



# INHERITED FEAR: THE CINEMATIC CONSTRUCTION OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN THANIYAVARTHANAM

**Shivani Sarat**

Postgraduate Student  
Department of English

Jain (Deemed-to-be) University, Bengaluru, India

**Abstract :** This paper examines the representation of mental illness in the Malayalam film *Thaniyavarthanam* (1987), directed by Sibi Malayil and written by A. K. Lohithadas Nair, through the lens of Social Stigma Theory and Cinematic Discourse Analysis. The film follows the tragic descent of Balagopalan, a schoolteacher whose life is dismantled by communal suspicion and inherited fears surrounding mental illness. With no formal diagnosis or deviant behaviour, Balagopalan is socially and emotionally isolated due to a single incident and the looming legacy of a supposedly "mad" ancestor. This paper explores how stigma is constructed not through medical frameworks but through familial silence, communal shame, and visual cues that depict alienation. It highlights the intergenerational trauma embedded in caste and family structures and critiques how traditional households become complicit and eventual accomplices, in psychological erasure under the guise of care. The analysis also reflects on masculinity, the suppression of emotion, and how the fear of mental illness becomes more destructive than the illness itself. *Thaniyavarthanam* ultimately becomes a cinematic case study in how cultural narratives reinforce stigma, turning the possibility of mental illness into a tool of social exclusion. The paper argues that the tragedy lies not in madness, but in the society that rushes to label it.

**IndexTerms-** *Thaniyavarthanam, Mental Illness, Generational Curse, Mammootty, Malayalam Cinema*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the landscape of Malayalam cinema, *Thaniyavarthanam* (1987), stands as a powerful cinematic meditation on mental illness and societal stigma. Set in a conservative Namboothiri household, the film explores the psychological unravelling of its protagonist, Balagopalan, a mild-mannered schoolteacher whose life is upended after a single incident leads his family and community to brand him as mentally ill. What begins as a moment of forgetfulness soon spirals into a tragic descent, not because of any confirmed diagnosis, but due to the suffocating expectations of a society steeped in superstition, hereditary fear, and collective paranoia.

This paper explores how *Thaniyavarthanam* captures the entrapment of mental illness within rigid familial and communal structures, where the fear of inherited madness overshadows medical reality. Drawing from Erving Goffman's Social Stigma Theory and applying Cinematic Discourse Analysis, the paper examines how visual elements, dialogue, and character behaviour collectively reinforce the tragic inevitability of Balagopalan's fate. It also investigates how the film critiques the dangerous power of communal labelling, the violence of isolation, and the failure of empathy within the domestic sphere.

By situating *Thaniyavarthanam* in its socio-cultural context, the paper attempts to reveal how cinema not only mirrors mental health stigma, but actively participates in constructing and contesting it — offering a poignant, painful reflection on the cost of silence and inherited fear.

## II. PLOT OVERVIEW AND CONTEXTUAL FRAME

*Thaniyavarthanam* follows the story of Balagopalan (played by Mammootty) who belongs to a small village in Kerala. A schoolteacher who resides in a conservative joint family, his world starts to fall apart after waking up screaming from a nightmare, a moment that serves as the trigger for suspicion and judgment by his family and community. Balagopalan who had just witnessed the death of his uncle Shreedharan, grapples with guilt and the emotional distress of his death. The family, plagued by a presumed history of hereditary madness, gradually starts to watch him, isolate him, and eventually reject him. Ironically, it is

not a real medical condition that kills off Balagopalan but rather the relentless pressure of inherited terror, social conditioning, and communal monitoring. All his efforts to project his normalcy and dignity notwithstanding, he becomes a victim of a story told by others—a story culminating in tragic inevitability.

The movie borrows significantly from Kerala's socio-religious culture, especially that of the Namboothiri Brahmin community, where notions of lineage and honour form the basis of identity construction. Placing the narrative within this caste-specific context, *Thaniyavarthanam* reveals that mental illness is not only a personal issue but that of the entire family, rendering it a social burden, threatening lineage, marriageability, and community reputation. The movie is a critique of how tradition, silence, and shame work within the home to hide, distort, and finally destroy psychological suffering.

### III. SOCIAL STIGMA AND WEIGHT OF HEREDITY

Using Erving Goffman's Social Stigma Theory, the film vividly illustrates how public perception can mutate into self-perception. Goffman defines stigma as an attribute that deeply discredits an individual, reducing them "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one." In *Thaniyavarthanam*, Balagopalan becomes a victim of what Goffman calls "courtesy stigma"—whereby the perceived deviance of one member contaminates the social value of the whole family.

Balagopalan's behaviour never truly confirms mental instability. His only "fault" is waking from a bad dream, followed by occasional moments of frustration—a normal reaction to increasing alienation and suspicion. But once the label is whispered into circulation, it spirals into a self-fulfilling prophecy. The community doesn't wait for a medical diagnosis; their inherited belief in familial madness becomes the only evidence needed to seal Balagopalan's fate. As Goffman explains, the internalization of stigma results in a "spoiled identity," and Balagopalan begins to retreat, doubt, and lose himself in the mirror his family holds up to him. Even his students, once adoring, begin to view him with hesitation. His colleagues distance themselves. The household begins to monitor his movements, deny him social interactions, and eventually remove him from decision-making roles. Balagopalan is transformed into a living ghost inside his own home. The film painfully charts this trajectory—not through spectacle, but through subtle domestic gestures: silences at the dinner table, whispered gossip, lingering glances, locked doors.

### IV. THE ROLE OF FAMILY: LOVE AS SURVEILLANCE

One of the most disturbing aspects of *Thaniyavarthanam* is how the family, particularly the women act as enforcers of tradition and gatekeepers of reputation. His mother, torn between maternal love and caste duty, insists on Ayurvedic remedies and temple rituals rather than psychological care. His sister-in-law, under pressure to protect her children and the family's name, begins advocating for Balagopalan's separation from the rest of the family. His brother, though sympathetic, remains passive—too entangled in his own roles to oppose the larger social script.

This kind of "care" functions as silent observation. The joint family house, which historically represents protection and communalness, becomes a stifling environment where every move is monitored, every utterance loaded. The patriarchal and caste-directed focus on maintaining family honour takes precedence over empathising or caring for an agony-experiencing individual. As the family's belief in Balagopalan being ill becomes more entrenched, their interventions mount—from dictating what he eats to confining him to a room. With a horrific irony, they are convinced they are assisting him.

### V. CINEMATIC DISCOURSE AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF ISOLATION

The film's visual language powerfully reinforces Balagopalan's descent into alienation. Using Cinematic Discourse Analysis, we can see how space, light, and sound are used to depict the growing rupture between Balagopalan and the world around him. Early in the film, he is shown as central in group scenes—he shares meals, jokes with students, and participates in temple events. As suspicion grows, the camera begins to frame him differently. He is pushed to the edges of the frame or placed behind doorways and curtains, visually marginalized within his own home.

In scenes where he sits alone in his room, the lighting becomes dimmer and colder. Natural light, once symbolic of harmony, is replaced by harsh indoor lighting that casts shadows across his face. His movement through the house becomes restricted—first socially, then physically. Eventually, the family isolates him in

a dark room, a literal and symbolic act of removal. The repetition of bars as windows, grills and partitions becomes a subtle but persistent motif, signaling imprisonment without formal incarceration. One of the most poignant scenes is when Balagopalan quietly observes the preparations for a family function from behind a door. His presence is not required. His voice is not asked for. And yet, he is fully aware—watching, grieving, slowly imploding. The silence in these scenes speaks louder than any dialogue.

## VI. INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND THE INHERITANCE OF FEAR

*Thaniyavarthanam* doesn't just present stigma as a social force — it roots that force within the psychological weight of intergenerational trauma. The fear that grips Balagopalan's family is not spontaneous; it is inherited. The family's dread stems from a long-standing belief that mental illness runs in their bloodline. A past ancestor, described vaguely as a madman, casts a long shadow over the present. What the film captures here is the way family memory becomes a prison. The mere possibility of "inheriting" insanity is enough to distort perception, rewrite behaviour, and strip Balagopalan of agency.

This trauma is not just remembered — it is rehearsed, repeated, and projected. The older generation, especially Balagopalan's mother, is deeply entrenched in traditional beliefs about fate and karmic retribution. Her fear, though wrapped in maternal concern, contributes to her son's slow erasure. She is constantly performing rituals, seeking blessings, and consulting healers, unable to recognize how these actions might be deepening her son's alienation. This inherited fear becomes so powerful that it overrides affection. The past dictates the present, and the family becomes a conduit through which historical trauma is enacted once more — this time on a man who has done nothing to deserve it.

## VII. COLLECTIVE SILENCE AND THE VIOLENCE OF COMMUNITY

If the family enforces stigma through ritual, the community enforces it through silence. Gossip, glances, and distance serve as tools of communal judgment. In *Thaniyavarthanam*, there are no interventions from outsiders. No one challenges the family's handling of Balagopalan. Teachers at school begin to avoid him. Students whisper. Neighbours stay away. The silence that surrounds Balagopalan becomes deafening. It is a silence that judges, punishes, and ultimately abandons.

This collective silence is a form of social violence. It masquerades as politeness but functions as erasure. Balagopalan becomes an uncomfortable presence—a reminder of what families fear but refuse to name. The community's inaction speaks to a broader cultural pattern: mental illness is only acknowledged when it disrupts public life. Until then, it is hidden away, disguised under euphemisms, or spiritualized beyond recognition. Even the headmaster who sympathizes with Balagopalan is unable to defend him against the weight of collective suspicion. In this way, the community becomes complicit in Balagopalan's fall — not by doing something, but by doing nothing.

## VIII. MASCULINITY, EMOTION, AND THE COST OF SUPPRESSION

One of the more subtle layers of *Thaniyavarthanam* is how it examines masculinity in crisis. Balagopalan is a schoolteacher, unmarried, obedient, soft-spoken. He is neither physically dominant nor emotionally expressive. In many ways, he doesn't fit the traditional ideal of the patriarch or the assertive male figure. Yet, he functions as a responsible adult — until the community decides he doesn't. His inability to assert himself, to fight against the accusations, and to display "masculine strength" becomes part of his undoing.

There is a tragic irony in how masculinity works in the film. Balagopalan is punished not for aggression but for vulnerability. As pressure builds, he becomes silent, withdrawn, tired. His despair is internalized, expressed not through violence, but through resignation. This quiet collapse is deeply gendered — it shows how men, especially in traditional settings, are offered no emotional outlets. There are no safe spaces for confession, no language for vulnerability. And when they fail to meet expectations, the collapse is treated as confirmation of their instability. Through Balagopalan, the film critiques the toxic expectations placed on

men to endure silently. His breakdown is not loud or spectacular; it is quiet, slow, invisible — and therefore more dangerous.

### IX. THE TRAGIC RESOLUTION: ISOLATION AS INHERITANCE

In the film's final act, Balagopalan is locked in a room, abandoned to his fate. It is a chilling echo of what supposedly happened to his ancestor. The family does not physically harm him, but they carry out a far more intimate form of violence: they accept his exclusion as necessary. This climactic isolation is the final confirmation that the label has become truth. The family, in trying to protect themselves, sacrifices him.

What makes the ending devastating is that Balagopalan never receives a diagnosis. There is no medical confirmation of illness. His story is not one of degeneration, but of destruction — destruction by fear, tradition, and silence. His fate is sealed not by madness, but by what others decide madness looks like. It is a textbook case of how **stigma**, once internalized and repeated, becomes indistinguishable from the condition it supposedly names.

The final image of Balagopalan sitting silently in a room, staring blankly, is not that of a mentally ill man — it is the image of someone broken by disbelief, by betrayal, by the unbearable weight of being misunderstood.

### X. CONCLUSION

Thaniyavarthanam remains one of the most powerful cinematic treatments of mental health in Indian cinema because it resists dramatizing the illness itself. Instead, it dramatizes the reactions to illness — the social, familial, and cultural responses that surround it. Through Balagopalan, the film reveals how mental illness is often not about the individual at all. It is about everyone else: how they fear it, suppress it, distort it.

Using the frameworks of Social Stigma Theory and Cinematic Discourse Analysis, we see how the film constructs stigma not just as a theme, but as a visual and emotional language. The camera isolates him as his family does. The narrative fractures him as the society does. The home that once symbolized protection becomes a prison. The same community that once respected him now watches from afar. And the same family that once loved him now fears him.

In doing so, Thaniyavarthanam becomes not just a story of one man's downfall but a cautionary tale about a society that refuses to see mental health for what it is — a human condition, not a moral failing or inherited curse. It shows how dangerous the silence can be, how strong labels can get, and how thin the line can be between sanity and madness — particularly when that line is defined by others. Finally, the tragedy of Thaniyavarthanam is not in Balagopalan's mind, but in the world outside it. A world too scared to know, too arrogant to inquire, and too hasty to judge.

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