changes in the hearts of every character. They turn out to be more responsible and begin to enjoy calmness at home. Change can also be seen when the glasses, which were dusty and useless in the beginning, were taken out for the guest, Nyla. Frankie feels happy when Nyla compliments that their house is beautiful.

Shammi's house represents dominance. Shammi's first appearance in the film portrays him as a traditional hero. Despite being clean-shaven, he owns a thick bushy moustache reflecting his attempt to embody a conventional masculine image. As he looks into the mirror, a critical moment unfolds as he removes a bindi, rejecting any form of association with femininity and mumbling about being a "complete man" like Raymond. Despite presenting himself as progressive, he subtly possesses toxic masculinity which becomes evident as the story unfolds. Shammi is not a regular villain; he has a limited understanding of life through his patriarchal lens. His dominating nature extends beyond family matters. he intimidates neighboring kids with their football in his land. All these instances reflect on ultra-masculine persona and a worldview shaped by layers of patriarchy.

In another scene, he asks his wife and her younger sister to avoid small talk in the kitchen and to share whatever they are talking about with him. He does not want

anything to happen in the house without his knowledge. In another notable scene he, his wife, and sister-in-law go for dinner at a relative's place. When the uncle draws a comparison between himself and Shammy as men who chose to live in his wife's house, Shammy humiliates him for living on the income of his wife who is working abroad, and for taking care of cooking and other house chores in her absence. He clarifies that he does not like the comparison as he has a job and is not living off his wife's income. Also, he does not approve of men being in the kitchen. He is also shown as doing moral policing when he barges into the Home Stay attached to their house because his African American female guest took her boyfriend Bonny to her room. He yells that it is "against our culture, this is not America" (*Kumbalangi Nights*, 1:25:20) and that he "will not let prostitution happen" (*Kumbalangi Nights*, 1:26:26). In the climax scene of the film, he is shown as physically overpowering and torturing the women of the family when he comes to know about the sister in law's plan to elope with Bobby. Shammy, who acts almost as if he is psychotic, pronounces that "Shammy is a hero" (*Kumbalangi Nights*, 2:05:19). Even at midnight he is well groomed and wears a formal outfit inside his house.

The dining table at his house acts as a replica of the dominant power structures of the society that suppress minorities. Shammi marries Simi whose father passed away a long time ago. He is the only male member of the family and with time he acquires the agency to overpower the women enforcing patriarchal control. This is the application level of Lefebvre's idea of space and power. At the beginning of the film when the dining table is shown, Shammi is at the side, along with his wife, observing Baby. In a later scene, he strategically positions himself as the head of the family predominantly run by three females showcasing his deep-seated insecurities and struggles for dominance. He sits at the centre of the table, with the women on the side

and his late father-in-law's photo behind him like he is replacing him as the head of the family.

The fear of the dominant by the subordinate is minutely portrayed when in a later scene, Simi's mother adjusts her position on the sofa while Shammi passes by. His space and appearance contradict Saji's lifestyle. He doesn't value the brothers' and considers them as waste, discarded ones who do not belong to the mainstream of society. They exist as "bare lives" in the initial stages but later restore their value. The concept of "childing" can also be seen whenever he addresses his wife as "mole" and interferes in her life. The collapse of hegemonic masculinity and societal standards is seen with the fallen Shammi. He has a failed performance and a fragile personality. Shammi is perfect but hollow. He represents patriarchal ideals and perfection but turns out to be toxic and disposable.

The women in the film act as safe spaces. They support each other and sustain their life in a more mature way than the male figures. Baby and Simi face oppression from the patriarchal head but later regain their agency and stand together. This is portrayed in the final scene when the sisters hold hands together. Baby also acts like a mother to Bobby; this is evident in the scene when Bobby breaks down in front of Baby. Sathi does not give up on her life after her husband's death. She does not file a complaint against Saji either for the death of her husband. She is accepted to Saji's house, and she initiates changes in the discarded space. Nylah the tourist, plays her part in being a part of the family and choosing her love. She finds the discarded space beautiful than astray. The portrayal of the mother challenges the traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The film celebrates womanhood, not by pitching men against women and women emerging victorious, but by the women bringing direction, depth,

and meaning in male-female relationships and forging gender equality at home and elsewhere.

Reclaiming of the discarded space is seen towards the end of the film as in alternative masculinity and spatial resistance. The brothers rebuild their relationship with each other and their home. They are no longer uncertain about their aim in life and livelihood. Towards the end, the brothers stick together and reinvent their house as a “home” for themselves. They are an alternative to the proposed idea of patriarchy, creating their own masculine identity based on care and community. They build themselves from scratch, moulding and remoulding themselves till they attain stability and peace in life. They open themselves to change and criticism, learn from their mistakes, and rebuild themselves.

Water plays a crucial role in the film as the primary setting is known for its backwaters that attract tourists from all over the world. The brothers’ house is in the social space generally considered discarded by society. The backwaters function as a site where the marginalised live, work, and struggle. The resorts and homestays are well maintained, but the inhabitants of the area lack the basic standard of living. They are pushed to the fringes and are almost invisible. They are labelled as waste and of no benefit to society. Water depicts fluidity and change. It is vital that the brothers who were labelled misfits undergo self-definition and redefines themselves. Saji’s breakdown and emotional acceptance can be seen as a form of catharsis where water acts as a cleansing agent and offers renewal. The final scene of the newly found home also represents the discard of rigid patriarchal norms and acceptance of an inclusive, fluid identity.

The characters who were voiceless in the beginning defy their status as wasted lives and find value in brotherhood and emotional support. Their home is no longer a symbol of failure but a site of renewal, challenging the logic of discard. The brothers eventually reject social stigma, creating a new form of belonging. The film suggests that the discarded can reclaim their space and identity through solidarity. The film critiques spatial and social exclusion, showing how discarded people and places are stigmatised.

Chapter 3

Death and Waste in *Ee Ma Yau*

Ee Ma Yau (2018), directed by Lijo Jose Pelliserry, is a film deeply rooted in themes of death, decay, and exclusion. Set against the backdrop of Chellanam, a coastal fishing village, the film tells the story of discarded lives and people. The film revolves around the events that unfold after the sudden death of Vavachan Mesthiri. The film discusses how society intervenes in life, turning the entire world upside down. It is the society that plays the role of the antagonist, crossing its limits and affecting the minds of the characters. With the unrelenting portrayal of funeral politics and religious hypocrisy, the film critiques the unfair treatment of the lower strata of the society. The film also uses the colloquial tone and dialect of the people making the film more connected with reality.

Dignity in death is a major theme in the film. It is deeply shaped by social, economic, and political factors. In the film, the graveyard turns into a space of struggle where basic justice and consideration are denied. Even though death is a universal human experience, people are not treated equally. Some people have elaborate funerals, while others are forgotten and erased from history. Undignified cremations wait for the marginalised where their value is lost.

Being considered a discard in society pushes one to the periphery of the society, cutting them off from any sort of progress. After the unexpected death of Vavachan, the family moves to a state where they are beyond the boundaries of the marginalised. The community, which should stand together splits up and spreads rumours regarding the death, creating confusion and chaos. The coastal village, on the whole, is a replica of the marginalised community. Vavachan's house becomes

marginalised within the community. They are unable to find a voice for themselves, eventually losing control.

Utilising discarded studies as a framework, this chapter will analyse how *Ee Ma Yau* depicts the discarded individuals, spaces, and forces of the society. Concepts of place, non-place, perception of space, bare lives and wasted lives will be used to analyse abandonment, death and power structures of the film. Discard manifests itself as a form of dispossession and abandonment in the film. The spatial exclusion reflects on the social hierarchies where access to meaningful spaces is only through dominant power structures. Death does not mean the end of life but the continuation of marginalisation; proper burial and space at a graveyard turns to privilege rather than a given.

The title of *Ee Ma Yau* is an alternative for RIP, or Rest in Peace in English. It is an acronym for 'EeshoMariyamYouseppe' or Jesus Mary Joseph. In certain Christian communities of Kerala, these words are written on the top of funeral cards that are used to inform people of a person's death. It is also a prayer whispered into the ears of people on their deathbeds in some Christian communities. The opening scene of the film is a grand funeral procession along the seashore. The music in the opening scene creates a sense of unrest and tension, overshadowing the events of the film. The theme of death lingers throughout the film, both directly and indirectly. The mundane life of the characters is introduced further, showcasing their discarded lives and practices. Pelliserry gives more importance to the setting and space rather than the actual characters. Vavachan reaches home after a long travel and waits for his son Eeshi to return. Eeshi talks about how he will give a grand funeral to his dad according to his wish. The situation of the house is calm until Vavachan falls and dies.

Eeshi is stuck and does not know how to process the information about his father's death.

The film provides images foreshadowing death. When Vavachan's daughter tells him about the reconstruction of the church altar, he replies that "once turned old, even humans should not be spared" (*Ee Ma Yau*, 00:13:26). In the next scene, he sees the angel of death before he collapses. Vavachan hands over a stack of money and tells his son that he needs a grand funeral. The desperate wish of the old man shows his intensive need to be accepted as a part of society. He wants the entire village to remember him for his death.

Death becomes the ultimate moment of discard in the film. Vavachan's corpse turns into an inconvenience after a point, the dead becomes a burden for the living ones. The sudden death leaves Eeshi so helpless that it even affects his way of thinking and executing the needful for the deceased. The people who gather at Vavachan's house start to spread stories regarding the death instead of consoling the family. Some even frame Eeshi as the murderer of his father. Upon viewing the scene with Bauman's idea of wasted lives, the poor and the dead are discarded and devoid of respect even in death. The approach initiated by the society questions the existence of the living and the dead.

The nurse and the priest are portrayed as power structures that worsen the condition of those less in power. The nurse reports the death as unusual and even does her duty with less interest. She approaches the house with the conceived notion that Vavachan was killed. The conflict with the church is mentioned from the very beginning, from the first sequence when Nisa says that the priest is not on good terms as Vavachan does not go to church often. The intervention of the church brings to

reality the thoughts of bare life proposed by Agamben, wherein death exposes how the institution controls dignity. Vavachan is denied the basic right of proper burial in the church graveyard. This incident also talks about the untold division and brutal reality in religion. During the final shots, Eeshi loses his patience and engages in a fight with the priest, which eventually infuriates him, and he denies Vavachan's burial in the church.

Eeshi and Ayyappan made arrangements for the funeral. Economic disparity also exists as Eeshi pledges his wife's gold to arrange money for the funeral. The "death fund" also talks about the financial crisis the family endures. Eeshi is depressed as he could not fulfil his father's last wish for a grand funeral. None of them offer help rather all of them wait for a chance to criticise the arrangements. There is no consideration or respect for the body either from society or religion. Death never changes anything but opens the way for more exploitation from society. Eeshi tries hard to set everything better, but his liminal space hinders his actions and crushes him.

The villagers interfere throughout the narrative. In the first scene, Vavachan engages in a fight when another person talks ill of his daughter. The villagers fuel the already existing confusion, creating chaos at the funeral. They misinterpret the incidents with the priest, the nurse, and even other villagers. They do not seem to help, though they pretend to join the family in mourning. Nissa's boyfriend tries to take advantage of her when she seeks consolation. They gossip about the living and the dead, first privately and, towards the end, publicly. By denying the poor a dignified farewell, the film exposes the hypocrisy of religious and social institutions. Vavachan's body is seen as an obstacle rather than a person deserving a proper burial.

According to Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life, the state and institutions control the right to a dignified existence even in death. Althusser's concept of the Ideological State Apparatus can also be mentioned as it functions by shaping the individuals' beliefs and behaviours to maintain the dominant ideology. The church's role in the film highlights how religious institution maintains control over people. The priest's refusal to conduct the burial without fulfilling formalities shows how ideologies align with bureaucratic control. Vavachan's status shifts from a social being to bare life, a corpse that lacks agency. The struggles Eeshi faces to arrange the burial portrays how even the living can be pushed to a bare life status. The absurdity of the burial reflects the concept of the state of exception, where laws are not equal for everyone.

The coastal village is portrayed as chaotic, neglected, and poverty-stricken, reassuring its status as a discarded space. The abandoned boats, the sea turning dry, and the financial hardships reveal the difficulties faced by the people in the discarded society. On applying the triadic model proposed by Lefebvre on spatiality, the village acts as a perceived space of everyday interactions and exchange. The church, local homes, graveyard, and funeral arrangements show how the village acts as a socially structured space following traditional norms. The church and police control and shape space through authority and signifies how space is governed by power structures. The denial of burial reveals how planned spaces override social and emotional needs. The burial site turns into a sacred symbolic space for Eeshi and the villagers that is the perceived space. The problems that arise during the funeral deconstruct the meaning of the site from sacred space to a space of struggle and humiliation. The sea is a recurrent view in the film, showing it as an open, unrestricted space out of institutional control. The funeral becomes a social performance, especially when

people from Pattani Island arrive claiming to be Vavachan's wife and son. This final incident triggers Eeshi and throws him into a frenzy, making the scene more chaotic and destructive.

Though fishing is the major livelihood of the village, the people do not have money to live a dignified life. The broken houses, flooded streets, and lack of resources suggest that both land and people are abandoned by the state. The long shots of the village encapsulate the deterioration due to lack of resources. The rain-flooded pathways and the houses reflect the neglect by the authorities. This can be further seen when the officials celebrate a retirement function rather than solving the issues at Vavachan's house. The plea by Ayyappan shows the breakdown of the discarded individual who is tired of the forceful implications of society. The coffin becomes a major icon in the narrative. It becomes a contested space explaining class-based exclusion. The people are shocked when the coffin arrives, exclaiming that it is expensive beyond their limits. People gather around arrange the coffin. When it is broken, the tone of the people who had earlier admired it changes. They strongly critique the unwanted expense and create commotion in the house of the deceased. The coffin can be a symbol of Edward Soja's third space. initially a symbol of honour is degraded through neglect, showcasing how poor are treated in death.

Eeshi struggles to prove his worth as a man and his duties as a son in a discarded community. He is unable to grieve the death of his father as many misconceptions revolve around the death and burial. This reflects Bauman's wasted lives where the lower classes must constantly struggle to justify their right to dignity even in mourning. The religious and social issues that are linked with death eventually lose Vavachan's rights to be buried in the church graveyard. He is buried in front of his house by his son, who loses his mind to the rules and problems imposed by the

society. Eeshi does not express his grief over his father's death, which gives another reason for the people to accuse him. He reacts violently, drags the women inside the house, locks them, digs a grave for his father, and finally, buries him.

The women in the film do not hold much agency in the film. This is evident when the women cries "who would help them and protect them again". They are mere audiences to the happenings at the house. In the opening scene Pennamma, wife of Vavachan Mesthiri complains about his absence at home. Eeshi's wife Sabeth discusses about the medicine that needs to be mixed with food in order to stop their alcohol consumption. Nissi's boyfriend tries to take advantage of her when she approaches him for consolation. Eeshi demeans the woman who claims to be Vavachan's wife. He uses obscene language and addresses her as a prostitute. Eeshi takes over the complete control of the situation by locking the women inside the house. The women are portrayed as completely dependent on men. They do not have the voice to take actions or control the situation.

The death of Vavchan Mesthiri turns out to be more of a spectacle than a personal moment of grief. The priest, the villagers, and the local authorities intervene and complicate the procedures. The surreal nature of the events critiques how social hierarchies extend even to death, determining who gets buried with dignity. Funeral industries commodify death, making it into a transaction. The society celebrates the faults of the deceased and waits for an opportunity to demean them.

Conclusion

The perception of discarded space, explored through the theoretical lens of Henri Lefebvre, Zygmund Bauman, and discard studies, discloses the deep entanglement between urbanisation, waste, and social exclusion. Spaces marked obsolete or unproductive by capitalist frameworks are not only abandoned but also actively produced as sites of marginalisation. This research has explained that while initially signifying neglect and disposability, discarded spaces possess latent possibilities for alternative forms of social organisation and resistance. The processes of abandonment and reclamation should be, therefore, understood as inertly political acts that shape life and environmental justice.

Lefebvre's spatial triad has provided an insightful framework for understanding the layered dimensions of discarded space. The differences between perceived, conceived, and lived spaces help to understand how urban environments are shaped by both top-down planning and bottom-up practices. Bauman's theory of wasted lives has focussed on the human dimension of spatial exclusion, which connects the fate of marginalised people to the structural logic of the production of waste. Discard studies have further deepened this analysis by showing how waste acts as both a material and a symbolic force in urban landscapes, reinforcing hierarchies of value and disposability.

This research has highlighted how discarded spaces can be reclaimed through acts of resistance, creativity, and survival. These places challenge the dominant narratives through ecological restoration and artistic interventions. The reclamation of waste spaces by marginalised communities interrupts capitalist spatial logic and reasserts the agency of those designated disposable. This dynamic underscore the

inevitability of rethinking urban planning and social justice frameworks to include more open and sustainable approaches to space-making.

Looking forward, the study of discarded space opens new platforms for research into climate change and alternative urbanism. As environmental deterioration and economic instability keep on producing new forms of spatial abandonment, it becomes increasingly urgent to examine how discarded space can be transformed. Future research might explore how community initiatives and policy interventions can reimagine waste spaces as valuable commons rather than sites of exclusion.

Kumbalangi Nights follows the journey of four brothers from being discarded to regaining their momentum in life. The film shows the power of familial bonds that family isn't just about blood relations but about the bonds we nurture and cherish. It tells us that empowerment arises from challenging oppressive norms and standing up for one's rights. Healing takes place when we open ourselves, our hearts and connect deeply with others. The relationships in the film remind us that love is not completely about perfection but accepting each other completely including their flaws. The film explores the balance between masculinity and femininity in the characters and their quest towards self-acceptance.

Ee Ma Yau is a heartrending satire on human ego, mortality, and the absurdity of our societal structures surrounding death. The film ends in chaos, reflecting the unpredictability of life and the rituals surrounding death. Eeshi's hopeless attempts to honor his father Vavachan's final wish for a grand funeral are greeted with obstacles, from religious governance to petty village politics. The funeral, despite all efforts,

turns into a tragicomic disaster, revealing the frailty of human dignity in front of social and institutional constraints.

Kumbalangi Nights and *Ee Ma Yau* depict discarded spaces and individuals through different lenses. *Kumbalangi Nights* focuses on family, masculinity, and healing, while *Ee Ma Yau* focusses on death, bureaucracy, and politics of discard, revealing institutional failure. The house of the brothers is shaped by social stigma associated with failure and dysfunction. The coastal village is a forgotten space abandoned by religious and governmental institutions. Unlike the house in *Kumbalangi Nights* the village does not transform instead remains a site of chaos and exclusion. Both films introduce neglected spaces and moments of rejection like Shammi mocking the house of Saji and Bonny and the priest denying Vavachan's funeral.

The character of Shammi embodies toxic masculinity enforcing rigid structures to failed men while Eeshi in *Ee Ma Yau* wants to be a responsible son but institutions make him powerless. Shammi reinforces discard while Eeshi tries and fails to resist it. Both films show discard as a structural system leaving individuals and places devalued, abandoned, and stigmatised.

Recognizing waste as a space of power and resistance carries significant consequences for how societies perceive value, consumption, and human dignity. As worldwide crises—spanning from climate change to economic instability—escalate, the knowledge provided by Discard Studies becomes more essential in reconceptualizing waste not as a final stage but as an opportunity for intervention. By thoughtfully examining the systems that generate waste and disposability, both scholars and activists can strive for more just and sustainable futures.

Ultimately, this research argues that discarded spaces are not simply passive remnants of economic decline but active terrains of struggle and transformation. By analysing the dynamics of spatial exclusion and resistance, we may work toward more impartial and equitable urban features. The study of discarded space is not only about recognizing neglect but also about envisioning new possibilities for reclaiming space, redefining waste, and reshaping the city itself.

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