



## Emotional Undercurrents: Exploring Water and Psychological Depth in *Ullozhukku*

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Doi : <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.5.1024.2704>

### ABSTRACT

This paper offers a psychoanalytic and hydrofeminist analysis of the Malayalam film *Ullozhukku* (2024), exploring the central role of water as both a narrative and symbolic force. Through the character of Anju, the film portrays water as a metaphor for emotional fluidity, mirroring the protagonist's psychological conflicts and moral dilemmas. By intertwining water with Anju's inner struggles—particularly her guilt, detachment, and desires—the film emphasizes the fluid nature of human consciousness. Drawing on Astrida Neimanis' concept of hydrofeminism, the analysis highlights how *Ullozhukku* uses water to blur the boundaries between the external environment and internal emotional landscapes, offering fresh insights into identity, gender, and subjectivity within cinematic storytelling.

Keywords: *Ullozhukku*, water symbolism, hydrofeminism, psychoanalysis, consciousness.

### INTRODUCTION

The Malayalam film industry has long been recognised for its commitment to realism and innovative storytelling, distinguishing itself from the more melodramatic tendencies of mainstream Indian cinema. Films like *Bheeshma Parvam* (2022), *Minnal Murali* (2021), *Rorschach* (2022), *Valatty* (2023), *Churuli* (2021), etc. exemplify this tradition, presenting the experimental narratives in the Malayalam film industry. In this context, *Ullozhukku* (2024), directed by Christo Tomy, emerges as a significant cinematic work that continues this trajectory while introducing a novel thematic exploration—the intricate connection between water and the human psyche. Urvashi and Parvathy Thiruvothu infuse their characters with a deep, poignant sense of emotion, delivering performances marked by authenticity and depth.

This paper aims to undertake a psychoanalytic reading of *Ullozhukku*, analysing its portrayal of water as both a physical and symbolic element that mirrors the protagonist's internal emotional conflicts. Drawing on Astrida Neimanis' hydrofeminism, particularly her notion of fluidity, I will explore how the film uses water as a metaphor for the fluid nature of human consciousness. "Water is between bodies, before us and beyond us, yet also very presently *this body* too" (Neimanis 87). Her concept of fluidity emphasizes the interconnectedness of bodies, water, and identities, proposing that just as water flows and adapts, so too does the human mind. Withrow in the prologue her prologue to the *Leadership in Unknown Waters: Limininally as Threshold to the Future* (2020) writes:

The element of water exhibits myriad paradoxes: it is both contained and free; it is both gentle and strong; it is buoyant and heavy; it covers and reflects; it has depth and breadth; it nourishes and erodes.

In *Ullozhukku*, this idea is vividly realized as the protagonist's mental state is reflected in the water currents and streams that pervade the film's narrative and visual imagery. Water in *Ullozhukku* is not simply an environmental backdrop but a dynamic narrative force, continuously interacting with the protagonist's inner life. Its omnipresence throughout the film elevates it beyond a mere natural element, transforming it into a central medium through which the audience can engage with the emotional and psychological depth of the story. The protagonist's internal struggles, marked by emotional upheaval and psychological distress, are mirrored in the turbulence and fluidity of water. In this way, water becomes a powerful symbol of mental turmoil, offering both a visual and thematic representation of the instability and fluidity of the human mind.

### PLOT OVERVIEW AND CHARACTER STUDY

Set against the backdrop of the flooded regions of Alappuzha, Kerala, *Ullozhukku* presents the emotionally intricate journey of Anju, a woman caught between societal obligations, personal desires, and unresolved emotional conflicts. Anju is married to Thomaskutty, a terminally ill man confined to his bed due to a brain tumor—a marriage arranged by her family to sever her relationship with her lover, Rajeev. Although Anju dutifully fulfills her

responsibilities as a wife and caregiver to her ailing husband and a beloved daughter-in-law to Thomaskutty's mother, Leelamma, there is an ever-present undercurrent of emotional discontent that defines her character throughout the film.

The narrative unravels Anju's internal turmoil by contrasting her outward calmness with the chaotic storm of emotions she experiences privately. Early in the film, her character is established as someone who performs her societal role with remarkable composure—caring for her bedridden husband, managing household duties, and enduring her unfulfilled life with little complaint. However, the audience is subtly made aware of her disillusionment, especially in the scenes where she shows no intimacy or affection towards Thomaskutty. The lack of love and emotional connection is evident, portraying Anju's marriage as a mere arrangement, void of personal fulfillment. Though not explicitly articulated, her inner sorrow, is conveyed through the subtle nuances of her body language and the understated sadness Parvathy brings to the role.

Anju's mental conflict begins to intensify after she discovers that she is pregnant with Rajeev's child. This revelation deepens her emotional crisis as it heightens her need for Rajeev and her desire to escape the life she feels trapped in. Yet, despite this growing emotional tension, Anju remains composed, not revealing her pregnancy's true circumstances until after Thomaskutty's death. Thomaskutty's passing, rather than liberating her emotionally, introduces new layers of conflict. While the household mourns, Anju remains emotionally detached, showing no outward sorrow for her deceased husband. Anju's detachment here is not simply a reflection of her feelings for Thomaskutty but a symptom of the deeper emotional disconnect that she has with her entire life situation.

Leelamma, devastated by the loss of her only child, now shifts her focus onto Anju's pregnancy, viewing the unborn child as a continuation of her son's legacy. Leelamma's misunderstanding—that the child is Thomaskutty's—places Anju in an even more complex position, heightening her feelings of guilt and entrapment. Despite Leelamma's genuine affection for Anju and her desire to raise the child as a living memory of her son, Anju struggles with the weight of her deception and the realization that her life with Thomaskutty was built on unspoken lies.

Her desire to leave and reunite with Rajeev after the funeral represents a desperate attempt to reclaim her life and agency. However, even this desire is not straightforward. Rajeev's insistence that Anju claim property rights from her in-laws, so they can secure a better life together, introduces another conflict. This demand puts Anju in a morally precarious situation, forcing her to choose between her loyalty to Leelamma, who, despite the emotional distance, has treated Anju like a daughter, and her future with Rajeev. The mental pressure of this choice becomes a defining moment for Anju's character, exposing the deep emotional toll of her decisions and relationships.

Anju's character is ultimately shaped by this interplay of emotional numbness and psychological turbulence. On one hand, her calmness and outward composure suggest a detachment from the emotional and moral chaos around her. On the other, her numbness masks the profound sense of betrayal, guilt, and longing that churns beneath the surface. Her emotional response to the people around her, especially Leelamma and Rajeev, reflects the complexity of her inner life, where love, guilt, and disillusionment coexist, each pushing her toward difficult decisions. The constant presence of water—whether calm or turbulent—parallels Anju's mental state, symbolising both her emotional entrapment and her yearning for freedom.

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## SYMBOLISM OF WATER

The film opens with calm backwaters, suggesting a sense of stability and serenity, though the undercurrent of emotional disturbance beneath Anju's composed exterior is subtly hinted at. In this early scene, Anju is shown as a seemingly happy woman, newly married, with the calm waters mirroring her outward tranquility. As the story progresses, the calm waters of her life become increasingly stormy, paralleling her growing psychological strain.

The water's transformation from placid backwaters to a relentless flood coincides with the key events in the narrative—most notably the death of Thomaskutty and Anju's decision regarding her future. These changes in the environment correspond with the unraveling of Anju's inner world. For instance, when Anju realizes she is pregnant with Rajeev's child, the onset of heavy rainfall signals the beginning of emotional turmoil for both Anju and Leelamma. The director brilliantly juxtaposes the rainfall alert on the news with Anju's personal realization of her pregnancy, drawing a parallel between the impending storm and the storm of emotions Anju must now confront.

Consider a human sitting in a boat in the Pacific during a rainstorm. The water-filled body becomes subject to a complex mixture of waters and spaces. The boat's position at the cusp of two fluid bodies — the heavy, wet one below it and the gaseous, humid one above—gets further complicated by liquid water falling from the sky... This *juzta* position combines multiple experiences of water. (Mentz 44)

As his health deteriorates, it is Anju who rows the boat across the flooded backwaters, a task that is both physically and emotionally laden. The act of navigating the turbulent waters becomes a metaphor for Anju's internal battle with morality, duty, and desire. The floodwaters outside reflect the emotional flood within, swelling in intensity as Anju continues to feel the weight of her choices. The ritualized responses of others—Leelamma's grief, the mourning household—contrast with Anju's numbness, emphasizing the emotional isolation she feels.

As the rain grows heavier, so too does the weight of Anju's guilt and confusion. The intensifying downpour delays Thomaskutty's funeral, trapping the characters in a liminal space where emotions fester and swell. The film reaches a symbolic peak when Anju experiences a vivid dream in which water's presence becomes hauntingly surreal. In the dream, Anju and Thomaskutty are in a room flooded by rain that penetrates the ceiling, soaking everything in sight. The room, entirely white, with a cradle hanging from the ceiling, becomes a symbolic space of loss, guilt, and unresolved emotions. As Thomaskutty presses his ear to Anju's pregnant belly, he acknowledges that the child is not his, and in a moment of violent possessiveness, he attempts to smother the unborn child. The blood that flows from Anju's body dissolves into the water, symbolizing the merging of her guilt, fear, and loss. The rain inside the room represents the overwhelming emotional current that Anju can no longer control, the boundaries between her reality and her

emotions breaking down completely. This dream marks a turning point in the film, prompting Anju to finally decide to leave the house and start a new life with Rajeev.

Throughout the film, the presence of water—whether as gentle rain, rising floodwaters, or the water-soaked room of Anju’s dreams—serves as a reflection of the shifting currents of Anju’s emotional life. The rain, at times calm and at times torrential, symbolizes both her desire for liberation and the inescapable weight of guilt and responsibility. When Anju meets Rajeev after her husband’s death, the climate is calm, suggesting a brief respite from the storm within her. However, as she returns to her home, the rain resumes, signaling that Anju’s inner conflict is far from over. The water thus becomes a constant reminder of the emotional currents that Anju must navigate, serving as both a symbol of her entrapment and her potential for emotional release

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## PSYCHOANALYTIC READING AND HYDROFEMINISM

In *Ullozhukku*, the representation of water and its relationship to Anju’s psyche can be analyzed through psychoanalytic lens. Astrida Neimanis’ hydrofeminist theory, which emphasizes water as a metaphor for fluidity in human experience, provides a compelling framework to understand Anju’s mental landscape and the emotional currents that shape her decisions throughout the film.

Psychoanalytically, water often represents the unconscious mind, a repository of repressed desires and unresolved conflicts. For Anju, her unconscious is deeply intertwined with her relationship to the water around her. The backwaters, at first serene, reflect her surface-level acceptance of her life as Thomaskutty’s wife.

Freudian psychology compares the mind to an iceberg. The tip of the iceberg that is actually visible above the water represents just a tiny portion of the mind. On the other hand, the huge expanse of ice hidden underneath the water represents the much larger unconscious. (Cherry)

Beneath this placid exterior, however, are deeper undercurrents of dissatisfaction, desire for emotional fulfillment, and an unacknowledged guilt tied to her affair with Rajeev. These unconscious forces rise to the surface as the rain begins to fall, destabilizing both her emotional state and her lived reality. The ‘id’ ‘ego’ conflict inside Anju arises as she struggles to reconcile her desires and needs with her ethical obligations. As the rain intensifies and the floods rise, Anju’s carefully constructed identity begins to erode. In Neimanis’ hydrofeminist terms, water allows us to rethink the boundaries between the self and the world, blurring the lines between inside and outside, the personal and the environmental. The blurring of these boundaries is evident in Anju’s growing inability to keep her emotions compartmentalized. Her guilt over the affair, her desire for love and sexual fulfillment, and her resentment towards her husband’s illness—all converge in moments of heightened emotional and physical crisis, like the flood that delays

The dream sequence where water invades the domestic space powerfully encapsulates these dynamics. The rain pouring into the room where Anju and Thomaskutty are dressed in white symbolizes the breakdown of the boundaries Anju has tried to maintain between her inner desires and her outward life. In the dream, water carries not just life (through the imagery of the cradle) but also death (through the blood that dissolves into the water). This is the latent content that has been expressed through her dreams.

Freud believed that the latent content of a dream is often related to unconscious desires, wishes, and conflicts. These are thoughts and feelings that are so troubling or unacceptable that the conscious mind represses them. However, they can emerge in a disguised form in our dreams. The latent content is not directly observable because it is often coded or symbolized in the dream’s manifest content. (McLeod)

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the water’s invasion of Anju’s domestic space suggests the return of the repressed. The rain represents the flooding of Anju’s unconscious into her conscious mind, forcing her to confront her conflicting desires, her guilt, and her fear of punishment. Thomaskutty’s declaration in the dream that the unborn child does not call him “Papa” signals Anju’s unresolved guilt about her affair, a guilt that manifests in the violent imagery of Thomaskutty attempting to smother the child. The dream collapses the boundaries between desire and punishment, love and guilt, with the water serving as the medium through which these emotions and fears are both expressed and absorbed.

Hydrofeminism, in its emphasis on water’s capacity to connect disparate elements and dissolve rigid boundaries, provides a powerful lens for understanding Anju’s psychological and emotional fluidity. Anju’s identity is not fixed; it is shaped by the flows of guilt, love, betrayal, and care that circulate within her relationships. The water that surrounds her reflects this constant state of flux—whether it is the tranquil backwaters of her early married life or the chaotic floods that accompany Thomaskutty’s death, water embodies the uncertainty and fluidity of Anju’s consciousness.

In *Ullozhukku*, water thus becomes a feminist metaphor for the complexity of Anju’s emotional life. Her journey, like the water that surrounds her, is one of continuous movement, shifting boundaries, and an ever-changing relationship with her own desires and sense of self. The fluidity of water, as explored through the lens of hydrofeminism, allows for a deeper understanding of Anju’s psychological depth and the forces that shape her decisions throughout the film.

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## BROADER IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The psychoanalytic and hydrofeminist reading of *Ullozhukku* offers a nuanced understanding of the interplay between the environment and human emotions. By using water as both a narrative and symbolic force, the film adds depth to the portrayal of internal conflict, making it a significant contribution to Malayalam cinema and broader discussions in film studies, psychoanalysis, and eco-feminism.

Hydrofeminism, which views water as a symbol of relationality and fluidity, provides a framework for interpreting Anju's journey. The film disrupts traditional narratives of female victimhood or empowerment, portraying Anju as a complex character whose emotional fluidity resists easy categorization. This aligns with hydrofeminist thought, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of bodies, emotions, and environments—ideas that the film visually and thematically reinforces through its persistent use of water imagery.

Through its portrayal of water as a central emotional force, *Ullozhukku* blurs the boundaries between the external environment and internal psychological states. This opens new possibilities for analyzing how natural elements can represent emotional complexity in cinema, suggesting broader implications for the study of identity, gender, and human subjectivity in relation to the natural world.

In conclusion, *Ullozhukku* illustrates the potential of water as a powerful metaphor for emotional and psychological fluidity, contributing to ongoing discussions within film studies, psychoanalysis, and hydrofeminism. The film's layered narrative and innovative use of water emphasize the complexity of human consciousness and identity, particularly within the context of women's experiences.

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