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Looped up Time, Locked up Memories: *Kishkindha Kaandam* and *The Persistence of Memory*

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Abstract

Time, memory, perception and experience are concepts that are more abstract than can be understood to be defined concretely. Science, Art and Literature have always tried in their own ways to unravel the complex interrelationship between these. Kishkindha Kaandam is a Malayalam film released in 2024, which depicts the struggles of a family coming to terms with a tragedy in the past. The second wife of the son in the family starts stirring up old memories and associated mysteries in the old house. As the aged father struggles to anchor himself in the present amidst losing his memory, the narrative unfolds slowly, and the audience, accompanied by Aparna, the second wife of Ajayan, travels along the time loops of Appu Pillai, Ajayan's father who is losing his memory. The Persistence of Memory (1931) is a famous Surrealistic painting by the great Spanish artist, Salvador Dali, and is considered the epitome of Surrealism in art. Also known as Soft Watches or Melting Clocks, the painting is, by general consent, an exploration of human experience, memory and time. These are the common themes explored in Kishkindha Kaandam also. This paper is an attempt at a cross-generic analysis, to look at how the treatment of Time and memory in Kishkindha Kaandam can be compared to Dali's treatment of memory and Time in his painting, The Persistence of Memory

I. INTRODUCTION

Time and Memory are two concepts that retain their fascination with human imagination across recorded History. Art forms and artists have attempted to give expression to the enthralling and uncoded equation and intricate relationship between Time, Memory and human experience, in various forms of arts and literature. Various branches of science have also tried to unfurl the concept of time, from varying perspectives and domains, including

Physics, Psychology and Neuroscience. Innumerable studies on the intertwining encoding of Time and Memory can be found aplenty across the world. Different takes on Time and Memory, from diverse points of view can also be found in Literature, Theatre and Movies. Films such as *Inception* (2010) familiarise the common man with divergent structures of Time and desynchronised memories, triggering questions related to the relationship between the two, especially one of

the most enigmatic questions to haunt human kind – what is Time?

Salvador Dali is synonymous with surrealistic art forms, specifically paintings, and his *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), popularly known as *Melting Clocks* and also as *Soft Watches*, is widely regarded as classic example of Surrealistic school of painting. *Kishkindha Kaandam* (2024) is a Malayalam movie that is varyingly classified as mystery, thriller, suspense, atmospheric and existential drama. It deals mainly with a character who is struggling to contain his loss of memory, and keeps going back to incidents that happened in the past to keep up with his memories. This paper is an attempt to look at the treatment of Time and Memory in *Kishkindha Kaandam* and how Time and Memory are understood to be encoded in *The Persistence of Memory*, and discover any similarities in these two art forms belonging to different genres.

1.2. Review of Literature

Numerous articles are available on *The Persistence of Memory*, analysing the techniques used to present Time, Memory and Experience. Plenty of scientific articles are available regarding scientific studies undertaken to decode the relationship between Time and Memory, including how time becomes significant only if there is sequential memory and also how neuroscience is still trying to identify the time-marker in human brain so as to help people deal with Alzheimer's and other forms of neurodegenerative conditions. Not many research articles are available on *Kishkindha Kaandam* yet, but there are review articles in leading dailies such as *The Hindu* and *Times of India*.

1.3. Research Gap

Since there are no comparative studies undertaken to do a cross-generic comparative analysis of *The Persistence of Memory* and *Kishkindha Kaandam*, and since both deal with Time and Memory and human experience and perception, there seems to be a research possibility for such a study.

1.4. Research Question

Despite the lacuna in chronological sequence and the differences in their respective

genres and features of their genres, is it possible to identify similarities between *The Persistence of Memory* and *Kishkindha Kaandam* with specific reference to their treatment of Time and Memory?

1.5. Hypotheses

Despite belonging to two different genres and placed in diverse spatio-temporal and socio-cultural contexts, *The Persistence of Memory* and *Kishkindha Kaandam* looks at how Time gets looped up and memories can become locked up for humans.

1.6. Methodology and Method

A cross-generic approach is proposed to be used for this comparative analytical study. Features and techniques found in *The Persistence of Memory* and *Kishkindha Kaandam* will be looked at to decode how Time and Memory are treated and presented in a way which challenges existing norms and customs of understanding the two concepts.

II. TIME AND MEMORY

While looking at how Time and Memory are perceived and understood in general, it can be seen that there are assorted approaches to defining Time, and attempts to quantify Time. By general consensus it is understood to be unidirectional and never static. Languages, for instance, try to quantify and sequence Time by using Tense forms for indicating the Past, the Present and the Future. On the other hand, several Psychologists insist that Time does not exist "out there", but is rather in the perception of it. Lanza, for instance, cites that Zeno had already proved, centuries ago, that Time is not in sequential motion, through his "Arrow Paradox" and that Einstein had illustrated through his Theory of Relativity that "time is relative to the observer" (Lanza 2021). "Time isn't a feature of the external world; it's a projection of something within us that ties together things we are observing", Lanza states (2021). The time as experienced by people has no meaning on its own, but has only relative value, which happens when one event is connected to another, and without memory, this may not be possible. Lanza calls memory "the glue" that helps the mind to connect the Past

with the Present. Einstein is supposed to have remarked on learning the death of an old friend that the friend “has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing . . . the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion” (cited in Lanza 2021).

Teki, Gu and Meck, in their article, “The Persistence of Memory: How the Brain Encodes Time in Memory” state that “Time and memory are inextricably linked, but it is far from clear how event durations and temporal sequences are encoded in memory” (2017). Theirs, and several other articles in journals such as *Nature Neuroscience* report scientific studies that try to comprehend how time stamping happens on memories. It is now assumed that the hippocampus in the brain is the one that is associated with imprinting time on events and thus time-stamping memories. More studies are highly recommended in Neuroscience in this direction, so that aids can be developed to help people diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and other memory-related disorders. Scientists believe that understanding the functioning of the hippocampus will enable better understanding of memory and memory loss, thereby enabling a better rehabilitation of people with memory trouble.

It should also be clearly stated that the understanding of the concept of Time will vary from discipline to discipline. For instance, there is a distinction between biological time and social time according to Circadian neuroscience. “Individuals have different circadian clocks depending on their chronotypes that vary with genetic, age, and sex. In contrast, social time is determined by time zones, daylight savings time, and education and employment hours” (Kelley, Evans and Kelley 2018). When there is desynchronization between circadian time and social time, sleep deprivation, health issues and poor cognitive performances can happen. “When circadian timing is disrupted, then the biological clocks in different tissues can become uncoupled, resulting in a state of internal desynchrony that can have negative impacts on memory creation and health” (Foster et al., 2013 cited in Kelley, Evans and Kelley). “When we recall a memory, we are able to remember not only what happened to us but also where we

were and when it happened to us,” observes Mathew Self (cited in Olagunju 2021), and hence what is important is “not just the “what” and “where” of a recollection but also the “when” (Olagunju 2021). “How does our brain know that “this” follows “that”? is the question raised by Olagunju.

Literature has also contributed immensely to the perception of Time, albeit at an imaginative plane, with such literary masterpieces like *The Sound and The Fury* by William Faulkner, and with prequels and sequels of existing works. Flashbacks are of special interest here because it indicates a sequence of action that materialized in the Past, but which is actually being re-played in the mind of a narrator. So who puts the time indicator in that sequence of events, which is exclusively now in the domain of memory? Movies are no exception to this literary approach to Time, and movies are abundantly made and enjoyed that manipulate the temporal sequencing of events or episodes, thereby challenging the perception of the audience, and stimulating a higher level of aesthetic experience. Artistic schools and artists have also experimented with Time and Memory, and about how experiences are invariably bound to the perceptions of these.

III. KISHKINDHA KAANDAM

The title “Kishkindha Kaandam” is taken from the epic, *Ramayana*, which is an episode where Lord Rama meets the Bali-Sugreeva-Hanuman trio. The Malayalam movie *Kishkindha Kaandam* is considered a commercially successful one and yet which presented elements of good craftsmanship by the creators, especially Dinijith Ayyathan, the director, and Bahul Ramesh, who doubled as the writer and the DoP, which probably helped in a seamless transition of scenes from the written script into camera frames. Bharadwaj Rangan gives the highest possible praise when he calls it “a superb existential drama” (Rangan 2024), though he agrees that it can be branded as a mystery too.



Fig 1: Poster of Kishkindha Kaandam (2024)

(<https://www.instagram.com/kishkindhakaandam/p/DAcufJy2kL/>)

The story evolves around Ajayan, his second wife Aparna and his aged father, Appu Pillai. Rangan also identifies the “huge house in the middle of a forest, and the numerous monkeys that inhabit this area” as other major characters (Rangan 2024). Ajayan’s first wife had died of cancer two years back, and his only son, Chachu has gone missing when Aparna and the audience in introduced to the story. The house is located near a reserve forest area, thus placing the story into a sylvan milieu, thereby steeping the story further into a mysterious atmosphere. As the story unfolds, Appu Pillai’s accelerating neurodegenerative condition is revealed, along with his own attempts to catch up with loops of time that soon disappears into the fog of memory loss, Ajayan’s attempts to protect his father, but Aparna’s curiosity getting out of hand and invading into the privacy of the old man who is battling a losing war with memory loss, but with a brave face, determination and courage that marks the soldier that he is. Appu Pillai’s secret battle with memory loss and the resultant attempt to re-synchronise time with past events and memories become pivotal to the story, and ultimately what is revealed is the unshaken bond between an old father who will protect his son even amidst the advancing fugue, and a son who will protect his father’s vulnerability

through covering up the progressing memory loss by playing to the short tempered and curt outbursts of the ex-serviceman. “Layered” is how Rangan describes the movie (2024), and that is exactly what it is. Into the loops of time created by Appu Pillai and, to a certain extent, by Ajayan, Aparna and the audience become entangled, and along with Aparna, the viewers try to unlock the memories that seemed to be locked into the loops of time.

IV. THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

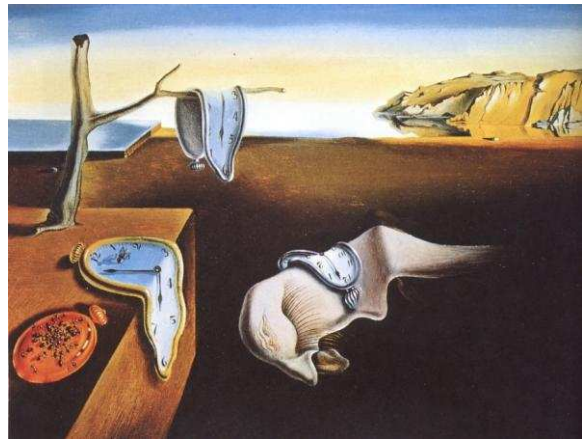


Fig. 2: *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) by Salvadore Dali

(www.singularart.com)

Salvatore Dali is considered by many as synonymous with Surrealistic art, and his painting, *The Persistence of Memory* is probably the most popular and widely known painting by him, upholding his legacy as a Surrealist artist almost single handedly. It “is rich with symbolism, and portrays Dali’s signature dream-like atmosphere” (singularart.com), and is a “hand-painted dream photograph” (singularart.com) depicting three melting clocks and an orange pocket watch with ants on its face, projected in front of an austere backdrop. “Dali claims he was inspired to paint the melting clocks after observing Camembert cheese melting on a hot day, but their meaning has been debated and interpreted in many different ways” (singularart.com), and interpretations include juxtaposing of the hard and the soft, fluidity of time, the ever-present role of time in human life, and even Einstein’s Theory of Relativity indicating the relationship between space and time.

From a visual standpoint, "The Persistence of Memory" draws us into an otherworldly landscape, with barren stretches, calm waters, and jagged cliffs under a muted sky. Amidst this setting, the melting clocks stand out vividly. One draped over a muted tree branch, another lazily hanging on a bizarre, fleshy face, and a third partially covered with ants. Each of these distorted timepieces is rendered with meticulous detail, making their fluid form even more jarring against the structured background. (papersowl.com)

Clocks represent the structured notion of Time to which humans are conditioned. When these are depicted as soft, subverting their rigidity, it is probably suggested that the concept of time is more individualistic and supple, much like the non-sequential and episodic time that is found in memories and dreams.

The bleak landscape is supposed to represent Port Lligat, Dali's hometown in Spain, and is often interpreted to indicate timelessness, in stark contrast to the melting clocks. "One of the most intriguing elements in the painting is the fleshy face or figure upon which one of the clocks drapes" (papersowl.com), and is widely regarded as a sort of self-portrait. "The closed eyes and sagging form suggest a deep state of slumber or even decay, furthering the notion of dreams and the subconscious mind. The ants, often a symbol of decay in Dali's works, on one of the clocks could signify the inevitable degradation that time brings" (papersowl.com).

Thus, by general consent, it is undeniably a portrait of Time, and Dali's take on the concept of Time, and how the conventional notion of Time is challenged by Dali, interlinking it with the quality and consistency of Time as found in memories, as perceived with subjective affect factors.

V. ANALYSIS

Since the two forms of art chosen for study belong to related yet different genres, a surface-level comparison might look difficult, and hence, this study chooses to analyse a thematic analysis. It is agreed upon without contention that *The Persistence of Memory* deals with Time and its interconnectedness with Memory,

though not limited to memory alone, but also with dreams, experiences and perceptions. *Kishkindha Kaandam* also deals with Time, perception of Time, memory and interconnectedness of time, memory, experiences and perceptions.

In *Kishkindha Kaandam* the narrative regarding the boy going missing is presented in a looped timeframe, with Appu Pillai consulting Sumadathan, an apparently shady character, and re-creating the time sequence umpteen number of times. Ajayan's narrative and Aparna's perception of the event is desynchronized, and the audience is unable to perceive the linear sequence of events till the last part of the movie. This unravelling of Time is heavily dependent on the memories represented to Aparna and the audience. Aparna here represents the point of view of the audience, and when Aparna tries to sort out the puzzle that is happening around her, she is doing it for the audience, or rather, the audience is with her in the exercise.

Through the maneuvers employed by Appu Pillai in his attempts to come to terms with the past (here, memories) and past sequences of events, thereby Time itself, the audience is sort of ushered into a roller coaster ride involving multiple loops of time, altering the perception of the audience and Aparna, regarding Appu Pillai, Ajayan, their relationship and the incident of Chachu going missing. Which is very similar to the way Dali presents his challenging perception of Time, daring the viewers of his painting, by placing the melting clocks and the one non-melting clock with ants in front of an enervated backdrop and an almost imperceptible humanoid face which appears to be in slumber as Life and Time passes by, passively.

VI. DISCUSSION

In *Kishkindha Kaandam* there are multiple loops of time and different sets of memories, but all leading to the same point in the end. Apart from the emotional depth portrayed in the Father-Son relationship, enacted to perfection by the actors, the movie presents multiple tracks of time, especially the past. There are also multiple narratives from the past, such as the story regarding Appu Pillai leaving the army

service and the lynch pin that holds all the threads together, Chachu going missing. Memories keep re-surfacing in the form of photographs, old home videos, and anecdotes, and these are presented like the clocks and ants and the landscape of *The Persistence of Memory*, challenging and stimulating the audience to decode and arrive at a pattern on their own. The movie keeps gyrating around memories – the forgotten memories that Appu Pillai keeps struggling to hold on without others realising it, and the memories that Ajayan remembers very much and does not want others to realise it. The desynchronised and distorted memories and time sequences presented by Ajayan is deliberate and for preserving his father's identity and dignity, whereas the efforts of Appu Pillai is the other way round – to establish a sequence and synchrony in the memories and time sequence that he is losing hold of.

VII. FINDINGS

From the analysis and discussion, it can be established that there are undeniable similarities between *Kishkindha Kaandam* and *The Persistence of Memory*, especially in the thematic concerns regarding Time, Memory and their interconnectedness with experience and perception.

Thus, the hypothesis of the study stands validated that despite belonging to two different genres and placed in diverse spatio-temporal and socio-cultural contexts, *Persistence of Memory* and *Kishkindha Kaandam* looks at how Time gets looped up and memories get locked up for humans.

VIII. CONCLUSION

A cross-generic study of the movie *Kishkindha Kaandam* and the surrealistic classic *The Persistence of Memory* have more thematic similarities than meets the eye on a cursory glance. Time, memory, their interrelationship with perception and experience are topics of high interest in the fields of Psychology and Neuroscience, and more studies can be taken up to reveal the way artists and writers have encoded these in their timeless masterpieces. The scope of this study does not permit detailed

analysis of the use of props in the movie and the painting as well as the use of colour schemes. Further studies in these angles would enrich cross-generic studies and multidisciplinary studies that involve Physics, Philosophy, Psychology, Neuroscience and Art and Literature

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