ShodhSamajik: Journal of Social Studies
October-December 2026 3(3)
https://shodhsamajik.com/

Original Article

PROSCENIUM ON REELS: A LEFEBVRIAN STUDY OF THE SPATIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THEATRE IN SELECT MALAYALAM FILM TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of theatrical space in four Malayalam films, Yavanika (1982), Mannar Mathai Speaking (1995), Grandmaster (2012), and Aattam (2023), through the spatial triad that Henri Lefebvre develops in The Production of Space: spatial practice, representations of space and representational space. It argues that none of these films treats theatre as a neutral setting. In each, the space of performance is shaped by the cultural, gendered, or institutional forces that surround it which in turn makes those forces visible. Yavanika uses the theatre troupe to expose and unsettle a social stereotype; Mannar Mathai Speaking turns conceived theatrical space into a site of comic misrecognition; Grandmaster portrays theatrical space to license its villain's violence; and Aattam, read alongside Lizbeth Goodman's feminist theatre criticism, shows how a rehearsal room can reproduce the very patriarchal hierarchies it appears to have left behind. The four readings trace a shift in the way Malayalam cinema imagines theatrical space, from a mirror held up to society to contested and gendered ground.

Keywords: Theatre in Film, Malayalam Cinema, Henri Lefebvre, Spatial Theory, Gender and Space

INTRODUCTION

Theatrical space in Malayalam cinema is seldom a mere backdrop. When films bring the stage, the rehearsal camp or the green room to the screen, they also bring with them the social relations that organise those places. This paper studies four such films: Yavanika George (1982), Mannar Mathai Speaking Siddique (1995), Grandmaster Unnikrishnan (2012), and Ekarshi (Director). (2023). Its central argument is that in each of them the space of theatre is both produced by the social relations around it. Read through Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad in The Production of Space, each film stages a distinct relationship between theatrical space and the ideologies it carries.

Yavanika uses the stage to expose the stereotypes that have gathered around 'people of theatre'. Mannar Mathai Speaking converts theatrical convention into comedy through a series of spatial misrecognitions. Grandmaster filters theatrical space through the commercial thriller in order to justify a villain's violence. Aattam, read alongside Lizbeth Goodman's feminist theatre criticism, reveals how a rehearsal space can reproduce patriarchal hierarchy within a troupe that appears to be egalitarian. These readings are situated against Kerala's own theatrical history which extends from temple and ritual performance, through caste-inflected folk drama, to the politically engaged theatre of the twentieth century. It is this history that gives each film's version of 'theatre space' its cultural relevance.

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Received: 12 October 2026; **Revised:** 08 November 2026; **Accepted:** 21 November 2026; **Published:** 28 November 2026
DOI: 10.29121/ShodhSamajik.v3.i3.2026.230
Page Number: 151-155
Journal Title: ShodhSamajik: Journal of Social Studies
Journal Abbreviation: ShodhSamajik J. Soc. Stud.
Online ISSN: 3049-2319, **Print ISSN:** 3108-2009
Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India
Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.
Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.
Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.
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HENRI LEFEBVRE'S SPATIAL TRIAD AS THE METHODOLOGY

The methodology used is the theoretical analysis of Henri Lefebvre's Spatial Triad. Lefebvre's triad offers three related ways of thinking about how space is produced, and this paper adopts all three as its organising method. Spatial practice or perceived space is space as it is used and inhabited: the routines, movements, and embodied habits through which people occupy a place. For Lefebvre, it is at this level that 'the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space' (38). Representations of space or conceived space refers to space as it is planned, designed or ideologically ordered. This is 'the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers' (38) encoded in signs, rules, and institutional authority. Representational space or lived space is space as it is directly experienced and symbolically inhabited, 'the space of "inhabitants" and "users"' (39); it is the space to which art, memory and imagination attach themselves.

The three are not insulated from one another. Lefebvre insists that they exist in constant dialectical relation, so that no space is ever only planned or only lived. The analysis that follows traces this dialectic of the perceived, the conceived and the lived through four films that stage theatre in markedly different ways. In the case of Aattam, Lefebvre's vocabulary is supplemented by Lizbeth Goodman's account of feminist theatre, which asks not only how space is produced but also who is permitted to produce it.

SPATIAL PRACTICE AND THE MAKING OF A STEREOTYPE IN YAVANIKA

Yavanika, directed by K. G. George, is among the earliest Malayalam whodunits. It is built around the investigation into the disappearance and murder of Ayyappan, the tabla player of Bhavana Theatres. As the investigation unfolds, conflicting testimonies about Ayyappan's character turn the troupe into a social cross-section. The stereotype of 'people of theatre' as volatile, disreputable and morally loose is set up, only to be complicated by the sheer range of people who make up the troupe. When read spatially, the film treats theatre not as a passive setting for the investigation but as ideologically active ground; the way the camera moves through the theatre's spaces is itself part of the film's argument.

Released in 1982, when professional theatre still drew large audiences, the film also registers a more immediate economic reality, that of unemployment. Rohini's family is a case in point. In one scene, her mother explains her illness and the family's poverty to Ayyappan (57:05):

Mother: I'm not well, I was lying inside.

Ayyappan: What's your illness, Amma?

Mother: They are many. It's years since they started. [...] Now the sick me, with three children who have lost their father, struggle to pave a path for the future. (57:10)

The small, sparsely furnished house in which Rohini lives is a reminder that, for a family like hers, theatre was less an art form than a livelihood, and one of the few opens to a young woman in her position.

The film's camera placement extends this argument. Several scenes are shot from behind the stage and observe actors as they cross from their own selves into character. During a performance of Bhavana Theatres' play Karuppum Veluppum, an actor named Varunan smokes heavily just before his entrance. The film captures the moment of transition from actor to character almost in real time (1:47:20). Elsewhere, the camera sits with the audience. Low-angle shots are taken from the spectators' position (17:13), eye-level shots follow the actors between preparation and performance (17:43), and a high-angle point-of-view shot of the green room verges on the voyeuristic (9:40). Together, these choices fold the film's own audience into the theatre's audience, so that the viewer is made to watch the spectators as they watch.

This is spatial practice in Lefebvre's sense. Vakkachan's cramped and ordinary rehearsal camp is a site of routine, embodied labour, a space that "embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation" (Lefebvre 33). A rehearsal scene shot in plain lighting, with the actors in their everyday clothes (48:15), makes this labour visible before it is transformed into performance. Even at this level, however, the space is not neutral. Vakkachan corrects an actor's line:

Vakkachan: Write it rightly so that you won't blabber on the stage. (56:25)

He also insists on the archaic word kulada ('an immoral woman'). His authority over diction and blocking shows that even the rehearsal space, however ordinary it appears, is already shaped by whoever controls it.

The climax collapses the distinction between rehearsal and performance altogether. On stage, in the middle of a performance, Rohini, who is in fact the murderer breaks down, when a wrongly accused man's false confession unsettles her. She steps out of her role and speaks in her own voice: 'No. No. I won't let that happen. [...] I did the crime. I'm ready to confess. [...] But... no it's not me. It's not me. It's not me.' This is representational space where the theatrical space "directly lived through its associated images and symbols" (Lefebvre 39), which can no longer be contained by the play's script or by the theatre's architecture. Rohini's breakdown shows that the space the troupe has built, conceived as fiction and practised as routine, is ultimately lived, and that what is lived cannot be fully scripted.

Across its length, then, Yavanika treats theatrical space as contested terrain. At times it is an instrument of directorial control, at times a vehicle for social critique and finally a space that its own inhabitant cannot keep apart from her lived reality.

Conceived Space as Comedy in Mannar Mathai Speaking

Mannar Mathai Speaking (1995), directed by Siddique–Lal, follows Urvashi Theatres into better times, after the financially deteriorated state depicted in its prequel, Ramji Rao Speaking. Whereas Yavanika treats theatrical space as socially revealing, this film presents it as conceived space in the most literal Lefebvre sense: a set of codes of costume, diction and character type that the troupe's members carry with them off the stage. The film mines these codes for comedy rather than for critique.

The prequel had shown Urvashi Theatres in decline, with its cluttered office of dusty posters, worn props and the losing authority of Mannar Mathai, its director. The sequel opens on the troupe's recovery, but its comic engine lies in how thoroughly the members have internalised theatrical convention as a way of reading real life. Meera, who marries the theatre actor Balakrishnan after a chance meeting, turns out to be concealing a criminal past and the troupe interprets this domestic crisis through the exaggerated moral categories of the stage rather than as an ordinary event. The title song and the play-within-the-film draw on stock types such as the virtuous heroine, the gun-wielding villain, and the wise elder. This is conceived space at its most codified: the ordered space that Lefebvre associates with planners and social engineers (38) is here extended to the space of popular drama itself.

The apt example comes in the climax, when Balakrishnan, Gopalakrishnan, and Mannar Mathai attempt to rescue Stella from Mahendra Varma's men. Absurdly dressed in stage costume, they speak in theatrical cadences and block their movements as though in a rehearsed scene. Real danger and stage gesture share the same unfinished building which is under construction. On one floor, Mahendra Varma's men threaten Balakrishnan's mother in earnest, while on another, Mannar Mathai mock-fights an effigy. The result is a doubled spatial parody in which the codes of conceived space are pushed so far beyond their function that they cea sense. They become comic precisely because of that failure.

This spatial misreading is not confined to the climax. Throughout the film, the members of the troupe interpret ordinary events, such as a woman's claim to a reincarnated identity or a threat to the household, through theatrical logic, and the resulting confusion is the film's chief source of comedy. In Lefebvre's terms, conceived space has moved inward. The members carry their theatre's codes into lived space and lived space repeatedly refuses to cooperate. Each time, the joke lies in the gap between what the troupe expects a space to mean and what it turns out to mean.

The film is also aware that this way of reading the world is becoming obsolete. In an early scene, the troupe's senior actor complains that no one comes to watch drama any longer, since audiences have turned to cinema or to television 'serials' (21:00). The complaint registers the pressure that the newer media placed on Kerala's professional theatre through the 1980s and 1990s. Renu Ramanath in "The Changing Scenario: Transitions in 21st Century Theatre in Kerala" describes these decades as a lean period for theatre in Kerala, marked by financial constraints and by the crisis that the television era brought with it, and traces the more experimental work that followed through Jos Chirammel's group Root and, later directors such as Sankar Venkateswaran and Deepan Sivaraman. Mannar Mathai Speaking does not engage with this history directly. Its theatre remains stereotyped and self-contained, functioning more as a temporary hub for its characters than as a genuine performance space. When the wealthy Mahendra Varma tells Meera that 'these drama troupe fools are better than the intelligent doctor' (1:37:43), the line captures how little status the film grants its own theatrical world, even as it profits from that world's comic conventions.

Reading through the 'spatial' lens, Mannar Mathai Speaking stages conceived theatrical space as a site of contest between cultural orthodoxy and its own comic exaggeration. Its humour thus becomes legible as a symptom of a theatre culture already conscious of its own decline.

BORROWED THEATRICALITY IN GRANDMASTER

Grandmaster (2012), directed by B. Unnikrishnan, is a commercial neo-noir thriller that uses theatre to construct its villain rather than to explore theatre itself. Mark Roshan, whose first name is borrowed from Mark Antony in Julius Caesar, appears only twice before the climax. Within the film's logic his theatrical unpredictability is sufficient to explain his violence: the eccentric artist and the murderer are treated as versions of the same type. The film is structured as a contest between Roshan and the investigating officer Chandrasekhar, repeatedly framed as a game of chess, but the novelty of this framing depends on the very stereotype of theatre from which it borrows.

This is partly a matter of directorial style. Unnikrishnan works within the conventions of commercial thriller filmmaking, with its high-contrast lighting and a score designed to cue suspense. He treats theatre as a genre signifier rather than as a lived institution, in a way that George's Yavanika does not. Where the spatial practice of Yavanika is built from the sensory detail of an actual drama camp, the theatrical space of Grandmaster arrives already filtered through the visual grammar of commercial cinema. It is conceived space shaped as much by the conventions of the thriller as by anything specific to theatre. This mediation is what allows Roshan's theatricality to function as shorthand for menace rather than as characterisation.

Theatre properly re-enters the film only in the climax, which is set in a school auditorium during a theatre performance performed by Chandrasekhar's daughter. Here Roshan, disguised as the mythical figure Narasimha, commits murder in full view of

an audience that reads the act as choreography (1:47:45). The auditorium itself belongs to the order of representations of space, since it is engineered and planned for a predictable civic function. The theatre workshop held in the school is spatial practice. The moment Roshan steps onto the stage as Narasimha; however, the space becomes representational space in the full sense. It becomes lived, symbolic and no longer contained by what its planners intended or its performers rehearsed. The mythic disguise does not so much conceal the murder as exploit the gap between what the auditorium is conceived to be, a venue for a school function, and what it is lived as by everyone inside it, a stage on which anything, violence included, can be read as part of the show.

Chandrasekhar comes to read the same stage differently. He views it as a site of strategy rather than spectacle. He describes his encounter with Roshan as one between two 'Master Directors', each able to anticipate the other's next move (1:58:25). The film's chess metaphor thus proves to be a spatial one as well. The same stage carries two competing readings at once, one of planned meaning and one of lived, improvised meaning. Even the choice of victims, Alice, Beena, and Chandrika who are murdered in alphabetical order, reads as an attempt to impose authorial order on violence. It reflects the same drive towards pattern and control that. In Lefebvre's account it characterises anyone who seeks to conceive space rather than simply to live in it.

The theatrical space of Grandmaster is thin in comparison with that of Yavanika or Aattam, but this thinness is itself instructive. It shows how readily 'theatre' can be borrowed as an alibi for behaviour that a film does not wish to explain in any other way.

Gendered Space and its Limits in Aattam

Aattam (2023), directed by Anand Ekarshi, is the most recent of the four films and, in spatial terms, the most self-aware. Made with actors and crew drawn from Lokadharmi, the Kochi-based theatre company led by Sri. Chandradasan, the film renders its rehearsal spaces with a degree of lived detail that the earlier films do not attempt. It does so in the wake of Kerala's own #MeToo reckoning within the film and theatre industries (Raj and Suresh; Mannil). Whereas the other three films use theatre as a device, whether for social critique, comedy or plot, Aattam poses a more pointed question: who decides what a shared and apparently egalitarian creative space actually means?

The film follows a theatre troupe after Anjali Balan, its only female member experiences a sexual assault. The troupe initially presents itself as gender-neutral and the opening scenes show an easy and genuine intimacy among its members. (6:30). The allegation, however, exposes a patriarchal structure that had until then simply gone unidentified. Here Lefebvre's dialectic is visible: a collaborative space turns out, once tested, to have been conceived on entirely different terms.

Before the allegation, the rehearsal room functions as spatial practice in the ordinary sense, a shared and habitual space in which the troupe's routines of greeting, joking, and casual authority are played out. Yet these routines already carry a hierarchy. Hari, a well-known film actor who has recently joined the group, moves through the space with a confidence the others lack. He rearranges people for a photograph, mentions the celebrities who might attend the play and plays a prank on a junior colleague that reasserts his seniority (6:18–7:06). Vinay, displaced as the play's presumed lead, responds with an outburst rather than an argument. None of this resembles patriarchy in the abstract but only an ordinary group dynamics. This is precisely Lefebvre's point about spatial practice which states that authority is 'deciphered' through space before anyone names it as authority (38).

Once Anjali makes her allegation, the troupe's response reveals what that space was conceived to protect. The male director and Hari treat the crisis primarily as a threat to the group's public image. A meeting is called to discuss it which becomes a debate about collective reputation rather than an inquiry into what happened. Lizbeth Goodman's account of feminist theatre is a useful frame to analyse the context. Institutional theatre spaces, she argues, are often structured to prevent precisely this kind of challenge to established authority, presenting that authority as neutral and necessary even as it silences dissent (150). What the film frames as a collaborative creative space thus turns out (under pressure of course) to run on representations of space in their most institutional form, a conceived order that determines whose account of events is believed.

The film's sharpest image of this order is Anjali's exclusion. After the allegation, the troupe continues to rehearse without her and substitutes a prop for her body in the blocking. The image literalises what Goodman calls the "symbolic disappearance" of women within institutional structures that treat their presence as replaceable (152). Female participation is reduced to a placeholder. Lefebvre's account of lived space nonetheless allows this moment to be read differently. Anjali's absence is not only imposed on her but is also, in its own way, a refusal; a lived space that will not resolve itself back into the troupe's comfortable fiction of harmony.

This refusal carries through to the end of the film. In the climax, Anjali stages a play that dramatises her own experience. Eleven masked men, standing in for the members of the troupe, voice the patriarchal judgements, spoken or implied, that shaped the way she was treated. One of them steps forward, unmasks, and confesses to the assault, offering the closure towards which the scene seems to be building. Anjali rejects it. She tells him that his identity does not matter, because his judgement of her was no different from that of anyone else in the troupe. The film denies both Anjali and its audience a clean resolution, and this denial is itself a spatial argument: genuine change would require the troupe's space to be rebuilt on different terms, not merely the naming of one guilty man within the old ones.

Read through Lefebvre and Goodman together, Aattam suggests that a rehearsal room, however informal it may be and however genuinely it is experienced as shared, is never free of the hierarchies that produced it. The film's refusal to resolve this contradiction is, finally, its most honest gesture.

CONCLUSION

Across these four film texts, Lefebvre's triad brings into focus something that is otherwise easy to overlook: theatrical space in Malayalam cinema is never simply a backdrop borrowed for atmosphere. Yavanika uses spatial practice to expose the gap between social stereotype and lived reality. Mannar Mathai Speaking turns conceived space into comedy through its own characters' misreading of it. Grandmaster shows how a thin, borrowed theatricality can license violence when a film treats theatre as a signifier rather than as lived space. Aattam demonstrates that even a space founded on collaboration and equality can, when examined through Lefebvre's dialectic, be shown to run on older and unspoken hierarchies. In conclusion, the four films trace a shift in the way Malayalam cinema imagines theatrical space, from a mirror held up to society to a space whose internal politics can no longer go unquestioned.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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