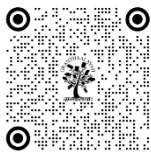


# FROM SUFFERING TO SPECTACLE: A CRITICAL READING OF MEDIA TROPES IN MALAYALAM SHORT STORIES

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the representation and critique of media culture in contemporary Malayalam short stories, focusing on works by Santhosh Echikkanam, Subhash Chandran, Ambikasuthan Mangad and Chandramathi. These stories dissect how the pervasive influence of television, reality shows, advertising, and news media infiltrates personal lives, distorts emotional responses, and commodifies human suffering. Through a close reading of stories like *Komala*, *Varthashareeram*, *America*, *Commercial Break* and others, the paper examines how media spectacle, consumerism, and the illusion of fame shape identities and relationships within Kerala's socio-cultural context. The stories critique a society increasingly driven by visual culture, where reality is often filtered through artificial narratives and mediated performances. The article highlights how literature reflects and resists the erosion of empathy and authenticity in a media-saturated world.

**Keywords:** Media Culture, Malayalam Short Stories, Consumerism, Visual Culture, Identity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Media culture refers to the pervasive influence of media in shaping societal tastes, values, and behaviours. With the advent of new media technologies and the expansion of communication networks, the boundaries between reality and representation have become increasingly blurred. Marshall McLuhan famously described media as "the extension of man," emphasising its role not merely as a tool for communication but as a fundamental force in the evolution of human consciousness and society (McLuhan, 1964). In the context of contemporary Kerala, media culture has penetrated deep into the everyday lives of people, shaping public discourse, individual identity, and collective consciousness. The widespread consumption of visual media, particularly through television, digital platforms and social networks, has created a mediated society that often substitutes representation for reality.

Contemporary Malayalam short story writers have responded to this phenomenon with sharp literary critiques that expose the psychological, cultural and ethical implications of media saturation. Stories by authors such as Santhosh Echikkanam, Subhash Chandran, Ambikasuthan Mangad and Chandramathi provide layered representations of how media culture redefines reality, distorts social values and manipulates public sentiment. Through a variety of narrative strategies, these writers illuminate the mechanisms by which media commodifies human experience, transforming

suffering into spectacle, identity into marketable imagery, and public issues into fleeting entertainment. Their stories challenge the audience to confront how deeply media logic governs thought processes, emotional responses, and social relationships.

This article explores select short stories that critique the overwhelming influence of media in contemporary Kerala. From the sensationalism of suicide in *Komala* to the hollow promises of reality shows in *Ningalkum Edit* Cheyavunna Chila Drishyangal and *Moksham*, and the consumerist pressures in *America* and *Commercial Break*, these narratives underscore the corrosive impact of media on traditional values, personal relationships, and individual agency. The analysis foregrounds how these stories interrogate the illusions constructed by media and question the complicity of the public in sustaining such narratives. The article attempts to map the connections between media culture and literary resistance in the current Malayalam literary landscape by interpreting these texts via the prisms of media theory and cultural critique.

## 2. THE SENSATIONALIZATION OF SUFFERING IN KOMALA

Santhosh Echikkanam's short story *Komala* presents a stark commentary on the media's transformation of personal tragedies into public spectacle. Drawing a parallel between the fictional Kerala town in the story and Juan Rulfo's *Comala* from *Pedro Páramo*, the narrative situates itself in a space where emotional death precedes physical demise (Rulfo et al., 2002). In this world, saturated by media, genuine human suffering becomes just another broadcast event. At the centre of the story is Kundur Vishwan, a 45-year-old man who threatens to commit mass suicide with his family due to mounting debt. This desperate act, instead of prompting societal or governmental intervention, becomes fodder for a television debate. The question, "Will Vishwan and his family die? Or not?" is posed not with urgency or compassion, but with the detached tone of a news anchor trying to keep viewers engaged (Echikkanam, 2021a).

The story constructs its critique through the format of a televised discussion, *News Time*, where a panel of experts, including a psychologist, crime research officer and an advocate, offer conflicting interpretations of Vishwan's actions. Their discourse, ironically interspersed with advertisements for home loans, reveals the commodification of crisis. The psychologist dismisses Vishwan's suicide threat as attention-seeking behaviour, while the larger debate veers into a sensationalist examination of whether society needs martyrs to initiate change. This narrative strategy exposes how television discussions are choreographed performances that prioritize viewer ratings over ethical responsibility. Instead of probing into the systemic failures, such as economic precarity or institutional apathy, that lead to such despair, the panel chooses to dissect Vishwan's mental health for public consumption (Echikkanam, 2021a).

Echikkanam's story is a scathing indictment of media culture that thrives on the consumption of pain. The broadcast functions not as a platform for reform or empathy but as a theatrical event that packages tragedy into digestible segments, complete with commercial breaks (Hinduja, 2017). Viewers, meanwhile, are implicated in this culture of indifference through mechanisms like SMS polling, where they vote on whether or not Vishwan should take his life. This transformation of a life-or-death situation into an interactive media experience illustrates how audiences are conditioned to treat human lives as reality-show content, momentary distractions with no lasting moral engagement.

## 3. NEWS AS NOISE: MEDIA INDOCTRINATION IN VARTHASHAREERAM

In *Varthashareeram* (translated as 'News Body'), the influence of media is depicted not merely as a background force but as a pervasive, almost subconscious presence that infiltrates everyday life. The character Pattyamma, who has never seen a television in her life, paradoxically praises Onida TVs as superior, a belief shaped entirely by advertisements and word-of-mouth media narratives. This irony reflects Marshall McLuhan's observation that "advertisements don't target the conscious mind, but the subconscious" (Echikkanam, 2021b). Pattyamma's internalisation of consumer messaging, despite her media illiteracy, demonstrates the profound reach of media indoctrination, where opinions are formed less by personal experience than by ambient cultural noise. Through such characters, the story reveals how media narratives permeate even the margins of society, where direct media access is limited but mediated ideologies flourish.

The character Kelu, who enters with two newspapers, furthers this portrayal of internalized media scripting. His casual dismissal of political figures—"Ministers... they should get it. They're good for nothing but cheating and eating..." – echoes common tropes in popular media, suggesting that public opinion is often a regurgitation of dominant media discourses rather than independent thought (Echikkanam, 2021b). Kelu's voice is not his own but an echo chamber of

news headlines and editorialized anger. The story highlights how media does not merely report on public sentiment but constructs and manipulates it, making people unwitting participants in the dissemination of biased or oversimplified perspectives. By dramatizing these everyday expressions of media-fed cynicism, Varthashareeram reveals the erosion of critical thinking and the normalization of reactionary discourse within domestic and community spaces.

Perhaps the most poignant example of media's psychological hold is found in Pattamma's dying wish: "If I die... it doesn't matter if you don't perform my sanchayanam... but you must put my photo in the newspaper" (Echikkanam, 2021b). This yearning to be memorialized through a media image rather than through traditional ritual encapsulates the shift in value systems driven by media exposure. The desire for posthumous recognition via publication reflects a society increasingly defined by visibility rather than meaning or intimacy. As Ajay P. Mangatt notes in his introduction to the story, "Even when living in the midst of poverty, the feeling of oblivion is the new culture that has conquered cities and villages with the dominance of the TV communication network" (Mathrubhumi, 2020). In this context, Varthashareeram does not simply critique the spread of media but mourns the cultural and emotional void left in its wake—a noise that drowns out authentic connection and reduces human worth to visual recognition.

#### **4. REALITY AS PERFORMANCE: VISUAL CULTURE IN ABHINAYA MUHURTHANGAL, NINGALKUM EDIT CHEYAVUNNA CHILA DRISHYANGAL AND MOKSHAM**

The story *Abhinaya Muhurthangal* (translated as 'Moments of Acting') interrogates the blurred boundary between reality and performance in the age of visual media. At its core, the narrative critiques the rise of reality television and the performative culture it engenders. The characters within the story become participants in a constructed reality that mimics life but is orchestrated for entertainment value. What emerges is a hollow world where authenticity is sacrificed for the sake of spectacle, and human experience is moulded to fit scripted expectations. The story raises critical questions about how far reality shows reflect truth, or whether they merely exploit emotionality and vulnerability for audience engagement. Through this lens, *Abhinaya Muhurthangal* presents visual culture as a distorting force that reconfigures lived experience into consumable content (The Caravan, 2020).

This theme is further developed in the stories *Ningalkum Edit Cheyavunna Chila Drishyangal* (You Can Edit Some Visuals) and *Moksham* (Salvation), which emphasise how digital technologies allow for the manipulation of visual realities. The title *Ningalkum Edit Cheyavunna Chila Drishyangal* itself points to the ease with which truth can be reconstructed, suggesting a world where reality is no longer a stable category (The Hindu, 2025). These stories explore the implications of a culture obsessed with curated images and fabricated narratives. Audiences are depicted not as critical viewers but as passive spectators who consume illusion as truth. In such a media environment, emotional responses are shaped not by actual events but by the edited, dramatized, and often deceptive presentations of those events. The viewer becomes complicit in sustaining this culture, reinforcing the feedback loop between content creators and consumer expectations.

Together, these stories critique a media ecology that commodifies emotions and dissolves the line between the real and the artificial. The authors illuminate a troubling trend: the transformation of spectatorship into a social norm, where individuals not only consume but begin to model their behaviour on mediated performances. This shift has far-reaching cultural consequences, as the genuine becomes suspect and the performed is mistaken for truth. By laying bare the mechanics of visual manipulation, *Abhinaya Muhurthangal*, *Ningalkum Edit Cheyavunna Chila Drishyangal* and *Moksham* compel readers to reflect on their role in perpetuating a culture where appearance supersedes substance, and where the camera, rather than the conscience, becomes the primary judge of reality.

#### **5. THE MARKET LOGIC IN AMERICA AND COMMERCIAL BREAK**

Subhash Chandran's short story *America* presents a sharp critique of how consumerism shapes cultural identity and displaces traditional values. By naming the story after a global symbol of capitalism and aspirational modernity, Chandran immediately signals the ideological force at play. The *America* in the story is not a geographical location but a metaphor for the commodified dream sold to societies on the periphery of globalization. Through vivid imagery, such as a young child, barely literate, using a remote control to navigate an endless stream of visual stimuli from a satellite dish—the story illustrates the erosion of cultural grounding in favour of a consumer-driven identity (Chandran, 2010). This early exposure to global media content shapes desires, behaviours, and expectations in ways that are disconnected from

the lived realities of the society in which the characters reside. The domestic sphere, once rooted in tradition, becomes the entry point for external market ideologies.

In *Commercial Break* by Ambikasuthan Mangad, the critique deepens as the narrative foregrounds how even serious domains such as news are reduced to commercial entertainment (Mangad, 2011/2020). The story revolves around the collapse of meaningful journalism, where even issues as grave as sexual violence are subordinated to spectacle. Instead of informing or instigating moral reckoning, media coverage is tailored for ratings, designed to provoke and entertain rather than educate or reform. The story exposes the logic of the commercial break, not as a mere interruption, but as the dominant rhythm of media consumption, where every piece of information is tailored to fit within attention cycles driven by advertising revenue. In this framework, victims are background figures, while perpetrators and their narratives are highlighted, often under the pretence of “balance” or sensationalism. The structural prioritization of profit over truth reveals how consumer logic distorts ethical media practices.

Together, *America* and *Commercial Break* lay bare the deep entanglement between media, consumerism, and identity formation. Both stories illustrate how market logic reconfigures not only what is shown and consumed but also how individuals understand themselves in relation to the world. In *America*, the foreign gaze shapes local aspirations, and in *Commercial Break*, ethical discourse is overshadowed by the need to retain viewer engagement. Identity, in both cases, becomes a product – constructed, packaged and sold back to individuals through media templates. These stories ultimately challenge readers to consider the cost of this transformation: a society where human worth is indexed by visibility, consumption replaces introspection, and media becomes the central site for negotiating selfhood and societal values.

## **6. THE ALLURE OF FAME AND THE BURDEN OF IMAGE IN ORU PALAKAMANUSHYANTE SANKADANGAL**

Chandramathi's *Oru Palakamanushyante Sankadangal* (translated as ‘The Sorrows of a Plank Man’) serves as a poignant exploration of how fame, manufactured and mediated through the lens of consumer culture, entraps individuals within the suffocating confines of their own public image (Jalakam Writer, 2017). The protagonist's desire for visibility is not rooted in artistic or personal accomplishment but in the seductive promise of recognition sold by media culture. The story carefully dissects how individuals are drawn into the vortex of mediated fame, often without fully comprehending the implications of their exposure. Fame, once achieved, demands continuous performance, an adherence to an external persona shaped by public expectation rather than personal truth. This commodification of identity strips the protagonist of agency, transforming him into a mere “plank man” – rigid, performative and ultimately dehumanized.

The narrative presents a sharp critique of advertising culture and its manipulation of human desire. The protagonist's relationship with media is one of both empowerment and exploitation. On one hand, it offers him a platform to be seen, to matter; on the other, it exacts a heavy price by defining his value solely through marketable attributes. Chandramathi reveals the emotional and psychological toll that comes with sustaining a curated image in the public eye. The struggle of the Sylvester-Muralika couple, caught between their private selves and their public personas, illustrates the dissonance between lived reality and projected identity. The characters become symbols of how consumerist logic, once internalized, can dictate life choices, relationships, and self-worth. Their efforts to keep up with media-induced expectations mirror the larger societal obsession with fame as a measure of success.

Towards the end, *Oru Palakamanushyante Sankadangal* underscores the emptiness that underlies the spectacle of visibility. Chandramathi uses the protagonist's entrapment in his media-constructed image to question the cultural narrative that equates fame with fulfillment. The story reveals that behind every glamorous façade lies an individual struggling with isolation, pressure, and disillusionment. Fame becomes not a source of liberation but a burden that silences the authentic self. In this way, the story serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of surrendering identity to media logic, a world where to be seen is to exist, and to be forgotten is to vanish into irrelevance. Through this lens, the allure of fame is revealed not as empowerment, but as a seductive and often destructive mirage.

## 7. TELEVISION, FAMILY, AND EMOTIONAL DISCONNECT IN PARAMBARAGATHAMAYA PRAYOGIKA NUNAKALAL

Parambaragathamaya Prayogika Nunakalal ('Traditional Practical Lies') presents a satirical yet incisive examination of how media culture, particularly television serials, disrupts the emotional fabric of familial relationships (Jalakam Writer, 2017). In this story, Chandramathi crafts a domestic setting where the omnipresence of television becomes a divisive force within the home. The narrative depicts how entertainment programs, especially melodramatic mega-serials, distort the priorities and emotional investments of family members. Women, portrayed as empathetically involved with fictional characters on screen, are paradoxically shown to be emotionally detached from the real lives of their own children and family members. This ironic contrast, where a mother weeps for a child on TV but shows indifference toward her own son in a boarding house, lays bare the substitution of media-fabricated emotions for authentic familial empathy.

The story critiques how visual media constructs a surrogate emotional reality that competes with lived human experience. The family unit, once a space for shared experiences and intimate interactions, is redefined by fragmented attention and manufactured sentiment. Chandramathi uses humour and exaggeration to underscore the absurdities that arise from this media saturation. Entertainment and news channels are portrayed not just as sources of information or diversion, but as ideological apparatuses that shape perception and emotional response. Viewers become emotionally conditioned by serialized suffering and scripted heroism, often to the detriment of real-life connections. The battle between news and entertainment channels in the story symbolises the chaotic cacophony of contemporary media that simultaneously desensitizes and manipulates its audience.

Parambaragathamaya Prayogika Nunakalal offers a critique of a culture that prioritizes spectacle over sincerity, fiction over familial presence. It reveals how television does not merely inform or entertain but intervenes in the affective lives of individuals, altering how they relate to one another. The story suggests that media-induced emotional displacement leads to a society where simulated compassion for fictional characters replaces genuine concern for actual people. Chandramathi's narrative warns of a growing disconnect between media-fed emotional narratives and authentic human empathy. Through its sharp wit and social commentary, the story calls attention to the need for reclaiming emotional authenticity in a world increasingly driven by televised illusions.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The selected Malayalam short stories discussed in this article reveal the pervasive influence of media culture on contemporary society, particularly in shaping perceptions, identities, and interpersonal relationships. From the sensationalised treatment of human suffering in *Komala* to the commodification of news and entertainment in *Commercial Break* and *Parambaragathamaya Prayogika Nunakalal*, these narratives collectively critique how media distorts reality, dilutes social responsibility, and fosters emotional detachment. The stories unmask the mechanisms by which media constructs artificial realities—through spectacle, performance, and consumerism—inviting audiences to reflect on their passive complicity in these mediated experiences. Characters shaped by or trapped within these frameworks reflect the broader psychological and cultural consequences of living in a world saturated with media stimuli and market-driven messaging.

Through sharp irony, allegory and emotional realism, writers like Santhosh Echikkanam, Subhash Chandran, Ambikasuthan Mangad and Chandramathi engage with media culture not merely as a thematic backdrop, but as an active agent in the transformation of societal values and human behaviour. These stories do not offer simplistic rejections of technology or progress; rather, they call for a critical awareness of how media reshapes notions of truth, fame, empathy and even identity itself. Documenting the far-reaching consequences of media intrusion, from personal despair to cultural breakdown, these pieces urge readers to scrutinize the authenticity of their media interactions. They aim to empower individuals to reclaim agency in a world increasingly defined by digital interfaces and manufactured realities.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.



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