

UNPACKING STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND LIMINALITY IN CONTEMPORARY SELECT MALAYALAM POLICE PROCEDURAL DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

*This article examines the representation of lower-ranked police officers in the Malayalam film *Nayattu* ("The Hunt," 2021), directed by Martin Prakkat and written by Shahi Kabir. Situating the film within the contemporary socio-political context of Kerala, the study explores how *Nayattu*'s visual and discursive strategies construct cultural meanings around police work and institutional power. In contrast to conventional Malayalam police procedurals that often glorify the police force, *Nayattu* presents an unadorned portrayal of the precarious conditions faced by lower-ranking police officers, revealing their marginal position within the hierarchical structure of law enforcement. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of structural violence and liminality, the article argues that the officers' vulnerability stems primarily from two interrelated forces: institutionalized structural violence and their liminal status within the system. Through a close textual and narrative analysis, the study illuminates the fraught lived realities of the police force in Kerala.*

KEYWORDS: Malayalam Cinema; Police Procedural; Structural Violence; Liminality.

INTRODUCTION

Indian-language-Malayalam cinema has long been known for its thematic diversity and narrative experimentation. Drawing from global cinematic influences, including the aesthetics of film noir, Malayalam filmmakers have explored a range of crime-related subgenres such as investigation thrillers, detective narratives, and procedural dramas. Within this landscape, the figure of the police officer has become increasingly central, not just as a symbol of law and order, but also as a multifaceted character used for comic relief, romance, or larger-than-life heroism (Koickakudy 3). Over the past decade, Malayalam cinema has seen a significant shift in how it represents police officers. A new generation of filmmakers and actors has begun to rethink and reframe the genre conventions of police procedurals, infusing them with contemporary socio-political commentary. While many films continue to follow the conventional formula in which a hero cop confronts a villain to restore social order (Koickakudy 4), there is a growing trend toward more nuanced, critical representations. These films blur the lines between heroism and brutality and challenge the traditional representations of the all-powerful police officer by throwing light on the systemic violence within the police force. They delve deep into the inner workings of the police officers' psyches, teasing out their vulnerability and precarity.

One such effort is *Nayattu* (trans. *The Hunt*, 2022), directed by Martin Prakkat and written by Shahi Kabir, a police officer by profession. This film shows a departure from traditional characterizations of the police as supreme enforcers of justice. Instead, it presents a grounded and realistic narrative that explores the vulnerability of lower-ranked police officers caught in the machinery of the state. *Nayattu* follows three police officers, namely Assistant Sub-Inspector

(hereafter ASI) Maniyan, Civil Police Officer(hereafter CPO) Praveen, and CPO Sunitha, who find themselves on the run after being falsely implicated in a custodial death. One day, after coming from a wedding party, Maniyan and Praveen, who are drunk, are joined by Sunitha, and their car collides with a motorcycle, leading to an accident. Rahul, the person who drove the police vehicle, escapes on the spot, leaving the three police officers responsible for the accident. The leading political party takes advantage of this situation by conveniently framing the three police officers for the murder, and thereby mobilizes the crowd against the three police officers, for electoral gain. The narrative navigates through their escape, arrest, and confrontations, and interrogates how state power renders even those within law enforcement as disposable.

In the wake of the increasing rate of suicides among police officers in Kerala due to immense pressure caused by understaffing, overtime, and rigid hierarchy (The News Minute), a deeper critical insight into the representation of cops in Malayalam cinema is paramount. Also, these pressing realities necessitate a critical investigation into the portrayal of police officers in Malayalam cinema to analyze how the contemporary police procedural films shape and respond to the societal reality. Therefore, this paper intends to carry out a detailed textual analysis of *Nayattu* to elucidate how the film uncovers police vulnerability at various levels. Through this analysis, the paper argues that contemporary Malayalam cop films attempt to offer a critical insight into the lived space of the lower-ranked police officers in Kerala, exemplifying their precarious position caused by systemic violence and existential uncertainty. By elucidating how the state mercenaries themselves become indispensable to the higher bureaucratic structure, the current study advances the domain of Critical Criminology, a contemporary criminological approach that explores the structural and power-related dimensions of crime.

The analysis is broadly divided into two sections. The first section focuses on structural and institutional violence, examining how systemic power and modern surveillance mechanisms contribute to the precariousness of police work. The second section investigates the liminality of the police officers. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of space and liminality, the paper explores how both geographical and social spaces respond and reinforce the liminal and uncertain state of the police officers.

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND SYSTEMIC EVIL IN NAYATTU

Nayattu has been instrumental in striking our conscience on institutional exploitation of the subordinate police officers by the state apparatus for political benefits, an evil that is seldom discussed and debated. In the film, the state bureaucracy emerges as the actor with the highest rank in the structural hierarchy, who exerts control not just over the public but also over the law enforcers of the state. Even senior police officers remain subservient to the coercive power of bureaucratic authority. Alongside their professional precarity, their caste identity also contributes to their vulnerability in a hierarchical system. The current discussion maps the trajectory of structural violence and its manifestations at various levels. It also explores how various socio-political factors contribute to the professional vulnerability of the lower-ranked police officers.

In the film, for the lower-ranked police officers, structural violence starts at their own workplace, the police station. The police station, conventionally perceived as a symbol of law and order, ironically becomes the space where systemic violence is most intense. The first instance is the denial of basic needs and rights. At the station, the SHO denies the leave requested by CPO Praveen, a lower-ranked police officer. Praveen's leave application, requesting permission to accompany his ailing mother to the hospital, is overruled by the institutional imperative to protect the Chief Minister, underscoring how personal needs are subordinated to the state's priorities.

Along with this denial, the lower-ranked police officers are often compelled to act illegally at the behest of the higher authority. This is where structural violence escalates. The police officers are coerced into falsifying and manipulating evidence, fabricating charges, and becoming complicit in legal violations. When a minister pressures the officers to frame an individual for a non-bailable offense, Maniyan laments, “Even goons have the liberty to accept or reject ‘quotations’, but we don’t” (00:19:06). His words expose the police officers’ lack of agency and autonomy. The law-violators seem to have more freedom than the law enforcers.

This very aspect of law-violators overpowering law enforcers is symbolic of stripping the law enforcers of their institutional authority. This is where structural violence intensifies as the external agents, empowered by political affiliations, assert dominance over a law enforcement agency. In a scene at the police station, CPO Sunitha’s brother, Shibu, a Dalit man supported by the ruling political party, insolently tells Praveen, “We do not bow anymore, Sir. It is a thing of the past.” This very statement invokes two connotations: (1) the assertion of political agency by the Dalit party and (2) the erosion of the institutional authority of the police officers. Unlike ASI Maniyan and CPO Sunitha, who are also Dalits by caste identity, Shibu asserts agency over the police officers. In spite of their uniforms, the officers are stripped of their institutional authority in this scene. His immediate release from the lock-up, upon the order from the Superintendent of Police (SP), and the dismissal of Sunitha’s complaint against him, as “mere verbal,” highlight the intensity of institutionalized disempowerment of the police officers. Galtung’s assertion that “those deprived are not only deprived relative to potential, but indeed to subsistence minimum” (177) is aptly illustrated here. The police officers’ authority is deemed invaluable by the structure that prioritizes political loyalty over legal procedure. The film’s visuals reinforce this dynamic: a rear headshot of Shibu as he exits the station embodies his dominance. This structural inequality raises the fundamental questions about institutional power: who wields it, and on whose behalf?

Structural violence reaches its peak when the three police officers are falsely implicated in the murder of a Dalit youth. This is the instance where they are completely subjected to vulnerability. Notably, the corporeal vulnerability of the officers is profoundly shaped by caste and profession. Maniyan and Sunitha, both Dalits, are implicated in the murder of another Dalit youth, highlighting their incapacity to aspire to be the torchbearers of their own community, let alone society at large (Vadackel and Romeo 2). Even within the police force, caste continues to determine access to power, protection, and recognition. The selective recognition of grief reinforces the structural inequality.

Structural violence reaches a climax when the system suppresses the dissent or resistance of its victims. Maniyan’s suicide at a defunct court in the forest is his final appeal for justice within a structure that rewards structural loyalty over justice. The defunct court, as observed by Vadakkal and Romeo, seems to pronounce the ultimate death warrant of justice and democracy. Maniyan records a video confession, which can possibly exonerate the officers, on his phone before committing suicide. However, this final plea for justice is also made futile by the structure, through the deletion of his video confession and Rahul’s false testimony against the three police officers. This reveals that the system not only kills but also conveniently removes its victims in order to retain the structure. The upcoming sub-section details how the preservation of institutional structure is exemplified in the film.

‘Protecting’ the Structure

According to Galtung, when the structure is threatened, those who benefit from it try to preserve the status quo to secure themselves (179). The state’s efforts to protect its image involve silencing dissent and mobilizing the state machinery against disturbances (Ginsberg 179). In the film, the structure preserves itself by scapegoating its own mercenaries. This is done through falsely implicating three lower-ranked police officers, Maniyan, Sunitha, and Praveen, in a politically charged murder case. Their scapegoating is a vehement move by the ruling political party to secure its seat in the upcoming by-election.

The media is deployed as a tool of symbolic violence, a mouthpiece through which the bureaucracy manipulates public perception and manufactures consent. The state-sponsored misinformation regarding the death of the Dalit youth is fed into the media, and finally reaches the mass who internalizes it uncritically. While his demise becomes widely mourned and politically instrumentalized, Maniyan’s death is met with indifference, rendered “ungrievable” (Butler) within the public sphere. This disparity in grievability exposes the structural inequalities: whose suffering is recognized, whose is erased, and whose suffering is grievable and whose is not?

Victims and Enforcers: The Police Caught in Systemic Evil

While the state preserves its structure by scapegoating lower-ranked police officers, *Nayattu* also reveals how the police themselves, though victimized, become complicit actors in sustaining the very system that renders them disposable.

The three police officers’ plea for justice is not just ignored, but actively suppressed by their superior officers, as instructed by the state. Thus, the bureaucracy retains its position of remote security by mobilizing its “machineries”. This dynamic reveals that even higher-ranking officers are subjugated within the bureaucratic hierarchy. When Praveen and Sunitha appeal to the Crime Branch officer, he replies, “The department cannot do anything against the government” (1:52:06), reflecting a hierarchy where ethical obligation is compromised over institutional loyalty. Such acts of condescension perpetuate systemic evil, in which injury is inflicted by faceless collectives whose members remain unaware of or indifferent to the harm they cause (Ginsberg 236). Apart from this, the higher-ranked police officers are also subjected to institutional and ontological violence. The film magnifies this condition through its use of narrative silences, which underscore two key points: first, the police officers (both higher- and lower-ranked) are helpless in the face of the state machinery; second, they are silenced and prevented from voicing their concerns within institutional discourse. When Crime Branch SP Anuradha questions why Section 302 was invoked despite insufficient evidence, the SHO merely replies, “The SP instructed me.” Her response is nothing but a two-second-long silence. This silence is emblematic of the institutional suppression exercised by state power on law enforcers, including higher-ranked police officials. She is further silenced by the Chief Minister when he says, “Show the smartness only while catching the culprits.” Such scenes exemplify how narrative silences function as a metaphor for systemic disposability of the lower-ranked police officers.

Apart from being the victims of institutional disposal and violence, the higher-ranked police also indulge in illegal acts such as fabricating evidence in order to secure their profession. This makes the higher officers “silent partners” in systemic evil. For instance, one police officer, during the search for the three police officers-turned-fugitives, lets them escape, suggesting, in Ginsberg’s words, a “philanthropically inclined” actor caught within a corrupt structure. However, the police officer is also aware that the fugitives will be caught by the system, as he himself is a part of the same corrupt structure.

Later, the DIG is forced to stage a “dummy arrest” of the police officers, before the actual arrest, to pacify public outrage. Here, the DIG’s act can be observed as a systemic transfer of “evil doing as the dastardly deeds of individuals to that evil-being, the ontological status of groups of subhuman beings” (Ginsberg 236). Also, Maniyan’s suicide is staged in the lock-up room, as a cover-up that the suicide had happened before the arrest, as the Chief Minister conveniently deflects the responsibility and threatens the police. The Chief Minister’s act of “washing his hands” becomes a symbol of systemic detachment and disposal of the state machinery. Furthermore, the Superintendent of Police, the highest echelon among the police officers, remains an omnipotent yet invisible power throughout the film. This absent presence of the SP reveals the systemic power and silent partnership in perpetuating systemic evil. It is the SP who instructs to release the law violator Shibu and arrest the three police officers.

By tracing the trajectory of structural violence and its manifestations, it has been observed that institutional oppression starts from the denial of basic rights and extends to the institutional erasure of identity. The state machinery, in order to preserve the hierarchical order, discards its own functionaries, regardless of their service and loyalty to the structure. This pushes the victims to a state of continual liminality, which is elaborated in the next section.

BETWIXT AND BETWEEN: LIMINALITY AND SPATIAL UNCERTAINTY

The analysis of liminal space is fundamental to understanding the precarious position of police officers. The spatial environments in the films- such as the police station, road, and forest- are not just mere backdrops of the narrative but also produce the same. This echoes the Lefebvrian idea that space is produced and constructed (*The Production of Space*). The spatial analysis of the film uncovers how different physical and geographical spaces respond to the liminality of the police officers.

Borrowing from van Gennep, Victor Turner defines liminality or liminal phase as a state wherein the “initiates” are in a state of “betwixt or between,” leading to the formation of a new identity, status, or realization. This state is often marked by uncertainty or lack of knowledge about what has happened and what will happen in the future. He uses the word “ritual” to refer to the social transformations (“Betwixt and Between”). Reading the film text through the lens of liminality exemplifies how the characters and spatial configurations respond to Victor’s concept of liminality as a phase of transition.

When these police officers are in a liminal phase, they are “neither one thing nor another; or maybe both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere” (Turner 93). After being framed for the murder of a Dalit youth, they are stripped of their identity as police officers, as they have been rendered powerless. The media and the general public disparagingly label them as “three [drunk] police officers.” This signals a suspension of identity caught between police officers and fugitives. The structural invisibility endured by those in the liminal phase has a twofold character; they are at once no longer classified and not yet classified (Turner 92). The three police officers continue to be in the state of liminality as they are referred to as culprits who are police officers.

In the film, Praveen, Maniyan, and Sunitha eventually become, in Simmel’s words, strangers to their workspace. Their “objectivity” is marked not just by detachment and passivity, but also by “distance and nearness, indifference and involvement” (Simmel 2). In this sense, the estrangement endured by the three police officers is marked by the end of their identity as police officers and the beginning of their label as fugitives or culprits.

When the three police officers bring the injured youth to the hospital, the doctor's immediate decision to notify the authorities and his harsh reprimand of Maniyan, Sunitha, and Praveen despite their disclosure of their identity as police officers underscores the erosion of their institutional legitimacy. Their uniformed status no longer commands respect or credibility; they are treated with suspicion and hostility. This symbolic inversion of power is further accentuated when they are aggressively pursued by Shibu and his political allies, who hold them responsible for the youth's death. This scene, in which civilians chase police officers, subverts the dominant narrative structure of conventional police procedurals, where law enforcers pursue offenders. Notably, this is the first instance when their identity as police officers is stifled. This liminality is endorsed not only by the social perception but also by the bureaucratic representatives, such as the ministers, who use these police officers as mere scapegoats and fabricate evidence against them. The analysis of the spatial practices is paramount to the study as it uncovers how geography responds to the liminality of police officers. The paper throws light on how different spaces in the film, namely the police station, the road, and the forest, respond to the liminality of the three police officers, namely Praveen, Maniyan, and Sunitha.

The police station in *Nayattu* functions as a liminal space, echoing Turner's idea of places where transformation and ambiguity unfold. Traditionally, a site of authority and control, the station becomes claustrophobic and hostile, stripping the officers of their agency. In spite of being a place of authority, the station is encroached on by outsiders such as Shibu (Sunitha's brother), who often harasses her, and the political party members. They seem to have the upper hand over the police officers in the station, as the ruling party backs them. This very scene of inversion of power gestures that the workspace offers no protection to the personnel. It becomes a space where those backed by the bureaucracy reinstate their power over the law enforcers.

As the narrative moves forward, the police station turns hostile to those working there. When the three police officers come to the police station to report the death of a Dalit youth, on the spur of the moment, they are framed for the "murder". This is where they realize that they are being 'hunted' when they see the live broadcast of the "murder committed by three drunken police officers" minutes after they report the death to the senior police officer. The betrayal is immediate and total; they comprehend their precarious position while still within this institutional space. Interestingly, the police station, which is traditionally perceived as the space for justice, is the first place from which the three police officers had to escape for survival. Gradually, the police station becomes hostile to the three police officers who once worked there. Their past labor and service are ignored; the space they once controlled now consumes them. The unjust staging of Maniyan's suicide is committed in the police lock-up room, implying that the space is capable of creating and manipulating evidence. This is compounded by the Crime Branch officer's act of destroying the evidence that testifies to the innocence of the three police officers. These instances point to the fact that a police station embodies liminality as a contested site where justice is altered, manipulated, and sometimes selectively granted, and where identities are created, destroyed, and reconstituted. For the three police officers, the police station becomes the space where their time is deemed insignificant, minimal, and empty. Therefore, it can be inferred that the police station is a space conceived by bureaucratic power, where it dictates justice and thereby exerts and maintains its position.

Nayattu deploys the roads in the film as a space of liminality, representing continuous movement without resolution. Throughout the narrative, CPO Praveen and SI Maniyan are often seen on the road, traveling in the police van. In the film, the road is emblematic of the liminal space of the police officers. They continuously travel as a part of their inquiry, investigation, escort, and even survival. The unsettling soundtrack in different scenes on the roads heightens the

tension of the protagonists' uncertain and precarious situation. During the day, the road is associated with routine duties, but as their identity as police officers crumbles, it becomes a space of uncertainty and exposure. The road also serves as a temporary shelter at night to evade the scrutiny of investigators and the media. Ironically, their attempt to escape is also under camera surveillance, implying the futility of their attempt to evade the surveillance.

To add on, the film presents the forest as a space of temporary shelter, offering the three police officers hope for survival and escape to Pazhani, a place near the forest that is away from the jurisdiction of the Kerala police. The aerial shot of the forest implicates the vastness and density of the forest, symbolizing it as uncertain. The vastness and diversity associated with space enrich the hope for betterment. The continuing scenes set in the forest are taken in wide-angle shots, in order to explicate the relationship of the characters with the environment. These scenes present the three police officers' temporary relief from surveillance and their hope for justice if they are presented in court. However, towards the final scenes set in the forest, it is presented as a space capable of concealing and revealing. Interestingly, the three police officers are captured and arrested in the forest, implying that the forest can be understood, in Soja's words, as a thirdspace, a space that is simultaneously real, imagined, and symbolic, as it initially appears to be hospitable to the fugitives and offers them hope of survival, and towards the end, turns hostile to them.

Additionally, the film's strategic deployment of the rural landscape is done to illuminate the implicit yet subtle ways the bureaucracy enforces surveillance. Notably, ever since the death of the youth, all the technological developments, such as surveillance cameras, border checking, verifications, and tracking devices, are used to track the movement of the three police officers who are on the run. However, none of these devices or surveillance cameras could capture the death of the youth and its cause. However, the three police officers were tracked down and arrested in a forest, a rural space with limited mobile networks and surveillance cameras. The investigators use only a pair of binoculars to observe the movement of the three police officers-turned-fugitives. This very act of strategically closing eyes to selective events, such as the death of the youth, is a deliberate attempt by the bureaucracy to secure and strengthen its electoral power. Although the forest in the film seems to be a space where modern technological surveillance is suspended, the investigating officers stealthily capture the three fugitive officers. The newly subtle strategies of disciplinary control and surveillance are capable of selective surveillance and deliberate exclusion. This responds to the Foucauldian idea that visibility is a trap (200). Here, the bureaucracy 'visibilizes' the 'murder' of the Dalit youth by the police officers, thus rendering the actual cause of the death invisible.

Notably, the final scene, depicting Sunitha and Praveen being transported to court in a police van, is symbolic of the persistent and unresolved liminality that defines their existence. The film's climax withholds any clear resolution, leaving the audience uncertain about the characters' fate. This open-ended climax underlines the state of unending liminal uncertainty into which the two officers are thrust.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the characterization of police officers in *Nayattu* through a detailed textual analysis, foregrounding how structural violence and liminality shape their experiences and lives. The trajectorial analysis of the structural violence observes that the precarity of lower-ranked officers emerges not only from their professional space within the institutional hierarchy but also from caste-based discrimination. Their vulnerability is thus an outcome of overlapping axes of caste identity and institutional positioning. The visualization of structural violence in the film serves as

a powerful, though implicit, indictment of the state's keenness to discard its law enforcers for political benefits. The study also contends that the liminality experienced by the three police officers is the consequence of the structural violence inflicted on them. The spatial dynamics within the film, particularly the portrayal of liminal spaces like the forest, rural interiors, and roads, highlight how spatiality contests and reinforces power. The rural landscape becomes a strategic space where the workings of surveillance and bureaucratic control unfold subtly yet effectively. The liminality of the central characters throughout the narrative underscores the impossibility of resolution, emphasizing their state of existential uncertainty.

Despite Kerala's reputation for progressive governance, marked by high social development, solid social capital, and a deep-rooted culture of public reason, *Nayattu* lays bare the continuing presence of systemic violence within the state apparatus. The film critiques this contradiction by presenting police officers as precarious figures, both agents and victims of the system, whose lives are deemed disposable by the very machinery they serve.

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