VOLUME 5 I SPECIAL ISSUE I ISSUE 2 I JULY 2026

ISSN (Online) : 2581-6519
ISSN (Print) : 2582-130x

TKM Arts College

International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research

A Peer-Reviewed, Biannual research journal

ONLINE

OPEN ACCESS

- Advanced Knowledge
- Inspiring Innovation
- Connecting Disciplines

tkmjournal@gmail.com, tijmr@tkmcas.ac.in

www.tijmr.org

Volume 5, Special Issue, Issue 2 July 2026

ISSN (Online) : 2581-6519
ISSN (Print) : 2582-130x

TKM Arts College

International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research

www.tijmr.org

TKM College of Arts & Science

Re-accredited by NAAC with **"A++"** Grade

TKMC P.O., Kollam, Karicode, Kerala, India. Pin - 691 005.

EDITORIAL BOARD

TKM Arts College International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (TIJMR)
www.tijmr.org

TIJMR is a bi-annual journal for multidisciplinary research published by TKM College of Arts and Science, Kerala, India. The journal publishes peer reviewed original research papers in Science, Humanities, Management and Literature. TIJMR also publishes special issues focusing on advances in specific areas and proceedings of select high quality conferences. All articles, opinions and commentaries, letters and book reviews published in TIJMR are the individual views of the authors and not the official points of view of the publisher.

Subscription

1. Annual subscription rate is ₹ 1000.00, Two years : ₹ 2000.00
2. The Demand Draft may please be drawn in favour of *The Principal, TKM College of Arts & Science* payable at *Karicode, Kollam*
3. Following details may be used for NEFT/RTGS

   Federal Bank
   SS Building, Sarathy Junction,
   Karicode, Peroor, Kollam, Kerala 691005
   A/C No : 25430200001956
   IFSC Code : FDRL0002543
   Account Name : TIJMR, TKM ARTS COLLEGE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH
   Branch Code : 2543

4. The supply will commence on receipt of the subscription amount in advance
5. All correspondence regarding subscription should be addressed to:

   The Editor,
   TIJMR,
   TKM College of Arts and Science,
   TKMC PO, Karicode, Kollam – 691005.
   E-mail: tkmjournal@gmail.com / tijmr@tkmcas.ac.in

Contents

Contents lists available at www.tijmr.org

TKM Arts College
International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research
(TIJMR) ISSN (Online) : 2581-6519 / ISSN (Print) : 2582-130x

journal homepage – https://tijmr.org/index.php/journal

From Heroic Symbol to Existential Absurdity: The Transformation of the idea of death in Algerian literature written in French

Ezzine Abdelhak
Ensb abdelhak.ezzine@ensb.dz
Human Sciences Research Unit
Philosophical Social and Humanistic Studies, University of Oran
Email:ezzine.abdelhak@univ-oran2.dz

ABSTRACT

Literary themes are numerous, and death occupies a central place. This theme occupies a significant part of Algerian literature, renowned for its richness, whether written in Arabic or French. In this article, we attempt to explore the concept of death in Algerian literary works in French through a descriptive study of the most important works that use the symbolism of death in literature. The study demonstrates that the meaning of death evolved significantly, transitioning from a collective, heroic symbol of resistance during the colonial era to a representation of individual and collective existential trauma and political critique following independence, particularly during the 'Black Decade' of the 1990.

Key words: *Algeria, Death, French, literature, language.*

1. Introduction

Death is a central and recurring theme in Algerian literature written in French, reflecting the country's complex historical, political, and cultural realities. Emerging during and after the colonial period, Algerian Francophone literature has often portrayed death not merely as a personal or biological event, but as a collective experience shaped by war, resistance, exile, and struggles of identity.

Many Algerian writers, such as Kateb Yacine, Mouloud Feraoun, Assia Djebar, and Mohammed Dib, have used the theme of death to explore the trauma of colonization, the sacrifices of the liberation movement, and thesocial transformations that followed independence. Through symbolic representations, poetic language, and narrative innovation, these authors depict death as both a site of memory and a space for cultural resistance.

Examining how death is represented in this body of literature offers valuable insights into Algeria's literary identity and its dialogue with history, memory, and language.

2. Stages of the Idea of Death in Algerian Literature

French colonialism played a major role in the development of the novel in Algeria and had a direct impact on the delayed emergence ofthe novel written in Arabic, as the French language spread throughout Algerian society.

As Ben Haddouga states, Arabic was a forbidden language, and those who spoke it openly were subject to prosecution. For Jelena, Arabic was a life or death tragedy.

This delay in the emergence of the novel written in Arabic was one of the effects of French colonialism, which led Malek Haddad to cry out in 1961: "The French language is my exile." He had no choice but to either adopt it or abandon writing altogether.

The 1950s witnessed the birth of the Algerian novel written in French, and everything written before that period can be considered an early stage that had not yet reached artistic or intellectual maturity. Among the novels published between 1926 and 1948, the number was very small-no more than seven. These include *Maryam Among the Palm Trees* (1934) by Mohamed Ould Sheikh; *An Algerian Boy* (1941) by Rabah Zanati; and *An Algerian Girl* (1948) by Jamila Dabbash. The novel *Al-Alj: The Prisoner of the Land of Barbarians* (1929) by Shukri Khoja remains one of the most important works of that early period.

The central question that intrigued writers of this period was: How could an Algerian become French? Despite the contradiction created by colonial occupation, how could one remain an Arab Muslim while being expected to assimilate into French identity?

As for the novels of the 1950s, they sought to move closer to Algerian society and to express its social and political conditions. The publication of Mohamed Dib's novel *The Big House* in 1952 constituted a decisive turning point in the development of Algerian fiction written in the French language, particularly in terms of content. This trend was further confirmed in the writer's later works, especially in the novel *The Fire (1954).*

In this work, Dib moved beyond previously discussed themes such as integration particularly the one mentioned earlier and instead focused on the lower classes of society. He documented their concerns and suffering under the burden of brutal French colonialism, which was far removed from the humanity it claimed to represent

What is noticeable in Mohamed Dib's novels is that they convey an ideological vision strongly opposed to French colonialism. For this reason, Mohamed Dib well deserved to be called "the Balzac of Algeria."

In his novels, Mohamed Dib denounces the violence inflicted by French colonialism on Algerians, speaking about the pain and suffering of the Algerian people in the countryside and highlighting the concerns of the peasants. Alongside Mohamed Dib, Mouloud Mammeri emerged in 1955 with his novel *The Sleep of the Just (La Sommeil du Juste)*, in which he describes the true position of France toward the Algerians. Through this work, he aims to reveal the reality of French colonialism and remove its mask before the Algerians, thereby undermining their blind trust in the imaginary slogans of France, which conceal despicable ideological intentions.

In *The Sleep of the Just*, Mouloud Mammeri portrays the state of poverty, deprivation, backwardness, suffering, and exploitation experienced by isolated tribal villages in the mountains. These communities suffer both under the weight of colonial domination and exploitation, and from internal disputes among themselves.

Similarly, Kateb Yacine's 1956 novel *Nedjma* presents the extreme poverty and unemployment experienced by Algerians in urban areas. The novel particularly highlights the exploitation of Algerian workers in city workshops, which intensifies their sense of injustice and drives them toward revolt. The work also evokes the demonstrations of May 8, 1945, during which thousands of Algerians were killed.

Both novels mark the beginning of a revolutionary protest movement in Algerian literature, exposing the plans of French colonialism and awakening readers to the harsh reality of colonial rule one that disguises itself under the rhetoric of equality and the false promise of integration.

It treats Algerians as it treats the French, but the reality is completely different, because there is a difference between what people say and what their hands do. All of this has been evoked in Algerian novels to express these contradictions; thus, the novelist confronts the colonizer's ideology with his own.

The novelist's discourse, written in French, then interacted with Algerian life during the occupation period and with the outbreak of the liberation revolution on November 1, 1954. The tendency toward revolutionary struggle became more prominent in the later works of Kateb Yacine, Malek Haddad, and Assia Djebar, which accompanied the political events that developed from the year 1954 up to the armed struggle.

These works include the novel *The Student and the Lesson* (1960) and Malek Haddad's 1958 novel

The Last Impression. The latter novel is considered the first to describe the events of the armed revolution, along with Mohammed Dib's 1959 novel *The African Summer*, Malek Haddad's 1961 novel *The Flower Pavement Does Not Respond*, and other novels.

Generally speaking, most scholars believe that the 1950s period constituted a decisive stage in the development of the French-language Algerian novel. Its general framework is rooted in the theme of the Algerian armed revolution, revealing the truth about France and exposing its inhumane practices. Its specific setting differs from one novel to another.

The novels of the 1960s, especially after independence, were no different from those of the 1950s. Most of the novels published during this period surveyed the difficult life in villages and towns and described guerrilla resistance operations in cities, such as Assia Djebar's 1962 novel *Children of the New World*. She also depicted attacks on villages and towns with cannons and airplanes and the demolition of houses over the heads of their inhabitants in Mouloud Mammeri's 1965 novel *Opium and the Stick*, while Hussein Bouzhar's 1967 novel *Fingers of the Day* and Saleh Falah's 1969 novel describe the difficult life in detention centers and prisons and the organization of escapes.

What is noticeable is that most of these works of fiction focus on the theme of the liberation revolution, depict the ugliness and brutality of the colonizer, and sing of the heroism of the people in order to strengthen the revolutionary struggle, especially before the mid-sixties.

As for the Algerian novel written in French after the mid-1960s, it took a new direction in light of a new phase known as the construction phase. This trend was fueled by the politically critical tendency toward the country's politics, as a result of the overwhelming chaos caused by the struggle for power. Examples include Mohamed Dib's *The King's Dance* (1968), Murad's *The Muezzin, Bourbon* (1968), and Rachid Boudjedra's *Insolation*, among other works that share their scathing criticism of the bureaucratic atmosphere that characterized the country, despite differences in the artistic methods of each writer.

All the novels published, particularly after the coup d'état that overthrew the regime of President Ben Bella on June 19, 1965, and the establishment of the military regime led by Colonel Houari Boumediene, were dominated by a critical political tendency due to the deteriorating situation, the country's conditions, the spread of bureaucracy, and various manifestations of corruption. After the mid-1960s, French-language narrative discourse came under heavy criticism. Its tone reflected the political and social conditions in Algeria, although artistic methods differed among writers. In general, one scholar has described this literature as social and political protest literature.

What we see is that the political event greatly affected the post-independence generation: some of them remained silent and stopped writing, others became less productive, and others continued their activities with the same enthusiasm. New novelists also emerged, led by Rachid Boudjedra and Yasmina Khadra.

The novels of the 1970s presented varied themes, such as the question of national identity and Amazigh identity, which can be found particularly in Mouloud Mammeri's novel *El Obour* (1982) and Nabil Fares' novel *Exile and Disarray* (1976), which was published in Algeria and dealt with traditional themes such as the Algerian revolution, continuing previous stages, such as Amna Mushakara's work *The Explosive Cave* (1979).

And Muhammad Shayeb's fictional works, such as Ezzedine Bounmore's *The Last Ordeal* (1983) and *The Atlas is Burning* (1987). This critical approach to the political and social conditions in Algeria continued in the French-speaking Algerian novel even after the October 1988 demonstrations and the promulgation of the Constitution of February 23, 1989, which authorized political pluralism, following the growing gap between the power in place and society, not to mention the miserable living conditions such as unemployment and inequalities

Ahmed Farhat: Cultural Voices of the Maghreb, Internation- al House of Printing, Publishing and Distribution, Lebanon, Vol. 1, 1984, pp. 84-85;
Ahmed Mounour: Algerian Literature in French, Office of University Publications, undated, 2007, p. 97

linked to disability. The power sought to respond to the needs of the Algerian people, and the novelists accompanied these events and expressed their social and political visions, which were embodied by paper characters.

The situation worsened after the government held elections to absorb the people's anger. The Islamic movement won by a large percentage. However, when the election results were annulled, the movement generated a desire for revenge against the authorities. Chaos and unrest spread throughout the country, and a state of emergency was declared in Algeria, creating an atmosphere of bloody violence. This lasted for a full decade, and Algeria suffered, while intellectuals, the government, and the defenseless people remained affected. Perhaps the most important examples that accompanied the events and described this sensitive period are the novels of Rachid Maimouni, such as *The Honor of the Tribe* and *The Belt of the Ghoula*, the most notable of which is *The Curse*, which depicted the Islamist sit in in the first square in May 1991.

Writers of this period expressed their rejection of the Islamist conception of religion and their fanaticism toward it, notably Rachid Maimouni in his 1993 novel *The Curse*, which aims to explain the Islamic phenomenon and the reasons for its emergence.

Among the most important novels dealing with the fate of Algeria are the novels of Yasmina Khadra, considered one of the most prominent crime novelists in Algeria, whose novels are an honest portrayal of what the Algerian people experienced during the black decade, such as *What Wolves Dream Of* and *The Lord's Sheep*. In his novels, he discusses the remnants of massacres in cities and villages, and the phenomenon of terrorism and violence against humanity, not only in Algeria but throughout the world, as a global phenomenon. In a novel entitled *The Swallows of Kabul*, he discusses this phenomenon in Afghan society in particular.

Thus, the 1990s period is full of novels that attempt to establish a narrative text linked to the historical scene and social and political reality. Novelists draw inspiration from events and characters from living reality in all its dimensions. They provide a vivid testimony to the torments experienced by Algeria during the black decade, whether written in Arabic or French.

The theme of death is one of the prominent themes of the contemporary Algerian novel, and I have worked extensively on it, particularly during the years of national crisis, when Algeria suffered a great tragedy that had negative repercussions on society, particularly on the intellectual class, who found no other way to escape these tragic situations than to break the barrier of silence and free their pens to write, record, and photograph. This is why they expressed the bitterness of the bloody situation and the absurdity of life. This embodies annihilation, human obsessions, existential anxiety, the struggle with life, and resistance to death.

Death represents an aesthetic tribute in Algerian literature, as it has nourished literary texts with a new theme and constitutes a fundamental preoccupation in novel writing. Just as death is synonymous with life, it is also synonymous with writing, as it adds dramatic dimensions to it. The literary worlds formed by Algerian writers represent an aesthetic and semantic enrichment of their texts. They represent the place—Algeria, the nation—in both its past and present, with climates of tragedy extending over time and shaping both its individual and collective history. The French, during colonialism, succeeded in suppressing anti-revolutionary action, and later the Algerians during independence followed with great effort, brutality, and absurdity against their Algerian brothers through individual or collective assassination and massacres by bullets.

Contemporary novel writing has addressed the issue of death and sought to study its symbolism, its many manifestations, and its various problems. The writer is more capable of sensing the power of death, more courageous in confronting its power and delving

Ahmed Mounour: The Identity Crisis in the French-language
Algerian Novel, a Literary Study, Maison du Sahel, Vol. 1, 2013, p. 217

deeper into its connotations. He follows it while it is at the height of its movement and continuity. He breaks the immediate present and moves on to the future.

Death is present as a central issue in most Algerian narrative texts, as these novels present the fates that the characters in the novels have faced on numerous occasions, and the sad scenes in which these characters have ended up "return us to the contemplation of a network of dualities that death creates" in its various relationships, such as the death of the self, the death of the other, natural death, and accidental death (murder or suicide).

Death was widespread in novels and was represented in many forms, including "social and emotional death, political and national death, intellectual and philosophical death, and before that, real death, or the killing of the imaginary being in the world." This artistic work is called upon to perform an important role in history.

What is remarkable about narrative texts from the independence era is their tendency to glorify death and to present its great heroic scenes and images. These images are embodied through "the act of martyrdom resisting the French occupation, embodying the heroism of the Algerian people and their epic effort to liberate their country during the revolution."

Death in this context takes on a heroic and symbolic character: "Death, in this perspective, embodies the will to exist in its most precise form, stemming from a problem that rejects all bargaining or blackmail."

The national crisis is a fundamental factor in writing about death. Algerian writers created their texts while being drawn to the climate of terrorism, violence, and death that reigned everywhere. They were drawn to the human reality that was bleeding under the weight of violence. It was an honest experience. "With death, the journey begins, and the image ends with the symbolism of the tragic event." A hideous face is revealed without approaching another face, which is that of survival.

What is remarkable about these fictional texts is their awareness of the significance of this event death and its psychological and social effects. Consequently, these experiences were emotionally and artistically honest, such that these literary texts became an "emotional experience that employs," in its emotional overlay, the accumulation of heritage and the social dimension with all its values and cultural deposits, as well as the political determinant and its ideological intersections. They form a kind of history of the reality of Algeria in the last decade of the 20th century, which entered history as the decade of blood and fire, whose title is death, whose goal is death, whose reality is death, and the death of death.

Death evolved from its various forms, from symbolic death during the liberation revolution to more absurd forms, as gratuitous and brutal death spread, which "amplified the fate of the nationAlgeria—and deepened the individual, familial, and societal tragedy of the Algerian person." "When the nation—Algeria—lost its bet with history at the time of independence, the Algerian people lost as a result."

They therefore bet on life, and the forms of their subjective suffering were amplified by what caused them certain or delayed death ever since. From the 1990s to the present day, states of fear have disrupted lifestyles, and climates of chaos have transformed reality into unreality, the reasonable into the unreasonable, and logic into the illogical. The original thus shifts from the precious to the unreasonable and incoherent.

It is clear that the writer who has experienced death has been more honest in conveying his images and scenes, because this harsh experience "destroyed his. soul, and he became convinced that death is the end of life, and indeed its greatest tragedy." He became more certain when he transferred his partial experience, in particular, to the reality of humanity in general, so that the vision was generally agreed upon that the truth of life is a short path to annihilation.

What is remarkable about recent novelistic experiments belonging to the existentialist movement is their tendency to formulate the theme of death in a profound philosophical and existential form and to seek to pose questions about existence and annihilation, since death represents a fundamental obsession for human beings, which makes them constantly reflect and contemplate

their lives, threatened at every moment by the danger of death. These novels also present an important philosophical idea the idea of the "salvation" of life which prevents a person from determining the fate of their life and also hinders their freedom, openness, and creativity.

Among the most notable Algerian novels that deal with death as an intellectual and literary theme, and that also celebrate the embodiment of images of death and its physical and symbolic scenes, are Ahlam Mosteghanemi's novels *Memory of the Body* (1993), *Chaos of the Senses* (1996), and *Bed Passer* (2003), as well as Al-Taher Wattar's novel *Al-Laz* (1972). These novels focus on images of the symbolic death of revolutionary figures and the death of revolutionary memory, fueling the liberal revolution with the fires of treason and collaboration with the French authorities.

Among other novels in which the subject of death dominates are *Fatwas of Death* by Ibrahim Saadi, *The Blood of the Deer* by Merzak Baqtash, *Timimoun* by Rachid Boudjedra, *The Pavilions of Dreams and Mourning* by Ezzedine Jalouji, *The Labyrinths of the Night of Conflicts* by Hamida Ayachi, *The Strangers* by Khadoussi Rabah, *Ceremonies and Funerals, The Archipelago of Flies, Witness of Darkness* by Bachir, *Mufti of the Tragedy of the Seventh Night After a Thousand, The Memory of Water, The Third Person Pronoun, The Lady of the Sanctuary to Comfort Me the Lame, The Candle and the Corridors, The Pure Guardian Returns to His Place of Honor* by Taher Wattar, *Splendor Adorns His Executioner for the Tourist Amateur, The Cellars of the Fugitive City* by Saadi Noura, *The Secrets of the City* by Fugali Jamal, and *The Secrets of the City* by Muhammad Muflah.

What emerges from these novels is their attempt to perceive death as a lived human experience and to immerse themselves in the universe of the living phenomenon. These texts thus arrive bathed in the odors of death, and it therefore became necessary for men and women novelists to aspire to death "as a true awareness of living reality, because it determines its relationship with political and social reality." It becomes expectation and salvation, and ultimately it transforms into a human destiny that the writer contemplates while plunging into death.

Writers approached it not merely as a subject but rather as a human concern. It became a national obsession that made Algeria a country of free trade in souls.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the theme of death in Algerian literature written in French serves as a powerful lens through which to understand the nation's historical journey and cultural identity. It is not limited to individual mortality but extends to collective experiences of loss, resistance, and renewal. Through their works, Algerian francophone writers have transformed death into a literary tool that preserves memory, challenges oppression, and expresses the complexities of postcolonial identity. This rich and multifaceted treatment of death continues to shape the Algerian literary landscape, reflecting a deep engagement with both national history and universal human questions.

4. References

Abdelhak, Ezzine. 2025. "Death in Literature: A Semiotic Reading of Yasmina Khadra's Novel The Swal- lows of Kabul". South Florida Journal of Development 6 (5):e5329. https://doi.org/10.46932/sfjdv6n5-068.

Ahmed Farhat : Cultural Voices of the Maghreb, International House of Printing, Publishing and Distribu- tion, Lebanon, Vol. 1, 1984

Ahmed Mounour: Algerian Literature in French, Office of University Publications, undated, 2007, p. 97 Ahmed Mounour: The IdentityCrisis in the Algerian Novel in French,

RabehCheriet: Manifestations of Time in the Contemporary Algerian Novel (Reading in Models), Djssour

Journal of Knowledge, Abdelrahman Ibn Khaldoun Tiaret University, Volume 5, Issue

How to cite this article:

Abdelhak E. 2026. From Heroic Symbol to Existential Absurdity: The Transformation of the Idea of Death in Algerian Literature Written in French. TIJMR, 5 (2): 1–7.

TKM Arts College International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (TIJMR)
Vol. 5, No. 2 July 2026, 8 - 16

Contents lists available at www.tijmr.org

TKM Arts College
International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research
(TIJMR) ISSN (Online) : 2581-6519 / ISSN (Print) : 2582-130x

journal homepage – https://tijmr.org/index.php/journal

Empowered Stages: The Rise of Arab Women in Theatre

A Shanil
Department of Arabic
MSM College, Kayamkulam, Kerala, Kollam
drshanil@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Women's participation in Arab theatre represents a journey of resilience, creativity, and transformation. From its earliest appearances in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, theatre in the Arab world mirrored societal values and moral codes that often restricted women's public roles. Initially, men performed female characters, influenced by social conventions that viewed stage performance as inappropriate for women. Yet, as Western-style dramatic forms spread across the Middle East, the need for authentic representation prompted cautious openings for female performers, particularly in Egypt, Lebanon, and later other Arab countries, marking a subtle but significant cultural shift.

Throughout the twentieth century, pioneering actresses and playwrights gradually made space for women's presence on stage, often blending artistic innovation with social commentary. Today, Arab women in theatre serve not only as performers but also as directors, playwrights, and producers, shaping narratives within a once male-dominated sphere. Their contributions reflect both continuity and change, balancing respect for cultural identity with the pursuit of new artistic freedoms. Despite persistent challenges, their growing influence signals an evolving theatre culture that increasingly acknowledges women's creative and intellectual authority.

2. The Beginning of Arab Women's Theatre

In the nineteenth century, many upper-class Arab Muslim women lived in a secluded world defined by a social and domestic system that symbolized both protection and privilege. What initially felt like an imposition became, for some, a marker of prestige, reflecting a family's ability to shield its women from the workforce. However, this separation limited women's broader social engagement, access to education, and economic independence.

As the century progressed, profound socio-economic changes reshaped societies across the Arab world, especially in Egypt. The rise of a new middle class, fueled by urbanization and migration from rural areas, transformed cities like Cairo into vibrant cultural and intellectual hubs. Though education and new forms of entertainment reflected the aspirations of this Western-influenced class, women largely remained confined to domestic spheres, with only a limited number receiving private tutoring at home.

From these privileged circles emerged some of the earliest advocates of women's emancipation. Egypt became a leading voice in the Arab feminist awakening, thanks to reformers such as Huda Sha'rawi (1879–1947)[1], Nabawiyyah Musa (1886–1951)[2], and Malak Hifni Nasif (1886–1918)[3]. These women championed education and social participation as essential paths to

The founding of the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923 and the publication of La Egyptienne[4] in 1925 became symbols of this awakening. While their advocacy favored gradual reform rather than immediate transformation, they grounded their vision in the belief that women's liberation and learning were consistent with the principles of Islam and vital to the emerging spirit of Arab nationalism.[5]

In the realm of theatre, a comparable trend emerged. Before the nineteenth century, Arab performing troupes embraced a non-mimetic style, which meant women were not required to participate in performances. Instead, for the sake of illusion and social norms, male actors dressed as women and portrayed female characters on stage. The introduction of more realistic, mimetic plays[6] made women's participation in stage productions increasingly important. Consequently, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, the demand for women willing to perform publicly increased. Still, this shift did not spark a similar interest in women taking on roles as playwrights or directors. Significantly, the earliest actresses within these new literary theatre circles were often drawn from non-Arab, non-Muslim backgrounds.

Ya'qub Sannu[7], regarded as the father of Egyptian theatre, faced great difficulty finding women willing to perform on stage, managing to recruit only two poor, illiterate girls. Consequently, his plays were limited to having no more than two female roles, which he had to create scripts for accordingly. He personally taught these young women to read, write, and act. According to theatre scholar Nihad Selaiha[9], the very first Arab actresses were actually Jewish sisters Milia Dayan and her sister[10].

Despite women's pioneering presence on stage, Selaiha points out that playwriting and directing remained domains dominated by men, with scripts often written by men though performed and embodied by women. Nonetheless, women's impact in theatre extended far beyond acting, as they played crucial roles in performance, management, patronage, and maintaining audience support, thereby significantly shaping the theatrical landscape. This blend of pioneering female performers and broader female engagement underscores the complex yet essential contribution of women to early Arab theatre history.

During early decades of the twentieth century, Egypt's theatrical scene witnessed a remarkable transformation

[1] Huda Sha'rawi was a pioneering Egyptian feminist, nationalist, and activist considered the founder of the modern women's movement in Egypt. Sha'rawi played a critical role in Egypt's nationalist struggles and was a symbol of women's emancipation, famously protesting colonial rule and social restrictions, including publicly removing her face veil in 1923. She established the Egyptian Feminist Union to advocate for women's suffrage, education, and legal reforms, becoming a lasting figure in Arab feminist history.

[2] Nabawiyyah Musa was a pioneering Egyptian feminist, educator, and writer who played a critical role in advancing women's rights and education in Egypt. She was the first Egyptian woman to graduate from university and the first female school principal, breaking barriers in a society that limited women's opportunities. Musa founded the Association for the Progress of Women and was a founding member of the Egyptian Feminist Union

[3] Malak Hifni Nasif also known by her pen name Bahithat al-Badiya, was a prominent Egyptian feminist, educator, and writer. Born into a middle-class family in Cairo, she was an advocate for women's education and rights, focusing on issues such as veiling, polygamy, and social seclusion.

[4] Egyptienne was a monthly women's magazine published in Cairo, Egypt, from 1925 to 1940. It was one of the earliest women's magazines and feminist periodicals in the country.

[5] Rubin, D. (2000). "World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: The Arab World" page. 25

[6] primarily inspired by Western theatre

[7] Ya'qub Sannu (1839–1912) was a pioneering Egyptian playwright, journalist, and political satirist, considered the father of modern Egyptian theatre. In 1870, he founded the country's first modern theatre company, performing plays in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, making theatre accessible to wider audiences. Known as "the Egyptian Molière," he introduced women to the stage, recruiting the first Arab actresses. His theatre was initially supported by Khedive Ismā'īl but eventually shut down due to his political activism.

[8] 'Yaqub Sanu', Wikipedia, 12 March 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Yaqub_Sanu

Rubin, D. (2000). "World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: The Arab World" page. 26

as women began to assume prominent roles on stage. Three leading troupes spearheaded this cultural shift. The first was George Abyad's company[11], which brought to Egyptian audiences stage adaptations of world masterpieces and renditions of major Western dramatic works. A few years later, in 1916, Naguib al-Rihani[12] founded Al Rihani Troupe, which quickly rose to immense popularity by presenting lively comedies and so-called "Franco-Arab" productions[13].

In 1923, another landmark was set with the creation of the Ramsis Troupe[14] under the direction of Yusuf Wahbi and Aziz Eid (1881–1942), known for producing both original Egyptian melodramas and translated Western classics. Alongside these dominant groups flourished numerous smaller ensembles, including the celebrated musical theatres of Sayyid Darwish[15] and Salama Hijazi, whose performances drew enthusiastic popular acclaim.

Munira al-Mahdiyyah (b.1885) also known as Sultana Al-Tarab, was a pioneering Egyptian singer and actress. Born in 1885, she made history in 1915 as the first Muslim woman to appear on an Egyptian stage, performing as an actress-singer with the Arabic Comedy Troupe run by Aziz Eid. Her debut was a major event, marking the first time a Muslim woman took to the stage as an actress, blending singing and acting in a dramatic-musical role. She quickly gained fame for her performances in Salama Hijazi's musicals and eventually formed her own company, becoming the first woman to own and produce a theatrical troupe in Egypt. From around 1917 to 1929, her troupe staged both original works and international adaptations, including operas and operettas, which were new to the Arab stage. Despite her success and rivaling prominent artists like Sayyid Darwish, she was eventually unable to compete with the rise of cinema and disbanded her troupe by 1930[17].

Fatimah al-Yusof[18] and Dawlat Abvad were among the first Arab stage stars in the early 20th century. Fatimah al-Yusof (1898-1958), known by her stage name Rose al-Yusuf, rose to prominence in 1916 with the support of Aziz Eid, who was working with al-Rihani's troupe at the time. As a teenager, she gained recognition by playing a 70-year-old grandmother, a role others refused, quickly becoming the troupe's leading actress. Later, she joined the Ramsis Troupe, where she starred in almost all productions from 1923. In 1925, she retired from acting to found the influential cultural and political magazine 'Rose al-Yusuf'[19], which remains a significant voice in the Arab world. She combined art, culture, and political activism, making her a groundbreaking figure in both theater and journalism[20].

Dawlat Abyad (1894-1978) was a pioneering Egyptian actress best known as the star of George Abyad's theatre troupe, which toured widely across the Arab world. Introduced to the public by Aziz Eid in 1917, she appeared in several companies before settling with George Abyad's troupe, excelling in tragedy and

[9] Nehad Selaiha was a renowned Egyptian theatre scholar, critic, playwright, and activist, widely regarded as a major pillar of modern Egyptian and Arab theatre. Born in 1945

[10] Rubin, D. (2000). "World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: The Arab World" page. 26

[11] established in 1912, George Abyad's troupe, was a pioneering Egyptian theater company led by a Lebanese actor and director with Lebanese origins. Abyad was instrumental in introducing Western theatrical traditions to Egypt and Arab theater more broadly.

[12] Naguib al-Rihani (1889–1949) was a pioneering Egyptian actor, writer, and producer widely regarded as the father of Egyptian comedy

[13] Rubin, D. (2000). "World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: The Arab World" page. 26

[14] The Ramsis Troupe, founded in 1923, was a cornerstone of modern Egyptian theatre. This troupe was known for producing a diverse repertoire that included original Egyptian melodramas as well as Arabic translations of Western classics.

[15] Sayyid Darwish (1892–1923) was an Egyptian singer and composer regarded as the father of modern Egyptian popular music and one of Egypt's greatest musicians.

[16] Aziza Amir, Wikipedia, 6 May 2026,

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Aziza_Amir&oldid=1352736462.

[17] Rubin, D. (2000). "World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: The Arab World" page. 26

melodrama. She was married to George Abyad, a prominent figure in Egyptian theatre and cinema. Dawlat Abyad acted throughout her life, earning the title "Queen of Tragedy and Melodrama", and left a lasting influence on Egyptian stage performance[21].

Meanwhile, Aziza Amir (1901-1952) joined the Ramsis Troupe in 1925 after responding to an advertisement by its director Yusuf Wahbi. She played numerous roles with the troupe and others, including al-Rihani's company. Aziza Amir later became a pioneering Egyptian film producer and actress, creating the first Egyptian silent film, Layla (1927). Despite opposition, her film became a hit, and she produced and starred in 25 films, often highlighting social themes contrasting rich and poor[22].

The Flourishing Era of Women in Arab Theatre

The flourishing era of women in Arab theatre marks a significant period of cultural and artistic transformation during the early to mid-20th century. During this time, women transcended traditional social barriers to become prominent figures on the Arab stage, challenging deeply entrenched norms around gender and public performance. This era coincided with dynamic socio-political changes, especially in Egypt, where figures such as Fatimah Rushdi and later playwrights such as Fathiyyah al-Assal emerged as trailblazers, founding theatre troupes and starring in groundbreaking productions.

Fatimah Rushdi (1908-1997), often called "the Sarah Bernhardt of the East", was an acclaimed Egyptian actress, singer, and film director. She came from a poor musical family and moved to Cairo at age 12. At 15, she got her first stage role, initially playing male parts in the Ramsis Troupe, challenging the convention of boys playing women's roles. Despite natural talent, her illiteracy was a barrier, so director Aziz Eid personally taught her to read and write. Their professional relationship evolved into marriage after Eid converted to Islam. Rushdi later founded her own theatre troupe, toured widely, and became a major figure in Egyptian performing arts[23].

Fatimah Rushdi performed iconic characters such as Hamlet, Mark Antony, and Qays, the melancholic lover from the famous Arab tale Majnun Layla[24], adapted by the Egyptian poet Ahmad Shawqi. Shawqi[25] also wrote The Death of Cleopatra, a verse play, specifically for her troupe. Through these powerful performances, Rushdi earned her reputation as a leading figure in Egyptian theatre and was often compared to Sarah Bernhardt[26] for her range and impact[27].

Fatimah Rushdi was a trailblazer in Egyptian theatre and cinema. She was the first woman director in the Arab world, staging successful adaptations of classics like Anna Karenina and The Resurrection by Tolstoy. In 1927, Rushdi starred in her first silent film, Catastrophe Atop the Pyramid, and in 1933, she wrote, directed, and starred in 'The Husband'. Despite her status as one of the most distinguished Egyptian actresses of the century and a symbol of stardom, she sadly passed away in 1997 living in poverty and solitude. Her legacy remains significant in Arab cultural history[28].

Nihad Selaiha notes that the first Arab woman playwright

[18] Fatimah al-Yusof, also known as Rose al-Yusuf (1898–1958), was a pioneering Lebanese-born Egyptian journalist, actress, and cultural icon. She is widely regarded as the Arab world's first woman journalist and a trailblazer for women in the press and theatre.

[19] Rose al-Yūsuf magazine, first published on October 26, 1925, in Cairo, was named after its founder, Rose al-Yusuf, a pioneering Syrian-born female journalist widely regarded as a trailblazer in Arab media. Initially launched as a cultural and literary publication focused on arts, theatre, and literature, the magazine quickly evolved into a political platform by 1928, becoming a significant voice against British colonial rule in Egypt. Founded alongside editor Mohamed El-Tabii, Rose al-Yūsuf attracted contributions from notable Egyptian journalists and prominent cartoonists such as Alexander Saroukhan, Rakha, and Zuhdi.

[20] Rubin, D. (2000). "World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: The Arab World" page. 27

[21] ibid

[22] Aziza Amir, Wikipedia, 6 May 2026,

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Aziza_Amir&oldid=1352736462

was Sophie Abdallah, whose play *Sweepstakes* was performed in 1951-52. Although no manuscript survives, those who saw it recall it as an unremarkable work, somewhat like Gorki's *The Lower Depths*. Nonetheless, this marked the beginning of women playwrights in the Arab world. By the 1960s, more plays by women began to be published, but it wasn't until the late 1960s and early 1970s that women's writings regularly appeared on Arab stages once again. This gradual return helped open the door for greater female representation in Arab theatre[29].

Fathiyyah al-Assal stands among the earliest women dramatists in the Arab world, dedicating her career to the theatre. Her first play, *al-Murjiḥāb*[30] was staged at the Alexandria National Theatre in 1969, followed by *al-Bashūr*[31] at the Gomhuriyyah Theatre in 1972. She continued to explore social and human themes in *Bilā Aqni ʿa*[32], which was produced at al-Salam Theatre, and later in *al-Bayn Bayn*[33], a play that, though never performed, reflected her persistent interest in questions of identity and freedom. Her final stage work, *Sijn al-Nisā* [34], was published in 1993 and stands as a testament to her lifelong concern for women's experiences. In addition to her theatrical works, al-Assal wrote more than twenty television dramas and scripted twenty-two television series, extending her influence across multiple forms of Arabic popular culture[35].

In 1962, the celebrated Egyptian belly dancer turned actress Tahiyyah Karioka established a theatre company with her then-husband Fayiz Halawah[36], marking a significant step for women in Egypt's cultural scene. Although the troupe's influence was not fully recognized until the 1970s, when state censorship subdued much of the country's theatre, it became one of the few venues to present politically subversive works. When authorities sought to ban the play Yahya al-Wafd![37], Karioka challenged the ruling in court, won the case, and proceeded to stage it. While Halawah often directed and starred in their productions, audiences were particularly drawn to Karioka's fearless performances, which combined political satire, social commentary, and wit. The company ultimately closed

[23]

[24] Majnun Layla, also known as Layla and Majnun, is a classic and tragic Arab love story that originated in the 7th century. It recounts the profound romance between Qays ibn al-Mullawah, nicknamed "Majnun" (meaning "crazy" or "madman") for his obsessive love, and Layla bint Mahdi, his beloved cousin and classmate. Their love was deep but unfulfilled due to societal and familial barriers; Layla's father refused to allow their marriage, fearing scandal because Qays was publicly called mad for his passionate devotion.

[25] Ahmed Shawqi (1868–1932), known as the "Prince of Poets" (Amīr al-Shu'arā'), was a foremost Egyptian poet laureate, linguist, and a key figure in modern Arabic literature. Born in Cairo, he was highly educated, fluent in Arabic, Turkish, French, Greek, and English, and influenced by French playwrights such as Molière and Racine.

[26] Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) was a renowned French stage actress often hailed as one of the greatest actresses of all time. Known as "The Divine Sarah," she gained international fame for her extraordinary talent, dramatic presence, and passionate performances in plays ranging from classical tragedies to contemporary dramas.

[27] Rubin, D. (2000). "World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: The Arab World" page. 28

[28] ' Al Ain. (n.d.). Fatima Rushdi. Al Ain. Retrieved June 2, 2026, from https://al-ain.com/article/fatima-rushdi-wikipedia'.Accessed 21 Dec. 2026.

[29] Rubin, D. (2000). "World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: The Arab World" page. 27

[30] "The Swing," (1967)

[31] "The Passport"

[32] "Without Masks," (1982),

[33] Betwixt and Between," (1985),

[34] "Women's Prisons"

[35] 'World Theatre Day- International Theatre Institute ITI'. Accessed 5 Dec. 2025. https://www.world-theatre-day.org/fathia_elassal.html.

[36] Fayez Halawa (1932–2002) was an Egyptian writer, director, and actor known especially for his influential political plays. He worked in radio before gaining fame in theater during 1960s, producing and participating in plays such as False Report (1962), Rubabikya, The Fox is Gone, The Tutteh Café, and Nyam Nyam. He also appeared in films and television, including the movie The Malatily Bathhouse .His legacy persists as a significant contributor to modern Egyptian theater and cinema

[37] "Long Live the Wafd!"

in the early 1980s following the end of the couple's marriage and partnership[38].

screenplays and two television scripts. She remains one of the few Arab women dramatists to gain both critical and commercial recognition on the stage[39].

During the 1990s and beyond, women dramatists continued to shape the cultural and intellectual landscape of Arab theatre with originality and depth. With the rise of the Free Theatre movement across the Arab region, women's contributions remained vibrant. Many of these independent troupes featured women as performers, directors, artistic leaders, stage managers, and playwrights. This younger generation of theatre women has continued to expand in number and confidence, expressing their ideas with increasing boldness and creative independence.

Among them, Nadia al-Banhawi emerged as a promising voice. Her debut play *al-Wahj*[40] is a philosophical and psychological exploration that transcends gender. Her next work, The Death and Love Sonata (1997), takes a more expressionistic approach, dramatizing the fragmented dimensions of its female protagonist's inner world.

At the institutional level, several women have assumed prominent positions in Egypt's theatrical and academic spheres, marking a significant shift in leadership. Foremost among them is Huda Wasfi (b. 1942), who has served as artistic director of both the National Theatre of Egypt since 1995 and the al-Hanajir Theatre since 1992. In theatre criticism, Nihad Selaiha[41] and Minha al-Batrawi[42] stand out as leading voices in contemporary Arab discourse. Selaiha, the chief drama critic for Al-Ahram Weekly, earned distinction for her analytical writings and scholarly translations, which have become foundational in the study of Egyptian and Arab performance[43].

Assia Djebar[44], one of Algeria's most celebrated novelists, extended her literary activism to the stage with her play *Rouge l'aube*[45], written in collaboration with her husband and performed at the Third Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers. Another Algerian dramatist, Fatima Gallaire-Bourega, residing in France, explored women's displacement and exile in her one-act play Princess, You Have Come Back (1988). Representing the broader Arab diaspora, Lebanese writer Hanan al-Shaykh, who left her homeland during the civil war of the 1970s, also creates powerful theatrical and narrative works centered on women's agency, cultural memory, and survival. Together, these authors demonstrate the diversity and reach of women's dramatic writing across languages, regions, and political contexts in the modern Arab world[46].

Women in the 21st-Century Arab Theatre

In the 21st Century Modern Arab theatre has evolved into a dynamic form of resistance and cultural activism, engaging with urgent regional issues such as the Palestinian issue, the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and the complex roles of women and religion

[38] 'Ma'rifa'. Accessed 1 Jan, 2026. https://www.marefa.org

[39] Rubin, D. (2000). "World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: The Arab World" page. 29

[40] "The Glow," (1996)

[41] Nihad Selaiha (1945–2017) was a renowned Egyptian theatre critic, scholar, translator, and writer, widely regarded as the leading theatre critic in the Arab world for decades. Known as a "theatre activist" and a "godmother" to many artists, she was a fierce advocate for creative energy and free expression.

[42] Minha al-Batrawi is an Egyptian actress, theatre critic, and cultural activist who played a central role in the independent theatre movement that emerged in Cairo during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

[43] Rubin, D. (2000). "World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: The Arab World" page. 29

[44] Djebar was known as a voice of reform for Islam across the Arab world, especially in the field of advocating for increased rights for women

[45] "Red Dawn,"(1969)

[46] Rubin, D. (2000). "World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: The Arab World" page. 29

in Arab societies. These themes are often treated with humor, irony, and audience participation, merging activism with artistic innovation. Theatre creation thrives vibrantly across Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Morocco, Tunisia, and the Gulf regions including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

This dynamic theatre scene continuously experiments with forms that emphasize deep social and political engagement. A notable development is the growing visibility and participation of women as both performers and creators, particularly playwrights and directors. These women utilize the stage as a powerful platform to explore and challenge issues of gender, politics, identity, and sexuality. Their work breaks traditional molds, fostering critical discourse on societal norms and amplifying female voices in Arab theatre and film, representing diverse contemporary narratives with boldness and nuance.

In 2011, after Egypt's revolution, the Independent Culture Coalition started a monthly festival called El-Fan Midan[47] to take art from theaters and galleries into public spaces like Cairo's Abdeen Square. The idea was to make music, theatre, and visual art open to everyone in the streets. That same year, Nora Amin[48], an Egyptian actress and director, created The Egyptian National Project for Theatre of the Oppressed in Alexandria, combining theatre with social awareness and community participation.

Fathia Al-Assal (1933–2014) was a renowned Egyptian playwright and activist known for her socially conscious dramas. Despite limited formal education, she wrote over 120 radio dramas between 1957 and 1967 and created nearly 60 television series. Key works include *Hiya wal Mosataheel*[49] ("She and the Impossible"), *Rommanat Al Mezan* and *Shams Montasaf Al Lail*[50] ("Midnight Sun"). She also wrote plays addressing critical social issues like female sexuality and domestic violence. Al-Assal served as president of the Egyptian Writers Association and was a lifelong advocate for women's and social rights, enduring arrests for her activism[51]. Her work has been translated internationally and remains influential in Egyptian theatre. Awatif Naim is an Iraqi playwright and actress noted for plays on women's issues, contributing significantly to Iraqi theatre post-2003 through directing, acting, and adapting works locally and internationally.

Laila Soliman, (b.1981) is an independent Egyptian playwright and theatre director educated at the American University in Cairo and the Amsterdam University of the Arts. Her work explores contemporary socio-political dynamics, focusing on personal and collective memories to challenge official histories. Notable works include *The Retreating World* (2004), *Ghorba: Images of Alienation* (2006), *Spring Awakening in the Tuktuk* (2010), and the series "No Time for Art" (2011–2013). She created *Hawa Elhorreya* (2014), about the 1919 Egyptian revolution, and the internationally toured opera *Woman at Point Zero* (2022), based on Nawal El Saadawi's novel, addressing women's liberation and abuse. Soliman's multidisciplinary and collaborative approach bridges personal histories and political realities across the Middle East and beyond.

Dalia Taha is a Palestinian poet, playwright, and educator born in Berlin in 1986 and raised in Ramallah. She holds an MFA in Playwriting from Brown University and has published three poetry collections, a novel, two plays, and a children's poetry book. Her plays, including *Fireworks*, have been staged at prestigious venues such as the Royal Court Theatre in London and the Flemish Royal Theatre in Brussels[52].

[47] "Art Is a Square"

[48] Nora Amin (B. 1970) is an Egyptian novelist, short story writer, translator, theatre director, performer, and cultural researcher.

[49] "She and the Impossible"

[50] "Midnight Sun"

[51] 'World Theatre Day - International Theatre Institute ITI'. Accessed 11 Dec. 2025. https://www.world-theatre-day.org/fathia_elassal.html

[52] Associates, Casarotto Ramsay &. 'Dalia Taha'. Accessed 1 Dec 2025. https://www.casarotto.co.uk/clients/dalia-taha.

Rama Haydar is a Syrian-Palestinian playwright and theatre director who studied Drama at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts and English Literature at the University of Damascus. Currently residing in Spain, she graduated from the High School of Dramatic Arts' Department of Stage Direction. She has participated in creative writing workshops across Syria, Lebanon, and Spain. She has directed plays *Hamlet Machine*. Her play *Desert of Light*[53] received an honorarium from Cornell University and was featured in readings at several international drama festivals, including the PEN World Voices Festival in New York City[54].

In the 21st century, Arab women playwrights and theatre practitioners have transformed performance into a powerful mix of personal expression and collective protest. Through festivals, digital platforms, and experimental collaborations, they continue to challenge silence, build community, and turn theatre into a space of liberation and memory. Their work addresses social and political issues while fostering solidarity and preserving cultural narratives. By redefining theatre, they assert vital voices that celebrate identity and resist oppression across the Arab world and its diasporas.

Conclusion

The history of women in Arab theatre reflects a remarkable journey of breaking societal taboos and pioneering new artistic spaces. Initially barred from performance due to social and religious constraints, women gradually emerged on stage during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially in Egypt and Lebanon, coinciding with broader socio-cultural reforms. Iconic figures like Munira al-Mahdiyyah and Fatimah Rushdi paved the way by becoming the first actresses and theatre company leaders, blending artistry with feminist awakening. Post-World War I expansion saw increased female presence on stage and in theatrical production, with women playwrights gaining recognition from the 1950s onward. Today, Arab women in theatre represent resilience and innovation, transforming the stage into a platform for social commentary and cultural expression.

[52] Associates, Casarotto Ramsay &. 'Dalia Taha'. Accessed 1 Dec 2025. https://www.casarotto.co.uk/clients/dalia-taha.

[53] "Desert of Light" by Rama Haydar is a tragicomic play set in the Yarmouk refugee camp outside Damascus during the Syrian civil war. It portrays the brutal siege on the camp and focuses on two Palestinian-Syrian refugees in their twenties who debate the best way to escape. Their conversation explores themes of love, resistance, exile, and the political and personal struggles faced by refugees.

[54] 'Faberllull'. Accessed 5 Dec. 2025. https://faberllull.cat/en/resident.cfm?id=42768&url=rama-haydar.htm.

4. References

Allen, R. (1984). Drama and audience: The case of Arabic theater. Theater Three, 6, 25–54.

Al-Khozai, M. A. (1984). The development of early Arabic drama, 1847–1900. Longman.

Aziza Amir. (2026, May 6). In Wikipedia. Retrieved May 6, 2026, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Aziza_Amir&oldid=1352736462

Casarotto Ramsay & Associates. (2025). Dalia Taha. Retrieved December 1, 2025, from https://www.casarotto.co.uk/clients/dalia-taha

FaberLlull. (2025). Rama Haydar. Retrieved December 5, 2025, from https://faberllull.cat/en/resident.cfm?id=42768&url=rama-haydar.htm

Fatima Rushdi. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved December 21, 2026, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatima_Rushdi

International Theatre Institute. (2025). Fathia El-Assal. World Theatre Day. Retrieved December 11, 2025, from https://www.world-theatre-day.org/fathia_elassal.html

Maarefa. (2026). Tahia Carioca. Retrieved January 1, 2026, from https://www.marefa.org

Rubin, D. (Ed.). (2000). World encyclopedia of contemporary theatre: The Arab world. Routledge.

Yaqub Sanu. (2026, March 12). In Wikipedia. Retrieved March 12, 2026, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yaqub_Sanu

How to cite this article:

Shanil, A. 2026. Empowered Stages: The Rise of Arab Women in Theatre TIJMR, 4 (2): 8–16.

TKM Arts College International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (TIJMR)
Vol. 5, No. 2 July 2026, 17 - 24

Contents lists available at www.tijmr.org

TKM Arts College
International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research
(TIJMR) ISSN (Online) : 2581-6519 / ISSN (Print) : 2582-130x

journal homepage – https://tijmr.org/index.php/journal

From Artransmission to Artransformation: The Journey of Storytelling in Kerala and Arabia

Ebrahim Najeem
Department of Arabic
TKM College of Arts and Science, Kollam, Kerala, India
Email: najeemtkmc@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

"Every art is first born in the pure innocence of tribal gatherings, then carried into the hands of priests, and finally sanctified into the communal rituals of religion". This reflection is not only about art's origin but about its dual journey-of Artransmission and Artransformation. Art never exists in isolation; like rivers, it flows, merges and takes new names in new lands. What we call today Kadhaprasangam in Kerala, or Maqamat in the Arab world, is part of this Artransmission-the living current through which stories travel, adapt and sanctify themselves in different tongues. In Kerala, Kadhaprasangam grew out of rustic folk songs and devotional gatherings, becoming a festive performance that carried epics, scriptures and folk- lore to common people, especially in the cultural heartlands of Kozhikode and Kannur. Across the seas, the Maqamat of al-Hamadhani and al-Hariri emerged as stations of eloquence, playful in wit, sharp in satire, yet equally communal in performance. Though distinct in tone-one devotional, the other satirical-both traditions reveal a shared reverence for the spoken word, a festival of voices where prose, poetry and memory intertwined. Ultimately, the study urges that oral art lives a double life: it travels across borders (Artransmission) and reshapes itself into new vessels (Artransformation). Both Kerala and the Arab world, though distant in geography, converge in their devotion to storytelling as sacred art-a practice into the living heritage of communities.'

Keywords: Artransmission, Artransformation, Cross-Cultural Exchange, Narrative Transformation

1. Introduction

"Every art is first born in the pure innocence of tribal gatherings, then carried into the hands of priests, and finally sanctified into the communal rituals of religion." This reflection on the journey of art captures its transformation from play into sacredness, from instinct into devotion. Story telling, among the earliest human arts, embodies this transition most powerfully-it begins around the fire, in whispered myths and shared laughter, and then flows into literature, ritual, and collective memory (Panikkar, 1995).

The Arab world, long before the advent of Islam, cultivated an extraordinary sensitivity to the spoken

Qass ibn Sa'idah al-Iyadi was a pre-Islamic Arab bishop, orator and sage from Najran, celebrated for his eloquence and prover- bial wisdom. He is remembered for delivering sermons at the 'Ukaz fair, where his rhetorical style anticipated Qur'anic cadence. Tradition holds that the Prophet Muhammed (SA) heard him preach, and some reports attribute to him the famous words: "He who lives, dies and he who dies is gone; and everything that is coming is near."

word. Qass bin Sa'da al-Ayadi, often re- garded as the father of the art of speech, shaped the rhythms of oratory that still echo in Arabic expressions today (Nicholson, 1907). Out of this oral matrix emerged with al-Khitab (oratory), which eventually gave birth to the Maqamah (Lyall, 1894). The Maqamat was more than entertainment it was a performance of intellect, wit, and cultural identity, refined by al-Hamadhani and al-Hariri into a genre of literary sophistication (Hamori, 1974).

On the opposite shore of the Indian Ocean, Kerala's Kadhaprasangam followed a parallel journey. Rooted in folk performance and temple culture, it blended narration, song, and drama into an oral art that educated and entertained village audiences alike. As Lorge Luis Borges reminds us, "Art is endless, like a river flowing, passing, yet remain- ing" (Borges, 1968). Like Arabia, storytelling in in Kerala was not a static tradition but a moving current absorbing myth, history, and performance into its flow. It transformed with colonial encounters, nationalist awakenings, and modern cultural transitions. Thomas Wolfe's reflection is apt here: "In the night-time, in the dark there, in all the sleeping silence of the earth, have we not heard the river, the rich immortal river, full of its strange dark time?" (Wolfe, 1940).

In this study, two interlinked concepts frame the cultural dynamics of storytelling. The first, Ar transmission, denotes the cross cultural journey of oral tradition the way stories migrated from Arabia to Malabar, from tribal gatherings to temple courtyards, carrying echoes of shared memory and devotion (Ramanujan, 1987). The second, Artransformation, addresses the metamorphosis of these traditions into new formats stage, cine-ma, radio and television where the spoken word found fresh vessels while preserving its ancestral core (Ong, 1982). Both concepts remind us that art is never created in isolation but transmitted, merged and reborn across borders and times, like reivers joining and parting (Toorawa, 1999).

Together, Artransmission illuminate the dual life of oral art: it travels and it transforms. It is at once migrant and a shapeshifter. To understand story telling solely as preservation would be incomplete; it must also be seen a translation-across languages, across geographies and across artistic media. Such a framework not only deepens our understanding of Kadhaprasangam and Maqamat but also opens pathways for comparative studies intraditions where art survives through both journey and metamorphosis. The introduction thus lays the groundwork for a historical, literary and cultural inquiry into how these traditions evolved, how women and audiences shaped their destiniesand how they later transitioned into form such as drama and cinema (Ganguly, 1997; Shulman. 1985).

1.2 Historical Analysis: Art transmission and the shaping of Oral Traditions

History does not record art as a sudden miracle. It records it as a slow weaving-threads of speech, song, and performance merging, knotting, and unravelling, only to be tied again in new forms. The theory of Artransmission reminds us that no art is born alone; it is always the child of another. Like rivers that branch and re-join, art flows from one source into many, carrying echoes of earlier voices (Panikkar, 1995).

In Arabia, this flow begins with the Khutbah-the speech of orators such as Qass bin Sa'da al-Ayad- i, whose style set the tone for Arabic eloquence (Nicholson, 1907). Th Qasida soon rose to prominence as the poetic vessel of memory, where tribal honour, love, and grief found immortal rhythm (Lyall, 1894). These forms did not remain isolated: gradually, the art of speech merged with the Qasida, and from their union, the Maqamah was born. With al-Hamadani and lat- er al-Hariri, the Maqamah crystalized into an art that was at once narrative, poetic, and performative oral literature that demanded both voice and presence (Hamori, 1974).

Kerala's story, though distant in geography, speaks in similar rhythm. Its Kadhaprasangamarose from temple performances, folk recitations, and de votional songs, becoming a narrative form that merged prose, poetry, and music into a single per formance. Like the Maqamah, Kadhaprasangam was never just a telling it was a staging of imagination, where audience gathered not only to listen but to live the story together.

The Artransmission between these traditions is not a matter of direct borrowing, but of shared human necessity: the need to preserve memory, to dramatize experience, to make art walk in the streets of common people (Toorawa, 2005). Yet transmission was only the first step. These oral forms, once woven into the fabric of community life, later underwent Artransformation moving into theatre, radio, cinema and television, where the voice found new vessels without losing its ancestral cadence. Thus, both traditions testify that story telling is never static: it travels (Artransmission) and it reshapes itself (Artransformation), binding past to present in living continuity.

1.3 The Route Map of Kerala's Kadhapra sangam: From Origins to Flourishing

If every art begins as a murmur in the village square, Kadhaprasangam was Kerala's whisper that grew into a resonant public voice. Its roots lie deep in ritual performances temple songs, Bhagavata Seva, Harikatha, and folk recitations that merged storytelling with devotion (Nambiar, 1989). These were not staged entertainments but spiritual gatherings, where narration carried both the weight of scripture and the fragrance of song. From these sacred beginnings, Kadhaprasangam stretched outward. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, performers began adapting religious tales into more secular and social narratives. They brought Mahabharata episodes to the stage one evening, and the next, narrated a tale of local reform or satire (Menon, 2007). The performance style fused prose narration, poetic verses, and music, creating an art that was both intimate and expansive like a single storyteller transforming into a chorus.

By the mid-twentieth century, Kadhaprasangam had become the people's theatre, addressing issues of caste, inequality, and social reform. Visionary artists such as V. Sambasivan turned it into a platform of conscience, where art was not only entertainment but education, a mirror held to society.

Yet, the route map of Kadhaprasangam is not a straight line but a branching tree. Some branches leaned toward devotional retellings, other toward political awakening, and still others toward popular entertainment. Each branch carried the same sap: the desire to reach people directly, without the mediation of complex stage machinery.

In this essence, Kadhaprasangam is the story of an art that walked with the people born from temples, nurtured in village squares, and finally flowering into cultural stages across Kerala (Panikkar, 1995). It is both memory and movement, a performance that listens as much as it speaks.

1.4 Comparative Bridge through the The- ory of Artransmission

Every art form is like a river it does not remain where it was born, but flows, merges, and reshapes itself in new landscapes. This is the essence of what I call Artransmission : the merging and re-molding of art across geographies, histories, and sensibilities. Just as

Kadhaprasangam is a traditional performing art from of Kerala that combines storytelling, music and dramatic narration. Root- ed in oral traditions and popularized in the early 20th century, it often draws from epics, folklore and social themes, blending performance with social commentary. Typically presented by a solo narrator-singer accompanied by musicians, it served as both entertainment and a medium of cultural transmission before the rise of cinema and television.

The Maqamat are a classical Arabic literary genre developed in the 10th century, consisting of episodic tales in rhymed prose (Saja') interwoven with poetry. They typically feature a witty, eloquent rogue who uses rhetorical brilliance to navigate various social settings. Initiated by Bad'al-Zaman al-Hamadhani (d.1008) and later perfected al-Hariri of Basra (d.1122), the Maqamat reflect the sophistication of Arabic balagha (rhetoric) and served as both entertainment and a pedagogical text for students of language and style.

V. Sambasivan (1929-1996) was one of the most celebrated exponents of Kadhaprasangam, the musical storytelling art form of Kerala. Known for his powerful voice, dramatic narration and ability to weave social critique into performance, he brought stories from epics, world classics and contemporary literature to popular audiences. His renditions of works like Less Misérables and Meghasandesham helped elevate Kadhaprasangam into a respected medium of cultural expression and social awareness.

Arabic Qasida merged with al-Khitab (Speech) and blossomed into the Maqamah form (Al-Jahiz, 9th century), Kerala's Kadhaprasangam was born from devotional recitations, but absorbed the currents of social reform, music, and theatre (Pillai, 2000).

Both were not isolated creations but living fusions. No art is born alone-it is always a child of earlier voices, carrying the echoes of what come before. In this, Arabic and Malayalam traditions stands as mirrors to one another, reflecting how art migrates transforms and survives.

As one Arab critic once noted, "Speech was the soul of the Arab; poetry its garment" (Ibn Qutqibah, 9th century) [17]. To this, Kerala answered centuries later with Kadhaprasangam, where Story was the heart of the people; music its rhythm. This Artransmission a theory of art as a continuous merging-allows us to see the roots of one tradition growing into the branches of another.

1.5 Women's Representation in Both Traditions

"No tradition is complete without the echo of women's voices-even when those voices are silenced in the texts, yet alive in the performance." In Kerala's Kadhaprasangam, women gradually carved a subtle but profound space. Though the earliest performers were men, women entered step by step the stage first as listeners, then as narrators and later as full participants in weaving the tales of epics, folklore, and scriptures. Their presence transformed the art into a dialogue not only between gods and men but also between women and their communities. Oral histories from Malabar recall women artists like Thankamani Amma, Ramla Beegum, and Aysha Beegum, who brought the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and local Islamic legends into intimate spaces. Through rhythm, music and narration, they allowed households and communities to experience devotion as performance. Their voices did not merely narrate stories; they sanctioned them turning performance into prayer, narration into remembrance (Panikkar, 1997). Some stories like Gul Sanowar, Laila Manjoo and Badrul Muneer-Husn al Jamal are still remembered nostalgically, even within conventionally rigid religious communities. In this way, Kadhaprasangam in Malabar became a bridge between art and worship, between story telling and supplication until, over times, it shed its traditional dress and moved into the forms of drama and theatre.

By contrast, the Islamic storytelling tradition of Arabia carried the Maqamat into mosques, assemblies and open gatherings where the very art of eloquence itself became a form of devotion. While the texts of al-Hamadhani and al-Hariri were dominated by male narrators, the devotional Qisas al-Ambiya' (Stories of the Prophets) tradition opened doors for women as listeners, transmitters within households, and making them keepers of sacred memory (Lyall, 1894). Although absent in textual authorship, women were present in gatherings as listeners shaping the reception of tales. Mothers, sisters and grandmothers in Arabia often transmitted prophetic stories, weaving piety into performance, ensuring that the accounts of Nuh, Ibrahim, Musa and 'Isa reached the intimate corners

The Ramayana, attributed to Valmiki, is an ancient Indian epic narrating the exile of Prince Rama, the abduction of Sita and the triumph or dharma over adharma.

The Mahabharata, attributed to Vyasa, is the longest epic in world literature, centering on the Kurukshetra war and exploring duty (dharma), fate and human conflict.

Gul-Sanowar is one of the celebrated Kadhaprasangams performed by Ramla Beegum, a pioneering female storyteller in the tradition. Trough poetic narration and emotive, she brought to life the tale of love, sacrifice and destiny that resonated deeply with audiences.

The famous Persian-Arabic romance, Laila Majnu attributed to Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209) though the tale of Qays and Laila existed earlier in Arab oral tradition. Adapted into Mappilappattu and Qissa literature through Moidu Moulavi and other Muslim scholars who translated Persian-Arabic Qissa for Kerala audiences. Popularized on stage by Ramla Beegum.

The tale of Badrul Muneer Husn al-Jamal, first composed as a Persian Qissa and later absorbed into Arabic storytelling, entered the cultural fabric of Kerala through the Mappila tradition. The Poetic rendering in Arabi-Malayalam was crafted by Moyinkutty Vaidar (1857-1892), hailed as the Mahakavi of Mappila literature. Later, Pulikkottil Hyder (1879-1979) expanded and adapted such Qissa into Malayalam narrative form, ensuring their survival in popular performance genres like Kadhaprasangam.

Their silent engagement, their laughter at satire, and their careful remembrance the tradition across generations (Hameen-Anttila, 2022).

Thus, women's storytelling became an invisible mosque and temple of sound; a striking parallel emerges: it carried the fragrance of incense and the echo of prayer, reminding us that theatre of faith is not always built of stone-it can be built of breath and memory (Stetkevvych, 1993). When Aysha Beegum performed tales from Islamic lore, the rhythm of her voice resembled dhikr, the remembrance of God. Similarly, when an Arabian grandmother recited the story of Yusuf's patience or Maryam's devotion, her narration was not mere performance it was an act of remembrance, devotion expressed in words, something close to worship. Both traditions remind us that, though women's names were often erased from written records, their voices carried faith, art and memory across generations.

Updating the Data of Storytelling from Oral Gatherings to Stage and Screen "Storytelling, like memory, does not vanish-it transforms its vessel. What once echoed in the open air of 'Ukaz or beneath the festival tents of Malabar gradually found new stages: the proscenium theatre, the radio, the cinema hall. The stories were not abandoned; rather, they were uploaded int new formats, carried forward through different rhythms of sound and light.

In Kerala, Kadhaprasangam began to wane in village squares as its themes were retold in modern theatre, television serials and Malayalam cinema (Panikkar, 1995). What was once intimate sung with harmonium and table before a gathered community-was now reframed for the silent gaze of a seated audience in the dark. Similarly, in the Arab world, the oral maqamah and qasida traditions gradually gave way to the novel and the stage play, later expanding int Arabic cinema (Stetkevych, 1993).

This migration of art ensured its survival, but a cost: the communal closeness of storytelling festivals began to fade. Where once the audience's sights, laughter and interjections shaped the performance, the new mediums required passive reception. Yet, this transition also birthed new forms of creativity cinema added visual metaphor, theatre introduced collective dialogue and television carried stories into households that had never before heard them.

Here we may introduce the concepts of artrans-formation: if artransmission denotes the cultural journey of oral traditions across seas and centuries, then artransformation signifies their renew- al across artistic mediums. Storytelling, in this sense, became a wanderer across formats, carrying the essence of its origins while wearing the garments of new art. It was not lost; it was translated into new languages of performance.

2. Methodology of the Study

The study does not merely trace a line of history; it listens to echoes, compares voices and seeks to capture the rhythm of cultural exchange. Its methodology rest on a comparative literary framework, where the Maqamat of Arabia and the Kadhaprasangam of Kerala are placed side by side not to measure superiority, but to unveil the shared veins of Artransmission and the transformations that followed.

The approach is tree-fold:

» Historical-Analytical Method: The roots of Maqamat, born in the eloquence of al-Hamad-hani and al-Hariri, are traced alongside the rise of Kadhaprasangam in Kerala's Malabar, nourished by Islamic devotional traditions and later reshaped by colonial encounters

In Islamic tradition, dhikr, literally "remembrance, refers to act of devotion in which the believer recalls and glorifies Allah through recitation, prayer, or meditation. While 'ibadah (worship) is reserved solely for Allah, practices such as storytelling, poet- ry or song-when infused with reverence may be understood as forms of dhikr, expressions of remembrance rather than formal worship.

Ukaz, Du al-Majaz and Dhu al-Majannah were the most renowned pre-Islamic Arabian fairs. Beyond commerce, they became vibrant cultural arenas where poets, orators and tribal leaders gathered for contest, alliances and displays of eloquence. Among them, 'Ukaz was the most prestigious, held annually near Ta'if during Dhu'l-Qa'da. Medieval tradition holds that the finest poems recited there were honored as Al-Mu'allaqat and said to be suspended on the Ka'ba-whether literallyor symbolically, they came to represent the highest achievements of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.

(Lyall, 1894); (Panikkar, 1997).

» Textual and Performative Study: Selected texts and performances are examined: the satirical wit of Maqamat and the devotional cadences of Kadhaprasangam. Transcripts, manuscripts, recordings and eyewitness accounts together provide material for analyzing structure, language and audience reception (Lyons, 2005).

» Ethnographic Reflection: Conversation with artists and audiences in Kozhikode and Kannur shed light on how Kadhaprasangam continues to live on in spaces in mosques festivals and village gatherings even as it faces pressures from cinema and digital media (Panikkar, 2001).

3. Findings and Recommendations

The comparative journey between Maqamat and Kadhaprasangam does not end in opposition, but in resonance. Several truths emerge:

» Both forms remind us that the spoken word is not meant to sleep on paper it is a living breath, meant to be performed, heard and shared. Whether in the bustling markets of Basra or the village squares of Malabar, storytelling was always a festival of voices.

» Though their accents differ Maqamat woven with satire and wit, Kadhaprasangam pulsing with devotion and prayer both bind communities in the same way: by weaving memory, imagination and faith into a collective rhythm.

» The path of Artransmission is clear: like rivers that branch and re-join, stories traveled through traders, pilgrims and poets, flowing between Arabia and Kerala, reshaping themselves while carrying echoes of older voices.

» A striking difference lies in the role of women: in Kerala, female voices entered the arena of Kadhaprasangam, while the Maqamat remained almost entirely male. This contrast reveals the elasticity of oral art, adapting differently to each soil.

» Above all, both traditions show that storytelling is never only entertainment it is also prayer, memory and moral compass, a sacred art that unites the human heart with its community.

Another dimension worth exploring is the parallel between the Arabic Maqamat and the Western form of the Dramatic Monologue. Both employ a performative voice, a carefully constructed person and an interplay between narrator and audience that transcends time and geography. Al-Hamad-hani and al-Hariri crafted characters who not only narrated but enacted roles, engaging listeners in ways similar to Browning's monologues centuries later (Lyall, 1894).

This comparative lens could extend the study beyond local or regional traditions, situating Maqamat as a bridge in the global narrative heritage. It reminds us that art, when transmitted, does not remain confined to a single soil; it germinates across cultures, findings new blossoms in unexpected lands (Panikkar, 1995).

» Thus, while the present study has mapped Kerala's Kadhaprasangam and Arabic story telling, future research may expand toward global literary traditions such as the dramatic monologue and picaresque narratives, positioning these forms within a wider network of world storytelling.

4. Conclusion

No study is ever truly complete, just as no river ends in itself. Every current flow into another, carrying fragments of soil, memory and light. Story telling, too,

The qasida is the classical Arabic ode, often exceeding sixty lines, with a monorhyme and a single meter. Its traditional structure comprises three movement: The nasib (amatory prelude, recalling lost love or homeland), the rahil (journey section, often with vivid desert imagery) and the madih (praise or moralconclusion). Rooted in pre-Islamic tribal culture, the qasida served as both art and archive-preserving memory, honor, grief and identity through rhythm and eloquence.

Cultural exchange in literary traditions often takes the form of what anthropologists' call “contact zones”-spaces where lan- guages, rituals and performances intermingle reshaping one another through both adaption and resistance. In the Indian Ocean world, such exchanges were not abstract but lived: Arab traders, Sufi saints and local storytellers shared not only goods but also myths, songs and performative styles.

Dramatic monologue is a type of poem or speech or both in which a single character speaks to a silent audience

resists closure-it seeks new shores, new audiences, new vessels of expression. What seems like an ending is but a merging, a continuation in another form.

In this way, the Maqamat and Kadhaprasangam remind us that art is not a finished monument but a living river. It only finds wholeness when traditions converse, when cultures embrace. As creation itself teaches us, the first beauty was not in isolation but in union: Adam and Eve, two bodies, one spirits. And in the Indian imagination, the vision of Ardhanariswara the divine fusion of masculine and feminine-becomes a symbol of that truth: perfection lies not in separation, but togetherness.

It is for this reason that the title of this study, From Artransmission to Artransformation, was chosen. For what begins as transmission one voice passed to another, one tradition echoing into new lands inevitably becomes transformation, reshaped by the soil it touches, reborn in new forms of art. Thus, this work, like the rivers it describes, does not claim completion. It offers instead a confluence-a place where traditions meet, flow together and remind us that storytelling, in every age, is a bridge across difference and a song of shared humanity. As a wind gathers scents from every garden it passes, so too does art carry fragments of every tradition it touches, merging them into a single, living fragrance familiar to every common. Like Andre Breton says, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." (Bredon, 1924).

Dramatic monologue is a type of poem or speech or both in which a single character speaks to a silent audience, revealing their personality, thoughts and emotions through the speech. The speaker is distinct form the poet and the monologue often provides insight into psychological or moral aspects of the character.

Rober Browning's dramatic monologues are poems in which a single speaker addresses a silent listener, revealing their inner psychology, moral dilemmas and charter through speech. Browning's innovation lies in giving the reader access to the speaker's consciousness while often leaving moral judgment to the audience, as seen in poems like My Las Duchess and Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister. (Browning, 1842-1889); Baldick, 2015).

Adam and Eve are regarded in the Abrahamic traditions as the first human beings created by God. Their story, recounted in the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible and in the Qur'an, symbolizes the origins of humanity, the duality of male and female and the unity creation.

Walter Pater (1839-1894) was an English essayist, critic and humanist, best known for Studies in the History of Renaissance (1873), where he articulated the influential idea that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music."

5. References

Al-Jahiz, Abu Uthman Amr ibn Bahr. Al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin. Cairo: Maktabat al-Khaniji, 1948.

Breton, Andre (1969). Manifesto of Surrealism. Translated by Richar Seaver and Helen T. Lane. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Ganguly, Suranjan. (1997). The Films of Emancipation. New Delhi: Anthem Press.

Hameen-Anttila, Jaako. (2022). Maqamah: A History of a Genre. Edinburg: Edinburg University Press.

Ibn Qutaybah, Abu Muhammad Abd Allah ibn Muslim. Kitab al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'ara'. Ahmad Muhammad Shakir (1953-Edited). Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1953.

Lyall, C. (1894). The Translations of Ancient Arabic Poetry: Chiefly Pre-Islamic. Condon: Willams and Norgate. Hamori, Andras (1974). On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press. Borges, Jorge Luis (1968).A Personal Anthology, Anthony Kerrigan (Edited), New York, Grove Press, New York.

Lyons, Malcolm C. (2005). The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Storytelling. Cambridge: Cambridge Uni- versity Press.

Menon, A. Sreedhara (2007). Cultural Heritage of Kerala: An Introduction. New Delhi: D.C. Books. Nair, P. Thankappan (1993). Kerala: Literature and Culture. Calcutta: Punthi Pustak.

Nambiyar, A.K. (1989). Keralathile Nadan Kalakal (Malayalam). Kottayam: Mangalodayam-Kerala Council for Historical Research's curated list of Rituals and Folk Arts Sources.

Nicholson, Reynold Alleyne. 1907. A Literary History of the Arabs. London: T.F. Unwin.

Ong, W.J. (1882). Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World. London: Methuen.

Panikkar, K.N. (1995), Culture, Ideology, Hegemony: Intellectuals and Social Consciousness in Colonial India. New Delhi: Tulika.

Panikkar, K.N. (1997). Culture, Ideology, Hegemony: Intellectuals and Social Consciousness in Colonial India. New Delhi: Tulika Books.

Panikkar, K.N. (2001). Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar, 1836-1921. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Pillai,A.N. (2000). Kadhaprasangam: Oru Charitra Padanam (Malayalam). Thiruvananthapuram: State In- stitute of Languages.

Ramanujan, A.K. (1990). Who needs Folklore? The Relevance of Oral Traditions to South Asian Studies. Honolulu: Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa.

Shulman, David (1985). Tamil Lyric Tradition: A Study in Tamil Literature and Hinduism. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Stetkevych, S. (1993). The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Toorawa, Shawkat M. (2005). Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur and Arabic Writerly Culture: A Ninth-Century Bookman in Baghdad. London & New York: Routledge Curzon

Wolfe, Thomas (1940).Of Time and the River: A Legend of Man's Hunger in His Youth. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

How to cite this article:

Najeem E. 2026. From Artransmission to Artransformation: The Journey of Storytelling in Kerala and Arabia. TIJMR. 4 (2): 17-24

TKM Arts College International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (TIJMR)
Vol. 5, No. 2 July 2026, 25 - 28

Contents lists available at www.tijmr.org

TKM Arts College
International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research
(TIJMR) ISSN (Online) : 2581-6519 / ISSN (Print) : 2582-130x

journal homepage – https://tijmr.org/index.php/journal

War and Trauma in Sinan Antoon's Novel: The Corpse Washer

N Shamnad
Department of Arabic
University College, Thiruvananthapuram
Email: shamnadmail@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Iraqi-American writer Sinan Antoon's Arabic novel The Corpse Washer explores the profound psychological and cultural impacts of war on individuals and communities in post-2003 Iraq. Through the narrative of Jawad, a Shiite youth trained in the family tradition of corpse washing, Antoon examines trauma, iden- tity crisis, and the struggle for meaning amidst pervasive violence. The novel utilizes narrative techniques such as flashbacks, memory fragmentation, and symbolism to portray the disintegration of personal and collective identities. Drawing upon trauma theory and postcolonial perspectives, this study analyzes how prolonged exposure to war reshapes individual identity and social cohesion, highlighting Antoon's contri- bution to understanding postwar Iraqi society.

Keywords *: Cultural Trauma, Identity Crisis, Iraq, Postcolonial literature, Sinan Antoon.*

1. Introduction

Sinan Antoon's The Corpse Washer (originally published in Arabic as Wahdaha Shajara al-Rum-man, 2013, translated in to English by the author himself in 2014) provides a penetrating explo- ration of the human psyche under conditions of protracted war. Set in post 2003 Iraq, the novel follows Jawad, a young Shiite man who inherits the family profession of corpse washing, a ritual deeply tied to religious and cultural traditions. This ancestral duty, intended to honor the dead, becomes a locus of both psychological torment and moral reflection for Jawad, who must navigate a world riddled with pervasive violence, sectarian strife, and political instability (Mankhi et al. 2020).

The novel illuminates the intricate relationship between individual identity and collective experience in a society marked by recurring cycles of violence. Jawad's personal trajectory his alienation from familial obligations, his exposure to trauma, and his search for autonomy - reflects the broader struggle of postwar Iraqi society to recon- cile personal desires with communal and cultural imperatives (Mhoodar 2025). Through a combination of detailed narrative description, symbolic motifs, and explorations of Shiite ritual practices, Antoon presents a nuanced study of trauma, cultural erosion, and the psychological consequences of prolonged conflict.

This paper examines how war and trauma precipitate an identity crisis in The Corpse Washer. It argues that Antoon not only portrays individual suffering but also illuminates the collective psychological and cultural repercussions of postwar Iraq. By employing trauma theory, postcolonial analysis, and close textual reading, the paper investigates the interplay of personal and national identity, the effects of cultural disruption, and the narrative strategies that articulate the complexities of

life in a war-torn society.

War and Trauma: The Psychological Impact Trauma, both psychological and social, is central to The Corpse Washer. Jawad's encounters with death and violence profoundly shape his mental and emotional landscape, producing symptoms typical of prolonged trauma: flashbacks, nightmares, pervasive helplessness, and moral disorientation. Antoon emphasizes how exposure to constant violence distorts memory and perception, leaving the protagonist in a liminal state where past and present converge chaotically (Mankhi et al. 2020).

From the opening chapters, Jawad is portrayed as haunted by the images of corpses he has washed, witnessing the fragility of life and the omnipresence of death in postwar Baghdad. Flashbacks to moments of innocence are juxtaposed with violent encounters, highlighting the rupture in temporal continuity that trauma produces (Mhoodar 2021). The psychological fragmentation is compounded by the societal normalization of violence, where sectarian attacks, political instability, and urban decay shape daily life. In this context, Jawad's mental distress is not an isolated phenomenon but a reflection of the collective trauma endured by Iraqi society.

Scholars such as Cathy Caruth (1996) emphasize that traumatic events often exceed the capacity of consciousness to process them, leaving survivors trapped in repetitive reliving of the experience. Antoon demonstrates this principle through Jawad's cyclical experiences of witnessing death and performing ritual washing, which evoke repeated psychological distress while reinforcing the inescapability of violence. Mankhi et al. argue that Antoon's depiction exemplifies how trauma can disrupt personal development, eroding a sense of agency and continuity in the self .

The novel also portrays the impact of trauma on family and communal relationships. Jawad's father, who embodies traditional authority and ritual continuity, becomes a source of moral tension, representing the inescapable weight of cultural and religious expectations. The intergenerational conflict highlights how trauma reverberates beyond the individual, affecting familial cohesion and the transmission of cultural identity (Mhoodar 2025).

Identity Crisis: Personal and Collective Dimensions Jawad's identity crisis is both personal and collective, illustrating the complex interrelation between individual agency and social expectation. Personally, he struggles to reconcile his de- sire for autonomy with the familial obligation to continue the corpse-washing tradition. His pursuit of art and intellectual engagement represents an attempt to carve out a self-defined identity in a society dominated by violence and moral ambiguity. Yet, his past, cultural heritage, and the omnipresent reality of war continually hinder his autonomy (Mankhi et al. 96).

This tension reflects a broader societal struggle. Postwar Iraq is depicted as a landscape of cultural disintegration, sectarian division, and political instability, where traditional roles are disrupted and individuals are left negotiating fractured social structures. Jawad's alienation mirrors the collective disorientation of a society struggling to redefine itself after decades of oppression and conflict (Mhoodar 2020). The erosion of cultural institutions, religious practices, and communal trust exacerbate the identity crisis, suggesting that personal identity cannot be fully reconstructed without societal stability.

The novel also examines exile and displacement as components of identity disruption. Jawad's internalized sense of alienation parallels the experiences of those physically or psychologically uprooted by war. His oscillation between adherence to tradition and pursuit of personal freedom encapsulates the tension between inherited identity and self determined identity. Antoon illustrates that war not only disrupts social structures but also destabilizes the internal frameworks by which individuals understand themselves, reinforcing the inseparability of personal and collective identity (Mankhi et al. 98).

Narrative Techniques: Memory, Flashbacks, and Symbolism Antoon's narrative strategies reinforce the depiction of trauma and identity crisis. Non-linear.

storytelling, characterized by frequent flashbacks and shifts in temporal perspective, mirrors the protagonist's fragmented consciousness. Memory is not a reliable guide; past traumas intrude upon the present, blurring distinctions between events, emotional states, and temporal reality (Mhoodar 2021). These narrative disruptions effectively immerse the reader in the protagonist's psychological experience.

Symbolism is central to Antoon's literary technique. Water, corpses, and artistic creation function as recurring motifs with layered significance. Water signifies purification and ritual cleansing, reflecting both spiritual and social attempts to restore order amidst chaos. Corpses symbolize both mortality and the omnipresence of societal violence, while Jawad's art represents a pursuit of meaning and agency in a world defined by destruction (Mankhi et al, 2020).

Additionally, Antoon juxtaposes the intimate and the historical, blending Jawad's personal narrative with the broader sociopolitical context of Iraq. This interweaving of microcosm and macrocosm illustrates how individual identity is inextricable from historical and cultural realities. By employing these techniques, Antoon not only portrays trauma but also critiques the societal conditions that perpetuate it, emphasizing the interdependence of personal suffering and collective history.

1.2 Cultural Context: Shiite Traditions and Postwar Iraq

The Corpse Washer is grounded in Shiite cultural and religious practices, particularly rituals surrounding death and purification. Jawad's initial commitment to corpse washing exemplifies adherence to familial and communal expectations, reflecting a deeply rooted cultural identity. Ritual serves both a spiritual and social function, providing structure and continuity amidst societal instability (Mhoodar 2021).

However, as war intensifies, these rituals become sites of tension and alienation. The act of washing corpses, once a sacred duty, is transformed into a source of psychological burden, symbolizing the intrusion of pervasive violence into cultural life. Postwar Iraq provides a context where sectarian conflict, infrastructural collapse, and moral uncertainty disrupt established practices, forcing individuals like Jawad to navigate competing de- mands of tradition, personal morality, and survival (Mankhi et al, 2020).

Antoon's depiction of cultural disintegration demonstrates the fragility of social cohesion in war-torn societies. The novel highlights the necessity of cultural and ritual practices for identity formation while illustrating how their erosion contributes to both individual and collective crises. In doing so, Antoon situates his narrative within a larger postcolonial discourse, examining the longterm effects of political and military interventions on societal structures and cultural memory.

2. Conclusion

Sinan Antoon's The Corpse Washer offers a multifaceted examination of war, trauma, and identity in post 2003 Iraq. Through Jawad's experiences, the novel portrays the profound psychological consequences of violence and the complexities of negotiating personal and collective identity amidst societal upheaval. Antoon's use of non-linear narrative, symbolic motifs, and cultural contextualization effectively communicates the fragmented and unstable realities of postwar life.

The novel underscores the inextricability of personal identity from cultural heritage and collective experience. By highlighting the interplay between trauma, memory, and ritual, Antoon contributes to the understanding of postwar Iraqi society while offering a universal meditation on the human condition in times of conflict. The Corpse Washer stands as a critical work in contemporary war literature, illuminating the enduring challenges of identity formation and cultural preservation in societies marked by persistent violence.

3. References

Antoon, Sinan. The Corpse Washer. Translated by the author, Yale University Press, 2014.

Antoon, Sinan. Wahdaha Shajara al-Rumman. Manshurat Jamal, Beirut, 2013.

Al-Moosawi, ASH. Magical Realism in Sinan Antoon's The Corpse Washer, Bayana Journal, 2025.

Bahoora, Haytham. Writing the Dismembered Nation: The Aesthetics of Horror in Iraqi Literature. Middle East Report, no. 268, 2013.

Blanchot, Maurice. The Writing of the Disaster. Translated by Ann Smock, University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

Bouzennada, Dahbia, and Maroua Touahria. Traces of Woundedness and Ruination in Postwar Iraqi Fic- tion: Sinan Antoon's The Corpse Washer as a Case Study. Larbi Tebessi University, 2023.

Caruth, Cathy. Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

LaCapra, Dominick. Writing History, Writing Trauma. Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.

Mahmoud, Radwa Ramadan. War and Violence in Sinan Antoon's The Corpse Washer. International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature, vol. 5, no. 2, 2016.

Mankhi, Azhar Hameed, et al. Prolonged War Trauma in Sinan Antoon's The Corpse Washer. International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change, vol. 12, no. 5, 2020.

Mhoodar, Rana Ali. "Traces of Woundedness and Ruination in Postwar Iraqi Fiction: Sinan Antoon's The Corpse Washer as a Case Study." University of Tebessa Repository, 2021.

Rob, IAIA. "A Translation Analysis of Sinan Antoon's Language in his The Corpse Washer", NAJAH re- pository thesis, 2017.

How to cite this article:

Shamnad N. 2026. War and Trauma in Sinan Antoon's Novel: The Corpse Washer. TIJMR. 4(2): 25-28

Contents lists available at www.tijmr.org

TKM Arts College
International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research
(TIJMR) ISSN (Online) : 2581-6519 / ISSN (Print) : 2582-130x

journal homepage – https://tijmr.org/index.php/journal

Punitive Therapies and the Question of Ethics in Cinematic Psychiatry : A Study of Select Malayalam Films

S M Niyas[1*]
[1]*Postgraduate and Research Department of English*
T.K.M. College of Arts and Science
[*]*Postgraduate and Research Department of English*
Maharaja's College. Ernakulam-682011, Kerala, India
Email- niyassm@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examines staging of psychiatry in select Malayalam films as a nexus of medical practice, social authority, and gendered regulation. Through a close analysis of Ulladakkam and Thalavattam, it traces the presentation of psychiatric institutions as arenas where treatment converges with surveillance, emotional silencing, and the management of deviance. Drawing on the notions of Michel Foucault, Nicholas Rose and Peter Sedwick, the discussion highlights the ways diagnosis, therapy, and clinical authority structure the identity of the patient and dictate the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. The films foreground the capacity of psychiatry to categorise suffering, suppress memory, and redefine subjectivity within moral and political frameworks. By situating madness within networks of trauma, gender hierarchy, and institutional control, this study demonstrates how cinema interrogates the ethical tensions of psychiatric care, and acknowledges the intimate vulnerabilities of those subjected to its gaze.

Keywords *: Ethics, Gender, Institutional Power, Madness, Psychiatry*

1. Introduction: An Overview of Psychiatry

Psychiatry, the medical discipline concerned with diagnosing and treating mental disorders, has evolved through shifting medical, cultural, and philosophical paradigms. From ancient rituals of exorcism to contemporary neurochemical research, its history depicts changing ideas of mind, identity, and social order. Early societies such as

Mesopotamia and Egypt explained mental disturbance through divine punishment or demonic possession, while the Hebrew Bible framed madness in moral terms. A decisive turn came with classical Greece, where Hippocrates attributed mental illness to imbalances in bodily humours and emphasised observation over superstition. Roman physicians like Galen refined these methods, and scholars of the Islamic Golden Age, notably Avicenna, advanced humane treatments and systematic classification.

In medieval Europe, Christian theology reasserted supernatural explanations, and asylums like London's Bethlem became places of confinement rather than care. The Renaissance revived anatomical studies and tentative medical approaches, preparing the ground for the Enlightenment. Figures such as Philippe Pinel and William Tuke introduced "moral treatment" that stressed structured routines and respect for patients, symbolising the gradual professionalization of psychiatry.

The nineteenth century brought widespread asylum building and systematic classification by Emil Kraepelin, even as overcrowding and neglect limited therapeutic aims. Freud's psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century redirected attention to unconscious conflicts and subjective experience, while biological psychiatry pursued somatic treatments from electroconvulsive therapy to early psychopharmacology, often raising ethical dilemmas.

Post–World War II developments such as antipsychotic and antidepressant drugs enabled deinstitutionalisation, although inadequate community care produced new social problems. The DSM-III of 1980 shifted psychiatry toward a descriptive, symptom-based model that enhanced diagnostic reliability but also invited accusations of overmedicalisation in which sadness has transformed ordinary distress into a disorder. From the 1980s onward, critiques in line with feminists, Foucauldians, and anti-psychiatrists questioned the authority of psychiatry, with Michel Foucault tracing how institutions defined and managed deviance under the guise of care.

Despite the influence of psychiatry on everyday life, sociology has often treated it as a secondary topic within studies of deviance or medicalisation. Earlier critiques, focused on the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s and 70s, risk overlooking contemporary realities such as community care, psychopharmacology, and patient advocacy. Research frequently privileges institutional power over the lived experiences of the patients, and remains dominated by Eurocentric perspectives, neglecting global contexts where psychiatry intersects with traditional healing, colonial histories, and structural inequalities. Methodological reliance on textual analysis and case studies has further limited insight into the diverse practices and negotiations within psychiatric care.

A more robust sociological approach draws on Foucault's analyses of power, knowledge, and subjectivity to reveal psychiatry as a historically contingent system that governs through norms and classifications. Building on theorists like Nikolas Rose and Peter Sedwick, this perspective examines how psychiatric expertise circulates beyond clinics into schools, workplaces, and digital cultures, shaping identities through self-regulation as much as institutional authority.

2. Review of Literature

The depiction of mental illness in media, particularly in cinema and television, significantly shapes public perception and contributes to the perpetuation or mitigation of stigma associated with these conditions. Indeed, several studies have focussed on pervasive negative portrayals in popular media and the way in which it constructs detrimental stereotypes and misinforms audiences.

Alastair M. Morrison's "Psych Ward Gothic: Melodrama, Hospitalisation Anxiety and a Case for the Humanities in Psychiatric Research" conceptualises psychiatric spaces through a gothic dimension, making the argument that melodramatic tropes encode anxieties about confinement and loss of agency. Expanding the focus to Indian contexts, Badr Ratnakaran et al.'s "Psychiatric Disorders in Malayalam Cinema" surveys diagnostic patterns and stereotypes in Malayalam films. Anoop M. Menon's "Representation of Therapy and Therapists in Indian Movies and TV Series: An Examination of Accuracy, Influence, and Perception" evaluates the professional depiction of therapists, and notes the prevailing discrepancies between clinical realities and melodramatic simplifications. Gayatri Bhatia et al., in "Movies and Matters of the Mind: Portrayal of Psychiatric Illnesses in Bollywood over Last Two Decades," undertake a content analysis that reveals both incremental shifts towards empathy and the persistence of stigma in Bollywood narratives. Earlier, "Media and Mental Illness: Relevance to India" by Susanta Kumar Padhy contextualised these portrayals within the context of Indian media by arguing that popular cinema significantly shapes public literacy about psychiatric conditions. Collectively, these works establish that Indian cinema operates as a crucial discursive site where psychiatry is simultaneously disseminated, distorted, and debated. However, no existing study has undertaken a sustained and theoretical examination of Malayalam commercial films through

the combined frameworks of sociology of psychiatry and medical humanities. And this lacuna underlines the significance of the present study.

3. Cinematic Psychiatry

Cinema provides a vivid site for exploring the dynamics of psychiatry. Malayalam films, in particular, weave psychiatry into narratives of gender, family, and morality, and expose the ethical tensions and cultural assumptions embedded in psychiatric practice. Far from merely portraying mental illness, these films function as cultural diagnostics, and reveal the mode in which psychiatry operates as both a medical discipline and a mechanism of social power.

In Malayalam cinema, the portrayal of psychiatry has evolved into a commentary on medicine, power, and the fragility of human experience. Films taken for this study are *Ulladakkam* and *Thalavattam*. They do not merely depict psychological illness, but stage it within institutional frameworks that shape how madness is perceived, managed, and contained. These narratives rarely explore healing as mutual understanding, instead, they foreground a world where diagnosis replaces dialogue and the clinic speaks louder than the individual. The psychiatric institution in these films operates not as a place of care but as a system of order that disciplines behaviour, suppresses dissent, and redefines identity. Through mise-en-scène, editing patterns and the calculated use of silence, the films under study craft a visual language that critiques the medicalisation of suffering and the authority that legitimises it. In this cinematic constellation, psychiatry shifts focus from the mind itself to the mechanisms that strive to fix, frame, and finalise it.

4. Narrating the Female Patient: The Case of Ulladakkam

The Malayalam film *Ulladakkam* (1991), directed by Kamal, offers more than a clinical story of trauma and recovery. It dramatizes the socio-political functioning of psychiatric discourse in late twentieth-century India where the unequal distribution of authority and the interpretive power of the clinician replace the voice of the distressed individual. Madness, rather than being allowed to speak in its own language, is translated into diagnostic categories, observed through clinical tools, and narrated by those deemed rational. In this structure, the psychiatrist assumes the role of interpreter, determining what counts as truth and what must be dismissed as delusion. The inner life of the patient, shaped by trauma, memory, and affect, is granted legitimacy only when it fits into predefined frameworks of understanding. As a result, the one experiencing psychological rupture becomes a subject to be deciphered, not heard.

This dynamic is evident in *Ulladakkam*, especially in the way the dissociation of Reshma is treated within the confines of a psychiatric institution. Her silence, her fragmented memory, and her symbolic expressions, such as fear triggered by certain images, are not explored as meaningful in their own right, but are decoded by a doctor using tests and therapeutic techniques. Her trauma is legible only through the structure of the clinical encounter. Though the treatment appears empathetic, the underlying model still requires her to conform to a narrative shaped by medical logic. Her recovery is measured by how well she reintegrates into socially acceptable behaviour, not by whether her own understanding of her pain has been validated. In this setting, madness is not allowed to narrate itself, but it must be made reasonable to be acknowledged.

Although the film *Ulladakkam* centres on the compassionate psychiatrist Dr. Sunny and his troubled patient Reshma, the narrative raises questions about power, gender, trauma, and the legitimacy of psychiatry as a moral as well as medical authority. In portraying how psychiatric intervention operates within personal, institutional, and social terrains, the film becomes a subtle critique of the structures and ideologies that shape how madness is constructed, treated, and contained.

Michel Foucault's groundbreaking Madness and Civilization lays the foundation for understanding psychiatry not simply as a science, but as a discourse that emerged to categorise and manage deviance. Foucault notes in Madness and Civilization, “the language of psychiatry, which is a monologue by reason about madness, has been established only on the basis of such a

silence" (Foucault, 1988). In *Ulladakkam*, Reshma's initial condition-silent, crouched in a corner, dissociated from her surroundings, is already a subject position produced by this silencing. Her madness is not merely her own loss of coherence, but a form of resistance, an unintelligibility that demands interpretation by psychiatric authority.

The figure of Dr. Sunny, though portrayed with humaneness and integrity, remains a representative of this authority. As both doctor and narrator of the therapeutic process, Sunny occupies a position of discursive control over Reshma's story. He diagnoses, interprets, and ultimately frames her recovery. Foucault's argument that "knowledge and power are not independent" (Foucault, 1995) is key here. Sunny's interpretation of Reshma's past is not merely therapeutic, but also performative. It produces her identity as a patient within the hospital's institutional and ideological structure.

The dissociation and subsequent psychosis of Reshma are not explored solely through biology but through fragments of her emotional history, particularly her early loss of her mother and the disappearance of her lover Arun. The psychiatric treatment she receives attempts to re-integrate her into a coherent subject, capable of functioning within normative expectations. However, what is overlooked is the extent to which her illness is shaped by structural trauma, gendered vulnerability, dependency, and the silence imposed by violence. Her madness becomes, in part, a protest against a social order that leaves her unprotected and voiceless.

In this social context, madness can be re-theorised as a language of refusal, a non-verbal resistance to systems that fail to accommodate vulnerability, grief, and emotional dependency. When familial structures collapse, justice system offers no redress, and emotional labour is nullified, the psyche may no longer comply with the demands of rational coherence. Hence, what is diagnosed as psychosis in Reshma would be understood not simply as a neurochemical imbalance or trauma response, but as the psyche's withdrawal from a world that refuses to recognise its wounds. In this framework, insanity emerges as a form of embodied dissent in which the breakdown of speech, order, and behaviour signals not dysfunction but a rupture in the contract of the subject with a society that has already failed her.

This perspective also challenges the clinical tendency to isolate mental disorders from their socio-political context. In lieu of treating the individual as ill within, it situates the experience of cliants within a continuum of neglect, gendered expectations, and emotional erasure. Reshma's silence, hallucinations, or compulsions are not to be reckoned as meaningless symptoms but as meaningful responses to a social reality that demands control, coherence, and suppression of affective excess. This reframing opens the possibility for a new kind of psychiatric ethics, one that listens not just for what can be cured, but for what is being said through the collapse of symbolic order. Madness, in this sense, is not simply what needs to be restored to health; it is what remains when systems of protection, intimacy, and narrative coherence are stripped away. Reshma's breakdown is legible as a radical act of visibility in a world that would otherwise render her invisible.

The hospital, while portrayed as a space of care, is also a field of surveillance and moral correction. The decision to use hypnosis, Rorschach tests, and guided exposure therapy points to the ways in which psychiatry functions not only to heal but to normalise. Foucault's observation in Discipline and Punish that "visibility is a trap" (Foucault, 1995) resonates here. Reshma is observed, tested, and analysed not just for her own benefit but also to organize her emotions with acceptable patterns. Her recovery is marked by her ability to recognise social cues, engage in bonding, and suppress the extremities of her trauma.

Furthermore, the therapeutic narrative implicitly emphasises a political economy of emotion, where dependency is framed as pathological. The emotional need of Reshma for maternal figures and for romantic stability is rendered suspect, requiring redirection and containment. This resembles what Foucault terms "governmentality"-"the management of individuals through the shaping of conduct" (qtd. in Hoy, 1990) in which pychiatry disciplines affect, redirecting it from its spontaneous or traumatic forms into patterns that sustain

normative relational models.

The phenomenon of transference, central to Freud's psychoanalysis, is not a clinical complication in *Ulladakkam*, and it assumes the form of a cultural metaphor. Reshma's unconscious substitution of Sunny for Arun represents the way psychiatry opens itself to emotional complexities it cannot fully manage. Freud has noted that transference creates false connections which must be resolved through interpretation. Yet in this case, transference is fatal. The system of care inadvertently enables the psychic confusion that leads to Annie's death, and this incident reveals the ethical and political limits of psychiatry.

Gender dynamics play a crucial role in the subtle interrogation of psychiatric discourse in the film. Reshma is cast as emotionally excessive, unable to function autonomously, and in need of containment, first through tranquilizers and later through affectionate but structured care. Her dependency is read as symptomatic of illness, whereas the role of Sunny as saviour is celebrated. This shows historical patterns wherein emotional expressiveness of women is often medicalised, while male authority is naturalised as has been written by Elaine Showalter, in The Female Malady that "psychiatry has treated women as patients and men as doctors, turning women's distress into evidence of their inferiority" (Showalter, 1987).

The eventual act of violence, that is, the murder of Annie by Reshma, is represented as an eruption of untreated trauma, but also reveals the impossibility of complete psychic recovery within the structures psychiatry offers. Annie, as the symbol of domestic and romantic finality, is the obstacle Reshma cannot symbolically process. The psychiatric institution, having taught Reshma to reintegrate into life, fails to prepare her for this rupture, thus failing her. The notion that "it was not her, but her mental condition" that was responsible for the act suggests a legalistic absolution, but it also masks the systemic and therapeutic failures that led to the event.

The final narrative resolution, the seven-year penance of Reshma under Mother Teresa, positions healing as a spiritual course in distinction from medical journey. This shift away from psychiatric care toward religious service hints at the limitations of clinical frameworks in addressing deep-seated existential and emotional wounds. The hospital, which initiated recovery, could not complete it. Foucault's insight in The Birth of the Clinic that "the medical gaze is always doubled by a moral judgement" (Foucault, 1994) is once again affirmed as Reshma has to atone for her crime and emotional excess through spiritual labour.

Importantly, the film does not vilify psychiatry. Dr. Sunny remains a humane and ethical practitioner. However, his role also shows the fragility of therapeutic neutrality. His inability to maintain emotional boundaries contributes to the fatal consequence of transference. This complicates the ideal of psychiatric detachment and calls for a renewed ethical inquiry into the therapist-patient relationship. The film invites viewers to see that care, no matter how well-intentioned, is embedded in unequal relations of power, trust, and vulnerability.

The treatment of Reshma in the hospital is thus not an isolated therapeutic act. It is part of a broader social effort to restore order. Psychiatry is a tool for re-inscribing women into culturally sanctioned roles such as calm, relationally coherent, and emotionally restrained. The madness of Reshma disrupts these expectations, and her 'cure' is measured by her return to them. Her breakdown at the wedding of Sunny is a rebellion against loss and the finality of reintegration, and it makes psychiatry a mechanism of social reproduction.

Ulladakkam ultimately stages a complex negotiation between madness and reason, care and control, individuality and normativity. While the psychiatric institution is a space of rescue and repair, it also operates within a state of ideological expectations that define what it means to be healed. The forgiveness offered by Sunny to Reshma is deeply moving, but it also divulges the triumph of the moral over the clinical, a closure enabled not by medicine but by compassion, guilt, and the recognition of structural failure.

The film thus provides a critique of psychiatric discourse while never reducing it to villainy. It presents psychiatry

as a modern apparatus that, in attempting to restore coherence to fractured minds, inevitably participates in regulating emotion, gender, and memory. Foucault writes, "Madness has become one of the dimensions of the social horizon, a region where time, truth, and the norm come together to produce the speaking subject" (Foucault, 1988). Reshma is this subject, formed, silenced, restored, and finally transfigured within the contours of power, pain, and forgiveness.

5. Institutional Power and the Collapse of Care: The Case of Thalavattam

While *Ulladakkam* explores the psychiatric institution as a space of transference, where treatment, blurring into emotional dependency and unresolved trauma, is channelled into fragile attachments, *Thalavattam* moves this exploration into a more violent and disciplinary register. In *Ulladakkam*, the therapeutic relationship is ethically unstable when the psychiatrist, Dr. Sunny, is unable to maintain clinical distance, emphasising how psychiatric authority is entangled with desire and guilt. The institution in *Ulladakkam* is not overtly punitive, yet it still exerts subtle control over the emotional life of the patient. By contrast, *Thalavattam* exposes a more overt and carceral version of psychiatry, where power operates through coercion, surveillance, and even irreversible procedures like lobotomy. Both films expose the institutional undercurrents of psychiatric practice, but *Thalavattam* intensifies the critique by presenting a system where care is replaced by punishment, and healing is obstructed by authoritarian control. The transition from *Ulladakkam* to *Thalavattam* thus marks a shift from psychological entanglement to institutional violence, and unveils the evolving anxieties around the legitimacy of psychiatry in Malayalam cinema.

The narrative of *Thalavattam* is an exploration of the association of psychiatry with power, discipline, and institutional control. The protagonist Vinod, suffering from mental illness after a traumatic loss, is admitted into a therapeutic environment, and confined within a heavily regulated and disciplinary psychiatric facility. This change in setting from hospital to carceral space foregrounds a troubling ideological premise that madness is to be tamed, contained, and silenced, and not understood or empathised with. The psychiatric institution is an extension of social order and authority, that uses its language and practice to repress as opposed to rehabilitate.

The figure of Dr. Ravindran embodies the authoritarian face of medical power. His disdain for Vinod and his methods of treatment go beyond clinical protocol and slide into personal vendetta, showing the tendency within certain psychiatric regimes to turn treatment into punishment. The incarceration of Vinod is less a matter of medical necessity and more an assertion of control. The hospital guards ascertain this ideology, working not as caregivers but enforcers, implying that the psychiatric institution functions within a carceral logic that disciplines "clients."

Dr. Ravindran manipulates psychiatric diagnosis to justify indefinite confinement, and it raises significant concerns about the legitimacy of clinical authority. By denying the recovery of Vinod and weaponising institutional norms to isolate him, he reduces judgment to surveillance and control. This explains a broader ideological underpinning of psychiatry where power determines the boundary between sanity and madness. As the narrative shows, recovery is not enough. Acceptance into social life must be sanctioned by institutional gatekeepers.

Dr. Savithri and Dr. Unnikrishnan offer contrasting models of psychiatry. While Ravindran stands for coercion, these two characters evoke the possibility of compassionate care. Their approach is grounded in familiarity, emotional intelligence, and genuine concern. The longstanding relationship of Dr.Unnikrishnan with Vinod is instrumental in his recovery, and it suggests that mental equilibrium is achievable more through human connection than confinement. Yet, even their good intentions are ultimately thwarted by the rigid, hierarchical structure of the psychiatric institution.

The love between Vinod and Savithri symbolises a resistance to clinical dehumanisation. Their relationship develops not within the official framework of therapy but outside it, as an alternative form of emotional healing.

This love story is not just romantic but political. It contests the inhuman ethos of the institution. However, this resistance is ultimately crushed by the patriarchal and authoritarian influence of Dr.Ravindran, which reasserts the supremacy of institutional norms over individual agency.

Thalavattam reaches its most harrowing moment when Dr. Ravindran performs a lobotomy on Vinod, an act that underscores the extreme violence embedded in psychiatric power. Lobotomy, here, is not only a medical procedure but a symbolic erasure of subjectivity. The transformation of Vinod from a recovering patient to a vegetative body demonstrates how psychiatric authority overrides personal narrative that renders the patient voiceless and inert. This violation reframes psychiatry as a system capable of obliteration and not restoration.

The act of euthanasia performed by Dr.Unnikrishnn-ending the life of Vinod to prevent further suffering-introduces a moral dilemma. Though deeply tragic, his action reveals the ultimate failure of a psychiatric system that sees no alternative between submission and death. The ideology at play here is one that frames madness as a state so unliveable under institutional conditions that even death is preferable. It forces viewers to question the ethics of confinement and the legitimacy of psychiatric control over life and death.

The descent of Savithri into madness after the death of Vinod completes the tragic circle. Her breakdown, like that of Vinod, is born of trauma, systemic violence, emotional repression, patriarchal control, and institutional betrayal. Her admission as a patient into the same asylum that destroyed Vinod implies the recursive nature of psychiatric discourse. It absorbs and neutralises resistance by turning the resistant subject into the object of treatment. In this cycle, the institution maintains its dominance by pathologising grief, rebellion, and love.

The psychological collapse of Savithri represents more than an individual reaction to loss. It denotes how psychiatry, when entwined with patriarchal structures, is indulged in regulating and disciplining female affect. Her emotional response to the fate of Vinod is swiftly reclassified as illness, effectively silencing her capacity for protest. The decision of the institution to admit her frames intense emotional experience as instability, thereby rendering nonconformity unintelligible within the framework of medical authority. This act indicates a larger strategy through which psychiatry functions ideologically. It classifies deviations from normative behaviour as symptoms, thus depoliticising anguish and ensuring the continued operation of social control.

Thalavattam demonstrates that psychiatry becomes a self-reinforcing system, where each act of resistance triggers deeper forms of containment. The trajectory of Savithri relates how the system interprets emotional integrity as a liability, especially when it challenges institutional hierarchy. Her love for Vinod and her outrage at the injustice done to him are redefined as signs of mental collapse, closing the space for ethical dissent. In doing so, psychiatry deviates from neutral science, and presents itself as an apparatus that absorbs rebellion through diagnosis, and effectively maintains its authority by transforming the subject into a perpetual patient.

The psychiatric institution in *Thalavattam* thus emerges not as a sanctuary for healing but as a realm of ideological enforcement. It reasserts normative codes of behaviour through clinical labels, turning non-conformity into illness. Nikolas Rose observes in Our Psychiatric Future: The Politics of Mental Health, "psychiatry plays a central role in the government of conduct" (Rose, 2018), and the film demonstrates how deeply this governmentality is embedded in the logic of institutional life. Individuals who challenge the system emotionally, romantically, morally, are systematically silenced or eliminated.

Moreover, the film critiques the gendered dynamics of psychiatric authority. The desires of Savithri are dismissed, and her choices overridden by paternal control. Her emotional autonomy is denied both as a woman and a caregiver. The silencing of her agency underlines the intersection of psychiatry with patriarchal ideology, where female subjectivity is subordinated to institutional interests. Here, the psychiatric system is a tool for gendered regulation where gender and mental health are inextricably linked through silencing and surveillance. Savithri is disempowered not because of her vulnerability, but because her emotional clarity

threatens the order imposed by the institution. Her eventual confinement represents a broader pattern in which dissenting women are absorbed into systems of classification and control. In this context, psychiatry, by enforcing compliance, functions, without offering any space for recuperation, as a cultural apparatus where female subjectivity is recoded as deviance and suppressed under the guise of treatment.

The recurring theme of memory, both personal and suppressed, plays a crucial role in the representation of psychiatric discourse. The fragmented memories of Vinod are not simply symptoms but testimonies to his trauma. The effort to recover them is a political act, a reclaiming of narrative. Yet the institution treats memory as pathology and attempts to erase it through drugs and surgery. At this juncture, remembering becomes an act of resistance, while forgetting is enforced by the system as a therapeutic necessity.

Memory, in the context of the institution, is treated with suspicion as a disruptive force that threatens the carefully maintained order of the psychiatric regime. The recollections of Vinod of Anitha and the events surrounding her death are framed as obstacles to his recovery. The therapeutic goal, instead of working through memory, is to suppress it, suggesting that emotional attachment to the past is itself a form of illness. This constructs a larger ideological framework in which forgetting is synonymous with wellness, and memory, particularly when tied to grief or resistance, is something to be chemically muted or surgically eradicated.

The use of psychotropic drugs and ultimately lobotomy explicates a medical logic in which the erasure of memory is equated with cure. Memory is viewed as excess, something irrational that exceeds the norms of behavioural control and emotional regulation. In this regime, the treatment does not aim at integration or reconciliation, but at obliteration. Such interventions state how psychiatry, as portrayed here, prioritises conformity over understanding, and silence over narrative. It ensures that what cannot be controlled must be eliminated from the psyche altogether.

Despite its tragic end, the narrative opens a space for reconsidering psychiatry. It compels the audience to question how authority is constructed and sustained within clinical settings. Who decides what constitutes recovery? Whose voice is heard? What forms of knowledge are deemed legitimate? In this context of medical and political questions that, Peter Sedgwick writes in Psychopolitics, "psychiatry does not exist in a vacuum. It is a social practice, shaped by and shaping the wider society" (Sedwick, 1982). Psychiatry works within a dense web of social relations, cultural assumptions, and institutional power. It does not emerge as a neutral science but as a social practice that both reflects and reasserts hegemonic systems. The criteria for diagnosis, the definitions of normalcy, and the methods of treatment are all shaped by historical contexts, class structures, gender norms, and political interests. In turn, psychiatry serves to shape the understanding of deviance existing in the society, emotional experiences, and subjectivity. By medicalising behaviours and affects that deviate from accepted norms, it legitimises certain forms of control while marginalising others. Thus, psychiatric discourse in *Thalavattam* is inseparable from the cultural and political forces that signify it with meaning and authority. The film lays bare these forces, and shows how psychiatric practices are bound to broader structures of control and domination.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the representation of psychiatry in Malayalam cinema through a focussed analysis of the films *Ulladakkam* and *Thalavattam*. The study began by outlining the historical evolution of psychiatry as a medical and institutional discipline, emphasising its dual function as a therapeutic practice and a system of social regulation. It then situated these concerns within Malayalam cinema, where psychiatry appears not only as a theme of medical treatment but also as a cultural discourse that interprets grief, memory, and desire. Through close readings of the two films, the analysis makes an attempt to demonstrate how cinematic strategies frame psychiatry as an apparatus of observation and control instead of placing itself as a neutral field of healing.

Both *Ulladakkam* and *Thalavattam* foreground psychiatry as a narrative centre while revealing its

entanglement with authority. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of the medical gaze, an attempt is made to analyse the psychiatric spaces of the films under study where diagnosis is a mode of surveillance and regulation. In *Ulladakkam*, apparently benevolent interventions of Dr.Sunny translate Reshma's trauma into clinical language, reducing the complexity of her suffering to a diagnostic case and asserting the interpretation of the psychiatrist as final. *Thalavattam* presents a more punitive version of this gaze. The detached authority of Dr.Ravindran transforms therapy into coercion, where medical treatments such as drugs and surgical procedures are deployed less for healing than for behavioural control. In both narratives, the hospital appears as a space of confinement instead of a sanctuary of care, and the psychiatrist assumes a role whose influence stretches beyond medical treatment into the moral and emotional dimensions of the lives of characters.

The visual and narrative strategies sustain this atmosphere of authority. High-angle shots, isolating close-ups, and meticulously structured dialogue position viewers alongside medical power, prompting them to perceive characters as clinical cases instead of individuals with complex personal histories. Memories of lost love, grief, and personal trauma are repeatedly translated into diagnostic categories and treated as conditions to be eliminated. Therapeutic intervention functions as an act of silencing in which emotional depth is replaced by the clinical demand to re-establish social normalcy. The suffering subject is thereby returned to an accepted social order, achieved only through the suppression of inner experience.

Viewed together, *Ulladakkam* and Thalavattam construct a cinematic language in which psychiatry appears more as a cultural apparatus that upholds order than as a discipline of healing. These films invite audiences to recognise the ethical tensions inherent in psychiatric authority without delivering overt critique, allowing spectators to witness the convergence of care and control. Future inquiries could expand this discussion to other regional cinemas or examine how audiences absorb such portrayals, thereby advancing understanding of the ways film shapes public perceptions of mental health and emotional distress.

7. References

Bhatia, G., et al. (2022) "Movies and Matters of the Mind: Portrayal of Psychiatric Illnesses in Bollywood over Last Two Decades: A Content Analysis", Asian Journal of Psychiatry, pp. 80-94. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2022.103398

Foucault, M., 1988. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Translated by R. Howard. New York: Vintage.

Foucault, M., 1994. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Vintage.

Foucault, M.,1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by A. Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.

Hoy, D. C., 1990. *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Menon, A.M. (2024) "Representation of Therapy and Therapists in Indian Movies and TV Series: An Examination of Accuracy, Influence, and Perception", Indian Journal of Mass Communication and Journalism, 3(4), pp. 13-22. https://doi.org/10.54105/ijmcj.d1075.03040624.

Morrison, A.M. (2025) "Psych Ward Gothic: Melodrama, Hospitalisation Anxiety and a Case for the Humanities in Psychiatric Research", Medical Humanities, 2(3), pp.66-74. https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2025-013521

Padhy, S.K., et al. (2015) "Media and Mental Illness: Relevance to India", Indian Journal of Psychiatry, 60(2), pp. 163-171. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24823515.

Ratnakaran, B., et al. (2015) "Psychiatric Disorders in Malayalam Cinema", Kerala Journal of Psychiatry, 28(2), pp.25-34. https://doi.org/10.30834/kjp.28.2.2015.52

Rose, N., 2018. *Our Psychiatric Future: The Politics of Mental Health*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Sedgwick, P., 1982. *Psychopolitics*. London: Pluto Press.

Showalter, E., 1987. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture*, 1830–1980. London: Virago.

Thalavattam, 1986. Directed by Priyadarshan. India: Poornima Enterprises. Film.

Ulladakkam,1991. Directed by Kamal. India: Century Films. Film.

Ussher, J. M., 2011. *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience*. London: Routledge.

How to cite this article:

Niyas S.M. 2026. Punitive Therapies and the Question of Ethics in Cinematic Psychiatry. TIJMR. 5 (2) : 29-38

TKM Arts College International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (TIJMR)
Vol. 5, No. 2 July 2026, 39 - 46

Contents lists available at www.tijmr.org

TKM Arts College
International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research
(TIJMR) ISSN (Online) : 2581-6519 / ISSN (Print) : 2582-130x

journal homepage – https://tijmr.org/index.php/journal

Confession in Exile: Mapping Feminine Consciousness in Anamika and Madhavikuty

Reshma Surendran
Department of Hindi
T.K.M. College of Arts and Science,
Kollam-691005, Kerala, India.
reshmasurendran1989@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Confession in exile is not merely a literary gesture; it is a way of surviving, remembering and rewriting the self. As Mirza Ghalib remind us, "Dil hi to hai na sang-o-khisht, dard se bhar na aaye kyun?– the heart, unlike stone or brick, must overflow with pain. Between two linguistic universe– Malayalam and Hindi – stand Madhavikuty (Kamala Das) and Anamika, two luminous writers who convert personal wounds into cultural testimony. Their voices, though shaped by different geographies and traditions, converge upon a shared terrain of feminine consciousness. This study examines how both writers map Stree-Chetna –the awakening of feminine interiority; through confessional and reflective modes. For Madhavikuty, confession becomes an exilic journey: a departure from silence, a pilgrimage into memory and desire. My Story (Ente Katha) unfolds not simply as autobiography but as an unflinching encounter with selfhood, where the intimate becomes insurgent and the personal becomes political. Anamika, writing in Hindi, gathers the forgotten women of myth, history and everyday domesticity, reani- mating them through a poetics of invocation. Her works, especially 'Tokri Mein Digant', transform marginalized feminine histories into lyrical acts of reclamation. Where Madhavikuty confesses her vulnerability, Anamika resurrects collective memory; where one bleeds truth, the other breathes continuity. Together, they reconfigure confession as an instrument of resistance – an exile from patriarchal narratives and a return to the sovereignty of voice. This research traces how longing, loneliness and desire become cartographies of feminine consciousness, charting new routes between personal witness and cultural cri- tique. Ultimately, their writings form a cross-lingual duet, revealing that the map of a woman's inner world is never bounded by geography, but by the courage to speak from the wound itself.

Keywords *: Ethics, Gender, Institutional Power, Madness, Psychiatry*

1. Introduction: An Overview of Psychiatry

To write is often to confess and to confess, in a world unsettled by a woman's truth, is to reb- el. In the works of Madhavikuty and Anamika, writing becomes a sacred disobedience, a quiet yet seismic act through which the self steps out of inherited silences. Their texts pulsate with the exile of the feminine voice banished from cultur al centres yet returning through the written work with a new, insurgent consciousness (Kumar, 2010). Confession, for them, is not weakness but weapon; not exposure but awakening..

Assistant Professor on Contract, Department of Hindi, T.K.M. College of Arts and Science, Kollam-5.
reshmasurecndran1989@gmail.com.

Madhavikuty, who also wrote in English as Kamala Das, stands as one of the most resonant confessional writers, transforms both Malayalam prose and English poetry into a terrain of unguarded honesty. Her works unveil the body, desire, and the haunting solitude of womanhood with a candour that unsettled the moral landscape of her time (Menon, 2005). Ente Kathais less autography than a bold reclamation of the selfan exile from silence into speech. It marked the moment when the private became political, when a woman dared to inscribe desire as truth and vulnerability as liberation (Rajan,1991).

Anamika, born in the northern plains of Hindi literature inherits a different yet resonant fire. A poet critic and thinker, she gathers forgotten mythic women mothers, widows, ascetics, rebels and restores them to the Centre of cultural memory through lyric tenderness and intellectual clarity (Trivedi, 2014). While Madhavikuty confesses through the raw exposure of wound and longing, Anaika invokes through layered myth, turning suffering into song. Yet both converge upon the same horizon: Stree Chetna, a feminine consciousness shaped not by theory but by lived fire and intergenerational memory (Joshi,2015).

In their writings, love and loneliness became two inseparable forces–tenderness resisting domination, longing interrogating devotion. Confession becomes creation; the private diary becomes cultural text and the intimate body stands as a metaphor for a generation's unspoken desires (Das,1973). Their voices remind us that exile is not merely geographical but emotional, linguistic and spiritual displacement from agency, from articulation, from selfhood.

This paper thus reads them not as regional figures but as luminous architects of a shared Indian feminist sensibility–one that merges the melancholy of Malayalam with the mythic cadence of Hindi (Nayar,2008). It traces how each writer reclaims language, body and memory as an act of authorship, mapping a feminine consciousness that disrupts silence and reshapes literary tradition. To study one poet is to understand a voice; to study both is to witness the contours of a whole landscape of women's writing confessional, ex ile and profoundly transformative.

From a Confessional mode of Poetry and its Universal Heritage Confession, in its finest form is not me rerevelation; it is a resurrection. From the trembling sands of the mystics to the tormented verses of modern poets, the confessional mode has always carried the pulse of human truth. It is the art of standing naked before language, asking neither for sympathy nor forgiveness but only to be heard (Lowell,1959).

The confessional tradition in literature is too ancient as it is universal. In the West, it found its earliest sanctuary in St. Augustine's confessions, where the act of self narration became a bridge between sin and salvation (Augustine,397). Cen- turies later poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell transformed that sacred intimacy into a modern idiom of psychological honesty; where poetry became both wound and cure (Plath,1965); (Sexton,1967). These verses revealed that the self could be profoundly political and that articulate pain was itself an act of survival.

In the East too, confession has long been a sacred art; though often veiled in mystic metaphor. The Sufi poetsfrom Jalaluddin Rumi to Ibn al-Farid, wrote of divine union in tones that were at once erotic and spiritual. Their confessions were not of guilt but of longing, of the soul aching to dissolve into the Beloved (Rumi, 1258; Ibn al Farid, 1235). This same yearning this trembling nearness be- tween love and loss; breathes again in the works of Madhavikuty and Anamika (Trivedi,2014). For both, the self is never a private; it is a window into the universal condition of womanhood; bound by desire, memory and the eternal search for self. Madhavikuty, in My Story, fuses the 'Christian notion of confession' with the Eastern mysticism of

Madhavikuty (Kamala Das), one of India's most influential confessional writers, transformed the landscape of modern Indian liter- ature through her fearless explorations of desire, memory and womanhood. Writing in both Malayalam and English, she bridged languages with a voice that was intimate yet insurgent, turning private emotion into public resistance.

Stree-Chetana refers to the awakening of feminine consciousness in Indian feminist thought, a growing awareness of women's agency, identity and emotional interiority. It marks a shift from silent endurance to articulate selfhood, where women begin to question, resist and rewrite the structures that shape their lives.

surrender. Her voice resembles both the Psalmist and the Sufi pleading and proud, sinful yet sanctified (Menon, 2005). Anamika, on the other hand, carries this heritage into her Hindi verse with mythic grace. Her poems confess not the self alone, but the collective memory of womanhood; the unsung voices of generations buried beneath silences of history.

Thus, the confessional mode in their writings is not borrowed but reborn shaped by their languages, their faith, their loneliness. It becomes a bridge between Augustine and Andal, between Plath and Mirabai, between the solitary cry of the Western poet and the collective lament of the Eastern mystic. Through them, confession transcends culture; it becomes the oldest forms of the soulin literature; the poetry of being human (Joshi,2015).

Feminism, in the work of Madhavikuty and Anamika, is not a borrowed banner but a lived pulse; awhisper that grew in to a tempest. Their feminism does not always declare itself in manifestos or slogans; rather, it breathes through the fragility of their sentences, through the tremor of a word that dares to be tender and truthful at once (Trivedi,2014).Both women wrote not to be labelled, but to be liberated to reclaim the right to name their own pain, to narrate their own stories and to speak in their own voices (Rajan, 1991).

In Madhavikuty's world, feminism begins with truth telling more a revelation of humanity than an argument. Her defiance is neither militant nor theoretical; it is existential. In Ente Katha, she refuses to decorate her emotions with social courtesy. She speaks of her lust and loneliness, of marriage and betrayal, of the body as a battle- field between love and shame (Menon, 2005). To her, writing becomes a form of resistance–a sacred act of unveiling what society demands be concealed. She confesses; "I too have desires" and in that single sentence, centuries of silenced women begin to breathe. Her feminism is one of vulnerability as strength the courage to be wounded in public, to let the self, exist beyond moral confinement (Nayar, 2009).

Anamika's feminism, though born of the same wound, travels through a different terrain mythic, maternal, collective. Where Madhavikuty exposes her scars, Anamika transforms them into metaphors, drawing up on the voices of ancient women, Sita, Draupadi, Meera, and unnamed household goddesses. Through them, she rewrites mythology from the kitchen's dim light, trans forming domestic silence into sacred song (Joshi, 2015). Her poetry reclaims the kitchen, the cradle and the temple as spaces of female authorship. She writes with compassion rather than confrontation, but her compassion is subversive; it redefines power as empathy and rebellion as remembrance (Sharma, 2017).

Together, these writers craft a plural feminist vision one that is intimate, introspective and deeply Indian. They show that the feminist struggle is not only against men, but against the centuries of silence women have inherited. In both, the self becomes a battlefield of contradictions mother and lover, believer and rebel, sinner and saint (Das,1973).

Their feminism, then is not the cry of anger alone but the music of awakening; an insistence that womanhood itself is a complete text, written in the link of resilience and tenderness. Through this dual language of confession and compassion, Madhavikuty and Anamika transform the private self into a public revolution; where every whisper becomes a word and every wound becomes a world (Joshi,2015).

1.2 Madhavikuty: The Language of Desire, Imagery and Social Criticism

In the writings of Madhavikuty, language is a landscape; textured sensuous and defiant. Desire, memory and longing are not abstract ideas; they are living images as tangible as the Kerala monsoon or the scent of jasmine in aquite courtyard. Her prose and poetry shimmer with

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was an American poet and novelist, a central figure in confessional mode of literature. She is known for her intense, emotional, imagery and her exploration of identity, mental struggle and female experience.

The "Psalmist" evokes the biblical tradition of lament and raw intimacy; confessing fear, longing, love and human frailty before the divine.

Mirabai, the sixteenth-century Bhakti poet-saint, wove her unwavering devotion to Krishna into songs of longing, rebellion and surrender. Her verses blur the boundaries between the earthly and the divine, turning feminine desire into a sacred, defiant form of spiritual freedom.

metaphors of the body and the home, where every room, every window, every breath is charged with erotic and emotional significance (Das,1973). The lover's absence becomes a river of silence, the mother's gaze, a mirror of societal expectation; the act of writing itself, a clandestine ritual of liberation (Nayar,2008). Her imagery is never decorative. Each symbol–a droplet of rain, a red hibiscus, a lonely lamp flickering against the night; carries the weight of inner rebellion. These images, si- multaneously delicate and sharp, illuminate the tension between self-desire and social morality. In portraying female sexuality, Madhavikuty does not embellish; she renders it real, urgent and ritualistic, even when society seeks to silence it (Ra- jan,1991).

Beyond desire, her work pulses with social criticism. Marriage, caste, patriarchal surveillance and the constraints imposed upon women's bodies and minds are interrogated with unsparing honesty. Through confessional narrative, she critiques not only personal relationships but also the structural inequities of Kerala's social fabric. The home, of- ten imagined as a sanctuary; is shown as a site of control and conflict; cultural norms are revealed as both intimate and political. Even mundane domestic rituals become subtle battlegrounds, where women navigate compliance and defiance with quiet courage (Das,1973).

Madhavikuty's genius lies in intertwining imagery with critique; making desire and disobedience inseparable. Her landscapes, bodies and objects are not passive scenery; they speak, resist and remember. A flower, a window, a rain-soaked path–all become metaphors of longing, loss and liberation. In doing so, she creates a literature that is confessional yet universal, personal, yet socially conscious and profoundly Indian in its sensibility (Nayar,2008).

In Madhavikuty, poetic imagery becomes a lens for social insight and desire becomes a tool of critique. Every sensuous line carries both the ache of the heart and the scrutiny of society, allowing readers to witness not just an individual woman but the broader culture that shapes, confines and challenges her (Rajan,1991).

1.3 Anamika: Imagery, Feminist Consciousness and Social Critic

In Anamika's poetry, imagery is both mirror and hammer; reflecting inner life while shaping social consciousness. Her words conjure the mundane and the mythic, the domestic and the divine, weaving them into a tapestry that celebrates woman- hood while interrogating its constraints (Trivedi,2014). Kitchens, courtyards rivers and ancient goddesses are not mere backdrops; they pulse with memory, resistance and longing, each image a subtle challenge to silence and erasure.

Anamika's imagination arises from collective female memory. The voices of mothers, widows and unnamed women from legend or lore echo through her poems creating a chorus of lived experience (Joshi, 2015). A lamplit room becomes the stage of rebellion; a river's flow mirrors both the inevitability of societal expectation and the quiet persistence of desire. Her imagery is care fully chosen earthy, textile like and lyrical; yet always in service of a larger consciousness: the awareness that to name and see women's lives is itself an act of defiance (Trivedi, 2014).

For readers, her poetry represents deeply feminist ideologies even though she never explicitly claimed to be a feminist writer, choosing instead to guide them through nuance rather the slogans. Desire, labor, ritual and domesticity are rendered as arenas of both constraint and agency.

Anamika's women navigate patriarchy with courage, intuition and sometimes quiet fury. Through metaphoric landscapes and layered symbolism, she critiques social inequities gendered hierarchies, normative morality and the erasure of women's narratives. Even seemingly gentle pastoral images carry political weight, reminding the readers that oppression can be intimate subtle and pervasive (Sharma, 2017).9

The feministic outlook of Madhavikuty and Anamika emerges not as theory but as lived experience; Madhavikuty through her raw confessions of desire and vulnerability and Anamika through her revival of forgotten women in myth and memory. Together, they shape a feminism rooted in voice, embodiment and cultural reclamation, where writing becomes both resistance and

Where Madhavikuty's imagery often foregrounds personal loaning and corporeal confession, Anamika expands the lens to include collective female consciousness where memory and modernity co- exist, revealing her believe that the personal and social are inseparable (Joshi,2015). In her verse, the domestic and the divine, the historical and the immediate converge to map the contours of a feminist vision.

Anamika's poetry demonstrates that imagery is not decorative but insurgent. Each tactile meta phora flowering river a fading lamp, a scared courtyard becomes a statement of presence and assertion of visibility and a tool for social critique. Through these images, her feminist consciousness emerges: aware, defiant and luminous, reminding readers that poetry can illuminate not only desire, but injustice and not only longing but resilience (Joshi,2015).

1.4 Comparative Synthesis: Imagery, Confession and Social Critique.

When the voices of Madhavikuty and Anamika meet across language and time, they form a dialogue that is both intimate and universal. Both- writers transform personal experience into literary testimony, making confession a bridge between self and society (Trivedi, 2014). Where Madhavikuty's Malayalam and English prose wear the flesh of desire and memory, Anamika's Hindi verse frames loneliness within collective consciousness and myth. Yet in both, confession is never self-indulgent; it is an instrument of revelation, critic and liberation (Rajan,1991).

Imagery serves as a shared language of resistance. Madhavikuty's gardens, lamps and rain soaked courtyards pulse with the body's yearning and the soul's solitude (Menon,2005). Anamika's rivers, domestic spaces and mythic landscapes carry the weight of history, memory and social inequities (Trivedi,2014). In Madhavikuty, the personal becomes emblematic of social norms; the intimate room reflects patriarchal surveillance, the tender encounter reveals gendered expectation. In Anamika, the collective female memory trans- forms everyday imagery into social critique; the ritual, the hearth, the goddess all speak against invisibility and erasure.

Both writers articulate a feminist consciousness through these intertwined techniques. Desire, longing and confession are never simply private; they interrogate power, tradition and moral constraints (Das,1973). Madhavikuty insists on the body as a site of truth, challenging cultural hypocrisy. Anamika expands this insistence into a generational and mythic frame, asserting the dignity and resilience of women silenced by history and Domesticity (Joshi,2015). Together, they demon- strate that feminism can be lyrical, confessional and socially conscious simultaneously resisting reductive categorizations.

Literary strategies converge to create a shared heritage of confessional, feminist writing: one where images carry both beauty and critique, where intimate revelation becomes social insight and where the female voice is reclaimed across time, region and language. Reading them in dialogue reveals a profound continuity in Indian women's literature; a poetic resistance in which to feel, to remember and to narrated is itself a radical act (Nayar, 2008). Through the interplay of imagery, confession and critic, Madhavikuty and Anamika transform the personal into the political and the private into the universal, leaving a luminous legacy for readers across languages, cultures and generations (Das,1973).

2. Methodology of Study

This research adopts a comparative, interpretive methodology designed to illuminate how Madhavikuty and Anamika transform confession into a mode of resistance and how their writings articulate a distinctly feminine consciousness shaped by emotional, cultural and linguistic exile (Joshi, 2015). The approach is qualitative analytical and reflective, weaving together

Anamika's Tokri Mein Digant (The Horizon in a Basket) is a celebrated Hindi poetry collection that explores the intimate intersections of womanhood, memory and everyday resistance.

The confessional tradition in literature refers to writing that reveals intimate personal experience-emotional, spiritual or moral as an act of selfexamination and truthtelling, placing the author's inner voice at the Centre of the narrative.

textual analysis, the- matic interpretation and cross-cultural contextualization.

Primary text includes Madhavikuty's Ente Katha, selected Malayalam short stories and English poems, alongside Anamika's Tokri Main Digant and her essays on Stree-Chetna and Mythic woman- hood (Sharma,2017).These works were selected for their shared preoccupation with desire, identity, displacement and social critique. Close textual readings form the core of this analysis. Attention is given to how each writer employs language, imagery and narrative structure to articulate female subjectivity (Nair, 2008). Particular focus is place on:

» Confessional modes self-exposure, emotional vulnerability and autobiographical inflections as act of reclaiming voice.

» Exilic experiences–moments where the pro tagonists' express distance from social belonging, cultural comfort or linguistic identity.

» Imagery and symbolism the transformation of personal experience into critique and cultural reflection Comparative mapping is then used to examine convergences and divergence between the two authors: how confession becomes a challenge to patriarchal surveillance; how imagery negotiates desire, domesticity and social injustice, how feminine consciousness is shaped by region, language and historical memory.

Secondary sources critical essays feminist theory, biographical studies and scholarship on con fessional writing provide a broader interpretive frame, situating the authors within a wider land scape of Indian feminist literature (Sharma, 2017). Ultimately, this methodology balance textual rigour with sensitivity to cultural and linguistic particularities. It allows the study to trace a nuanced cartography of feminine consciousness mapping how confession becomes a pathway through exile, toward selfhood and literary liberation.

3. Suggestions and Recommendations.

The comparative exploration of Madhavikuty and Anamika highlights the enduring power of con fessional writing in articulating feminine con sciousness and negotiating emotional and cultural exile. Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge:

» Cross Linguistic Studies of Confessional Feminism: Future research can further explore how women writers across Indian languages– Tamil, Bengali, Marathi, Urdu – use confession to challenge cultural displacement and reclaim identity.

» Exile as Feminist Critical Lens: Scholars may examine forms of exile linguistic, emotional, domestic, spiritual as recurring frameworks in Indian women's writing, depending the connection between persona narrative and social structures.

» Thematic Deepening: Beyond confession, themes such as intergenerational trauma, spiritual displacement and the politics of desire merit focused analysis, especially in relation to Indian feminist poetics.

» Translation and Textual Accessibility: More nuanced translations of both authors would preserve emotional textures and confessional cadence, allowing wider access to their feminist interventions.

» Pedagogical Integration: Their works should be introduced into university courses on feminist literature, confessional writing and comparative poetics. Their texts encourage critical empathy and illuminate the intersections of gender, language and society.

» Creative and Scholarly Engagement: Work shops, seminars and literary forums can use their writings to inspire contemporary authors, especially young women exploring narrative selfhood and emotional exile.

» Digital Achieving and Collaborative Research: Digitised collections of regional feminist writing poetry manuscripts, letters, essays would preserve rare materials and support collaborative, multilingual scholarship.

Ultimately, Madhavikuty and Anamika remind us that literature is not merely an artistic expression but a landscape of return where confession heals exile and where women reclaim history through voice, courage and memory. These recommendations seek to sustain

that legacy, nurturing a literary tradition that honours the personal, the political and the profoundly human.

4. Conclusion

In the shifting terrain of exile, emotional, cultural and spiritual; Madhavikuty and Anamika reveal how confession becomes both shelter and search light. Their writings show that exile is not always geographical; it can be the quiet estrangement from one's own body, from tradition, or from a language that has forgotten how to speak a woman's truth (Devika,2010). Through this lens, the personal becomes inseparable from the cultural, the intimate from the collective and confession becomes a passage through which feminine consciousness is mapped with startling clarity.

Madhavikuty's prose and poetry uncover the exiled self within the domestic sphere transforming longing into a radical critique of societal expectation (Das,1976). Anamika, in her Hindi verse, gathers the dispersed memory of generations, weaving myth, domestic labour and quiet rebellion into a tapestry where tenderness itself becomes subversive (Anamika,2014). Both writers inhabit different linguistic and cultural worlds, yet their confessional voices echo across these distances with a shared urgency: the need to name, to reclaim and to resist the erasures imposed upon women (Showalter, 1985).

Imagery becomes their map of consciousness, rainsoaked courtyards, flickering lamps, remembered goddesses; each symbol tracing the con tours of exile and return. Through these metaphoric landscapes, desire and dissent are not opposing that expose injustice while preserving the sanctity of lived experience (Gibert & Gubar, 1979).

This study reveals that their writings contribute to a universal heritage of confessional feminist literature, where self-exposure becomes an act of both defiance, and healing (Cixous,1976). Confession, in their work, is not mere revelation; it is a bridge

5. References

Das K. (1973). Ente Katha (My Story). Calcutta: Sterling publishers.

Kumar S. (2010) Women and Confessional Writings in Modern Indian Literature. New Delhi: Routledge, India.

Menon R. (2005) Kamala Das: A Literary Study. Kerala: DC books, Thiruvananthapuram

Promod, K. Nayar (2008) Postcolonial Literature and Feminist Discourage in India. New Delhi: Pearson Education.

Rajan R.S. (1991) Realism and Reality in Kamala Das: Journal of Indian literature. 34, 345 – 56. Rama, Trivedi (2014) Voices of Modern Hindi Women Poets. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.

Joshi S. (2015) Stree-Chethana and Confessional Poetry: A comparative study. Delhi: Primus Academic Publications.

Sharma M. (2017) Imagery and Feminist Consciousness in Anamika's Poetry. Journal of Hindi Literary Studies.12 (1) 22 – 38.

Lowell R. (1959) Life Studies. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux Sylvia, Plath (1965) Ariel. London: Faber and Faber.

Augustine S. (397 C.E.). Confessions. Rome: Ancient Texts.

Sexton A. (1967). To Bedlam and Part Way Back. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.

Rumi J. (1258). Masnavi. Konya: Seljuk Press. Ibn Al Farid (1235). Diwan. Cairo: al-Azhar Press.

Devika J. (2010) En-Gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam. Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan.

Anamika (2014) Tokri Mein Digant: Their Gatha 1. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan.

Showalter E. (1985). The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory. New York: Pantheon Books.

Gilbert S.& Gubar S. (1979). The Madwoman in the Attic: The Women Writer and The Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Cixous H. (1976) The Laugh of the Medusa. Signs, 1 (4), 875-893. A French Journal of (Translation) Le Rire de la Meduse (Original French Version :1975).

Spivak G.C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture. (pp. 271-313). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Das K. (1997). Only the Soul Knows How to Sing: Selected Poems. Kerala: D.C. Books, Kottayam.

K. R., Nair (2000). The Poetry of Kamala Das. New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House.

How to cite this article:

Reshma. S. 2026. Confession in Exile: Mapping Feminine Consciousness in Anamika and Madhavikutty. 5 (2): 39–46.

VOLUME 5 I SPECIAL ISSUE I ISSUE 2 I JULY 2026

ABOUT TIJMR

TIJMR is a fast-indexing, peer-reviewed and biannual research journal publishing high-quality multidisciplinary research that advances knowledge and inspires innovation across disciplines

PUBLISHED BY
TKM College of Arts & Science
Kollam, Kerala - 691005, India
0474 2712240
tkmjournal@gmail.com
www.tijmr.org

Printed and published by Shahal Hassan Musaliar on behalf of TKM College of Arts and Science, Karicode, Kollam.
Printed at Sujilee Press, Chathanoor, Kollam, Kerala - 691572.
Published from Kollam, Kerala-691005. Editor : Dr. Mumthas Yahiya.