

## **Narratives of Neglect and Nurturance: The Discourse on Elder Care in Malayalam Cinema**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2026.26.1.39>

### *Abstract*

*This scholarly inquiry situated within the theoretical framework of literary gerontology, delves into the multifaceted representation of ageing in post-2020 Malayalam cinema. It critically examines how cinematic portrayals intersect with broader societal discourses and cultural narratives concerning senescence. Within the purview of literary gerontology, a diachronic examination of ageing narratives across ages and cultures reveals a persistent tension between reductive stereotypes and complex, individualized portrayals. The purpose of this study would be to question the ‘claims’ of the ageing narratives that forcefully associate old age with weakness and decline. Through a rigorous analysis of key films, including Jananam 1947; Pranayam Thudarunnu and Home, the paper explores the recurring themes, characters, and narrative structures that characterize the representation of ageing in the cinematic landscape of Kerala.*

*By examining these films, the paper contributes to a broader understanding of the ways in which Malayalam cinema has contributed to a more nuanced and inclusive representation of ageing. It also raises important questions about the role of cinema in shaping societal attitudes towards old age and the challenges faced by older adults, inviting further scholarly exploration and critical engagement.*

**Keywords:** Literary Gerontology, Malayalam cinema, Ageing, Representation, Subversion.

### **Introduction**

Gerontology, a relatively young field, has roots stretching back millennia across diverse cultures. Traditionally divided into sociology, psychology, biology, and health, gerontology offers a multifaceted perspective on human ageing. While traditional research focuses on medical, public health, and social science angles, literary gerontology provides a unique lens to explore age and ageing within cultural narratives. Literary gerontology, as Wallace (2012) suggests, treats literature as a “gerontological resource” (“Literature” 411). Literary gerontologists like Constance Rooke and Kathleen Woodward have taken an interest in novels specifically related to old age and have categorized them under a new genre of literature *vollendungsroman* (German for “winding up”) coined after *bildungsroman*, a literary term used to refer to coming-of-age novels (*Handbook of Humanities and Aging* 245). Rooke suggests that writers of the *vollendungsroman* genre, typically engage with the identities and social

relationships of the old to conceptualize a self-actualization marked by some kind of major loss that eventually triggers the beginning of a change or withdrawal rather than an absolute end. He argues, “Although events such as retirement or the loss of a mate or removal to an institution provide sudden jolts and propel the plot of the *vollendungsroman*- disengagement is typically regarded as a continuous process- and not always or only as a progressive deterioration” (248). The *vollendungsroman* challenges writers to move towards developing older characters beyond the notions of decline that dominate the alterity of old age, offering affirmation in the face of loss by constructing new meanings of life, even when the life of the character is deconstructed (Rooke 248). By examining the portrayal of older characters, the exploration of age-related themes, and the underlying assumptions about ageing embedded within texts, researchers can gain valuable insights into the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of the ageing process. Moreover, literary gerontology can serve as a tool to combat ageism, a pervasive form of discrimination that stigmatizes older individuals.

Sally Chivers and Hannah Zeilig suggest that literary and artistic representations of the old can transform the meaning of getting old and thereby bolsters a “desire to embrace rather than elide the complexities of later life (Zeilig 8). Chivers further indicates that fictional narratives provide authors with a creative space to address the anxieties surrounding the stigma of old age. Zeilig argues, “narrative and literary approaches to age and ageing, when allied to perspectives from critical gerontology can furnish scholars with important perspectives for interpreting and reconfiguring age” (7). Engaging with narratives about ageing affords readers and viewers alike the possibility to liberate the elderly from stereotypes as they question assumptions about the socio-cultural constructs of age. By analyzing literary and cinematic texts, this emerging field delves into the construction, representation, and challenge of ageing in cultural discourse.

As Kathleen Woodward remarks, literary gerontology operates in such a way that it enables us to investigate how cultural narrative forms “mediate our understanding of the ageing process” (*Ageing and its Discontents* 45). By employing theoretical frameworks such as psychoanalysis, feminism, and postcolonialism, researchers can deconstruct the complex ways in which age and gender intersect, challenge dominant discourses of ageing, and explore the experiences of marginalized older populations. Literary gerontology delves into the ways in which literature and film can illuminate the complexities of ageing, challenge societal stereotypes and offer nuanced perspectives on the ageing process.

Drawing parallels with Laura Mulvey’s (1975) seminal theorization of the male gaze, the “gerontological gaze,” invites us to scrutinize the ways in which older characters are represented, to investigate the roles they play within narratives, and to analyze the significance attributed to their experiences. It encapsulates the modes through which ageing bodies are subjected to scrutiny, marginalization, or fetishization within narrative frameworks. Margerete Gullette, a pivotal figure in age studies, critiques what she terms “decline narratives”- cultural scripts that align ageing with inevitable deterioration and loss (*Agewise* 149-154). She says, “Whatever happens in the body, and even if nothing happens in the body, ageing is a narrative. Each of us tells her own story (5). In the context of the American society, she frames ageing as a process of loss and diminution, whereas she argues for a more complex, self-authored understanding of entering later life. In an attempt to underscore the pervasive cultural logic, she critiques:

Decline is a metaphor as hard to contain as dye. Once it has tinged our expectations of the future (sensations, rewards, status, power, voice) with

peril, it tends to stain our experiences, our views of others, our explanatory systems, and then our retrospective judgements. Once I feel I am at risk, the collective future can shrink to the fantasized autobiography of the Aging Me.... One of decline's saddest ego-centripetal effects is to obscure anything suffered by those adjacent to us, in the polity and across the globe. The only history that matters is that of our times. Decline then squeezes the life span further, into an inflexible, biological, individual arc. (*Aged by Culture* 11)

The dichotomy between vitality and decline can often be seen in literary and cinematic representations of ageing. Older characters are often portrayed as either wise and experienced, or frail and dependent. This binary categorization, while simplistic, reflects deep-seated cultural anxieties about ageing and mortality. In many narratives, older characters are relegated to the margins, their stories relegated to the background as younger protagonists take centre stage. This marginalization can perpetuate negative stereotypes about ageing, reinforcing the notion that older individuals are irrelevant and obsolete. However, a growing body of literary and cinematic works challenges these reductive portrayals. By foregrounding the experiences of older characters, these texts offer more nuanced and complex representations of ageing.

Another important theme in literary gerontology is the exploration of intergenerational relationships. Gullette argues that "age is not a solitary condition but is always lived in relation to other ages, and literary texts richly demonstrate these complex, often fraught, yet sometimes deeply affirming, intergenerational negotiations of power, identity, and care" (*Aged by Culture* 112). The interactions between older and younger characters can also reveal much about societal attitudes towards ageing. In some narratives, these relationships are characterized by tension and conflict, reflecting generational divides and misunderstandings. However, other texts highlight the potential for intergenerational solidarity and mutual respect. By examining these dynamics, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which age and generation shape our identities and relationships. As Woodward notes, "the elder's narrative, often a retrospective on a life lived, frequently encounters the younger generation not as a blank slate for wisdom, but as an active, sometimes challenging, recipient or even a co-creator of meaning, revealing the fluid and reciprocal nature of intergenerational exchange rather than a simple transmission of knowledge" (*Ageing and its Discontents* 78).

The gerontological gaze also invites us to consider the role of memory and nostalgia in shaping our understanding of ageing. "Memory, in the context of literary gerontology, is not merely a recall of past events but a dynamic, often reconstructive process that shapes the elderly character's present identity and their engagement with their environment, frequently imbued with the bittersweet hues of nostalgia" (Woodward 52). In many literary and cinematic texts, older characters are portrayed as repositories of cultural memory, passing down traditions and wisdom to younger generations. However, memory can also be a source of pain and loss, as older characters grapple with the decline of cognitive function and the fading of loved ones. By exploring the complex relationship between memory and ageing, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the richness and complexity of the human experience.

## Discussion

Malayalam cinema, often lauded for its progressive narrative sensibilities, has recently embarked on a cinematic exploration of ageing, a theme previously relegated to the margins of

mainstream filmmaking. Post-2020, a distinct shift in the representation of older characters is discernible, moving beyond stereotypical portrayals to delve into the multifaceted complexities of the ageing experience. This paper delves into this cinematic evolution, examining key films such as *Jananam 1947*; *Pranayam Thudarunnu* and *Home*, to illuminate the nuanced and often subversive representations of ageing that have emerged in contemporary Malayalam cinema. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from gerontology and film studies, this analysis seeks to understand how these films challenge and subvert dominant cultural narratives surrounding ageing.

As Andrea Charise remarks in her very famous book *The Aesthetics of Senescence: Aging, Population and the Nineteenth Century British Novel*, “contemporary media, medicine and economics regularly frame ageing as nothing less than an imminent social catastrophe, while other conclusions (like taking population ageing as a public health success or the outcome of improved medical care) have been overwhelmed entirely” (147). However, the films under consideration, present a departure from the traditional trope of the elderly as either wise, benevolent figures or comical, doddering caricatures. Instead, they offer complex and multifaceted portrayals of older individuals who are active agents in shaping their own destinies. These films challenge the notion of ageing as a period of decline and despair, highlighting the resilience, agency, and continued relevance of older adults.

Abhijit Ashokan’s directorial debut, *Jananam 1947*, *Pranayam Thudarunnu*, raises profound questions about the treatment of Kerala’s senior citizens. The film posits that the current generation may be diminishing the autonomy of the elderly, limiting their ability to determine their own lifestyle choices. It suggests that as society prioritizes rapid progress, the needs and desires of senior citizens may be overlooked, leading to marginalization. The film further questions whether existing systems adequately protect the well-being of the elderly while preventing their social isolation. Starring Leela Samson and Kozhikode Jayaraj as Gowri and Sivan, the film delves into the profound loneliness experienced by many elderly individuals after the loss of their spouses.

*Jananam 1947*; *Pranayam Thudarunnu* presents elderly characters embracing the optimistic accumulations of Robert Browning’s often-cited “Rabbi Ben Ezra” (1864)- “Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be” (1-2); they are not mere relics of the past but individuals grappling with contemporary issues such as trauma, loss, and the challenges of intergenerational relationships. The plot of the film revolves around Gowri, a former educator hailing from a privileged background, who finds herself a reluctant inhabitant of a modest elderly care facility. Yearning for the autonomy and familiarity of her own home, she pleads with her estranged son for a chance to return. Her pleas, however, fall on deaf ears.

A fellow resident suggests an unconventional solution: a marriage to Sivan, a widower and employee of the facility. Despite their disparate socio-economic backgrounds, Gowri finds herself drawn to the idea as a means to reclaim her independence. Sivan, recognizing an opportunity for companionship, agrees to the proposal. The decision, however, sparks fierce opposition from both Gowri’s and Sivan’s children. Driven by concerns of financial security and societal judgment, they vehemently oppose the union. The ensuing familial conflict serves as a microcosm of societal attitudes towards unconventional relationships, particularly those involving older individuals, highlighting the dilemmas involved in intergenerational value systems.

The film beautifully captures the stark contrast between Gowri’s former life of privilege and

her newfound simplicity. As she transitions from the confines of the care facility to the serene beauty of the countryside, the film captures the subtle transformations in her demeanour. The director eschews a rushed narrative, allowing the relationship between Gowri and Sivan to develop organically. Sivan, a humble farmer, feels the pressure to meet the expectations of his educated wife. As Gauri adapts to her new life, donning traditional attire and embracing domestic chores, the film explores the power of companionship to transcend societal norms. While certain aspects of the narrative, such as Gowri's rapid assimilation into Sivan's simple lifestyle, may stretch credulity, the film ultimately emphasizes the enduring power of human connection. By focusing on the profound bond between Gowri and Sivan, the film challenges conventional notions of love, marriage, and ageing.

*Jananam 1947; Pranayam Thudarunnu* shares progressive values, but the progressiveness is not in the face. Both Shivan and Gouri are product of their times; so, it's natural when Shivan proposes to Gouri saying, "I'd love to have someone make tea for me". Similarly, Gouri, who has been caged in the retirement home for over three years, is raring to do household chores, like a typical homemaker. After they move in together, she happily cooks and feeds Sivan, while he sweats it out on his farm.

The film brims with wonderful moments that display love in all its splendour. In a fleeting moment, we can see Gouri checking if Shivan ate the food that she packed and realising his love for spicy dishes. Like any newly married couple, their intimacy blossoms gradually. Usually in films exploring old-age romance, it is a norm to show at least one of them with a terrible past relationship. However, in this film, both Gouri and Shivan were deeply in love with their former partners and hold them in high regard even after their passing. They don't shy away from talking about their past and the fond memories accompanying it. At the same time, they also embrace the present and their beautiful and respectful relationship.

*Jananam 1947; Pranayam Thudarunnu* offers a nuanced exploration of gerontological themes, subverting conventional portrayals of aged romance. The protagonists embody a refreshing paradigm of ageing, characterized by vitality, affection, and a sense of purpose. Their enduring bond underscores the pivotal role of social connection in augmenting well-being and cognitive health in later life. The film challenges ageist notions by celebrating the enduring nature of love and intimacy, showcasing a relationship replete with tenderness and warmth. Moreover, it delves into the interplay of gender roles and ageing, demonstrating how traditional expectations can be negotiated and redefined. Geri Berg and Sally Gadow suggest that "part of that richness of ageing is its non-linear temporality, the fullness of its moments, when an experience is slowed to the stillness of a painting and allowed to reveal its internal meaning irrespective of the external sequences in which it exists." ("Towards More Human" 92). Additionally, the film's emphasis on personal agency and autonomy highlights the importance of empowering older adults to actively shape their lives, fostering a sense of meaning and purpose. In essence, *Jananam 1947; Pranayam Thudarunnu* offers a compelling perspective on the multifaceted nature of aging, challenging stereotypes and celebrating the richness of later life.

The Malayalam film *Home* offers a poignant exploration of the complex dynamics of ageing, family, and societal expectations. The film delves into the complexities of a middle-class family grappling with the challenges of ageing and the digital revolution. Centring on Oliver Twist, a former video cassette shop owner, and his family, the film explores the societal upheaval caused by the shift to online modes of living. The narrative highlights the impact of this change on

the elderly and less tech-savvy individuals, particularly Oliver's grandfather, 'Appachan.' By juxtaposing Oliver's family with those of his friend Suryan and his son Antony's girlfriend Priya, the film offers a multifaceted exploration of human relationships in the face of technological advancements.

The film *Home* provides a poignant reflection of a society deeply entrenched in technological advancement. The narrative is particularly focused on the character of Oliver Twist, a middle-aged man struggling to bridge the generational gap with his tech-savvy sons, Antony and Charles. Oliver's earnest attempts to connect with his children within the digital realm highlight the challenges faced by older individuals in adapting to rapid technological change. As Robert. N. Butler remarks, "The cultural arts reflect our strongest fears and desires to avoid that period of human life which constitutes old age. A negative, stereotypic theme which enables us to close our eyes to the realisation of old age- including the joys as well as the pains- permeates much of our literature" ("Humanistic Perspectives" 392). The characters Oliver Twist, his wife Kuttiamma, and his father 'Appachan' are portrayed as kind, helpful, and trustworthy, yet also perceived as lonely and somewhat antiquated.

*Home* can be seen as a literary text that explores the themes of loss, and memory. The film's narrative structure, characterized by its fragmented and nonlinear timeline, mirrors the fragmented nature of memory and the subjective experience of time in old age. Intriguingly, the film delves into Oliver's past, revealing a time when he and his father were at the forefront of technological innovation. Their ownership of a popular video cassette shop and their knowledge of typewriters and foreign literature position them as early adopters of technology. This retrospective narrative offers a unique perspective on the evolution of technology and societal roles. It underscores the film's exploration of generational shifts and the fluid nature of terms like "technologically advanced" and "elite."

A recurring theme in research on youngsters' perceptions of old age focuses on physical appearance, reflecting a society where people are often evaluated based on their looks. "In mainstream cinema, pervasive emotional responses to old age and ageing range from annoyance, impatience, irritation, anger, and fear to sadness, pity, compassion, and sympathy. The encounter with the ageing body may trigger feelings of disgust, repulsion, and aversion. These emotions are culturally and politically mediated." (Zecchi and Medina 260). The 'ideal gentleman' image is highly praised, influenced significantly by social media trends set by influencers whose impact transcends generations. This push towards becoming a trendsetter rather than just a follower is constant, but the underlying idea that men should aspire to be gentlemen remains steadfast. This is evident in the case of Joseph Lopez, the father of Priya and Suryan and friend of Oliver. Despite belonging to the same age group and sharing a gentlemanly appearance, their distinction lies in their use of smartphone technology, symbolizing the 'new normal cool look' for older adults in the pandemic era. Recently, this trend has been highlighted in advertising, with transformations of older adults becoming viral sensations. When older adults engage in activities associated with younger generations, they often become viral sensations, as it contradicts societal expectations. The older generation is not typically expected to be adept in the digital world; breaking these stereotypes can lead them to being perceived as outliers or trendsetters, as they are not fully integrated into what is considered 'normal' society.

The prevalent anxiety experienced by children regarding the process of ageing is primarily centered on the themes of illness and mortality. When children articulate their perceptions of

older adults, they frequently highlight attributes such as baldness, wrinkles, impaired vision, diminished auditory capacity, and general frailty. These descriptors signify a perceived decline in both physical and cognitive functions, which serves as a poignant reminder of human vulnerability and the inevitability of death—conceptually referred to as the ‘threat of animality.’ This fear aligns with a broader theoretical framework positing that the tangible manifestations of the aging body evoke an acute awareness of mortality. In an attempt to mitigate existential anxiety relating to death, individuals often rely on cultural beliefs and societal norms. However, these efforts may be compromised by the persistent awareness of our intrinsic physicality, which can elicit feelings of discomfort or aversion, as it starkly emphasizes human fragility and the certainty of death.

Literary gerontology not only celebrates the productive aspects of ageing but also candidly portrays the challenges, offering a nuanced view of later life. Narratives, even as they underscore the capacity for older characters to cultivate profound interior lives, also confront the harsh realities of physical decline and increasing vulnerability, depicting how the body’s diminishing capacities can lead to isolation, dependency, and a profound re-evaluation of selfhood. While older individuals are often seen as sadder, lonelier, and duller than younger people, they are also viewed as unaggressive, kind, polite, friendly, good, and wise. A portrayal of this can be seen in the character Oliver Twist, who despite experiencing loneliness and neglect, exhibits care and love towards his children and acquaintances. For instance, Oliver’s misunderstanding about Antony seeking a smartphone for him, which was actually for Priya’s father, leads to a profound sense of disappointment and hurt. Self-esteem, particularly significant in buffering death-related anxiety, becomes a critical issue for the elderly. Oliver’s experience of negative attitudes from Antony plunges him into deep depression. Literary gerontology reveals how narratives depict the ‘othering’ of older adults—a form of ageism—as a defensive strategy by younger characters to distance themselves from reminders of their own mortality and the ultimate human fate.

Finally, the film’s use of makeup has also played a significant role in reinforcing societal stereotypes about the elderly. As Geri Berg and Sally Gadow observe,

One of the processes of ageing that we recognize most easily is the alteration of smooth surfaces and straight lines, skin wrinkles and roughens; posture becomes curved; memory is restructured; formerly unbroken stretches of clarity are marked by peaks and between them hollows called “confusion”....It is as though these changes, body and mind express the greater intricacies, the finer articulations that are possible in the person for whom reality has become many-layered, folded upon itself, woven and richly textured, a reality no longer ordered in the more familiar linear fashion, but now a world filled with leaps, windings, countless crossings, immeasurably more intricate and perhaps also more true than the world of one dimensional thought and self-evident distinctions. (“Toward More Human” 86)

By giving Oliver, Kuttijamma, and Appachan less attractive looks that include bald heads, grey hair, and faded clothes, the film visually anchors these characters in the typical imagery of old age. This portrayal resonates with the audience’s pre-existing notions about the elderly, making the characters relatable and authentic. Kuttijamma’s character,

in particular, embodies the traits of a typical mother, including her love for gossip, further grounding the film in the reality of middle-class family dynamics. The film skillfully weaves these elements to present a realistic and touching narrative that reflects the complexities of ageing and familial relationships in contemporary society.

The representation of ageing in *man* often includes negative stereotypes, such as baldness and diminished physical vitality, leading to what is known as over-generalization effects. These effects encompass two types: emotional over-generalization, where older adults are perceived as sad, lonely, and depressed, as seen in the characters of Oliver, Kuttiyamma, and Appachan; and babyishness over-generalization, where older faces are seen as weaker, gentler, and more vulnerable. On the other hand, the film has a scene where Oliver's lecture about capillary action exemplifies the rich knowledge and effective communication skills of older adults. This generation, often raised in joint family systems, possesses practical knowledge and experience in various fields, from home remedies to basic electrical and plumbing work. They acquired this knowledge not through the internet but through hands-on experience and observation, contributing to stronger family bonds and a harmonious living environment. In contrast, the current generation, growing up in nuclear families and immersed in the digital world, often lacks these skills and the deep family connections of previous generations. The film highlights the downside of the smartphone era, portraying it as a trap set by global companies, leading to a loss of privacy, diminished face-to-face interactions, and a generation engulfed in their devices, often at the expense of productive time and personal connections.

The Covid-19 pandemic increased the reliance on electronic gadgets, forcing a shift to digital platforms for everyday tasks, creating challenges especially for the older generation. The film *Home* approaches this subject empathetically, contrasting the humorous and often derogatory portrayal of the elderly's struggles with technology in popular media. It underscores the importance of understanding and respecting the elderly, who have been thrust into a rapidly changing technological landscape, struggling to adapt to the new norm of digital payments and online interactions. This empathetic approach not only highlights the challenges faced by the older generation but also serves as a critique of the society's growing dependence on smartphones and the internet, urging a more balanced and respectful understanding of the elderly's experiences in the digital age.

The film *Home* presents a nuanced portrayal of the generational divide in attitudes towards ageing and technology. The film contrasts the rich knowledge and experience of older generations, evident in their practical skills and effective communication, against the digital immersion of younger generations, emphasizing the loss of deep interpersonal connections and privacy. Moreover, the pandemic's acceleration of technology reliance underscores the struggles of the elderly in adapting to new digital norms. *Home* thus serves as a poignant reminder of the need for empathy and understanding towards the ageing population in the rapidly evolving digital era, challenging the audience to reconsider their perceptions and interactions with older generations.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this analysis has delved into the intersection of cinematic representation and gerontological theory, examining the nuanced portrayals of age and ageing in contemporary

Malayalam cinema. By employing a gerontological gaze, the study has explored how the films under consideration challenge dominant cultural narratives and stereotypes, offering alternative perspectives on the ageing experience. These films subvert traditional representations of older adults as passive, dependent, or comical figures and instead present them as active agents shaping their own destinies. By foregrounding the complexities of intergenerational relationships, memory, and the impact of technological advancements, they invite us to reconsider our understanding of ageing as a multifaceted and dynamic process. In her introduction to the section “Literature and Ageing” in the *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, Sarah Falcus states, “Stories of age do not provide answers to questions about ageing. They do not illustrate gerontological concepts. They can offer comfort, inspiration and possibility” (53). The enhanced visibility of older characters in movies contributes to a better understanding of ageing by providing more complex and diverse representations of age by openly dealing with topics such as love, desire, and sex in old age, friendship, shrinking relationships as one ages, as well as failing health. By engaging with cinematic texts such as *Jananam 1947*; *Pranayam Thudarunnu* and *Home*, we can foster a more empathetic and inclusive society that values the contributions and experiences of older adults.

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