



Psychoanalytic Rereading of the Poetry of Vailoppilly Sreedharamenon, a Poet of Memories

Binoy Varakil^{1*}

^{1*}Assistant Professor Department of English St.Joseph's College Devagiri, Kozhikode, Kerala

Citation: Binoy Varakil, et.al (2022). Psychoanalytic Rereading of the Poetry of Vailoppilly Sreedharamenon, a Poet of Memories, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 28(2) 01-13
Doi: xyz

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Vailoppilly Sreedharamenon, one of the most celebrated Malayalam poets of the twentieth century, is often remembered as the “poet of memories” for his ability to transform personal recollections and collective emotions into profound lyric experiences. This research article offers a psychoanalytic rereading of his poetry, particularly focusing on five significant poems— <i>Mampazham</i> (“Mango”), <i>Mrugasalayile Thallappuli</i> (“Mother Tigress in the Zoo”), <i>Kannikoythu</i> (“Maiden Harvest”), <i>Kudiyozhikkal</i> (“Eviction”), and <i>Ariyillanjittu</i> (“Because There is No Rice”). Drawing upon Freudian and Lacanian theories of the unconscious, repression, desire, and memory, the study explores how Sreedharamenon’s poetry reveals the poet’s deep engagement with trauma, nostalgia, and the human psyche. The analysis also situates his work within the socio-cultural context of postcolonial Kerala, where memory becomes a site of both resistance and reconciliation.

Introduction

Vailoppilly Sreedharamenon (1907–1985) occupies a central position in the modernist movement in Malayalam poetry.

His works bridge the gap between classical romanticism and the realism of the later decades. Deeply rooted in the emotional landscape of Kerala’s agrarian life, his poems often reveal a complex interplay between memory, morality, and modernity. Vailoppilly’s poetry is characterized by emotional depth, introspection, and subtle psychological insight. His recurrent themes—childhood innocence, human suffering, social displacement, and existential anxiety—make his oeuvre a rich field for psychoanalytic exploration. A psychoanalytic reading allows us to see Vailoppilly’s poetry not merely as lyrical expressions but as articulations of the unconscious mind. His verses resonate with the conflict between repressed desire and moral duty, the search for maternal protection, and the struggle to reconcile the inner self with the outer world. This study interprets his selected poems through Freudian concepts such as the Oedipal complex, repression, and sublimation, and Lacanian ideas of the mirror stage, symbolic order, and desire, highlighting how memory becomes both a symptom and a cure in his work.

Psychoanalytic Framework: Memory, Desire, and the Unconscious

Freudian psychoanalysis interprets art as a manifestation of unconscious desires and repressed emotions. According to Freud, the creative process is akin to dream-work, where forbidden desires are disguised through symbolism and metaphor. The poet, like the dreamer, transforms personal trauma into aesthetic experience.

Lacan’s reinterpretation of Freud introduces the concepts of language and subjectivity into psychoanalytic theory, arguing that human desire is structured through language and that the self is fractured between the “Imaginary,” “Symbolic,” and “Real” orders.

In Vailoppilly’s poetry, the unconscious often surfaces through recurring images of nature, motherhood, hunger, and loss. His poems are haunted by the memory of deprivation and longing—psychic wounds that find symbolic expression through natural imagery. Each poem becomes a dialogue between the conscious and unconscious mind, revealing the conflicts of a self-caught between nostalgia and social awareness.

Mampazham (Mango): Nostalgia, Innocence, and the Return of the Repressed

Mampazham ("Mango") is one of Vailoppilly's most anthologized poems, celebrated for its simplicity and emotional resonance. On the surface, it recounts the childhood memory of stealing a ripe mango from the neighborhood tree, only to be caught and punished. However, a psychoanalytic rereading reveals it as a metaphor for repressed desire and the guilt of transgression. The mango, luscious and forbidden, symbolizes the object of desire—the "lost" fruit of innocence that the adult poet can only recollect, never reclaim.

Freud's concept of the Oedipal conflict is subtly present here. The young speaker's act of stealing and the ensuing punishment parallel the forbidden desire and its repression. The memory, though painful, becomes the foundation of the poet's creative energy. The adult Vailoppilly transforms guilt into art, re-enacting his early trauma through language—a process Freud called sublimation. The poem thus becomes a site where memory reconciles moral anxiety and desire, transforming shame into poetic insight.

Mrugasalayile Thallappuli (Mother Tigress in the Zoo): Captivity, Repression, and Maternal Desire

In *Mrugasalayile Thallappuli* ("Mother Tigress in the Zoo"), the poet encounters a mother tigress confined within the bars of a zoo. Her eyes, filled with anguish and yearning, become mirrors to the poet's own repressed emotions. The tigress symbolizes both the primal instinct and the mother figure—nurturing yet trapped, powerful yet domesticated. This dual image aligns with Freud's theory of ambivalence in the mother-child relationship and Lacan's notion of the mirror stage, where identity is both formed and fractured through reflection.

The zoo represents the Symbolic Order—a space of social control and language—where instinctual freedom is curtailed. The tigress's longing gaze evokes the "Real," the realm of pure emotion and unmediated experience that remains beyond language. The poet's empathy for the tigress is thus a projection of his own psychic repression. Through her image, he confronts his sense of entrapment within moral, cultural, and linguistic structures. The poem transforms the mother-animal bond into a meditation on the human condition: the conflict between instinct and civilization.

Kannikoythu (Maiden Harvest): Fertility, Renewal, and the Feminine Unconscious

Kannikoythu ("Maiden Harvest") celebrates the joy and sanctity of the first rice harvest, a ritual deeply embedded in Kerala's agrarian tradition. On a literal level, it depicts women reaping grain, singing songs of fertility and gratitude. On a psychoanalytic plane, however, the poem represents the union of the conscious and unconscious—the integration of creative and reproductive energies.

The female body, symbolized through the image of the maiden reaper, becomes a metaphor for the fertile unconscious. In Freudian terms, it represents the life instinct (*Eros*), which counterbalances the death instinct (*Thanatos*). The rhythmic motion of reaping mirrors the rhythmic pulse of the psyche, suggesting catharsis through ritual labor. Vailoppilly's language transforms agricultural imagery into erotic and maternal symbolism: the earth as mother, the seed as desire, and the harvest as fulfillment. Yet beneath the celebration lies a sense of transience—an awareness that joy, like fertility, is cyclical and temporary.

Kudiyozhikkal (Eviction): Trauma, Displacement, and the Anxiety of Loss

Kudiyozhikkal ("Eviction") marks a darker turn in Vailoppilly's poetry. It portrays the forced displacement of tenants from their ancestral homes, capturing both social injustice and existential despair. The poem resonates with postcolonial trauma but also operates as a personal allegory of psychic eviction—the uprooting of the self from its unconscious foundations.

From a Freudian perspective, the eviction symbolizes repression: the act of expelling unwanted memories or emotions from consciousness. The loss of home parallels the loss of psychic stability. The poet's empathy for the dispossessed reveals his own internal exile—a sense of alienation within modernity. Lacan's idea of the "lack" (the void within desire) becomes crucial here: the poem's pathos arises not merely from material loss but from the impossibility of returning to the symbolic "home" of innocence and belonging. Thus, *Kudiyozhikkal* is both social commentary and psychic confession.

Ariyillanjittu (Because There is No Rice): Hunger, Death, and the Sublimation of Suffering

Ariyillanjittu ("Because There is No Rice") is among Vailoppilly's most haunting poems, confronting the raw realities of hunger and death. The poem narrates the tragedy of a poor family's starvation—a stark reflection of postcolonial Kerala's socio-economic disparities. Yet, through a psychoanalytic lens, hunger assumes symbolic dimensions. It becomes the manifestation of unfulfilled desire—both physical and existential. Freud identified hunger as the primal drive underlying all human motivation, preceding even sexual desire. In Vailoppilly's poem, this hunger transcends the body; it becomes a spiritual void, echoing Lacan's notion of desire as "the desire of the Other." The poet's empathy becomes a form of sublimation, transforming collective suffering into poetic consciousness. The absence of rice signifies not just material deprivation but the absence of meaning in a world governed by moral indifference. In this sense, the poem becomes both elegy and resistance—a testimony to the psychic endurance of the poor.

Memory as a Site of Healing and Resistance

Throughout Vailoppilly's poetry, memory functions as both wound and remedy. The act of remembering allows the poet to confront repressed experiences and to transform pain into art. His recollections are rarely nostalgic in the sentimental sense; rather, they are dialectical, negotiating between past trauma and present awareness. In *Mampazham* and *Kannikoythu*, memory restores a lost connection with innocence and community. In *Kudiyozhikkal* and *Ariyillanjittu*, it records the trauma of loss. This dual nature of memory—restorative and melancholic—aligns with Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia, where the subject oscillates between acceptance and attachment to the lost object.

For Vailoppilly, poetry becomes the stage of this oscillation. His lyrical voice functions like the analyst's couch, inviting both confession and catharsis. The poet's role, in this sense, mirrors Freud's own metaphor of the "archaeologist of the mind"—digging beneath the ruins of consciousness to uncover buried truths.

Conclusion

A psychoanalytic rereading of Vailoppilly Sreedharamenon's poetry reveals the profound psychological depth that underlies his lyrical simplicity. His poems, though rooted in the local soil of Kerala, speak to universal human conditions—desire, guilt, loss, and redemption. Each of the selected poems represents a stage in the psychic journey from repression to realization. Whether it is the guilty pleasure of childhood in *Mampazham*, the maternal anguish of the caged tigress, the fertility of *Kannikoythu*, or the despair of *Ariyillanjittu*, Vailoppilly's verse captures the continuous negotiation between the unconscious and the social order.

His poetry exemplifies the function of art as sublimation: the transformation of private pain into collective empathy. Through memory, he constructs a bridge between self and society, personal trauma and universal truth. In reimagining his work through psychoanalytic theory, we recognize Vailoppilly not merely as a poet of memories but as a poet of the unconscious—one who maps the hidden landscapes of the human soul with compassion and precision.

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