

The Role of Mise-En-Scène in Amal Neerad's Films: A Comparative Study

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Abstract—This study investigates the role of mise-en-scène as a primary vehicle of meaning in the cinema of Malayalam filmmaker Amal Neerad, analysed across three films spanning his career: *Big B* (2007), *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014), and *Bheeshma Parvam* (2022). Drawing on auteur theory and Marxist film theory, the research employs qualitative narrative analysis alongside a structured metric framework to examine how visual elements including lighting, set design, costume, figure movement, and spatial composition function as ideological and narratological instruments. Across diverse genres, historical contexts, and tonal registers, Neerad's films demonstrate a cohesive visual philosophy in which space, light, and the human figure within the frame constitute an argument about power, identity, and moral geography. The study reveals a progressive evolution from the claustrophobic neo-noir aesthetics of *Big B* to the painterly historical realism of *Iyobinte Pusthakam* and the operatic symbolic minimalism of *Bheeshma Parvam*, establishing Neerad as a significant visual auteur in Indian regional cinema.

Index Terms—Mise-en-scène, Visual Auteursm, Realism, Framing, Masculinity, Malayalam Cinema.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cinema is fundamentally a visual art form, and the filmmaker's primary mode of communication is the image how it is composed, lit, and staged. At the core of this visual language lies mise-en-scène, a concept originating in French theatrical tradition meaning 'placing on stage,' which in film studies encompasses all elements a director controls within the frame: lighting, set design, costume, figure movement, and spatial relationships. When applied consistently and purposefully, mise-en-scène becomes a medium

through which meaning, ideology, and emotion are conveyed rather than merely illustrated.

Amal Neerad, who built an illustrious career as a cinematographer before turning director, exemplifies this visual precision. His debut feature *Big B* (2007) announced a filmmaker of sophisticated visual sensibility capable of transposing international genre aesthetics into the specific cultural geography of Kerala. His subsequent films *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014) and *Bheeshma Parvam* (2022) collectively form a cohesive, visually distinctive filmography that rewards auteur analysis. Though separated by genre, historical period, and tonal emphasis, the three films share an identifiable directorial signature in which space, light, and the human figure within the composition consistently serve as sites of ideological argument.

Scholarship on Malayalam cinema has grown in recent years, yet studies focusing on its visual dimensions remain limited. This paper addresses that gap by applying mise-en-scène analysis and auteur theory to Neerad's filmography, examining how his visual choices encode themes of power, masculinity, community, and historical memory across three landmark works.

II. BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The critical framework of mise-en-scène owes its theoretical foundations to the French critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950s, particularly André Bazin, who argued for the image as the primary locus of filmic meaning. This gave rise to auteur theory, identifying the director as the primary creative voice through identifiable stylistic and thematic

consistencies across a body of work. Within Indian cinema studies, scholarly attention has disproportionately favoured Hindi cinema, leaving regional language cinemas underexplored. Malayalam cinema which has produced the parallel cinema movement of the 1970s-80s and a current commercial renaissance is only now receiving sustained academic attention.

Neerad's background as a cinematographer provides a structurally significant advantage: his native fluency in the grammar of the camera lens choice, lighting ratio, compositional geometry allows the *mise-en-scène* in his films to function as direct visual expression rather than mediated instruction. This quality distinguishes his work and makes it particularly productive for close analytical reading.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Objectives

The study aims to: (i) identify and analyse key elements of *mise-en-scène* across Neerad's selected films; (ii) compare how his visual language evolves across genres, historical contexts, and narrative frameworks; and (iii) determine how *mise-en-scène* functions as a medium for encoding themes of power, masculinity, community, and cultural identity.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in auteur theory (Truffaut, 1954; Sarris, 1968) and Marxist film theory (Althusser, 1971), which together provide the conceptual tools to read visual decisions as expressions of both personal directorial vision and ideological positioning. These lenses are operationalised through qualitative narrative analysis systematic examination of how visual style interweaves with narrative structure and a structured metric analysis that assigns intensity levels (Low / Medium / High) to five *mise-en-scène* parameters across the three films.

3.3 Parameters of Analysis

Six parameters are employed across the thematic and metric analyses: (i) Spatial Design and Setting; (ii) Lighting and Colour Palette; (iii) Costume and Character Styling; (iv) Props and Symbolism; (v)

Character Positioning and Blocking; and (vi) Movement within the Frame.

IV. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

4.1 *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014)

Set in colonial plantation-era Kerala, the film's *mise-en-scène* is historicised and ideologically dense. The plantation estate is not merely a backdrop but a spatial text encoding class oppression and feudal violence. The Iyob mansion rendered through low ceilings, narrow corridors, and massive timber structures produces physical and psychological constriction, literalising patriarchal entrapment. Outdoor spaces signal emotional freedom but remain structurally inaccessible, mirroring the characters' social immobility.

Lighting employs a Gothic chiaroscuro tradition: selectively applied shadow fragments bodies and spaces, projecting moral ambiguity as an inherent property of the social order. The earth-tone colour palette browns, greens, ochres connote decay and fatigue, intensifying around scenes of betrayal and confrontation. Costuming operates as a legible class index: Iyob's formal, heavy attire embodies feudal rigidity and colonial complicity, while Alosky's plain dress signals ideological rebellion. Props rifles, liquor bottles, religious icons, architectural frames function as recurring motifs of surveillance, authority, and moral degradation. Blocking consistently elevates Iyob within the frame while relegating other characters to the periphery, making hierarchy visually legible without dialogue.

4.2 *Big B* (2007)

Neerad's debut reconstructs Kochi as a stylised neo-noir space. Industrial locations docks, warehouses, narrow urban streets are not socio-realistically rendered but transformed into atmospheric genre environments, their moral ambiguity encoded in blue-grey desaturated colour palettes and high-contrast artificial lighting. The city becomes a mythologised stage for violence and masculine performance.

The protagonist Bilal's costuming black attire, leather jackets, minimal accessories construct an archetype of disciplined, suppressed masculinity. Props (cigarettes, guns, motorcycles) function as extensions of character psychology and social identity. Symmetrical compositions centre Bilal within the frame, with low-

angle shots amplifying his authority. Dynamic, off-balance framings convey tension and kinetic energy. Unlike Iyobinte Pusthakam's measured staging, Big B deploys movement as spectacle: slow-motion sequences choreograph violence as ritual performance, producing what the director himself describes as a world defined by aggression, secrecy, and urban survival.

4.3 Bheeshma Parvam (2022)

Neerad's most ambitious work synthesises the claustrophobic urbanism of Big B with the historical realism of Iyobinte Pusthakam in a large-scale Mappila Muslim family saga set against Mattancherry's layered architectural heritage. Warm amber colour temperatures dominate the Parambil household interiors, connoting legacy, warmth, and belonging values the film simultaneously celebrates and mourns. As betrayal and conflict intrude, cooler, desaturated tones encroach, functioning as colour-coded foreshadowing below the threshold of explicit dialogue.

Compositions recall Renaissance family portraiture: Michael (Mammootty) is consistently centred or elevated in ensemble frames, his geometric dominance visually asserting patriarchal authority even as the narrative charts its dissolution a productive tension between composition and plot. Costuming differentiates characters along generational and ideological lines: Michael's white mundu and dark shirts invoke traditional Keralite authority, while younger characters' more expressive dress signals instability. Props religious icons, family heirlooms, corporate symbols constitute a complex symbolic system centred on the conflict between inherited power and contemporary ambition. Blocking is deliberately static and hierarchical; stillness, in contrast to Big B's kinetic energy, signifies power.

V. METRIC ANALYSIS

The metric analysis operationalises aesthetic elements through comparative intensity ratings (High / Medium / Low) across five parameters, enabling systematic cross-film comparison.

Table 1: Comparative Metric Analysis of Mise-en-scène Intensity

Parameter	Iyobinte Pusthakam (2014)	Big B (2007)	Bheeshma Parvam (2022)
Spatial Symbolism	High	Medium	High
Lighting & Colour	High	High	Medium
Costume as Identity	High	High	Medium
Props & Symbolism	High	Medium	High
Blocking & Positioning	High	High	High

In Iyobinte Pusthakam, uniformly high ratings reflect a mise-en-scène in which each visual element participates in constructing a historically specific system of power relations, with space itself serving as an ideological artefact. Big B's mixed profile medium spatial symbolism, high lighting and blocking indicates a stylised, genre-driven aesthetic where mood and spectacle take precedence over deep spatial ideology. Bheeshma Parvam's pattern high spatial symbolism and blocking, medium lighting and costume signals a more restrained, psychologically interior approach in which blocking and spatial arrangement become the primary carriers of meaning. The trajectory across the three films moves from dense historical visual systems to stylised genre construction to symbolic minimalism.

VI. FILM-WISE FRAME ANALYSIS

6.1 Big B: Key Visual Observations

In the harbour introduction sequence, low-key lighting with blue-grey colour dominates, partially obscuring Bilal's face and constructing emotional distance. The mise-en-scène transforms Kochi into a space of urban warfare where emotional and physical conflicts are inseparable. Warehouse confrontation scenes position Bilal in the foreground with opponents distributed behind him, visually mythologising his presence. Slow-motion choreography reinforces his authority. The absence of physical contact in family scenes, Bilal placed apart from others via door frames and spatial barriers, communicates emotional isolation as structural rather than circumstantial.

6.2 Iyobinte Pusthakam: Key Visual Observations

The return-from-war sequence exemplifies the film's visual philosophy: warm earthy tones, mist, and natural light produce a painterly historical atmosphere. Compositions mirror classical portraiture Iyob at the head of table, sons distributed at measured distances making the patriarchal hierarchy spatially self-evident. Nature (forests, hillsides) consistently codes as emotional freedom and transition, contrasting with the Gothic constriction of mansion interiors. Alosky's open posture and relaxed body language distinguish him visually from the family's rigidity. Environmental movement rain, smoke, drifting mist adds texture and emotional weight without explicit statement.

6.3 Bheeshma Parvam: Key Visual Observations

The family gathering sequence exemplifies Neerad's mature *mise-en-scène*: warm amber light, Renaissance-style compositional hierarchy, and the domestic space functioning simultaneously as stage and symbol. Michael's white mundu renders him visually distinctive within every ensemble frame. Close-ups are deployed sparingly and selectively, reserved for moments of betrayal or emotional vulnerability to maximise psychological impact. Corridors, staircases, and doorways become sites of emotional confrontation, with walls and furniture performing narrative functions articulating fragmentation, surveillance, and division without the need for dialogue.

VII. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Taken together, the three films follow the development of a filmmaker whose visual intelligence deepens alongside expanding resources and scope. The unifying constant across all three is Neerad's insistence that space, light, and the human figure within composition are not ornamental but argumentative. His *mise-en-scène* does not illustrate the story; it constitutes it.

7.1 Location as Ideological Text

Neerad consistently refuses to treat location as neutral backdrop. In *Big B*, the urban margins of Kochi are coded as morally compromised through low angles and shadow saturation. In *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, the plantation highlands are framed to reveal the spatial logic of colonial domination, making the physical

terrain speak the language of class oppression. In *Bheeshma Parvam*, Mattancherry's stratified architectural history marks out a dynasty that is simultaneously rooted and rotting. Geography functions as argument.

7.2 Lighting as Moral and Psychological Instrument

The lighting philosophy evolves in ideologically consistent ways. *Big B* borrows chiaroscuro and neon-infused low-key lighting from noir tradition, literally obscuring and revealing moral character. *Iyobinte Pusthakam* employs diffused natural and period-appropriate light to underwrite its realist-historical assertions. *Bheeshma Parvam* uses warm amber interior keys that cool as family authority dissolves, creating a real-time chromatic record of narrative power shifts.

7.3 Framing and Blocking as Power Inscription

Vertical and spatial positioning within the frame consistently encodes power relations across all three films. In *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, planters and overseers are habitually framed above labourers, making class hierarchy visually legible. In *Bheeshma Parvam*, Michael's geometric centrality in ensemble compositions visually asserts patriarchal authority even as the narrative charts its collapse a productive tension between composition and plot that constitutes the film's central dramatic irony.

7.4 Costume and Production Design as Semiotic System

Neerad does not treat costume as period decoration but as a system of signs. The contrast between labourer and planter dress in *Iyobinte Pusthakam* rough versus pressed, dark versus light, worn versus pristine constitutes a sustained visual argument about material inequality. In *Bheeshma Parvam*, subtle shifts in family members' costuming track the dissolution of group identity as the family fractures.

7.5 Evolution of Spatial Sensibility

A striking formal trajectory runs through the three films: a gradual opening of spatial sensibility. *Big B* is a film of constrained dimensions and claustrophobic urban closure, mirroring its protagonist's psychological entrapment. *Iyobinte Pusthakam* introduces landscape and natural scale through wide frames that emphasise both the enormity of terrain and

the smallness of the labouring body within it. Bheeshma Parvam synthesises both registers intimate domestic drama punctuated by compositional grandeur reflecting Neerad's growing command of spatial scale as a narrative instrument.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The cinema of Amal Neerad, examined through mise-en-scène analysis across *Big B*, *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, and *Bheeshma Parvam*, constitutes a compelling case study in how a filmmaker can employ the visual organisation of the film world not merely to support narrative but to constitute it. Separated by time, genre, and context, the three films nonetheless cohere into a visual philosophy in which every compositional decision every adjustment of light and shadow, every placement of a human body within a frame carries an argument about power, identity, and the moral weight of inhabited space.

The comparative analysis reveals that Neerad's development as a filmmaker is not only one of expanding technical resources and production scale, but of deepening visual intelligence: an increasingly sophisticated understanding that mise-en-scène is a language with grammar, rhetoric, and the capacity for genuine philosophical statement. In *Big B*, this language constructed a neo-noir moral universe, mapping the urban geography of Kochi onto the psychological interior of a protagonist caught between power and conscience. In *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, it achieved ideological gravity colonial plantation landscapes becoming spatial texts in which the geometry of exploitation was rendered precisely visible. In *Bheeshma Parvam*, the grammar reached operatic maturity, with colour temperature tracking dynastic decline, confrontations choreographed as ritual, and architectural heritage serving simultaneously as source of pride and monument to impermanence.

Most significantly, the analysis establishes that Neerad perceives the physical world his characters inhabit as never ideologically neutral. Spaces in his films have been shaped by power and continue to exercise it upon those who move through them. His desire to invest commercial mainstream Malayalam cinema with the visual rigour conventionally reserved for art cinema to insist that a mass-audience gangster film or a period epic demands serious attention to what its frames are

saying constitutes an important contribution to the language of Indian regional cinema, and to the broader argument for mise-en-scène as a primary site of meaning-making.

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