



Ottayan: A Narrative of Trauma, Disability, and Social Responsibility

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Abstract

P Paul Varghese's Malayalam short film *Ottayan* presents a poignant narrative of trauma, disability, and social responsibility, portraying the psychological and economic struggles of a family grappling with adversity. This study examines the film through trauma studies, disability studies, and social responsibility theories. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and Judith Herman's model of trauma and recovery, the research explores how the protagonist, Rahul, internalises psychological distress, leading to self-isolation and suicidal thoughts. Lennard J. Davis' concept of the 'normate' and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's notion of the 'staring gaze' provide insight into societal perceptions of disability, while Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach contextualises the economic hardships that exacerbate familial tensions. The study also incorporates sustainability and economic justice theories to examine the intersection of financial instability and emotional well-being. Through an analysis of *Ottayan*'s dialogues, visual metaphors, and narrative structure, this paper argues that the film critiques societal attitudes toward disability and economic disparity while highlighting the importance of collective empathy and support systems. The findings underscore the necessity of fostering inclusive narratives in regional cinema to drive conversations on mental health, disability rights, and sustainable social responsibility.

Keywords: Trauma studies, disability studies, social responsibility, Malayalam short films, mental health

Introduction

Short films have the power to capture human experiences in their rawest form, shedding light on issues often overlooked by mainstream narratives. *Ottayan*, a Malayalam short film, intricately weaves together themes of trauma, disability, and socioeconomic struggles, offering a compelling case for scholarly exploration. The film follows the life of Rahul, a once-aspiring young man now bedridden after a devastating bike accident, his mother who is burdened with financial and emotional responsibilities and his younger brother Kannan, who grapples with his own frustrations. Through its poignant narrative, *Ottayan* highlights the psychological toll of trauma, the marginalisation of disabled individuals, and the ethical responsibilities of society toward vulnerable populations.

To analyse *Ottayan*, this study employs an interdisciplinary approach rooted in trauma studies, disability studies, and theories of social responsibility. Trauma studies, particularly Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and Judith Herman's model of trauma and recovery, provide insights into Rahul's psychological state and the long-term effects of unresolved trauma. Caruth posits that trauma is not just an event but a recurring psychological wound that disrupts an individual's sense of self. Similarly, Herman's framework, which outlines stages of trauma recovery - establishing safety, remembrance, and reconnection - becomes crucial in understanding Rahul's journey through despair and eventual hope. His fragmented sense of reality, triggered by past memories and verbal wounds inflicted by his own family, is a testament to the cyclical nature of trauma.

Disability studies further enrich the discussion by shedding light on how society constructs and perceives disability. Lennard J. Davis' concept of the "normate" examines how Rahul, due to his physical limitations, is excluded from societal participation, reinforcing the idea that disability is a social construct rather than merely a medical condition. Tobin Siebers' *Disability Aesthetics* provides a lens to understand how the film visually represents Rahul's isolation - his restricted movement, confined perspectives, and symbolic framing all contribute to the narrative of marginalisation. By presenting disability not as an individual defect but as a societal issue, *Ottayan* challenges the audience to reconsider notions of ability, dependence, and dignity.

The film's exploration of financial hardship and familial tensions invites an analysis through the lens of social responsibility and economic justice. Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach highlights the limitations imposed on Rahul and his family due to economic constraints, questioning the extent to which society provides support for the disadvantaged. Furthermore, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* becomes relevant in understanding how economic disparities perpetuate cycles of helplessness, as seen in Kannan's resentment and the mother's desperation. Additionally, theories of slow violence by Rob Nixon contextualise the long-term, unseen suffering caused by economic instability, showing how the burden of caregiving and poverty erodes individual agency over time.

By applying these literary theories, this study seeks to establish *Ottayan* as more than just a regional short film - it is a deeply layered narrative that brings critical social issues to the forefront. Through textual analysis of dialogues, visual metaphors, and narrative structures, this research will highlight the film's relevance in contemporary discourse on trauma, disability, and societal ethics. The study ultimately argues that *Ottayan* is not only a reflection of lived experiences but also a call for collective awareness and responsibility in shaping a more inclusive and empathetic society.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to analyse *Ottayan* through the lenses of trauma studies, disability studies, and social responsibility. The primary focus is on textual and visual analysis, using film dialogues, cinematography, and character interactions as key data points. The research relies on established literary theories to interpret the psychological, social, and ethical dimensions of the film.

The primary material for this study is the Malayalam short film *Ottayan*, which presents a deeply emotional narrative revolving around trauma, disability, and financial struggles. The study

also references relevant scholarly works in trauma studies, including Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* and Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, to examine the protagonist's psychological distress. Disability studies frameworks, particularly Lennard J. Davis' *Enforcing Normalcy* and Tobin Siebers' *Disability Theory*, guide the analysis of Rahul's marginalisation and self-perception. Additionally, economic and ethical perspectives are drawn from Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to contextualise the family's financial struggles and social responsibilities.

This study follows a two-stage methodological approach. First, as part of the thematic analysis, the film is examined for recurring themes related to trauma, disability, and social marginalisation. Key dialogues, visual elements, and character interactions are identified and categorised. Special attention is given to how Rahul's disability is portrayed, how trauma affects familial relationships, and how financial struggles shape character decisions. Next, at a theoretical application level, trauma studies theories are applied to analyse Rahul's psychological state, focusing on his response to loss, isolation, and emotional distress. Disability studies provide insight into how the film constructs disability, both as a personal experience and as a societal issue. Social responsibility theories examine the ethical dilemmas faced by the characters, especially regarding economic hardship and caregiving. By employing this interdisciplinary approach, the study aims to offer a nuanced understanding of *Ottayan*, illustrating its relevance to contemporary discussions on trauma, disability, and social justice.

Results and Discussions

The short film *Ottayan* offers a compelling narrative that resonates deeply with themes of trauma, disability, sustainability, and social responsibility. Through a close reading of the film's dialogues, visual metaphors, and character interactions, this section explores how the film engages with these theoretical perspectives, emphasising the broader social implications of the protagonist's struggles.

Trauma studies and the psychological toll of suffering

Trauma studies offer a lens to examine the psychological wounds that *Ottayan* explores. The film depicts intergenerational trauma, where economic hardship and disability contribute to cycles of emotional distress. The mother, who bears the burden of both financial instability and caregiving, exhibits signs of caregiver burnout, an often-overlooked form of trauma. Her emotional breakdown, expressed through her outburst about poisoning her children, "Once I'll poison you guys and put an end to all this" (13:29) is not an actual desire but a manifestation of accumulated stress and helplessness. Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma suggests that individuals who experience extreme distress may express their suffering through fragmented or involuntary recollections (Caruth, 1996). This is evident in Rahul's internal replaying of conversations, where phrases of dismissal and frustration repeat in his mind. The recollection of the lines "You think of playing with the ball now" (17:06), "But you can't even get up right?" (17:10), "Even if she gets the money, she'll run to the hospital taking you" (17:14), "After my marriage, it's only you who's left" (17:19), and "Once I'll poison you guys and put an end to all this" (17:23) amplifies his suicidal thoughts.

The film also underscores the societal perception of disability as a source of shame or burden. When Nichu innocently remarks, "But you can't even get up, right?" (6:38), it reflects how disability is often seen through a lens of incapacity rather than resilience. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) discusses how trauma survivors often internalise societal judgments, leading to self-imposed isolation. Rahul's withdrawal from the outside world, his refusal to eat, and his reluctance to communicate with his family all align with the psychological patterns of trauma victims. His moment of crisis, holding a knife while remembering his mother's words, represents the culmination of these internalised wounds.

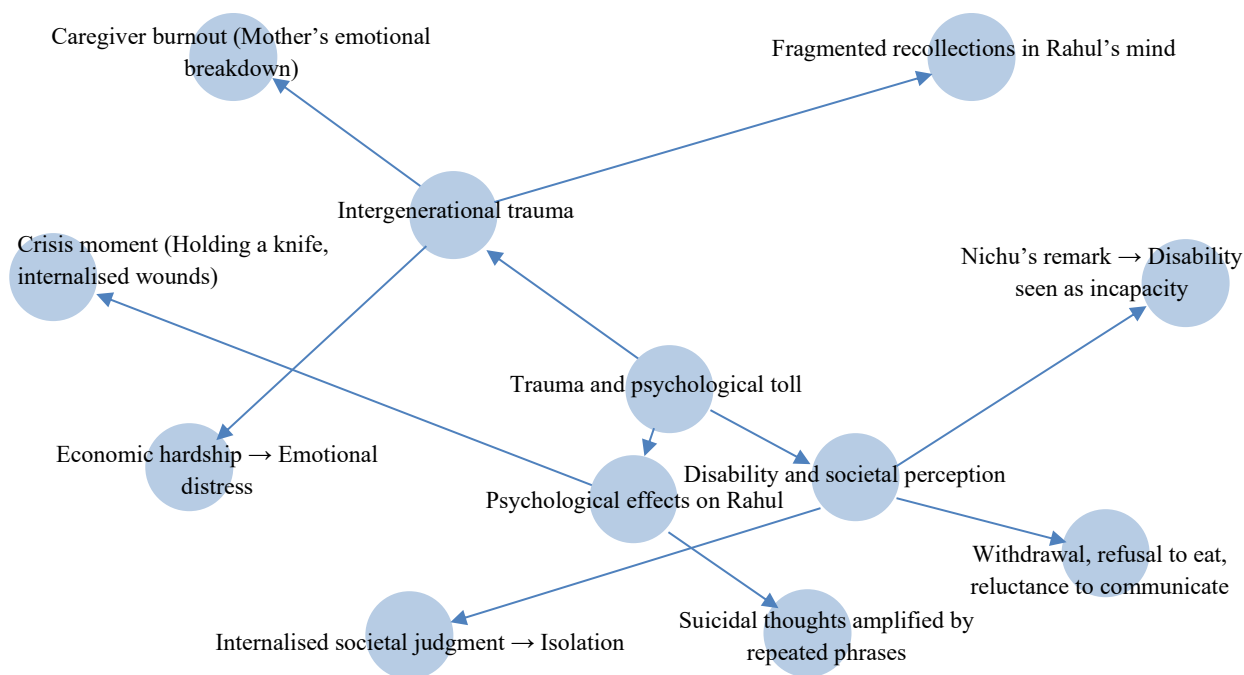


Figure 1- Trauma and Psychological Suffering in *Ottayan*

Disability studies: from victimhood to agency

Disability studies challenge the traditional medical model of disability, which frames impairments as personal tragedies. Instead, scholars like Lennard J. Davis argue that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon, where the real barriers stem from societal exclusion rather than physical limitations (Davis, 2013). *Ottayan* presents a nuanced depiction of disability, not merely as an individual struggle but as a condition influenced by external attitudes and economic constraints.

Rahul's situation reflects a dual struggle: his physical condition and the loss of his social identity. Before the accident, he was active, independent, and hopeful. Afterward, he is treated primarily as a dependent figure, with his needs often overshadowed by financial concerns. His younger brother, Kannan, views him as a passive recipient of care rather than an individual with aspirations. This dynamic aligns with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of the "staring gaze" (2009), which highlights how society often views disabled individuals with either pity or curiosity, stripping them of agency. However, Rahul's request for *The Alchemist* signifies his latent desire for self-determination. When Nichu asks "Which book is that?" (6:25), Rahul says "It's the book of a shepherd, who never fails in life." (6:27) By engaging with a narrative about perseverance, he symbolically rejects the idea that his life is over, positioning himself toward a path of self-renewal.

Sustainability and economic struggles

Economic sustainability is a critical theme in *Ottayan*. The family's financial instability exacerbates their emotional suffering, highlighting the intersection of poverty and mental health. The mother's desperate attempts to secure a loan illustrate how economic systems often fail vulnerable individuals. The aggressive creditor, Shankar says "There's no point in spending on him. I want my money returned tomorrow. Or else, you'll see my true nature. I am just reminding you myself. Him being alive, I don't think I will get that money." (11:44 -59). His words represent a larger issue within financial structures - where the urgency of repayment takes precedence over human well-being. Sustainable economic models emphasise the importance of financial inclusivity, where resources are allocated to support those in crisis rather than push them deeper into debt (Sen, 1999). In this context, *Ottayan* critiques a system that prioritises financial recovery over human dignity. The film suggests that economic sustainability should extend beyond environmental concerns to include social and financial stability, ensuring that individuals like Rahul's family are not left to fend for themselves.

Moreover, the film subtly critiques materialism through Kannan's addiction to his mobile phone. While his family struggles to afford necessities, he immerses himself in digital escapism, detached from reality. This contrast between real-life struggles and technological distractions echoes Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), which argues that modern society prioritises superficial engagement over authentic human connections.

Social responsibility: The role of community support

One of the film's central messages is the importance of social responsibility in supporting vulnerable individuals. Rahul's suicidal contemplation is not merely the result of his accident but a reflection of the neglect he experiences from those around him. His mother, overwhelmed by financial stress, unintentionally neglects his emotional needs. Kannan, wrapped up in his personal frustrations, fails to see his brother's suffering. When his mother says "Your brother was supposed to be taken to the hospital yesterday, I couldn't do that also" (3:13-15), his response is "Then, let the checkup go on. Even after spending this much, you haven't realised anything right?" (3:17-19). Even the creditor, Shankar, prioritises debt collection over human compassion.

The film suggests that mental health is not an isolated issue but a collective responsibility. Scholars like Emile Durkheim (1897) argue that suicide is often linked to social disconnection rather than personal weakness. Rahul's descent into despair could have been mitigated through stronger communal support. The brief yet significant moment where his mother kisses his forehead before leaving ultimately prevents his suicide, symbolising the power of even the smallest gestures of care.

The closing awareness message by Namitha Pramod reinforces this point, urging viewers to approach mental health with empathy rather than judgment. The film aligns with social responsibility theories, which emphasise that sustainable societies are built not only through economic and environmental policies but through emotional and psychological well-being.

Visual symbolism and narrative techniques

Beyond dialogues, *Ottayan* employs visual storytelling to enhance its thematic depth. The cluttered, dimly lit home reflects the entrapment felt by the characters. The contrast between the vibrant outside world, as seen through Rahul’s window, and the confined interior space emphasises his isolation. These visual cues align with cinematic techniques used in realist filmmaking, where the environment serves as an extension of the character’s psychological state (Bazin, 1967).

Additionally, the use of sound plays a crucial role in conveying tension. The abrupt horn of Kannan’s friend’s bike signifies escapism, highlighting Kannan’s detachment from family responsibilities. The shattering of glass near Rahul’s bed foreshadows his emotional breakdown, reinforcing how minor incidents accumulate into psychological distress.

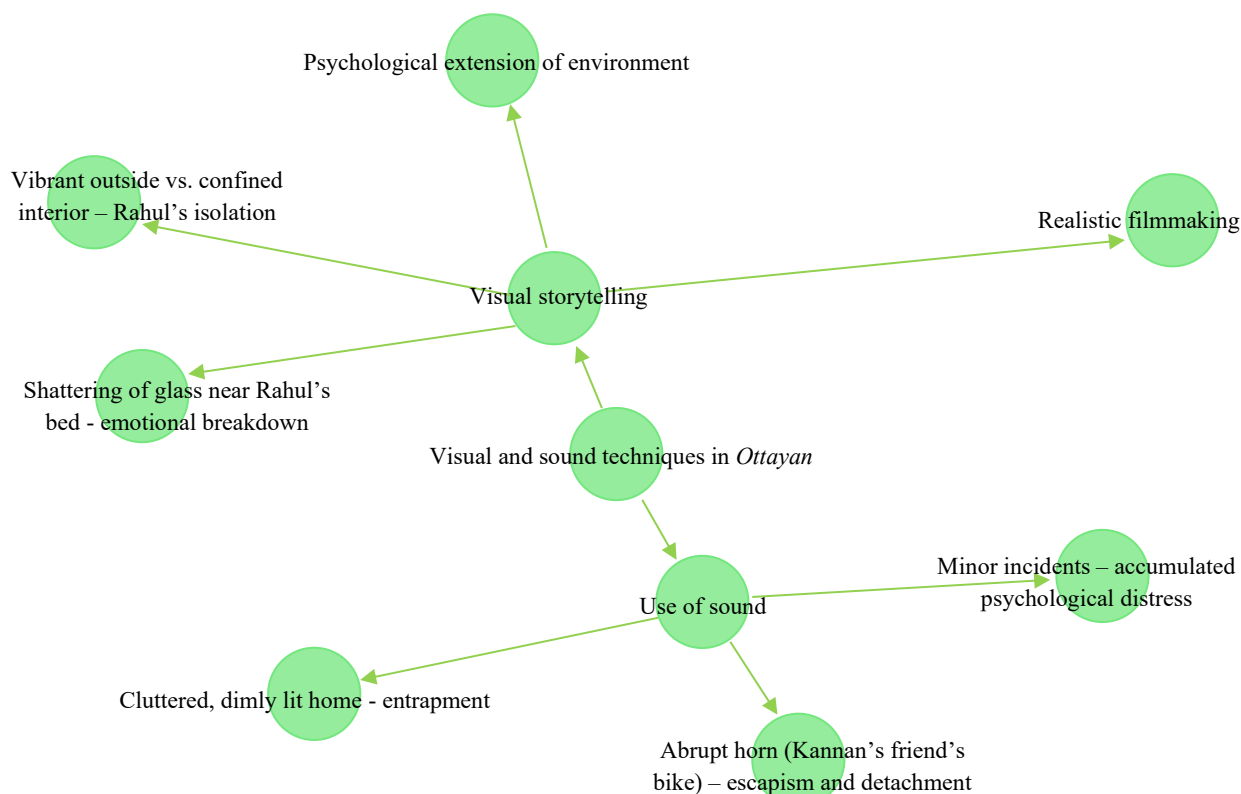


Figure 1- Visual and sound techniques in *Ottayan*

Conclusion

The findings suggest that *Ottayan* is more than a narrative about disability and poverty - it is an exploration of how trauma, economic instability, and social neglect contribute to psychological suffering. By applying trauma studies, disability studies, sustainability, and social responsibility theories, the film can be understood as a critique of systemic failures and a call for collective empathy. Its message is clear: words and actions have consequences, and even the smallest gestures of care can be life-saving. The film urges society to recognise the silent struggles of marginalised individuals and to foster a culture of emotional and financial support. Through its poignant storytelling, *Ottayan* compels viewers to reconsider their own roles in shaping a more compassionate and sustainable world. The responsibility to alleviate suffering is not solely an institutional burden but a moral duty shared by all.

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