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The Eternal Kilippattu: The Recurring Song of the Bird in Malayalam Film Songs

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Abstract: Movie songs are integral to Indian cinema, so much so that they are often dubbed as musicals in Western discourse. From duets, melodies, the romantic numbers around the trees, and even disco-pop music that fills tourist buses and wedding halls, songs showcase the wide-ranging musical and cultural spectrum of Indian films. Thunchathu Ramanujan Ezhuthachan wrote *Adhyathmaramayanam Kilippattu* using the help of a bird as the messenger. This symbolic association has endured, with birds being a recurring motif in Malayalam literature and cinema songs, symbolising freedom, love, and longing. This paper takes up for analysis Malayalam movie songs from 1980s–2025. Birds are used as metaphors for a girl, as in “Thathamma Peru” and “Kilipenne” songs in *Dosth* (2001). They also appear in evocative imagery, as in “Thamarakkili Paadunnu” from *Moonnam Pakkam* (1988) and “Kurukkane Karakana Kiliyale” from *Swapnakoodu* (2003). This paper explores the recurring motifs of birds in Malayalam movie songs using Jung’s collective unconscious theory, examining their cultural significance, symbolic meanings, and aesthetic presence within the larger framework of Indian cinematic music.

Keywords: *Malayalam Cinema, Avian Imagery, Collective Unconscious, Intermediality, Jungian Archetypes*

Human beings make meaning of the world by means of individual as well as cultural experience. Certain symbols, motifs and archetypes exert a particularly enduring resonance within the human imagination more than others, and among the most persistent of these is the figure of a bird. Across literature, movies, and everyday speech, birds recur as powerful symbolic carriers of meaning. This paper explores the recurring motifs of birds in Malayalam film songs through the lens of Carl Jung's theory of collective unconscious, examining their cultural significance, symbolic meanings, and aesthetic presence within the larger framework of Indian cinematic music.

The literary relevance of lyrics has been increasingly acknowledged within the global cultural discourse. Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016- awarded "for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition" underscores the legitimacy of examining lyrics as cultural and literary texts. The Swedish Academy's comparison of Bob Dylan to Homer and Sappho, whose epic poems were originally sung to the lyre—reminds us that literature was an oral and musical art form long before it was a printed one. This recognition strengthens the academic relevance of examining Malayalam film songs as both cultural artefacts, and poetic compositions.

The cultural impact of Malayalam film lyrics is also evident in everyday expressions and popular discourse. For instance, the phrase "Aha, Vayalar ezhuthumo idupole" (Ah, could even Vayalar write like this?) is often used ironically to describe subpar writing. This expression gained currency following the film *Sunday Holiday*, in which actor Siddique's lyricist character dubs a Telugu song into Malayalam and, despite the substandard outcome, praises his own work. Such examples illustrate how the high-art status of a legendary lyricist becomes a yardstick in common parlance and how lyrics move fluidly between cinema, literature, and popular culture, shaping both artistic and colloquial expression.

Literature Review: Global and Local Context

Global Literary and Cultural Context

Writers across the world have borrowed from avian imagery to convey human experiences. Edgar Allan Poe has written *The Raven* (1845) after a bird as a symbol of grief and memory. John Keats in his eight-stanza long 1819 poem *Ode to a Nightingale*, written after being inspired by a nightingale that built a nest near his home in spring, uses the nightingale as a vehicle to ruminate on the transience of human life. The romantic poets had a fascination with everything nature, and frequently turned to birds for inspiration, which can be seen in the works of writers like Percy Bercy Shelly's *To a Skylark* (1820) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), the poem has profoundly influenced people that wearing 'an albatross around my neck,' derived from the lines "Instead of the cross, the Albatross About my neck was hung" (lines 141-142) has become a slang expression for carrying the burden of guilt.

Beyond Romanticism, birds continue to carry symbolic weight. Harper Lee's 1960 Pulitzer winner novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in Alabama in America during a time when the civil rights movement was going on and Atticus Finch advised his kids not to kill a Mockingbird, an emblem of innocence. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou, uses the caged bird imagery, for depicting how deeply ingrained racism was in rural America in the 1950s. While the free bird "dares to claim the sky", the caged bird, whose "wings are clipped", opens "his throat to sing" (lines 1-9). The caged bird is a metaphor for systemic racism, trauma and the power of literature and voices of resistance. In contemporary literature, the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's magical realist novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1997) demonstrated how avian imagery persists.

Birds are so ubiquitous in human culture that they even shape language and folklore. In fact, birds are so abundant that in Hindi language, one of the first nursery rhymes taught to kids is called *Chidiya Rani* (the Queen Bird), while proverbs such as "Ab pachtaye hot kya jab chidiya chub gayi khet" ("What use is regret once the sparrow has eaten the field?"), meaning the same as English saying "crying over spilled milk". The word *ullu* means an owl, and also serves as a colloquial term to call someone foolish. The proverb "early bird catches the prey," uses avian imagery as a call to be more proactive, suggesting that timely action would increase one's chance of success just like in the natural world where the first to wake up will get more resources. A couple in love is often called 'lovebird', after the Agapornis parrots known for their proximity and long-term bonding. While the "love-bird" archetype suggests a perfect, symbiotic union, the psychological reality of such proximity is often more complex. As Irvin D. Yalom observes in *Love's Executioner*, "two broken-winged birds coupled into one make for clumsy flight" (12). This insight challenges the cinematic trope that romantic merging leads to liberation, suggesting that such unions only lead to delay of necessary action by the individual. In a Jungian sense, this "merging" is often a failure of the transcendent function; rather than resolving the inner tension between the conscious and unconscious, the individual attempts to outsource their wholeness to another. In movies like *Dosth*, where bird imagery suggests freedom of choice, Yalom's metaphor reminds us that true "flight" or transcendence requires individual wholeness rather than mutual dependence. The bird imagery in *Dosth* signifies autonomy of choice against the restrictions brought upon by family, class and honour.

Local Context: Malayalam Cultural Inheritance

The repeated usage of avian imagery in Malayalam cinema songs taps into a shared 'racial memory' that dates back to the Killipattu tradition of the 16th century. In Malayalam literature, Thunchaththu Ramanujan Ezhuthachan, considered as the father of Modern Malayalam literature occupies a pivotal place. He recomposed the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana* to Malayalam language as *Adhaytma Ramayanam Kilippattu*, making *Ramayana* accessible to Malayali devotees and helped in the propagation of the Bhakthi movement. Even today, Kerala celebrates the month of Karkkidakam as 'Ramayana Month'

and devotees collectively read Ezhuthachan's *Ramayana*. Rather than adapting Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, Ezhuthachan has translated it into modern Malayalam in the Kilippattu(parrot-song) style, where in the bird is narrating the Ramayana. He uses the bird as not merely a literary device but a strategic and symbolic choice to circumvent the restrictions on him, not being a Brahmin to write about Lord Ram. By using Killippatu he circumvents restrictions of him and destabilises hierarchical boundaries of caste and authorship while creating a powerful intermedial form. Critic K.Ayyappa Panicker argues that considering *Adhyatma Ramayanam* as merely a devotional text is belittling Ezhuthachan's literary and cultural achievements. The bird is an archetype for the messenger between the divine and the common people.

Interestingly, the world's biggest bird statue is in Kerala, the Jatayu bird sculpture in Jatayu's Earth Center in Chadayamangalam. Jatayu is a divine bird in Ramayana that occupies a prominent position in the region's cultural and mythical imagination. In Indian mythology, birds are often considered spiritual beings or Demi-gods, most notably Garuda, considered as the vehicle of Lord Vishnu, further illuminates the sacred resonance of avian imagery. Lord Rama sends a Hansa-vahana as a carrier of his message to Sita in the Sanskrit poem *Hansa-Sandeha* (The Goose Messenger. In Hindu mythology, Brahmas's *vahana* (vehicle) is the *hamsa* (Devdutt Pattanaik).

In Malayalam, the slang term "Kili Poi" means that you have lost your senses, usually momentarily. From a Jungian perspective, this mirrors the archetype of the bird as a symbol of the soul or consciousness; when the "bird" leaves, the individual is no longer mentally present. "Kozhi", the Malayalam word for chicken, is colloquially used to refer to a boy running after girls, a casanova or a womaniser, a romantic predator. The usage is often derogatory and with teasing connotations. The association might have come from the Malayalam word for rooster "poovan kozhi", which is known for its strutting and its behavior of pursuing hens. The term "poovan" itself can also be used to refer to a "casanova" for the same reason from where "poovalan"(casanova) comes from. This represents a primordial image where animal behavior is projected onto human social dynamics. These terms are not merely slang terms, they are examples of intermediality.

In Kerala culture or even in broader Indian cultural traditions, birds are often used as symbols for innocence, purity and simplicity, adding another meaningful layer of resonance in film lyrics of their recurring presence. The choice of animals serves a gendered shorthand for the characters energy, and societal expectations. Animals are often associated with the masculine-predators and protectors; while birds are often associated with the feminine as symbols of tenderness. Exemplified by movies such as *Animal* (2024) with Ranbir Kapoor's hypermasculine role, Tiger franchise (*Ek Tha Tiger* (2012), *Tiger Zinda Hai* (2017) and *Tiger 3* (2023)) of Salman Khan. Tiger and lion are apex predators on top of the food chain, emphasising strength over vulnerability. Mohanlal's 2000 movie *Narasimham*, meaning a man-lion, the fourth avatar of Vishnu, linking the protagonist to the divine

with uncontrollable fury meant to destroy evil, framing masculinity as beastly but righteous. Birds are attributed feminine traits such as softness and motherly instincts in movie names like *Deshadanakkili Karayarilla* (1986), *Aniyathipravu* (1997), *Ammakilikkoodu* (2003) and *Swapnakoodu* (2003). Birds in movie titles evoke images of fragility, virtue, and domestic sphere. Birds are often portrayed as symbols of the sky, untainted by the mud of the earth, traditionally associated with family honour tied to women's virginity. While tigers and lions roam the jungles, women are in their nest-domestic sphere depicting the mother's instinct to sacrifice rather than combat. The migratory bird (deshadanakili) is a frequent metaphor in Malayalam movies and literature highlighting a woman's plight of having to leave her house due to marriage or tragedy. It's interesting to note that when a female character is given an animal name such as Tigress, it's usually a deliberate attempt to subvert these very norms and expectations and set the tone that she is stepping into the forbidden masculine territory.

Methodology

This research paper is conducting a qualitative textual analysis of film lyrics, which allows for a deep dive into the subtexts behind avian imagery in lyrics, rather than counting how often birds are mentioned. The theoretical grounding for this exercise would be Jung's Collective Unconscious, using this lens helps to interpret why certain birds like parrots appear repeatedly across different eras of cinema. The recurring bird motifs in Malayalam movie lyrics aren't merely aesthetic choices, but are manifestations of the collective unconscious. In the Jungian archetype's lens, the bird functions as a 'psychopomp'; a mediator between the conscious world of the protagonist and the unconscious world of their emotions. Within the Kerala context, this is filtered through a specific Cultural Schema established by the Kilippattu tradition, where the bird acts as a carrier of both sacred truth and mundane experience. Thus, when a contemporary lyricist evokes the 'Kilipennu' or the 'Raappadi,' they are activating a shared psychological inheritance that transcends individual memory. The first philosopher to elaborate on archetypal forms like beauty and truth is Plato. Archetypes are the prototypes and are atavistic and universal. The fundamental facts of human life are archetypal like birth, sibling rivalry, clash between generations, etc, and certain character types have been established as archetypal like the self-made man, the witch, the villain, etc. Birds, a primordial image inherited from the past, is an archetypal symbol of the soul and transcendence, and Jungian application helps in understanding why these songs resonate with audiences across generations, by tapping into a shared cultural memory that equates birds with storytelling and truth. This study selects a variety of songs of various genres like melodies and fast-paced numbers, from the late 1980s to the present, that explicitly make use of avian metaphors. The collection includes pivotal songs like *Thamarakkilli Paadunnu* and *Kilipenne* to show the transition from poetic imagery to contemporary metaphors.

Thematic Analysis

Indian movies have always used songs to drive the script forward, strengthen the narrative, sustain attention, as well as to heighten the film emotionally. Whether it be Bollywood or any other regional industries in India, songs are integral to the cinematic experience, so much so that the movies that come out of these industries – are dubbed as musicals in western discourse. In the case of Mollywood, a film industry from the Southern Indian state of Kerala, movies are often praised for realistic depiction of life and always giving importance to technicians and artists who work behind the scenes of the movie which can be seen in the distinctive aesthetic quality of cinematography, the music lyrics, soundscape, background extras and set design.

Among Malayalam lyricists, figures such as poet O.N.V Kurup, Gireesh Puthenchery, Yusufali Kecheri, and others have been recognised with several state and national awards for their lyrics. Their oeuvre shows how film lyrics are often deeply poetic and resonate beyond screen. Lyrics often play a crucial role in shaping the genre and mood of an Indian film. They convey the emotions the writer or director wishes to emphasise, while also offering thematic clues and, at times, foreshadowing the narrative. For most songs, both music and lyrics are equally important in building the film's emotional narrative, excluding non-item number songs. India's first feature film *Raja Harishchandra*, was a silent mythological movie released in 1913 directed by Dadasaheb Phalke. However, Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara* (1931) is the first Indian "talkie" with music and dialogues, and it was advertised as all "talking, singing and dancing" (Shah). From then on the trend continues to thrive and the singing and dancing are part and parcel of Indian movies, contributing to the unique identity of Indian movies.

Malayalam movies deal with all sorts of themes like rebellion, love and the struggles of the commoners to live in a highly capitalistic society. Movies have always been a reflection of the times often weaving social critique into their narratives. The movie lyrics often written to go hand in hand with the movie, also mirror this diversity of concerns. This paper explores the recurrent usage of birds as imagery, symbolism, and metaphor in Malayalam movie lyrics. Birds often serve as figures of comparison, often used as a representation of women in songs like *Killipenne* of *Dosth* movie, where the hero likens his lover to a bird. Interestingly, in the same movie *Dosth*, two other songs (*Thathamma Peru*, *Maayapraave*) have avian imagery incorporated into the very title itself. The movie is about friendship and love and here they use avian imagery ubiquitously to suggest freedom of choice, echoing the messaging of the movie to let people be free to make decisions regarding their life instead of restricting them by family honour, caste and class boundaries. Often wings and by extension flight is used as a metaphor for freedom in common parlance; when a person is freed from whatever that caged them, they were said to be emancipated from the cage and to have flown away. They symbolise liberation, however Lord Byron complicates this equation by equating friendship to "love without its wings", he implies an attachment that is grounded and enduring and not soaring (Don Juan 9.1). In this

sense, wings represent passion and desire to transcend limits, while friendship demands a quieter connection- one that offers connection instead of seeking flight. So in lyrics, often birds not only symbolise freedom but also a longing for connection and emotional intimacy. Thus, bird imagery reflects both the urge to escape and the urge to remain, reflecting deeper archetypal tensions within the collective unconscious. Byron reminds us that some bonds don't need flight but grounding.

Here bird imagery works as a metaphor for liberation, autonomy and innocence of a girl in love. Birds are used in various circumstances to in various things from beauty to fragility of life. Birds are so significant in Indian culture, especially when it comes to death that a person's official mourning period ends with *balitarnam* (ancestral rites), where in the crow is seen as *pitrus* (ancestors) is invited via clapping so that the dead person attains Moksha according to beliefs, when the crow consumes the *pinda* (rice ball). Here the crow becomes a messenger to the spiritual world, crossing its earthly boundaries. It's often dismissed as unclean or ugly however, in a fascinating paradox, it becomes an important messenger in ancestor rites. While in many cultures black is associated with evil or void, here it is associated with absorption where it absorbs the offerings for the afterlife. Malayalam poet Vyloppilli Sreedhara Menon in his poem *Kakka* subverts the beauty standards set by his ancestors by calling crows as 'സൂര്യപ്രകാശത്തിന് ഉറ്റതോഴി' (The close friend of sunlight), 'പുത്തിരുവാതിരത്തികൾ'. While the collective unconscious rejects dark or ugly aspects, the poet is celebrating crows by performing Individuation-the process of integrating the Shadow (the unaccepted/dark parts of nature) into a holistic view of life and death. Even though the Malayalam saying *Kakka Kuli* (crow's bath) mocks someone who bathes quickly while the poet Vyloppilli calls the bird "മേറ്റവും വൃത്തിവെടുപ്പുഴുന്നോൾ" (one who is extremely clean/tidy), referring to the constant preening it does as nature's scavenger.

Carl G. Jung emphasises the 'collective unconscious', regarded as the repository for 'racial memories' and of primordial images and patterns of experience that he calls archetypes. He views great literature as the expression of the archetypes of the collective racial unconscious and believes a great author would provide access to archetypal images buried in the racial memory, thereby providing insight into the shared, unconscious aspects of human experience (Babu 182-183). Birds are archetypal symbols of the soul, transcendence as they can fly away and are often viewed as a messenger between two realms. Often a person's comeback is referred to as the Phoenix bird rising from the ashes, which is a mythological bird that symbolises rebirth and resurrection. Raven is often used as an archetype for death and dove is associated with peace with the Malayalam phrase "Samadanathinde Vellaripravugal", denoting it. Hence, songs might also be drawing on from these universal associations. The lyricist Gireesh Puthanchery uses doves abundantly in his lyrics. In the song *Nee Januaryil Viriyumo Pranayami Pozhiyumo* from *Akale* (2004), the Malayalam adaptation of Tennessee Williams short story *Glass Menagerie*, the lyrics goes like "Chirakukal thedum cherukilimagal pole", Geethu Mohandas'

character's innocence is referred through the lines as she's compared to a small-bird in search of her wings. Birds also often embody human emotions, and the longing of the character is seen here in the lyrics.

Birds function as intermediary symbols, carrying centuries of cultural meaning into contemporary media. They also work as motifs of transition, from love songs to elegies. In the song from the 1999 film *Usthad*, "Vennila Kombile Raappadi / Ennumee Ettante Chingari," Gireesh Puthanchery uses the bird *raappadi* (nightingale) to express the love and melancholy a brother feels when his sister is being married off. The imagery is bitter-sweet, there's happiness for his sister as well as a profound sense of grief. Keats in *Ode to a Nightingale*, uses nightingale as a symbol of immortality in stark contrast to the transience and suffering of human life, and here the nightingale can symbolise the fleeting moments in one's life always prone to change. Using a nightingale to symbolise sister attributes to innocence and vulnerability as she steps into a new role, a significant transition in life. A sister leaving her home after marriage is a common ground for happiness and sorrow in South-Asian culture, with several songs in the sub-continent across languages, Spotify and other music streaming platforms have a section called 'bidaai' (farewell, typically used to refer to a bride's farewell from her mayka (home) to sasural (in-laws) songs. Puthanchery uses a swan (arayanam) to refer to the mythical beauty of his lover in the movie *Valliettann* in the song *Nettimele Pottittalum* with the lyrics "adivachu nadakkunorarayaname" (the swan that walks gracefully). The lyrics compare the lover's stride to that of a graceful Arayanam, the heavenly hamsa from mythological lore.

Birds are often used intertextually to represent women, especially the emotional status of love and confinement. In the song *Thamarakilli Padunnu* from *Moonnam Pakkam* (1988), the bird is used to depict the blossoming romance between the hero and heroine, the lines 'Killipatu veendum namukinu orkaam' (Let's once again remember the bird's song), signalling the shared sense of nostalgia. This symbolism takes a darker turn in *Manichithrartazhu* (1993), the Tamil song with lines "Oruvan Potta Valayil Veezund, Uravai thedum Pookooyil Nan" (I'm a song bird, ensnared, Yearning for my kindred skies), the song explicitly uses the image of a caged bird to underline the profound sense of entrapment and psychological distress of the protagonist Ganga played by Shobana.

The bird is used as a harbinger of grief by lyricists. In contrast to the nightingale in the song in *Usthad* where a brother's grief of his sister's farewell, in the song *Rappadi Kezhunnuvo*, the image of the bird is representing the mother's imminent death. This song penned by legendary Malayalam poet O.N.V Kurup for the film *Akashadoothu* perfectly ties into the movie's sadness. It uses the imagery of a nightingale- the mother bird who's crying for her kids as she has not much time left on earth. The lyrics has a lot of bird imagery, like "Ninde Pulkutile Killikunjurangan" (Let the little bird in your nest sleep) "Ammapainkili" (Mother parrot), all referencing a mother's sorrow of her imminent death and her pain of separating her children and being separated from them.

At the lighter end of the spectrum, the playful songs in the 2003 movie *Swapnakoodu* like “Kurukane karakana kiliyale”, referring to women metaphorically as sparrows that control the fox, depicting youthful exuberance. Similarly the song “Ammoomakkili Vaayaadi” from the film *Chandralekha* (1997), penned by Gireesh Puthanchery has abundant bird imagery from the very title itself to ‘Kana Kuyile’ ‘Kulakozhi’ and ‘Ponman’. This song is used as the introductory song for the heroine as she returns home, establishing her playful character through playful natural imagery. Another Gireesh Puthanchery song “Choolamadichu Karangi Nadakum Cholakuyilin Kalyanam” from *Summer in Bethlehem* is a celebratory song featuring women frolicking around, once again using Kuyil(cuckoo) to depict feminine joy and vitality. In *The People* (2004) lyricist Kaithapram in the song *Annakilli Neeyeneile*, uses bird references to show youthful love exuding the energy of a party anthem. Kaithapram has also penned *Kukku Kukku Kuyile* for the movie *Nakshathrangal Parayathirunnathu* (2001), where the heroine voices her romantic fantasies about marriage, by addressing the Kuyil, reinforcing the bird as a confidant and symbol of longing.

The song *Kiliye Kiliye* (oh bird, oh bird) from the 1983 movie *Aa Raathri* has recently regained popularity due to its use in a pivotal moment in the film *Lokah* (2025). In an interview with The Cue studio, the script writer Shanthi Balakrishnan says that they used the song because it has the lines ‘Uyarangaliloode Pala Naadukal Thedi’ (traversing heights in search of several places), where the character is seeking for her nest, akin to a bird. It denotes a person who’s not bound by earthly boundaries. According to Jung’s psychological theory revolving around the resolution of inner conflict, when the psyche finds itself in a conflict between two opposites, that is between the ego and the subconscious, the transcendent functions as a medium for these two to communicate. And the result is that the mind would create a ‘third thing’ such as a symbol or perspective, that Jung argues that the transcendent function bridges the conscious and unconscious, while it does not pick one side (Jung 72-80). This represents the Transcendent Function, the bird flying through ‘heights’ to find ‘many lands’ symbolizes the soul's desire to rise above mundane reality and explore the vast possibilities of the collective unconscious. For the Transcendent Function to succeed, the "bird" must be capable of flight. Yalom argues that "no amount of patience will help" a pair of broken-winged birds fly; they must be "pried from the other, and wounds separately splinted." This aligns with the Jungian idea that the soul's exploration of the collective unconscious is a journey toward individuation. The recurring motif of the bird in Malayalam cinema thus serves a dual purpose: it represents the peak of human aspiration and, as Yalom suggests, the painful necessity of individual healing before that aspiration can be realized.

Conclusion

Julia Kristeva emphasised that all signs are understood in relation to others i.e. intertextually. A text in any medium resonates with meanings from cultural history and other contemporary media, genres etc. An analysis of Malayalam movie lyrics across decades confirms this, demonstrating the ubiquitous nature of bird imagery as excellent vehicles for conveying a wide range of human emotions. Ultimately, birds in Malayalam cinema function as a strategic and symbolic choice that democratizes meaning, allowing filmmakers to express complex themes of liberation, autonomy, and the human condition through a shared, unconscious cultural vocabulary.

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