Shakespeare and 'Keraliyatha': 'Romeo and Juliet', Adaptation and South Indian Cinemas

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Shakespeare and Keraliyatha: Romeo and Juliet, adaptation, and South Indian cinemas

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Abstract
This article discusses two Romeo and Juliet adaptations from Kerala, Annayum Rasoolum (dir. Rajeev Ravi, 2013) and Eeda (dir. B. Ajithkumar, 2018). Both films situate the lovers in a regional milieu which challenges notions of progress, as representations of political and religious contest suggest. Taking Ratheesh Radhakrishnan’s claim that the Malayalam film prioritises Keraliyatha or ‘Kerala-ness’, I suggest that songs and rituals are crucial to the films’ imagining of the lovers in relation to local cultures. Annayum Rasoolum and Eeda hold out the prospect of different futures, yet, ultimately, fall back on ambiguated conclusions and spectacles of separation and precarity.

Keywords
adaptations, India, Malayalam film, Kerala-ness, Romeo and Juliet, Annayum Rasoolum, Eeda

Résumé
Cet article s’intéresse à deux adaptations de Roméo et Juliette du Kerala, Annayum Rasoolum (dir. Rajeev Ravi, 2013) et Eeda (dir. B. Ajithkumar, 2018). Les deux films inscrivent les amants dans un environnement régional qui, ainsi que le suggèrent les représentations de tensions politiques et religieuses, remet en question les notions de progrès. Nous appuyant sur l’affirmation de Ratheesh Radhakrishnan que le cinéma malayalam valorise le Keraliyatha, ou l’identité kerala, nous suggérons que les chants et les rituels jouent un rôle central dans la façon dont ces deux films imaginent les amants par rapport aux cultures locales. Annayum Rasoolum et Eeda nous laissent entrevoir la perspective d’un avenir différent, avant de s’en remettre finalement à des conclusions équivoques et des scènes de séparation et de précarité.

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One of the benefits of the digital age is the growing availability of Shakespeare films from around the world. We have become exposed not only to the diversity of global Shakespeares but also to a variety of regional examples within cultures and nation-states. Hence, eschewing the focus on ‘Bollywood’ (the Mumbai-based film industry of India), current studies of Shakespeare on film in India increasingly direct attention to ‘regional cinemas’ so as, in the words of Poonam Trivedi and Paromita Chakravarti, ‘to bring their particular histories of literary and theatrical engagement with Shakespeare into the larger and more interactive picture’.1 This article discusses two recent Shakespeare adaptations from Kerala (the south-west Indian state), Annayum Rasoolum/Anna and Rasool (dir. Rajeev Ravi, 2013) and Eeda/Here (dir. B. Ajithkumar, 2018). Annayum Rasoolum, according to the director, is ‘inspired by Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet’ and ‘[adheres] to the Shakespearean classic’; similarly, to cite publicity, Eeda ‘[adapts]…Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet’ and is ‘faithful to the play’.2 Although both films enjoyed commercial release in cinemas, they have had their most sustained exposure on platforms such as Google Play, Netflix, and YouTube, making them typical of the ways in which Shakespearean cinema increasingly circulates via digital means.

Although Kerala was only created in 1956 when, following the States Reorganisation Act, borders were redefined along linguistic lines, an engagement with Shakespeare in Malayalam (the dominant language of Kerala) is of longer standing.3 Translations of Shakespeare into Malayalam date from the late 19th century (translations of The Comedy of Errors, Hamlet, King Lear, The Merchant of Venice, and The Taming of the Shrew, among others), while Shakespeare has been routinely popularised due to his works being adapted into a range of Keralan folk forms and genres such as the pamphlet, kathakali (a dance drama), and kathaprasangam, an originally devotional mode of story-telling performance.4 The plays are cited in Malayalam cinema, with adaptations such as Kaliyattam (dir. Jayaraj, 1997) and Karmayogi (dir. V. K. Prakash, 2012), which adapt Othello and Hamlet, respectively, demonstrating both a familiarity with, and a market for, the tragedies on screen.5 Annayum Rasoolum and Eeda, then, draw on flourishing regional traditions, and, as this article argues, intersect with Shakespeare at multiple levels.

According to the ‘Kerala model’, a measure of local social and economic success, the state scores highly on a range of developmental indicators. In terms of literacy, education, sex ratio, life expectancy, the provision of social services, and infant and adult mortality rates, Kerala is generally favourably placed.6 However, Annayum Rasoolum and Eeda situate the ‘star-crossed lovers’ (Prologue, 6) in a regional milieu which challenges any easy notions of progress.7 As the section ‘Settings and communities’ argues, these adaptations elaborate distinctive settings and geographies in their representation of political and religious contest. Conflict takes several forms, not least, as both

Mots clés
Adaptations, Inde, cinéma malayalam, identité kerala, Romeo et Juliette, Annayum Rasoolum, Eeda
films reveal, cycles of violence and social and sexual segregation. Taking Ratheesh Radhakrishnan’s claim that the recent Malayalam film prioritises Keraliyatha or ‘Kerala-ness’, I argue in the ‘Songs and rituals’ section that songs and rituals are key to the films’ imagining of the lovers in relation to local cultures. Illuminating here, therefore, is the emphasis on calendrical rituals, the coding of religious spaces, and soundtracks that mediate the play in specifically Keralan musical idioms. Crucial to both films are scenarios that cut across barriers of affiliation; accordingly, as I argue in the ‘Outcomes and endings’ section, Annayum Rasoolum and Eeda hold out the prospect of different futures, through either sub-narratives or conjurations of change. Yet, ultimately, both films fall back on ambiguated conclusions, whether these suggest themselves in cyclical narratives or spectacles of separation and precarity. In this way, even as they yearn for alternative realities, these cinematic adaptations affirm a less ameliorative construction of Kerala’s modernity and reflect dispassionately on the entangled histories that shape their imaginative possibility.

Settings and communities

Annayum Rasoolum and Eeda announce their Shakespearean credentials in comparable ways. In Annayum Rasoolum, the prologue finds an expression in Ashley, a ship employee from the Christian community whose voiceover continually punctuates the narrative with summary and backstory. Characters in the film such as Benvolio and Mercutio are suggested in the Christian Colin and the Muslim Abu, while Tybalt is echoed in Kunjumon, brother to Anna/Juliet, also from the Christian community. In Eeda, a comparable process of transliteration is evident in the figures of the investigating officer, Sudeep Majumdar, whose absences bring the erring Escalus to mind, and Guruji, who, in his religiosity, is akin to Friar Laurence. Character types aside, both films display Shakespearean identifications in plot development. Balcony scenes, periods of exile, and arranged marriages are features of each film’s storyline. A party, or chance meeting, is the occasion on which the lovers properly meet (an encounter at a weavers’ collective in Eeda and a Christian festival or perunaal in Annayum Rasoolum) and, as part of their respective climaxes, each film culminates in missed or belated communications. In a many-layered fashion, then, Romeo and Juliet is the underlying premise and creative rationale for Annayum Rasoolum and Eeda.

Key to the adaptation of Shakespeare in Annayum Rasoolum and Eeda are strategies of localisation. Settings are carefully established, with markers of district and neighbourhood encouraging site-specific recognition. For example, Annayum Rasoolum opens with a sequence detailing the backstreet harbour areas of Kochi, southwest Kerala, where the film is set. As the camera pans over shop fronts and warehouses, a motorbike’s point of view offers a lively sense of the business on which some of the city’s industries depend. Interestingly, the point of view is that of the municipal police force, suggesting an equation between the camera’s eye, Escalus in Romeo and Juliet and the surveillance operations of the state. The sequence points up how subjects in Kochi are watched and monitored. Acoustically, localisation is at work in the lyrics of the accompanying song, ‘Kaayali-narike’, which references Aspinwall and A. V. Thomas (among others), ‘companies’
which deal in products such as coffee, coir, rice, and rubber on which fortunes in South India have historically been made. This is a world, then, of late capitalist movement, the camera’s roving, investigative eye bringing to light worlds within worlds, places within places. As much is intimated in the fact that the police officers are Hindu and the man they seek (Hyder, a ferry-operator) is Muslim: Kochi, as it is discovered, is structured along majority/minority lines and cannot be known according to one overarching perspective.

Where Annayum Rasoolum highlights the activity of trade, Eeda reveals business at a standstill. This film’s opening discovers a hartal (strike or lockdown) in Kannur, Malabar, in northern Kerala, with eerie effects accruing from ground-level shots of closed shops and aerial panoramas of deserted streets and abandoned buildings. In the place of a song, a newscaster’s voiceover announces that the city is ‘shut down completely’ following a ‘murder’: ‘a manhunt was on, and the killers will be caught soon’. Glimpses of military monuments and the fleck of red on bunting and yellow on vehicles suggest a viscerally politicised landscape, a Kerala characterised by the terrors of internecine conflict. The film’s title – Eeda/Here – stresses the ongoing, contemporary complexities of the situation: this is a setting not so much embedded in history as having a purchase in the here-and-now.

Within these settings, each film deploys differently visualised localisation strategies. With Eeda, the dominant image is that of the idavazhi (a narrow mud-baked lane with grassy banks on either side): winding and sinuous, these surrogates for the streets of Verona criss-cross the locale in labyrinthine combinations. Once caught up in the idavazhi’s interstices, it is easy to see how quickly college student, Aishwarya/Juliet, and insurance company worker, Anand/Romeo, can lose their way. By contrast, the dominant image in Annayum Rasoolum is that of the ferry that hourly makes the crossing between the Vypeen islands and the Kochi mainland. It is on the ferry, a culturally neutral environment not subject to state surveillance, that taxi-driver, Rasool/Romeo, and sari-shop worker, Anna/Juliet, conduct their courtship. If Romeo and Juliet represents the balcony as the lovers’ private space, Annayum Rasoolum extends the idea, finding in the ferry a public space that admits of private conference. A typical sequence in this apolitical setting privileges glimpses of choppy waters, views of the harbour area, and close-ups on smiling faces; here, the love affair is made possible (Figure 1). At the same time, as patterned moments of passage make clear, the courtship itself is time-bound and dictated by the rules of the journey. Echoing the time constraints of the play, and its sense of gathering pace, Annayum Rasoolum shows how intimacy is subject to the rhythms of negotiating the city’s geography.

If they diverge from each other in their envisioning of setting (Kannur/Kochi, north/south, backstreet/ferryboat), then these adaptations come together in locating Romeo and Juliet’s ‘ancient grudge’ (Prologue, 3) in praxes of political contestation and the separatist effects of cultural and religious difference. Both films, avoiding specifics, suggest deeply rooted conflicts which colour present conditions. And, whether it is Kannur or Kochi, Eeda and Annayum Rasoolum explore the reverberations of living in riven communities. The war zone setting of Eeda is a consequence of what is described by the director, B. Ajithkumar, as a ‘rivalry…well-known to everyone in Kerala’ between the two main local political parties, the KJP (the Montagues) and the KPM (the
Neither acronym is unpacked; however, each party is differentiated according to colours, rubrics, and iconography. For example, associated in the film with saffron; the singing of vedas; loyalty to the ‘motherland’; prayers to the monkey-god, Hanuman; adulation of Bharat Mata (the mother goddess of India); and the epics, the KJP brings to mind the existing BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), known for its nationalist leanings and conservative agendas. 10 (The connection is clarified in scenes in which Guruji/Friar Laurence reads to a group of schoolchildren from the Mahabarata, a key text in the dissemination of Hindutva ideology.) At the opposite end of the political spectrum is the KPM, associated in the film with red, portraits of Lenin and Che Guevara, the language of martyrdom, and resistance from below: as one party member cries, referencing central government, ‘This isn’t North India to bow before your overbearing power…this is Kannur!’ Here, the Communist Party of India (CPI) or the Marxist Communist Party of India (MCPI) is conjured, an identification powerfully registered in shots of walls daubed with hammers and sickles and statues of workers: in Eeda’s representation of the KPM, the archetypal party member is a demi-god who belongs to a pantheon. As Maya Chadda writes, ‘cross-cutting cleavages [have been] created [in Kerala] by… strong party competition and frequent changes in the governing party’. 11 Notably, in mapping the ‘ancient grudge’ onto contemporary politics, Eeda discovers each party as complicit in the perpetuation of ‘new mutiny’ (Prologue, 3). Similar maxims are shared across the political divide (Upendran/Mercutio, of the KJP, cries, ‘It’s better to die like a tiger than live like a dog’, while Dineshan, a KPM leader, notes ‘Better to die with honour than hide like a dog’), suggesting shared but equally divisive notions of loyalty and heroism. Interestingly, party commitment is not based on class or caste; instead, what is striking is the fact that Anand/Romeo and Aishwarya/Juliet belong to the same (Hindu) constituency.

More conventionally, the central conceit in Annayum Rasoolum hinges on Rasool/Romeo and Anna/Juliet belonging to different religious (Muslim and Christian) communities and thus inhabiting different areas of Kochi (respectively, Mattanchery and the Vypeen islands). In this connection, Annayum Rasoolum owes its impetus to the intersecting cultural histories of Kerala, tradition holding that Christianity came to this part of India via the ministry of the disciple, St Thomas, and Islam through Middle Eastern trade. 12 Within the wider world of Kochi, both groups are realised in terms of minority
identifications; for example, complementing the scene in which Hyder (brother to Rasool) is hassled by the Hindu majority police force is the moment when Anna/Juliet is forced to apologise by her unsympathetic Hindu employers. On one hand, *Annayum Rasoolum* embraces the significances of cross-community exchange, as when Ashley/the prologue reflects, in voiceover, on encountering ‘new people’ from ‘places I had not seen in my homeland’. On the other hand, the perils attached to precisely the same interaction are vividly conveyed when Anna/Juliet and Rasool/Romeo cross a busy road in downtown Kochi: her accompanying warning, ‘This will not work out... It will become an issue’, works metaphorically to suggest anxieties about moving from one geographical space – and culture – to another. *Romeo and Juliet* is sparing in its topography, singling out within Verona’s walls St Peter’s Church (3.5.114), Freetown (1.1.95), and the ‘grove of sycamore’ (1.1.114), and ascribing to none of these locations a Capulet or Montague designation. *Annayum Rasoolum* by contrast reads all of its community spaces as potential danger zones, not least as this is physically realised in a series of fights between Colin/Benvolio, Abu/Mercutio, Kunjumon/Tybalt, and Rasool/Romeo that take place in a downtown shopping mall and at a market on the Vypeen islands. These places of commerce are overlapping in their membership, and hybridised in their populations, with disorder quick to surface. In this way, *Annayum Rasoolum* – a film whose very title, through the coded names and ‘um’ (‘and’) conjunction, points up an inter-faith relationship – constructs Kochi both as a site of possibility and a landscape of disturbance.

In keeping with the representation of conflicted communities, both films deploy techniques of juxtaposition and contrast to evoke worlds which, over the course of the action, become increasingly separate. The petty bourgeois milieu of *Annayum Rasoolum*, for example, is evoked in a collage that cross-cuts between Rasool/Romeo’s dingy harbour-side apartment (in which he prays, the chant of an imam sounding in the background) and Anna/Juliet’s simple bedroom (the camera focuses on an image of Mary and the holy family on the wall): the lovers are alike, it is suggested, in their spirituality. Towards the end, a similar movement shows Anna/Juliet contemplating a calendar on her bedroom wall (the date for her arranged marriage nears) and Rasool/ Romeo staring at the bars of his gaol (he is awaiting trial for his part in one of the street brawls). Playing a variation on the play’s motifs, the episode now discovers enclosure and incarceration as the point of connection. The hope of before has ceded place to the desperation of a ravaged relationship, the changed emphasis underscoring closed options and circumscribed lives. Initially, the fact that Aishwarya/Juliet and Anand/Romeo in *Eeda* have studied or continue to study in Mysore, Karnataka, places them at a distance from their Kerala surroundings. Specifically, Aishwarya/Juliet and Anand/Romeo hail from the fictional ‘Chenniam’ and ‘Kavileri’, respectively; as the director states, these ‘resemble place names in the North Malabar region’ and were created to ‘sound as if they are in Kannur and... subconsciously suggest... associations with “Red” and “Shrine”... which provide... authentic local flavour’. As the film progresses, then, the lovers are pulled back to Kannur through social and familial obligations. As in *Annayum Rasoolum*, dissolves between domestic interiors stress narrowed situations, the effect of which is to underscore a sense of their divided worlds. Mysore spaces (college
rooms and well-appointed apartments) give way to Kannur conditions (cramped cubicles): there is no longer a shared environment the lovers can call their own.

Priya Alphonsa Mathew and Rajesh James write that ‘Malayalam cinema’ frequently trades on ‘narrative expressions of... hyper-masculinity’, and, in this respect, both adaptations spring to mind. 16 ‘The boys are out of control’, states Dineshan, the KPM leader in Eeda, adding, ‘Can’t let them get away with this’: in this formulation, one act of aggressive male bravado needs to be answered with another. ‘Where do the heck they look?’, Abu/Mercutio asks his male friends in Annayum Rasoolum, his comment about women betraying a belittling mind-set. Such expressions of group identity also take their cue from the street brawls of the play in which puns referencing phallic exposure (‘I strike’ (1.1.5) and ‘to be valiant is to stand’ (1.1.8)) combine with threatening assertions of desire: ‘I will... thrust his maids to the wall’ (1.1.16). In both films, a reliance on hyper-masculinity serves to vilify those who are deemed politically ‘other’, as when Anand/Romeo in Eeda, counselling an end to the destructive ‘game’, is reprimanded by KJP party thug, Unni: ‘Have you gone soft in the head? Is this how men talk?’ he demands. Belonging with the imputed loss of hardness, patriarchs are robbed of familial authority, displaced by more commanding male representatives. To cite one instance, Joseph/Old Capulet, grizzled and check-shirted in Annayum Rasoolum, has given up on parental responsibility: he stands impassively by during fights and stares silently into the distance as the arranged marriage negotiations progress: similar to his dramatic counterpart, who is mocked for requiring a ‘crutch’ when he demands a ‘sword’ (1.1.69), he is a study in disempowerment. When fathers attempt to reclaim control, they are quickly crushed. In an equivalent scene in Eeda, for example, Aishwarya’s father/Old Capulet protests at ‘singling out political rivals for murder’, only to be silenced by the gruff Dineshan: ‘When did you turn Gandhian, uncle? When the system is based on force, are we to preach non-violence?’ he questions. It is not so much the patriarch in Eeda who exercises influence, then, but the party leader, the so-called ‘status-seeking... “big-man”’ of the local community who, in the words of Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, is ‘self-defined through redistributive strategies’. 17 Families are subsumed within inhibiting cultures and politics in Annayum Rasoolum and Eeda, the expression of masculinity operating both to support collective action and to enforce social control.

In the promulgation of ‘Malayalee modernity’, Susanne Bygnes observes, attention has focused on ‘the explanatory logics of the attained emancipation of women’ and ‘gender development’. 18 Her argument is writ large in Eeda’s representation of Aishwarya/Juliet. Although oppressed by her older party leader cousin (‘Don’t step out now’, Dineshan warns Aishwarya/Juliet), she resists the logic that would consign her to the domus. In political meetings, she is embarrassed at the inflammatory language; at other points, she condemns violent extremism, and, installing herself as her own Friar Laurence, pro-actively arranges for her marriage to Anand/Romeo and insists on freedom of choice: ‘Shouldn’t I marry the person I like?’ The objections raised here reframe Juliet’s own objections (‘I must wed / Ere he that should be husband comes to woo... I will not marry yet’ (3.5.118–19, 121)) at the same time as they declare a politics of subjectivity that eschews KJP and KPM identifications. But Aishwarya/Juliet is also exceptional. Elsewhere in the film, women defend the machinations of their husbands, but rarely
intervene politically. This more conservative construction ties *Eeda* to *Annayum Rasoolum* in which there is little sense of gendered freedom. The characteristic view is of a physically restricted Anna/Juliet, as expressed in shots of her hiding behind her hair and blocked by groups of other women and church candles. A typical gesture is of withdrawal: Anna/Juliet retires to the stairwell at the back of the saree shop in which she works or steps from the threshold into dark recesses. Anna/Juliet’s desire to occupy the background goes with her general submissiveness, while her prevailing modesty accords with the virtuous and unthreatening deportment of the conventional ‘Bollywood’ heroine. In these respects, *Annayum Rasoolum* exemplifies the claim of Meena T. Pillai that, in Malayalam cinema, ‘the “patrifocal” ideology of... society’ favours ‘the contours of a normative femininity that deny women their identity’.¹⁹ Placing women in vexed relations to their communities, *Eeda* and *Annayum Rasoolum* not only conjure but also dismantle the logics of emancipation, drawing on localisation strategies, and visual and verbal detail, to demythologise state rhetoric.

**Songs and rituals**

Towards the end of the play, Romeo assures himself that his ‘dreams presage some joyful news at hand’ (5.1.2). In a more despondent mood shortly after, he rejects his seeming fate (‘I defy you, stars’ (5.1.24)). As part of its investment in *Keraliyatha*, *Annayum Rasoolum* and *Eeda* also dramatise predictions and forecasts, even if the latter film appears at first parodic. The action of *Eeda*, for example, is interrupted by a lottery seller whose invitation to seize the auspicious moment (‘Karunya lottery! Why don’t you take it on? Is today your lucky day?’) is offset by the spectacle of his mutilated body (as amputee, he bears the scars of strife). At the same time, *Eeda* can affirm the power and influence attached to prognostic lore in Keralan contexts and, in the same way that *Romeo and Juliet* is underpinned by specific ‘calendrical and religious as well as astrological and folkloric’ references, so does the film insert the lovers into the festive and ritualistic rhythms of Hinduism²⁰. Pertinent here is the way in which Indira/Lady Capulet insists, after consultation with an astrologer, on ‘the twelfth day of Chingham’ for Aishwarya/Juliet’s marriage, an arrangement her daughter fiercely resists by organising secretly her union with Anand/Romeo.²¹ In a related episode, to celebrate *ugandi* or the new year, Aishwarya/Juliet and Anand/Romeo meet as devotees at a *teyyam*. A manifestation of a cultural predisposition to read the stars, as well as an expression of *Keraliyatha*, a *teyyam* typically involves blessings and promises of good fortune.²² The sequence in *Eeda* is staged in precise order – a prelude of cymbals and drums, tending the sacred flame, communing with participants, kinetic bows, and dancing, bathing in the fire and brandishing of symbolic weapons. In this sense, the *teyyam* episode gestures both to the play’s concern with modes of blessing (Romeo’s ‘rude hand’ is made ‘blessèd’ by Juliet’s (1.5.48)) and its delight in scurrility. The *teyyam* enacted is, Mercutio-like, that of the *pottan daivam* in which a comic ‘loafer’ or ‘idiot’ mocks hierarchical derelictions.²³ In particular, the *pottan daivam* is associated with equality and ideas of a shared humanity.²⁴ As the lovers’ eyes meet across the crowd and the dancer-performer, resplendent in magnificent head-dress, anklets, and a coconut-frond
skirt, reaches the ritualistic high-point, the ceremony breaks down – a fight erupts between KJP and KPM party members, Anand/Romeo flees and Aishwarya/Juliet is escorted away. The lovers are denied their blessing and the whole is realised as a Shakespearean maimed rite. Crucially, in the necessary sequencing of actions, the final dance, and removal of the head-dress, are prevented. More broadly, in that the teyyam has been desacralised (an ‘outrage’ (3.1.81) has been committed), Eeda points up how cultures of ritual are incapable of containing the region’s political instabilities.

If the sacred sphere of the teyyam is disrupted, the equivalent sacred aspects of the shrine are honoured. Towards the end of the film, Anand/Romeo and Aishwarya/Juliet agree to meet again at a local shrine, a timber-built, squat building, surrounded by greenery, dedicated to Shiva, the Hindu deity. It is here at this archetypal articulation of Keraliyatha that the lovers come together to enjoy a ‘safe haven’, the film’s localised reading of the play’s ‘cell’ (4.1.17), and a privatised religious space. As violence rages unchecked in the forests around them, the lovers enjoy a night together at the shrine, the focus on their draped forms and sated expressions suggesting that consummation has taken place. Once they shelter within the shrine’s walls, it is implied, Anand/Romeo and Aishwarya/Juliet are unassailable, lending weight to the notion that Shiva, in his creative capacities, functions as their guardian. As A. L. Basham notes, Shiva, although he ‘lurks in horrible places, such as battlegrounds’, also incarnates ‘justice...[and] love for his creatures’ and is frequently represented with ‘one hand in an attitude of blessing’. Making up for the derelictions of the teyyam, the implied Shiva executes invisible but regenerative functions, meaning that the shrine takes on the properties of the bedroom rather than the vault. In this space, fortune smiles on the lovers, ensuring their survival in the midst of chaos.

While the shrine in Eeda works to overcome the separatist effects of party politics, churches in Annayum Rasoolum convey a sense of the cultural histories that keep the lovers in mutually exclusive categories. Thus, Anna/Juliet is lensed against some of the well-known Catholic cathedrals of Kochi, such as ‘St Antony Pray for Us’ in downtown, the Basilica of our Lady of Ramon Ave Maria, also on the mainland, and Our Lady of Hope on the Vypeen islands. Associated with visions, miracles, and pilgrimages, these stately edifices, characterised by soaring spires, stacked columns, and white-washed exteriors, recall Jesuit-sponsored colonial praxes at the same time as they make architecturally visible links between Kerala and the European Renaissance: they embody peculiarly cross-fertilised complexions of Keraliyatha. In Romeo and Juliet, of course, the ‘holy shrine’ (1.3.91) is Juliet herself, and the ‘two blushing pilgrims’ (1.3.92) Romeo’s lips. In a variation on the trope of worship, Annayum Rasoolum discovers instead the rituals of Catholicism marking moments of disagreement and rupture. Anna/Juliet enters church interiors to pray, leaving Rasool/Romeo outside, the physical distance between them exacerbated by institutional walls and barriers. Or Anna/Juliet pauses at a roadside to kneel before a primitive cross, Rasool/Romeo hanging behind in grim anticipation of the gulf that will prove their undoing.

Rituals, then, create or deepen impasses, making trials manifest and difficulties apparent. It is here that the adaptations’ songs serve a key bridging purpose. Lalitha Gopalan coins the phrase ‘cinema of interruption’ to capture the ways in which Indian
cinemas enlist music and dance in extensions to, and enhancements of, the narrative.²⁸ Rachel Dwyer goes further in her discussion of Indian cinemas, noting that ‘songs allow things to be said which cannot be said elsewhere’.²⁹ Eeda is a case in point. As supplement to the action proper, and surrogate for the articulation of emotion, the film features a song sequence, ‘Mizhi Niranju’, with an alternating male and female voice. Harmonising voices suggest collaborative composition and a developing courtship, while the lyrics (‘This ache, so sweet, that glistens in the eye; this night... This flame that you lit spreads a golden light... our soul-chords have merged... You’re the bird that scorns borders, I’m the wind beneath your wings... This tale our dreams tell’) announce an experience of bodily freedom and mutual sensual pleasure that draws on the play’s images and metaphors. Specifically, Romeo and Juliet’s allusions to ‘glorious... night’ (2.1.69), ‘light’ (2.1.44), ‘wond’ring eyes’ (2.1.71), ‘rich music’s tongue’ (2.5.27), ‘wind-swift Cupid wings’ (2.4.8), and ‘flattering-sweet... dream[s]’ (2.1.182–3) are recast in ‘Mizhi Niranju’ in such a way as to infuse the soundscape with a sexual charge. Such associations are aided by the accompanying montage that shows Anand/ Romeo and Aishwarya/Juliet exploring Mysore (Figure 2). The city, as seen through their eyes, both allows for experiences untrammelled by parental intervention and encapsulates love, as suggested in scenes of gift exchange, motorbike rides, and sightseeing: the lovers wonder, for instance, at the famous statue of Bahubali, the Jain deity whose period of meditation led to spiritual ascendancy (ascetic abnegation is ironically compared to eroticised delight).³⁰ For the director, the significance of Bahubali is that ‘he gave up power and violence’.³¹ Here is an ‘interruption’, then, that, taking energy from the play’s subscription to a ‘language’ of ‘transformation’, transports the lovers, in Marjorie Garber’s words, to a world of ‘myth or romance’.³² In contrast, Eeda’s second song sequence, ‘Maarival Maayana’, introduces a lone female counter-voice that, in its minor chords and bleak tonalities, reins in the exploratory excitement of ‘Mizhi Niranju’. Telling visuals centre on Anand/Romeo’s island exile, dense with strangling undergrowth, and Aishwarya/Juliet’s family home, unwelcoming and
flickering with shadows. The two songs are interrelated, with the second functioning as a sombre rejoinder to the first, as the lyrics establish: ‘the wind blows out the lamp, a heavy darkness spreads...the sun meets its end in a blood-red pool, the sorrow of this world...this earth mother’. Motifs of death and the cessation of all things echo the play’s apocalyptic tenor – both Friar Laurence’s view that ‘The earth, that’s nature’s mother, is her tomb’ (2.2.9) and Juliet’s demand for ‘motion to ‘end’ (3.2.59) so as to announce the ‘general doom’ (3.2.67).

A less busy film dialogically than Eeda, Annayum Rasoolum accordingly prioritises a greater number of song sequences, an additional feature being the ways in which music and setting closely interrelate. For example, in the song that introduces Rasool/Romeo’s exile in Ponnani/Mantua, a northerly fishing port in Kerala, shots of industrious workers are complemented by the maritime theme of the lyrics: ‘Who is your boat-man to navigate? Where is your oar, as you journey into the ocean?’ The point is that Rasool, unsure of his bearings, lacks any sense of family or psychic anchorage, as his disconsolate wandering on the beach indicates: like Romeo, he is a ‘desperate pilot’ (5.3.117), lacking ‘steerage of [his] course’ (1.5.112). Picking up on the play’s imagery of eyes and sight, a complementary song sequence shows the lovers on the Vypeen-Kochi ferry, a space we recognise as theirs alone. Distinctively, as the camera alights on Anna/Juliet and Rasool/Romeo searching for each other amid the crush of other passengers, the lyrics stress a ‘dream’ of merging in keeping with their watery environs: ‘fill your eye with the sight of the sea...you flowed out like bay waters into the ocean...Within my innermost self you become the seven seas as I turned into clear sparkling waters’. At this point, the prospect of Anna/Juliet and Rasool/Romeo coming together is remote and, hence, is conveyed only metaphorically. Yet, in a not dissimilar manoeuvre to Eeda, Annayum Rasoolum stages a final song sequence that builds on earlier musical suggestions. As the lovers, who have fled Kochi, enjoy a rural retreat or kind of Shakespearean ‘green world’, a scene of domestic bliss – shopping for household items, washing, and bathing – unfolds in concert with song lyrics that highlight an achieved union: ‘bodies touched by tender rays of the sun and kisses, brightness spreads and light flows in rivulets...to be together’ (Figure 3). Both song and montage culminate in a love-making scene rare in South Indian cinemas: Anna/Juliet and Rasool/ Romeo are filmed lying side-by-side, lips almost meeting, the emphasis being on their

**Figure 3.** Anna/Juliet and Rasool/Romeo embrace in Annayum Rasoolum (dir. Rajeev Ravi, 2013).
partly clothed bodies. The consummation is discreetly romanticised thanks to the hazy blues that, resembling a veil, colour the mise en scène, with the sequence as a whole utilising close camerawork and a heightened lyric mode to suggest a climactic moment. Functioning in such capacities, both films rework in a musical register the investment in Keraliyatha at the same time as they make up for gaps and fissures and more fully narrativise the lovers’ relationships.

**Outcomes and endings**

Several song sequences pull against the expectation that the narrative is destined for a tragic outcome. Certainly, in Eeda and Annayum Rasoolum, there are glimmers of alternative dispensations, prospects of other arrangements that reflect favourably back on the lovers and their predicaments. Eeda, for example, finds symbolic capital in Aishwarya/Juliet’s resistant potential. Although her precise discipline at J. S. S. College, Mysore, is never specified, she is seen studying channels and bandwidths, subjects that bode well for unrestricted communication and exchange. For Aishwarya/Juliet, studying in the United States is a priority: as she says, ‘I don’t want to stay in this cursed place’, her ambition representing a move to break free of defining Keralan systems. In a comparable way, Annayum Rasoolum continually makes spectacles of mobility. Rasool drives a taxi, which allows him access to various Kochi communities and facilitates his meeting others outside of his class/caste. Similarly, working on one of the ferries, Hyder’s life and work are identified through a to-and-fro movement between mainland and islands. And, even if she conceals herself and is associated with spaces within, there are moments when Anna/Juliet, too, pushes at the limits of her environment, travelling with Rasool/Romeo to Ponnani/Mantua and joining him in exile (the accompanying visuals of migratory birds suggest release and escape). Indeed, and not only during the song sequences, dreams of lives beyond Kochi are an integral part of Annayum Rasoolum. Thus, Hyder is keen to leave South India and take up a better job in Kuwait: much of his time is spent waiting for the crucial call that will transform his fortunes. He is suggestive, in fact, of a South Indian labour market and a demographic in flux; as Filippo and Caroline Osella note, ‘migration to the Persian gulf’ constitutes a global development whereby some Malayalis are empowered to leave and then return to their homelands, ‘construct houses...[and] buy private education...and...consumer goods’, thereby changing class and participating in different lifestyles. More widely, the film is framed by an aesthetic appreciation of mobility, as when Ashley/the prologue reflects on the ‘sheer joy of [a] crossing’ – from Kochi to Vypeen – that is ‘incomparable to any other in this whole world’. In moments such as these, Kochi appears replete with opportunity.

Indeed, in each film, sub-narratives intersect with the main narratives in such a way as to point up porous boundaries and productive cross-community liaisons. Particularly revealing is the way in which, in Eeda, female–female relations cut across divides of political loyalty. For example, for all her long-suffering dedication to her husband, KPM stalwart, Mohanan/Benvolio (who is confined to a wheelchair following a spate of violence), Leela takes pains to empathise with Aishwarya/Juliet and, later, to shelter
Anand/Romeo, offering him a room at a point when he is fleeing the police. ‘No one will find you here, that’s for sure’, he is told, with Leela functioning in Nurse-like capacities as go-between and protectress. Within the ranks of his own party, Anand/Romeo is additionally assisted by a further Nurse-like character, Pushpalatha, lover to Upendran/Mercurio. It is she who advises Anand/Romeo that he is in danger of being framed for murder by those closest to him: ‘the plan is to put you on the list’, she warns. Such is the fervour of party allegiance that any deviation from its codes of conduct is seen as an instance of betrayal. Yet, as Eeda simultaneously intimates, the ties that bind party membership are not entirely fixed, looks, asides, and whispers signalling fault-lines and support. The significance of such sub-narratives is taken to its furthest extreme in Annayum Rasoolum. At a critical point, Ashley/the prologue discloses in flashback a romance-that-never-was with a college student, Lily (Anna/Juliet’s sister). In this backstory, Ashley/the prologue loses his love to a rival, never having had the courage to declare his feelings, only to find that Lily, having been jilted, joins a convent. At the close of the film, however, Ashley/the prologue leaves his ‘silence’ behind and is united with a Lily who has abandoned her religious vocation. In Indian cinemas, this is, of course, an archetypal storyline, yet its implications here reside in the larger point it makes about thwarted romances. The Ashley/Lily plot runs parallel to the Anna/Rasool plot, affirmatively inflecting its contours and direction. A second, and more pertinent, sub-narrative centres on the couple who first accommodate Anna/Juliet and Rasool/Romeo during their period of exile. Playing with the notion that, as one film critic notes, ‘the rural [is] the authentic space of the Malayalee subject’, this interlude introduces us to Rosie and Peter (formerly Purushothaman), who has converted from Hinduism to Christianity in order to marry. The names themselves are revealing of the change in identification; in addition, glimpses of a contented Peter and Rosie praying before an icon of the Virgin Mary with their young daughter work to suggest that the marriage owes its success not simply to conversion but also to sacrifice and compromise. At one level, Peter and Rosie serve as analogues for the Nurse and for Friar Laurence; at another level, they represent the potential for relationships to be conducted across borders and for traditions to be negotiated and challenged.

As both Annayum Rasoolum and Eeda demonstrate, however, these alternative scenarios – and instances of personal contact that go against the grain of party fealty – are ultimately side-lined. In Eeda, women who support the lovers feature only in terms of the execution of a singular narrative function. By the same token, the promising conjunction of Peter and Rosie in Annayum Rasoolum notwithstanding, the couple soon disappears from the action. If, moreover, Ashley/the prologue and Lily reunite, then the film also makes clear that theirs is a same-faith (Christian) connection: love, it seems, in this conjuration of Kochi, cannot be sustained across structures of religious difference. Meanwhile, the kinds of mobility discovered elsewhere in the film recede in significance when we consider that they relate, for the most part, to men only: Kochi’s seeming boundlessness is premised on gendered restrictions.

If Annayum Rasoolum and Eeda ultimately complicate scenarios premised on change and promise, then this is reflected in their respective endings. In recent years, world cinema adaptations of Romeo and Juliet have taken a distinctive interpretive turn, many
films spotlighting not so much death as survival, suggesting that the lovers can rise above the damaging imprint of their surroundings. Forces tending towards annihilation are resisted, the play’s tragic linear movement reformed to take on a more ameliorative cast.\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Annayum Rasoolum} and \textit{Eeda} do not align themselves with this swing in thinking; rather, they spotlight loss, fragmentation, and repetition as tragic hallmarks. \textit{Annayum Rasoolum} is typical. Having heard of Anna/Juliet’s arranged marriage, Rasool/Romeo escapes from gaol and travels to the Vypeen islands in a desperate bid to halt the ceremony. The camera focuses on him sprinting past the shops and offices of downtown Kochi, reminding us of the film’s opening and suggesting a narrative arc that has come full circle. After the frenzy of the crossing, the film goes silent as it transitions to the scene of Rasool/Romeo’s arrival at Anna/Juliet’s family home. The shift in the soundtrack is suggestive of Romeo’s entrance to the churchyard, opening of the Capulet vault, and encounter with ‘unsubstantial death’ (5.3.103). The uninvited Rasool/Romeo comes too late and discovers Anna/Juliet dead, partly covered with a sheet, having taken her own life. A break with the play, in which, of course, Juliet is only asleep, Anna’s suicide conforms with the film’s orientation: the hymn, laced with funereal notes, that she sings earlier in church (‘love is to accept death’) alerts us to a specifically Catholic-Keralan view that death is the price to be paid for love. Murphy Halliburton notes that ‘Kerala has the highest suicide rate in India’, a statistic which is put down to ‘loss of tradition’, the ‘effects of urbanisation’, ‘trends of modernisation and increasing involvement in the global economy’, the result being an endemic ‘psychopathology’.\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Annayum Rasoolum} may assume additional shades of meaning in this light: the marks on Anna/Juliet’s neck suggest hanging, while the trajectory traced implies an ever-contracting encounter with the world (from the liberation of exile to the confinement of bedroom/vault).

Anna/Juliet’s death throws into relief the mixed fortunes of those who remain. Although the Rasool/Romeo and Anna/Juliet story inspires Ashley/the prologue to win back Lily, and while it is his perspective, chorus-like, that closes the film, this is the only unambiguous positive. More generally, the voiceover summary highlights disconnected existences, stasis, resignation, and dispersal. For example, Colin/Benvolio marries a nurse and emigrates to the United Kingdom; Fazila, wife to the murdered Abu/Mercutio, consigns herself to domestic drudgery; and Hyder has to be content with never working in the Gulf. There is little impression of communities healed; instead, the emphasis is on restlessness, disillusion, and precarity, as the lyrics to the accompanying song establish: ‘the heart in constant danger of mishap’. The lure of looking to new possibilities is counterbalanced by insecurities and disappointment. In the final montage, we return to Rasool/Romeo: beardless and wearing dark glasses, he travels on a train, the implication being that he has concealed his identity and is on the run. To cite a recent study of social instability, Rasool/Romeo is typical of the Keralan migrant who moves away ‘not only to escape unemployment and seek better fortunes elsewhere’ but to ‘save face . . . migration helps . . . damage limitation’.\textsuperscript{37} And, as the final shot lingers on a train station sign (‘Dockyard Road’), it is clear that Rasool/Romeo’s journey has taken him outside of Kerala altogether to Mumbai and its harbours. One port world is replaced by another: Rasool/Romeo continues in a cycle of maritime work but utterly separated from all previous contacts and experiences.
In Eeda, both Anand/Romeo and Aishwarya/Juliet survive, but, given director B. Ajithkumar’s desire to honour ‘the ambiguity in the ending’, it is unclear how far we can judge this as a demythologisation. Although they find shelter in the shrine and wake in each other’s arms (the scene approximates the aubade), the day can only be greeted in trepidation (Figure 4). ‘More light and light, more dark and dark our woes’ (3.5.36), states Romeo, and, certainly, in Eeda, the suggestion is that the ‘woes’ of the lovers are not yet over. As Anand/Romeo and Aishwarya/Juliet emerge into sunlight, another hartal (strike or lockdown) is under way, a newscaster’s voiceover explaining that a ‘manhunt’ is ‘on’ following the murder of a party ‘worker’. On one hand, the promise of police intervention and the restoration of ‘peace’ (the ‘glooming peace’ (5.3.304) is cited here) would seem to augur well for the lovers; similarly, the shop fronts Anand/Romeo and Aishwarya/Juliet pass (‘Idea’ and ‘New Kannur Travels’) hint at journeys in the offing. On the other hand, very little has changed. The lottery seller is still present, selling his auspicious tickets and testifying to the injurious effects of conflict. The broadcast we hear is identical to that which opens the film, the only adjustment being the specification of a different party worker (KJP rather than KPM). As director wryly notes, ‘that is how it works in Kannur’. In Eeda, political rivalries and party warfare persist. Kannur’s players are locked in cycles of violence and revenge killings that admit only of group alliances. It is a system of membership in which, as the close of the film points up, Anand/Romeo and Aishwarya/Juliet have no place.

**Conclusion**

At a reflective point in Annayum Rasoolum, Fazila, wife to Abu/Mercutio, advises the love-struck Rasool/Romeo, ‘Love does not have caste or religion. You go ahead and love’. Her recommendation is a plea for what Jonathan Gil Harris has termed elsewhere ‘masala love’ – that is, ‘love relations that join people from different communities’ but that generate and help reinforce ‘a deep-seated phobia’. While ‘masala love’ has long
held a sentimental appeal in India, not least in ‘Bollywood’ films, its presence in Keralan cinemas is less frequently noted. Indeed, as *Annayum Rasoolum* and *Eeda* demonstrate, adapting *Romeo and Juliet* to Malayalam-speaking cultures is a relatively recent phenomenon, and one that enables new expressions. 41

In a Keralan context, cultural regionalism has been powerfully registered in the emergence of a local film industry, as evidenced in the so-called ‘new-wave’ of the 1970s and, subsequently, the creation, in the 2000s, of production facilities in Kochi and Trivandrum, respectively.42 Films such as *Annayum Rasoolum* and *Eeda* showcase the creativity of state-grown products at the same time as they trade on images and associations of Kerala in rural and urban, and north and south, settings. More generally, the distinctive reworking of *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of local idioms, imaginaries, and praxes serves to advertise a Kerala capable of producing Shakespeare adaptations that can rival any of those associated with the more mainstream, centralised Indian film industries. *Annayum Rasoolum* and *Eeda* rehearse personal struggles to engage with modernity in terms of a politics of the self while placing on display the ways in which history and culture – notions of community – militate against that endeavour. The challenge for the lovers, in both films, is to be authors of themselves and each other. As the last line to the opening song, ‘Kaayalinarike’, in *Annayum Rasoolum* establishes, there is ‘always the same refrain, no vacancy’. These two South Indian adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* point up the extent to which there is no space for the lovers, no opening outside of culture or politics to be occupied. So it is that *Annayum Rasoolum* and *Eeda* are replete with scenes (political meetings or religious rituals) in which individual subjectivities strain against, and fail to be accommodated within, formal institutional rhythms and structures. The process, as I have argued, is often gendered. Masculinist rhetoric in both films diminishes and arraigns women (and men) who are perceived to go against membership modes of social organisation. Neither *Annayum Rasoolum* nor *Eeda* is diagnostic (i.e. they do not attempt to explain the ways in which women, in particular, are disempowered by the economies and ideologies of Kerala); nevertheless, they still privilege instances of inequity and, via Shakespeare, take the ‘Kerala model’ to task.

Positioning themselves critically in relation to the historical and cultural categories they examine, these films give Shakespeare a fresh habitation and find in *Romeo and Juliet* specifically South Indian applications and relevancies. Distinctive and interventionist, *Annayum Rasoolum* and *Eeda* deploy constructions of *Keraliyatha* in order to reflect upon, debate, and question paradigms of feeling, types of communal interaction, and shibboleths of identification that have past and present purchases. Performing in such capacities, they demonstrate the vitality and value of Shakespeare for a new digital audience. The platforms to which Indian Shakespeares are now gravitating allow us to explore issues of place in a more differentiated fashion even as they also provide opportunities for understanding the work of adaptation in its multiple regional manifestations.

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1. Poonam Trivedi and Paromita Chakravarti, ‘Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: “Local Habitations”’, in Poonam Trivedi and Paromita Chakravarti (eds), Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: ‘Local Habitations’ (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 1–19, 4.
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21. Chingham is the Malayalam term for the Leo constellation.

22. J. J. Pallath, Theyyam: An Analytical Study of the Folk Culture: Wisdom and Personality (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1995), pp. 18, 19, 54, 77–8.

23. Pallath, Theyyam, pp. 99–101.

24. In the pottan daivam myth, a pulaya (untouchable) argues against the caste system with a sankara (Brahmin scholar), utilising a discourse of the sameness of blood reminiscent of Shylock’s well-known speech in The Merchant of Venice. ‘When your body is cut, what gushes out is blood, when our body is cut, what oozes out is blood: why then do you speak of caste difference?’ the pulaya demands. See Pallath, Theyyam, p. 100; ‘Pottan Theyyam’, <https://theyyamkerala.wordpress.com> (5 February 2021); ‘Pottan Theyyam: A Story of Social Satire’, <https://www.tyndisheritage.com/theyyam> (5 February 2021).

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26. Another interpretation is that the shrine is dedicated to the pottan daivam.

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30. The Gommateshwara statue of Bahubali is located on a hill in Shravanabelagola, Karnataka.

31. Interview between B. Ajithkumar and Mark Thornton Burnett, 10 June 2020.

32. Marjorie Garber, Dream in Shakespeare: From Metaphor to Metamorphosis (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 47.

33. Osella and Osella, Social Mobility in Kerala, p. 15.
34. Radhakrishnan, ‘Urban/the City’, p. 180.
35. See Mark Thornton Burnett, *Shakespeare and World Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 222–6.
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